

The Wolf Moon

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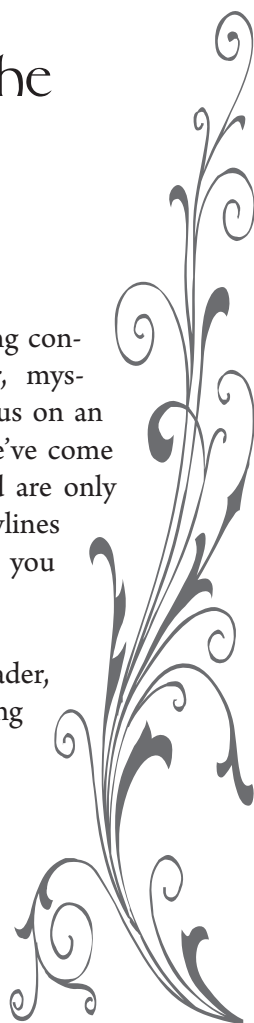
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PRAISE FOR THE Wolf Moon!

"The Wolf Moon is a thrilling and satisfying conclusion to this magical trilogy. Danger, mystery and the ultimate power of love take us on an engrossing journey with the characters we've come to know as friends and those we are glad are only fiction. The author deftly weaves the storylines begun in the first two books into a tale you won't want to put down."

~Christine Myers, Proofreader,
Lady Myers' Wordsmithing



Dedication

To my parents, who allowed me the freedom to run wild and the time to read. Without this, my imagination could never have conjured up this story!



"There is no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

~Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass





Chapter One

MAEVE LEWIN STUMBLED backward, her hand at her throat. Green eyes followed her from the portrait, the tangle of red hair the exact color of her own. It was like looking in a mirror, all but the red medieval gown. This was the first painting she'd uncovered, the rest of them still waiting patiently against the wall of the garage with their batting intact.

She lurched forward on legs weak with shock to find the return address on the crate. They'd been shipped from Edinburgh, Scotland, directly to Milltown, Massachusetts, and transported by truck to the First Street Gallery where she worked, booked in for the upcoming show. Upon searching further, she found the name "Lewin" on the bill of lading. Her mind raced, thoughts tumbling one after the other. She was born in Scotland, or so her father had told her. Her mother... was dead.

Maeve examined the portrait further, noticing two wolves in the shadows on either side of the figure. When she turned away to view another still leaning against the wall, she could swear

their heads swiveled to watch her. She tried to ignore the tingling down her arms as she pulled away the batting and brought the second painting into the light shining through the open garage door. In this one, a landscape of dark trees rose into an indigo sky filled with charcoal clouds. In the space between the trees and clouds, a swarm of birds made a dark smudge against the sky. In the shadows next to the trees was a small figure that did not look human.

She peered closer, wondering if the small elfin face with the large eyes was supposed to represent a fairy or a sprite. In the next, one a hooded female figure floated in space and in her palm she held a luminous stone that had been painted with streaks of gold and silver radiating out from it. After uncovering the others, she realized that the stone was in all of them, either shining like a star in the background, or hanging on a cord around the neck like her doppelganger, or held in a hand. An intense feeling of *déjà-vu* made her dizzy and she reached for the wall to steady herself. Tiny black spots swam across her vision.

"You're pale as paper," her coworker said, peering at her worriedly from the doorway leading into the gallery proper.

"Take a look at this painting," Maeve pointed and moved back to give her room.

The metal door slammed closed as Susan came into the garage to examine the portrait. "She looks a bit like you, doesn't she? Why don't you go get a scone and a cup of coffee; I'll finish uncrating the rest."

Maeve's teeth chattered as she walked across the square, and it was not from the cold. Passing by the fountain, the serpent's green-gold eyes seemed to focus on her; she thought she saw the tongue flick in and out of the wide-open jaws. Her breath caught in her throat and she hurried past, looking over her shoulder once she reached the coffee shop. But when she looked back, sunlight glinted off the bright metal scales and water poured out of the motionless mouth and splashed innocently into the wide bowl below. She sat down heavily at a table and closed her eyes, trying to stop the images from rolling across her

mind. The paintings were so familiar—and yet, how could they be? And the wolves seemed as if they actually existed instead of being merely paint. An hour ago she was contented, even happy, and now it seemed as though her ordinary world had turned on its axis.



By the time Maeve returned, Susan had moved all the paintings into the gallery and placed them against the wall in the order she thought they should be hung. Maeve closed the garage door and joined her in the gallery space, walking down the two steps to take a look.

Since it was the most commanding, Susan had placed the portrait prominently as the centerpiece of the show. The woman seemed to be part of a willow tree, her legs disappearing at the place where the limbs split. Graceful willow branches cascaded downward on either side of the slim body dressed in a fitted red gown trimmed with gold braid. And behind her was an uneven stone bowl filled with water. But in the shadows where the wolves had been, there was only darkness. “Where are the wolves?” Maeve asked, goosebumps standing up on her arms. She hugged her arms around her body, a chill snaking up her spine.

“What wolves?” Susan asked. “I didn’t see any wolves.”

“They were right here.” Maeve pointed into the background. “How could they be gone?”

“You must have imagined them.”

Maeve was fairly certain she had not imagined them, but if they had been there, where were they now? An answer to this question popped into her mind unbidden and made her laugh: *They have other more important things to attend to.*

“What’s funny?” Susan asked, watching her with a puzzled expression.

Maeve shook her head in a dismissive way and bent to examine the symbol carved into the ornate wooden frame: a vertical

line with four equally spaced horizontal lines pointing to the right. After that, the words: The Willow.

Maeve moved closer. "The name on the tag is Lewin, same as mine.

What do you think's going on?"

Before Susan could answer, Maeve's cell phone rang. When she looked at the screen, she saw that it was Harold, a friend from college and a former lover. They stayed in touch, but it had been months since they'd spoken. "Hey. What's up?" Maeve answered, moving away from Susan.

"I was thinking about you. In fact, I couldn't get you out of my mind. Is anything strange going on?"

Maeve laughed. "Are you intimating that we have some telepathic link? To tell you the truth, though, we just got some artwork in for the new show, and there's a painting I'm staring at that looks exactly like me."

"Really. I'm coming by."

"Oh—kay," she answered, but the call had already ended. Was Harold in town?

A half hour later, Harold walked through the gallery door, his gaze going to where the two women were setting up for the show. His usually short brown hair hung to his shoulders, a two or three-day growth on his square jawline. His hazel eyes roamed the room. "So where's this mysterious painting?" he asked.

Maeve pointed and Harold moved to stand in front of it. After a minute or two, he turned. "This is definitely you, Maeve. Who's the artist?"

"Some woman from Scotland who has my last name."

"Some woman? Didn't you tell me your mother lived in Scotland?" he asked, walking along to stare at each painting in turn.

"Yes, but I haven't seen her since I was like two and a half. Dad said she was dead."

"These landscapes are giving me goosebumps," he said, rubbing his arms.

"You too? I've been having all sorts of reactions to them. Did you notice the stone?"

“Oh yeah, it’s in every one of them. Moonstones are linked to the moon, and a lot of cultures use them for protection. From what I’ve read, they signify the inward journey, to bring what’s hidden into the light.”

Maeve swiveled to stare at him. “Since when do you know such things?”

Harold met her surprised gaze. “I read mystical stuff all the time, Maeve. I thought you knew that about me.”

“I always thought you were a practical person, down to earth.”

Harold let out a laugh. “I have that side, too. I’m Leo with Capricorn rising and a Scorpio moon. Fun-loving, dogged, and highly sexual.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Maeve giggled, watching him. She and Harold had been in an intimate relationship, but because of distance and circumstances, had decided not to pursue it, although their friendship had continued. Harold was her best friend, the person she turned to her when she was troubled, worried, or depressed. “I don’t know my rising sign or my moon sign. All I know is my birth sign is Aries.”

Harold cocked his head to the side, one hand moving to his chin. “Aries is a fire sign, like Leo. I’d say you probably have an earth sign in there somewhere, like Virgo or Capricorn. You’re stubborn and exacting in your work.”

“Harold, you should do horoscopes,” Susan said, coming over to stand next to him and twirling a lock of her hair. “I’m a Taurus.”

Susan was flirting with him and something about this did not feel good, especially the way Harold was now gazing at her. Maeve moved away from the two of them, trying not to listen to their conversation. After all, she and Harold were only friends; if he wanted to go for Susan, then so be it.

Maeve was looking through files on the desk in the entry hall when Harold joined her. “Are you searching for the artist’s first name?” he asked.

She nodded, trying not to meet his soft hazel eyes. Something about his scruffy look was turning her on.

"Did you notice the Ogham at the bottom of that portrait?"

Maeve looked up, caught by him whether she liked it or not. "You mean those lines? What is Ogham, Mister 'I know everything mystical'?"

Harold grinned. "It's the language of the druids, an alphabet they used. There are other interpretations, but I like that one the best."

He pushed his hair back from his face just as he always did, but this time, Maeve felt a little flutter in her midsection as she watched him. "Are you growing a beard?"

"What? Oh, I just haven't bothered shaving. Did I tell you I'm quitting my job?"

"No. When did that come about?"

"It's been brewing." He looked into the gallery where Susan was on a stepladder readjusting a painting. "Hey, can I stay at your place tonight?" he asked, turning back to her. "I've got some errands to run, and I don't feel like driving all the way home."

Maeve wondered if he'd made a date with Susan, but she didn't want to ask. Harold lived a few hours away and had stayed at her place many times in the past couple of years, but right now she felt proprietary about him. "Will you be around for dinner?" she asked in her most innocent tone.

He frowned in puzzlement. "Yeah. I was going to take you out."

Maeve let out a sigh and relaxed. "Of course, you can stay." She glanced into the gallery noticing that Susan was having some difficulty with one of the paintings.

"Let me help with that," she said, hurrying down the steps. By the time she climbed off the ladder, Harold was gone.

It was close to five o'clock when Susan handed her a folded piece of paper. "Found this in the carton with the painting that looks like you," she said, holding it out.

Maeve unfolded it, noticing that it was hand drawn. It depicted a forest, a river, a small cottage, and a group of standing stones. Several other markings led the way into what looked like wilderness. The map seemed archaic and very old. "What is this?" she asked, perusing it carefully.

"How do I know? Just figured you might want it."

A vision of a very different land flashed through her mind, one with thatch-roofed houses and no cars. "What does it mean?"

Susan shook her head. "I'm the practical type, Maeve. I'm sure there's a logical explanation. Ask Carol on Monday. And by the way, are you and Harold together or just friends? He's a cutie."

Maeve felt a blush warm her cheeks. "We're friends, Susan. I've known him since college." Maeve was twenty-four now, two years since she graduated. Harold was two years older. Their love affair had begun before he graduated and continued for nearly a year.

"If I were you, I wouldn't let that one slip away. If you aren't interested, I could certainly go for him."

Maeve tried to smile as she met Susan's gaze. "I don't have any control over him. If you want to pursue it, go ahead. But he doesn't live in Milltown. He lives in Halston, and it's a haul to get there, no pun intended."

Susan nodded. "He told me all about his life and where he lived." She turned and pulled her coat off the coat rack. "I hope he comes to the opening." She slid her arms into her black wool pea coat and gave a little wave before she headed out the door.

Before leaving the gallery, Maeve went to take one last look at the portrait. It was very strange to have her own face staring back at her, but the expression in those eyes was decidedly more self-assured than hers had ever been. A vision went by so quickly that she barely caught it. She was in the land she'd had a glimpse of earlier and on horseback; she *was* this woman, and what she knew and felt was light years ahead of where she was now. In the shadows, the wolves' golden amber eyes followed her as she stepped back from the painting. "You're back," she whispered, hugging her arms around her body. They didn't answer.



When Maeve reached her apartment, Harold was leaning against his vintage Volkswagen bus with his arms folded. He picked up his duffel and his guitar case and followed her up to the second floor, waiting while Maeve unlocked the door and pushed it open with her hip.

“Wine?” she asked, heading to the refrigerator.

“I’d prefer a beer if you have it.”

Maeve poured a glass of wine from her open bottle and then pulled a beer from the fridge and twisted off the cap. She handed him the bottle and joined him on the couch.

He nodded his thanks and took a pull from the bottle. “I’ve been going kind of crazy trying to sort out my life. I hate accounting, but I’m good at it, and it pays my mortgage.”

Maeve took a sip from her glass. “Tell me about it. That painting in the gallery is extremely disturbing to me. My mother must have painted it—there’s no other explanation.” She gazed at him. “Seems like we’re both poised for something new.”

“I agree. Have you talked to your dad?”

“Dad’s no help. Whenever I bring her up, he changes the subject.”

“Hmm. Sounds like he’s hiding something. Do you know for sure she’s dead?”

Maeve shrugged. “I only know what Dad has told me, but now that the paintings arrived, I...”

“If your mom didn’t paint those paintings, I’ll eat my hat,” Harold interrupted.

Maeve laughed. “And which hat is that, Harold? Your Irish tweed cap, the Australian outback one you bought last summer, or the Stetson?”

Harold grinned. “I guess I’m a little over the top when it comes to hats, aren’t I?”

“You could say that.”

“Seriously. You said they came from Scotland. Who else would paint a likeness of you? Any other relatives over there?”

“I have no idea. Dad has never mentioned a word about Scotland or relatives. I’ve never even seen a picture of my mom.”

Harold put his beer down on the coffee table. "That's strange, Maeve. What father doesn't have at least one picture of his kid's mom? I think it's time you took matters into your own hands. Have you thought about going to Scotland?"

This thought had crossed her mind. She remembered the map and went to get it out of her pack. "Look at this," she said, handing it to him. "It was in the crate with the portrait."

Harold unfolded it, his eyebrows pulling together in concentration. "Looks archaic."

"The paper isn't that old."

"Could have been copied."

Maeve sat next to him, leaning close to get a look. "Yeah, I guess."

After a few minutes, Harold folded it up and placed it on the table behind the couch. "Can we hang out tomorrow?"

Maeve was surprised by the question and the way he asked it. When her gaze met his, she felt the flutter again and had to look away. "Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe a picnic in the park? I want to sort through my thoughts, and I need a sounding board if you're willing."

"You're my closest friend, Harold. Of course I'm willing."



Instead of going out, they made dinner together, and ate at the little kitchen table. After cleaning up, they finished the wine and talked about the paintings and Harold's future. When Maeve mentioned her experience with the wolves, Harold did not laugh.

"Those paintings may be more than paint," he said, seriously.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean there could be magic at work."

Maeve scoffed. "Come on, Harold. There's no such thing."

"What other explanation is there?"

"Well, I could have imagined them, or..." Maeve stared at the wall, trying to come up with a logical reason why wolves would be there one moment and not the next.

"Don't discount what you don't understand."

"Aren't you the mystical one," she said, trying to make light of the weird feeling in her stomach.

Around ten o'clock, Maeve yawned. "I'm going to bed," she announced, rising. "Sheets are still on the pullout couch from the last time you stayed, and there's a blanket in the chest there." She pointed to the cedar chest against the wall.

Harold took the wine glasses into the kitchen. "I've stayed enough times to know where everything lives," he said. "See you in the morning." The look he gave her was one she hadn't seen for a couple of years. Was that longing in his eyes?

Maeve brushed her teeth and put on her pajamas, her mind churning with what might be happening with Harold, the disappearing wolves, and trying to visualize her mother. Could the artist really be Finna? The name was just about all she knew about the woman who gave birth to her. She had to call her dad tomorrow and demand the truth. She put her head on the pillow and closed her eyes, lulled to sleep by Harold strumming his guitar.

Maeve ran down a forest path, a wolf on either side of her. Tall ferns brushed against her bare arms, low-lying cedar limbs catching at her hair. Something or someone was after her. When a crow flew out of nowhere and nearly slammed into her face, she veered off under the trees, and stopped to catch her breath. When she glanced down, she saw that she was dressed in the medieval red gown like the woman in the painting. For some reason, this did not surprise her.

The wolves waited, their amber eyes focused on hers. In the distance, she could see the cliff edge and a man standing there as though waiting for her. She was drawn to him. A prickling sensation went up and down her arms and she hugged them around her body.

Again, she hurried along the path, closing the distance between them. When he turned, she recognized Harold, her heart thumping loudly in her ears. But this Harold was not the Harold she

knew—this man was wearing a crown and carrying a broadsword in his right hand. His hair was long and tangled and he had a beard. She was ten feet away when he disappeared over the lip of the hill. When she reached the spot where he'd been and looked down, she saw a war going on. The valley floor was filled with men carrying swords, the clashing metal and shouts ringing in her ears. The dead and dying lay everywhere, blood pooling around them. And now Harold was in the midst of it all, his sword flashing silver as he fought for his life. Maeve screamed as a sword pierced his chest and sent him sprawling.

Maeve woke up gasping for breath. The bedclothes were tangled around her body and she was covered in sweat.

Her bedroom door banged open and Harold ran in. "Are you all right?"

"I...I don't know. I had a terrible dream." Maeve extricated herself from the sheets and blanket and tried to stand. When she swayed and nearly fell, Harold was instantly there, his arm around her waist for support.

"Sit. I'll get you a cup of coffee." He left her on the bed and disappeared, reappearing a moment later with a mug. "Drink this."

Maeve leaned back against the headboard and took a sip of the hot liquid. Harold had added cream and it tasted exactly as she liked it. She patted the bed next to her. "Can you stay with me for a minute?"

Harold sat next to her, his worried gaze moving across her face. "You screamed, Maeve. Can you remember the dream?"

"You had a crown on your head and I...I was dressed like the woman in the portrait. It was really freaky. There was a battle, and I was sure you were going to be killed. That's when I woke up."

Harold stared into the distance. "Sounds scary. I wonder what it means."

"It didn't seem like that kind of a dream—you know, the symbolic ones? This one seemed like it was really happening."

Harold chuckled. "So I'm a king and you are...what—my queen?"

Maeve punched him in the arm. "I'm not kidding, Harold. And I don't think I was a queen. I certainly didn't feel like one."

"How would you know?"

"Well, for one thing, I had two wolves with me." Maeve wrinkled her nose. "I smell something burning."

"Oh, crap! I was cooking breakfast." Harold jumped up and ran out of the bedroom.

Maeve finished her coffee, her mind still caught up in the dream. It seemed so real. By the time she dressed and reached the kitchen, Harold had placed two plates of food on the table.

"Sorry about the burned edges. Just cut them off."

Maeve glanced down at the omelet he'd prepared. "Looks perfectly fine to me. Thanks for cooking."



While they were cleaning the kitchen, Harold turned to her. "Are you still up for spending the day together?"

Again, that plaintive note, as though he expected to be rejected. "Why wouldn't I be? I can make some sandwiches for our picnic, or we can stop in at the deli."

"I suggest the deli. I didn't see much in the way of sandwich makings in your fridge. I think I'll go take a shower unless you want to go first...or possibly with?"

Maeve opened her mouth in surprise, gazing at her friend. His head was cocked to the side, his eyebrows lifted, an impish smile lifting the corners of his mouth. He was flirting with her.

Maeve laughed. "You go ahead, I'll wait."

"Okay, but you don't know what you're missing." Harold grinned as he grabbed his duffel off the floor and headed for the bathroom.

Maeve thought about when they were lovers. It had bothered her when they broke up, but when they discussed the situation, they both came to the same conclusion—it was better to remain friends than to risk it all. She had to admit she was

feeling the stirrings of attraction again, and it seemed he might be too.



While Harold was in the shower, the mailman knocked and handed Maeve a special delivery package covered in foreign stamps. She signed for it and closed the door. It was from Scotland from someone with her last name, an F. Lewin. She ripped it open and took out an envelope with her name written on it in block letters. Inside was a letter in longhand on thick cream-colored stock.

My dearest Maeve,

By now, the paintings must have arrived at the gallery. Your father reluctantly gave me your work address and your home address—this is how I managed to finagle a show where you worked. But in your father's defense, he's been worried and trying to keep you safe. You see, it was our intention to protect you from your future, but now I realize that this was impossible. I cannot stop what destiny has in store for you. You must come to Scotland before the Winter Solstice. I will explain everything once you arrive.

Please keep a watchful eye out for any unusual happenings. I do not wish to frighten you, but you could very well be in danger.

I have missed you so much, my sweet one, and wish I could have come to the U.S. with you and your father. Unfortunately, my part in the unfolding drama was to remain behind in Scotland. Please know that I love you with every part of my being and have missed you every day we've been apart.

All my love, Finna

Maeve barely heard Harold come out of the bedroom. "Hey, what's up?" he asked, putting his hands on her shoulders and making her jump.

"Another piece of the puzzle," she said quietly.

"What puzzle?"

"Take a look at this." Maeve handed him the manila envelope and headed for the shower.

Maeve showered quickly, her mind whirling with the letter. When she came out of the bathroom, Harold was sitting at the table playing his guitar. "Well? Did you read it?"

Harold turned, his gaze meeting hers. "Very odd, I have to say. Are you going?"

"I don't know what to do. I guess I should call Dad before I decide anything. For all I know, Finna could be completely crazy. It would explain why Dad's never talked about her."

"Yeah, I guess that's true. Why don't you get that over with, and then we can go for a hike and have a picnic."

Maeve nodded, her mind rushing ahead to what she would say to her father. She was angry with him for his unwillingness to tell her about her heritage. She picked up her cell phone and punched in his numbers a little more aggressively than usual.

"Dad? I just got a letter from my mother. Why didn't you tell me she was alive? She says I have to come to Scotland before Winter Solstice. What in hell is going on?"

"What exactly did your mother say?" Alex asked in his raspy smoker's voice.

Maeve imagined his slightly stooped figure, seeing him run nervous fingers through his salt and pepper hair. "She said I have some destiny to fulfill or some such nonsense. She also said I could be in danger. And Dad, there's a painting here that Finna sent—it's me but not me. How does she even know what I look like?"

There was a long silence before Alex said, "I sent her pictures of you over the years. She must have painted it from one of those. You should go, Maeve. Your mother has some strange ideas that I don't share, but she is your mother and she loves you."

"What ideas, Dad—the destiny thing? And what about the danger part?"

"Just go to Scotland, Maeve, and try not to take what she says too seriously."

When Maeve said something in response, she realized he'd hung up.

"Oh, my god! What is happening?" Maeve grabbed her stomach where nerves coiled like a snake ready to spring. When she redialed his number, he didn't answer.

Harold's mouth quirked. "Don't ask me, I'm not the one with the destiny."

"How can you make light of this? I feel like I'm living a nightmare."

"Your mother said she'd fill you in once you get there. I'd say this is a mystery you need to follow through to the end."

"Easy for you to say," she said. "You're not part of it."

Harold smiled. "Maybe I am. You did say I was wearing a crown in your dream, right?"

Maeve ignored him. "Am I supposed to just get on a plane and go to Scotland to meet a mother I didn't know I had? And what if she's nuts?"

"Looks like it. If I can swing it, I'll meet you over there sometime before the New Year. Sounds like fun to me."

Maeve felt something heavy lift off her shoulders. "Really? That would be great, Harold." She moved close to hug him, breathing in the scent of pine and fresh air clinging to his heavy wool sweater. When he pressed her close, she felt his heart beating against hers.

He kissed her on the cheek and pulled away. "You need some fresh air," he said, grabbing his wool tweed cap from the counter.

They met up with her neighbor, John, on their way downstairs, and Maeve stopped to introduce the two men. John was tall and lanky with dirty-blond hair that looked unwashed. He smirked at the two of them. "Having a little weekend *tete-a-tete*, are we?"

Maeve frowned at him. "Harold and I are friends, that's all."

John pulled a face and raised his eyebrows. "If you say so." He continued past them up the stairs and Maeve heard his door close.

"What's with that a-hole?" Harold asked.

Maeve shrugged. "I don't know him very well. He has social issues, I guess."

"I saw some older dude go in his apartment when I was waiting for you yesterday. I swear I've seen that man before, either hanging around the gallery or somewhere I've been recently. He was wearing a cassock and had a giant gold cross around his neck. The church is really into baubles."

Maeve laughed. "Maybe John is having an exorcism."



Maeve and Harold followed the path toward the river where a light mist hung over the water. The echoing calls of ducks and geese mingled with the low roar of the swiftly moving current. Apparently, they were the only people in the park. Heavy sweaters and hats kept them warm and they had brought along an extra blanket for their legs. Harold spread the plaid blanket and opened the bottle of Zinfandel while Maeve put out cold roast beef and freshly baked whole wheat bread, and the various pickled vegetables from the deli.

Maeve threw some breadcrumbs to the ducks and then glanced at Harold, who was lying back on his elbows watching the river. "What are you thinking about?"

"You. Scotland. Me wearing a crown." He reached for a piece of roast beef and pulled off a chunk of bread. "Your life is about to change."

"If I go."

"Are you kidding? You have to go."

Maeve stared into the distance, thinking about the letter. "I've always had this strange sense about my future—as though

something was waiting for me. And even though Dad told me my mother was dead, I had this unrealistic hope that she would miraculously materialize. But I have a career here, and I was hoping to move up in this business, to become manager of the gallery.”

“I understand completely.”

Maeve met his gaze. “You know, if I really think about it, my life here has never felt quite right. This place has never felt like home.”

“I’m in the same boat, Maeve. I love Halston, but all of it blew up a month or so ago. I can’t be an accountant for the rest of my life.”

“Do you believe in destiny?”

“I do believe in it. I’ve read too many books about fate and serendipity. And my Scottish mom has told me a zillion stories about odd happenings from way back when.” He chuckled. “Her maiden name is MacAlpin and she insists she’s related to royalty.”

“If she’s related to royalty, you are too. But who is MacAlpin?”

“Kenneth MacAlpin was the first king of Scotland.”

The image of Harold wearing a crown appeared in her mind, but she pushed it away. This Harold was her friend and confidant. The other Harold had been a warrior—like Kenneth must have been.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Harold said a few minutes later. Her pulled her up. “We can leave everything here.”

Maeve looped her arm through Harold’s. She matched her stride with his as they strolled next to the willow and sycamore trees lining the riverbank. She was close to Harold’s height and she liked how they fit together, hip to hip. His arm was warm and strong; she could feel muscles under the heavy sweater he wore. The mat of sodden leaves under their feet masked their footfalls. Fog drifted in from the river, and soon they were enveloped in a cottony world where sounds were muffled and the air was completely still. Maeve had a strange feeling they were being

watched but attributed it to the thick fog. They met no one. It felt like someone or something was holding its breath, waiting.



Sunday morning dawned bright and sunny, and despite the dip in temperature, Harold insisted that Maeve go with him on an early morning walk. "There's a forest trail behind the college that will get our hearts pumping," he said, tugging Maeve from her nest of blankets.

"I hardly slept at all," she complained grumpily. "And I thought you planned to go home this morning."

Harold stopped to stare at her. "Do you want me to go home?"

Maeve gazed into his warm eyes. "No. But if you want me to be in a good mood, you'd better have some coffee brewing."

Harold laughed and dragged her out of bed. "I have coffee, milady," he said, bowing. "And scones for your delight."

"What? How long have you been awake?"

Harold grinned sheepishly. "Just an hour, or maybe two."

"What's with you?" Maeve reached for her robe.

"Maybe it's all this talk of destiny or maybe being here with you. I feel energized and ready to take on the world. I guess I needed a couple of days away from Halston."

Maeve followed him into the kitchen, happy to see that he was a man of his word. A plate of scones cooled on the counter and her French press was filled with coffee, steam rising from the spout. She poured herself a cup and sat down. "My dreams were mild last night. After the letter and everything I expected to wake up screaming again."

Harold sat across from her. "It's because you made a decision. You're going to Scotland, and I'm coming over for Hogmanay."

"Hog what?"

"It's the Scottish New Year."

"You know a lot more about Scotland than I do."

"Scottish mom, remember? You'll know more than I do soon enough."



Maeve and Harold dressed warmly and left the apartment, heading for the college and the woods behind. There was still snow left behind among the trees from the last storm, and chunks of ice came over the tops of Maeve's boots as she traipsed after Harold. "Wait a second," she called out, taking off her boot.

When she straightened, Harold was standing very close to her. The atmosphere shifted as he bent to kiss her lightly on the lips. His nose was cold against her face, and he smelled of wood smoke from the fire they'd made this morning. She felt an ache deep inside as she put her arms around his neck and pressed against him. When they pulled apart, they stared at each other without speaking.

"It's all I can do not to ravish you right here," Harold whispered.

Maeve looked around the deserted woods, the snow piled up against the tree trunks. "That would be a cold endeavor," she said wryly. She took his hand and prodded him forward on the trail, but her heart was thumping crazily in her ears. Things were changing between them.

"When are you heading home?" she asked a few minutes later.

Harold turned to look at her, his eyes filled with longing. "I have to get back. I still have a few clients who expect me to deal with their finances."

"I wish you could stay."

They stopped and gazed at one another. "Maybe I can spend tonight and leave early in the morning. My first client isn't until ten."

"Are you sure?"

Harold nodded, his eyes never leaving her face. Without saying a word, they both turned and headed down the hill and back toward Maeve's apartment.



Maeve woke in her bed, a feeling of languid ease moving through her body. Harold was dozing next to her and she pulled the sheet off him to stare at his well-proportioned body curled toward hers. When she ran her fingers lightly across his skin, his eyes opened and he pulled her close, his hazel gaze intent. He held her gaze as their bodies joined, the exquisite pleasure bringing them to the brink and pushing them over. "Harold," she moaned, sinking back against the pillows.

"I concur," he said, lazily kissing her shoulder. They fell asleep again, his leg over hers, his body pressed into her back where she curved against him.

A long while later, Maeve carefully extricated herself, found her robe, and went into the kitchen to make something to eat. It was late afternoon and hunger pangs had taken over her stomach. "What do you want?" she called from the kitchen. "I have frozen pizza or we could make a vegetable omelet with salad."

"Anything. Whatever is easiest—I'll be there in a minute."

She decided on the omelet and had broken four eggs into a bowl and was whisking when Harold arrived looking sleepy and appealingly disheveled. He was wearing a pair of gray sweats and a faded green t-shirt. "What can I do?"

"Could you chop up some garlic and asparagus?"

They worked side by side with only the rhythmic chop of the knife and the sizzle of butter as things were added to the pan. Every so often, she stole a look at him and a little flush of pleasure would go through her. When he glanced at her and their eyes met, his face was so familiar and yet utterly new at the same time. This was very different from the last time they'd been

lovers, as if their deeper friendship had brought them into an entirely new place.



For the first time in many days, Maeve slept without dreaming. In the morning, she fixed coffee in a daze and carried two mugs into the bedroom. Harold was awake, leaning against the headboard with his eyes closed. When she walked toward him, he opened his eyes and pulled at the tie of her robe.

"Careful, Harold," she laughed, "I have hot coffee."

"Sorry, but I just couldn't help myself."

Maeve turned toward him as she got on the other side of the bed. He had set his coffee cup on the bedside table, his gaze focused on her.

"Maybe we should have coffee first."

"I have to leave soon."

"Damn. I forgot." Maeve put her coffee on the table and removed her robe, reveling in Harold's expression as he gazed at her body.

"You're beautiful," he mumbled, reaching for her.

"This isn't the first time you've seen me naked, you know."

"I forgot," he murmured, his fingers moving through her tangled hair. His mouth found hers.

It was later that she asked, "What's going on with you? This is like the worst time for us to start this, not that I'm complaining."

"When we decided to take the sex out of our relationship, I knew it was the wrong decision, at least for me. But I thought you didn't feel the same way. I'm sorry about the timing. I didn't know you'd be leaving for Scotland a second after we became lovers again."

Maeve leaned forward and looped her arms around his neck. "I thought it was interesting that neither of us ever had more than one date with someone new. But since you were never around, I just assumed you weren't interested anymore."

Harold nodded, pulling her against him. "Making love with your best friend is like having whipped cream on your ice cream. I can't imagine being with anyone else." He kissed her and then pulled back to look into her eyes. "Are you okay with this?"

"I'm more than okay. And I'm so glad you'll be coming to Scotland. That's the best news yet." But underneath her happiness, Maeve's world had tilted—the paintings, her upcoming trip to meet a mother she didn't know she had, and now Harold. It felt like overload. And on top of that, there was something she couldn't identify—the feeling that she was being watched, like at the river. Whatever it was, it hovered at the corner of her consciousness, just out of reach.



Chapter Two

MAEVE WAS WANDERING through the farmer's market when she came upon the psychic who had given her a reading in the past. "Hello, Gertrude, remember me? Maeve Lewin?"

Gertrude straightened from where she'd been examining some handmade baskets. "Of course I do. I think of you now and again and wonder how you're doing." The dark-haired woman smiled and held out her hands. Gone was the heavy kohl that had lined her eyes the last time Maeve had gotten a reading. And her black wool skirt and heavy brown sweater looked ordinary and drab. The exotic gypsy had been replaced with a pale woman in her forties who looked tired.

"Would you like a reading?"

Maeve stared at her, trying to search out the flamboyant fortuneteller who had talked her into having a Tarot card reading six months before. "Yes," she said, dubiously. "I think I would."

Gertrude brightened. "Shall we go back to my booth?"

"You have a booth here?"

"Yes, I come to this market every year around this time. It seems everyone has questions when the dark begins to usurp the light."

Maeve followed her along the stalls of fruits and vegetables, flowers and small handmade gift items. Her booth was at the end of the row and set back from the others. It had a small kerosene heater and a heavy rug curtain for privacy and warmth.

"So, Maeve, how are you?"

As the dark eyes stared into hers, Maeve felt like Gertrude could see right through her. The psychic had tied a brightly colored Indian print scarf around her head to hold her hair back from her face, and now her cheeks were full of color, her brown eyes deep and wise.

"So-so. I've been having dreams and I just found out my mother is alive and living in Scotland. She sent her paintings to the gallery where I work, and one of them is a portrait of me wearing a medieval red dress. Dad always told me she was dead. And I've made plans to go and visit her for the Winter Solstice. And Harold I have become lovers again and it's very bad timing because..."

Gertrude held up her hand. "Let's stop here, shall we? You've mentioned a number of important issues. Let's see what the cards have to say." Gertrude took Maeve's hands and closed her eyes. "Breathe deeply and let your thoughts drift away."

Maeve felt the energy from the woman's hands flow into her body, filling her with calm. After a moment, Gertrude let go and picked up the Tarot deck. "Shuffle the cards," she said.

Maeve picked up the deck, shuffled, and divided it into three piles as she had the first time. "Now, pick them up and stack them with your left hand," Gertrude ordered. "Good. Now close your eyes."

Maeve was in a dark tunnel. It was narrow and absolutely silent. She held out her hands feeling damp rock on either side of her. It felt oppressive, as though she couldn't take a deep enough breath. As her eyes became accustomed to the lack of light, she noticed a slight greenish glow emanating from the walls. A low sound came to her

ears and she peered ahead where the tunnel wound downhill and disappeared in darkness. She inched forward. In the background, she could hear the slap of cards being laid on the table and Gertrude's droning voice. "Keep going, Maeve," she heard someone say.

"You will be traveling a great distance," Gertrude droned. *The tunnel headed steeply down and she stumbled, righting herself with a sharp intake of breath.* "You will be coming into your power after this trip—you have a momentous and dangerous job ahead." Maeve struggled to listen. *The last thing her conscious mind heard was,* "Your destiny is catching up with you."

Maeve lay flat on her back under an oak tree, its thick branches gnarled and misshapen by age. Next to her was a circle of standing stones, and when she looked at them closely, she noticed the same lines carved into the stone that were on the frame of her portrait. Ogham.

An icy wind touched her cheek and she smelled smoke. In the distance, she heard the clash of swords, screams of pain, the whinny of frightened horses. Thunder rolled across the sky, silencing the harsh cries of crows in the branches above her. When darkness blocked the light, she looked up to see hundreds of dark birds flying silently overhead. Her body contracted and she covered her head with her hands.

Maeve opened her eyes to see Gertrude staring at her with some concern.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Yeah, I think so." Maeve didn't know what she felt. "Was I asleep?"

"I don't know if I would call it sleep. You were gone for a few minutes. Do you remember where you were?"

"I remember a hillside and a stone circle—birds."

Gertrude nodded. "Anything else?"

"No, not really." A lingering unease made her frown as she struggled to remember. "What happened that you're not saying?"

"I cannot tell you unless you remember."

"Why not? I need to know, don't I? It is my reading."

"Yes, but there are certain rules. If your conscious mind is not ready for what your unconscious is aware of, I cannot be the one to cross that barrier."

Shadowy images hovered on the outskirts of her mind but refused to come into focus. "What if I don't remember?"

"You will when you're ready. You must trust yourself and your inner knowing, Maeve. The outer is only your conscious mind."

Maeve shook her head. "How can I trust something that I can't even see?"

Gertrude looked into the distance for a moment before she answered. "It takes practice," she said turning back. "Think about how you perceive things without working it all out in your mind—your intuition."

Maeve nodded slowly. "I remember traveling or a trip."

"Yes. That was part of the reading."

"I also remember a place—a tunnel." Maeve felt cold, as though those dank walls had entered her bones.

"Don't worry, you will know what to do when the time comes; just follow the signs."

"What signs?"

"I cannot say more than this."

"What about my mother?"

"You've already discovered your mother, haven't you?"

"Well, yes, but I haven't met her."

"She's part of your future." Gertrude got up and opened the curtain. A light snow had begun to fall. Maeve looked down at the table where the Rider-Waite Tarot cards were laid out in a cross formation. The Page of Cups was in the center and she saw the Tower, the Devil card and the Lovers and some others that she didn't get a chance to examine.

Maeve gave Gertrude some cash. "Should I come back?"

"I have no more to tell you unless you remember." Gertrude looked at her intently. "I wish I could say more."

Maeve walked away feeling more confused than she had before the reading. Her thoughts went to Harold. It had been over two weeks and she'd heard nothing from him. Her trip to Scotland had been finalized. She would be leaving soon. Why hadn't he called?

She was just about to put on her coat when she noticed the crow on top of the telephone pole, one beady eye focused on her. For some reason, she felt frozen in place, unable to move. A second later, the bird flew from its perch and attacked her with talons as sharp as razors, drawing blood on both her forearms. She screamed and swatted at it until it flew away. Badly shaken, she headed toward home, planning what herbal salves to put on the oozing wounds. She'd never heard of a crow attacking like this.

It was only later that she remembered the sound of a man's laughter and the shadow that caught her eye just as she crossed the street to her apartment.



The next day was the opening and Maeve dressed carefully in her black dress with sleeves that covered her cuts. Her sleep had been interrupted the night before by disturbing dreams that featured crows and the portrait of her. She'd merged with the figure and headed away, following the wolves into the shadows.

When she looked into the mirror, she realized her hair was a tangled mess from rolling around during the night. She pinned it up using a couple of sticks she'd recently acquired for just this purpose and then applied the red lipstick that she saved for special occasions. The scratches throbbed and burned and she still felt shaky, wondering if she'd really heard laughter and had seen a shadowy figure disappear into the grove of pines behind her apartment building.

But now, she had to put it behind her and focus on the day. She was the one who had arranged for the caterers and sent out the invitations. The crowd would be substantial—she didn't have time to worry about something her overactive imagination had conjured up.



When Maeve arrived at First Street Gallery, Susan and Carol, the owner, were both there and busy with last-minute details. Two large bunches of flowers had been left on the floor by the door, and Maeve went to find a vase.

"It all looks fine," Carol said in her southern drawl, putting her hand on Maeve's shoulder. "I knew I was smart to hire you."

Susan gave her a thumbs up and went to greet the caterers arriving through the front entrance. Maeve went down into the gallery to straighten a few paintings that had shifted. When she came to the portrait, she stopped to take a look, peering into the background for a moment when she saw something move. Gasping, she stepped back, nearly falling over the bench behind her. She was positive she'd just seen a wolf trotting through the trees behind the figure. She took a deep breath and turned away, trying to keep herself from running out of the gallery. Was she losing it? First the crow attack, and then the laughter, and now this.

An hour later, the gallery was filled with people, champagne glasses in their hands as they milled about, chatting and staring at the paintings. There were "Sold" stickers on several of them. Out of the corner of her eye, Maeve noticed a priest walking slowly along, his hands clasped behind his back. When he came to the portrait of her, he stopped and leaned forward, his eyebrows moving together in a frown. When he pushed his heavy gray hair off his forehead with the fingers of his right hand, the ring he wore caught her eye. It was heavy gold, and from where she stood, it reminded her of a Celtic knot, but this knot was broken in the middle. He turned and signaled to Carol, who walked over to him. Maeve watched them talking and then the man removed his wallet from under his cassock and pulled out a wad of bills that he handed to her. There was something familiar about him.

A couple came into the gallery and Maeve turned away to greet them. Later, when the crowd thinned and she searched for the priest, he was gone—and so was her portrait.



It was the day before her flight when she finally heard from Harold. She felt hurt and angry and wanted to lash out, but she gave him a chance to explain himself first.

"Maeve, I'm sorry I haven't called. Everything has been crazy up here. Can I come down and spend the night? I want to drive you to the airport tomorrow."

"Why haven't you called? I figured you'd decided it was all a mistake. That's basically what happened the last time we tried this."

"It's just the opposite, Maeve. I've been trying to wrap my mind around how strongly I feel for you. That's partly why I haven't called. The other reason is my damned accounting business. I can't seem to convince people that I'm actually quitting. They won't leave me alone. If I get on the road now, I'll be there before five. Can I come?"

"Come down, but we need to have a long talk before my flight. I don't want to leave without figuring out what's going on between us. Are you up for it?"

"As long as you forgive me, I'm up for anything."

After they hung up, Maeve pulled her suitcase out of her closet and began to fill it. She knew Scotland could be bitterly cold this time of year. Her stomach was in knots as she packed a couple of sweaters and warm pants and added socks and a pair of boots. When her glance went to the books on her bedside table—one on herbs that she had bought several years before for a class she was taking and another on the magical properties of trees—she threw them into her carry-on. They would make for good reading on the flight.

By the time Harold knocked on the door, she was pretty much done and had opened a bottle of wine. Her nerves were at a fever pitch.

As soon as she opened the door, she forgave him. His liquid eyes, his furrowed brow, and the way he reached for her and pulled her close gave her all the information she needed. His feelings for her had not changed.

She closed the door behind him and pulled him toward the couch and the table where she'd placed the wine, two glasses,

and a plate of cheese and crackers. "You put me through hell, you know. As if I don't have enough going on."

"Maeve, I—"

Maeve smiled and handed him a glass of wine. "Insecurity is the worst." She shook her head.

"Believe it or not, I've been insecure too. I thought you might freak out about what happened between us, especially with the opening and your upcoming trip. It was pretty intense."

"I have been freaking out, but not about my feelings for you. I got a reading from the psychic I told you about, Gertrude."

"What did she have to say?"

"She said I have a momentous task in front of me. This trip seems like more than just a trip, and I'm scared."

"Isn't it enough to meet your mom after all these years?"

"What about the destiny thing?"

Harold shrugged and took a sip of wine. "I want you to call me and let me know what's going on. I'm not getting there until the thirty-first."

"I will if I can get my cell phone to work." Maeve pushed up her sleeves, exposing the long scratch marks on her arms.

"What the hell happened?" Harold asked, grabbing her hands.

"Didn't I tell you? I had a run in with a crazed crow." She tried to laugh but the cuts hadn't healed yet, even after applying her concoction of calendula, comfrey, and arnica.

"Jesus, Maeve. The cuts look infected."

"It's fine, Harold. It's getting better." She pushed her sleeves down. "Dad made me promise to call him too. Everyone seems worried, and that worries me even more. Did I tell you about the priest I saw at the opening?"

"No. Was that significant for some reason?"

"He spent a long time in front of the portrait of me, and the ring he was wearing creeped me out."

Harold frowned. "Why?"

"It looked like a broken knot and it seemed sinister. And he bought the portrait."

Harold looked surprised. "He—bought the portrait of you?"

"I thought it was pretty strange too, and Carol said he just forked over three-thousand dollars like it was nothing."

"Come here," Harold said, placing his wine down and reaching for her. "Everything's going to be all right," he whispered into her ear. "I'll be with you soon."

His breath was warm on her neck, his arms pulled tight around her. She felt safe until the moment he released her. "I'll be counting the days until you get there," she said, trying to forget the wolves, the priest, and her dreams.



The morning came too quickly. There had not been much time for sleeping, and when the alarm went off at five o'clock a.m., it startled both of them. Maeve jumped out of bed and headed for the shower while Harold went to the kitchen to make coffee.

He brought two mugs into the bedroom, handing one to Maeve through the open bathroom door.

"Thanks, I definitely need coffee this morning."

"You can sleep on the plane. Just feel sorry for me, the one who has to drive home and see a client this afternoon."

Maeve came out of the bathroom in her underwear, her hair up in a towel. She saw Harold looking at her, eyes half closed. "Don't even think about it, we only have thirty minutes until we need to leave, and I'm not even dressed."

"I can be quick," Harold teased.

"Didn't you get enough?" she laughed.

"It's never enough."

"You need to hold that thought until the thirty-first." She pulled the towel from her hair and shook out her wet curls.



On the way to the airport, Harold pulled the map out of his jacket pocket. "We never talked about this. I think it's significant, don't you?"

"You brought it along? Why?"

"Your mom sent it, Maeve. I figured she meant you to have it. Look at this." He held it out with one hand as he steered with the other. "Those lines are Ogham," he said, pointing to the rocks drawn in at the top of the map. "And this cottage could be your mother's place. If it is, there's something she wanted you to see. And look here—these lines represent mountains, and this is a river."

"I have enough to worry about without that too. Give it to me," she said, snatching it out of his hands. "I can ask Finna when I get there."

"Jesus, Maeve, don't be so damn touchy. I just thought we should have examined it further. I know it has some special meaning. Take a look at the rock on the hillside next to the standing stones—it has writing on it."

Maeve thought about her vision of the standing stones, the Ogham carved into them. She didn't want to think about it after everything that had happened over the past weeks. "Why are you so interested in this stupid map all of a sudden? Whatever meaning it has will have to wait," she snapped, pushing the map into her pack.

"Why don't you ever take what I have to say seriously? It's like you've made up your mind without even listening. It's infuriating."

"I'm not ignoring what you have to say, it's just that..."

"It's just that you don't want to hear my insights. As usual, it's all about you." He shook his head, his lips pressed together. "I wish we hadn't..."

Maeve swiveled to stare at him. "Hadn't what, Harold? Hadn't had sex? You're the one who freaked out the last time. Are you freaking out this time too? Why did you start it if you felt this way?"

Harold frowned and turned. "You're the one who couldn't handle it last time, Maeve. You said I lived too far away, for

starters. And you also mentioned some guy you were dating before I came into the picture. 'Ron's a better fit,' you said. It really pissed me off."

"I only said that because you were acting like we shouldn't have taken that step. I was trying to save myself from a nasty break-up down the road."

"Jesus, Maeve! This is like the worst time to be having this conversation! Why didn't we hash this out at the time? And what about the map?"

"I don't know." Maeve stared out the window.

At the airport, Harold helped Maeve carry her bags to the counter. The line was long and, once she checked in, there was little time for lengthy farewells. With the new restrictions, he couldn't accompany her to the boarding gate.

After she had taken off her coat and shoes, she turned to say goodbye, but Harold was already gone. He hadn't even said goodbye or have a good trip or anything.

At the gate, she put her carry-on bag next to an empty seat and sat down, wondering why in the world they had argued about a stupid map. He was angry with her, and it was too late to do anything about it.



Chapter Three

FEAR GRIPPED HER throat as soon as the plane began to taxi down the runway. She was heading into the unknown. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes when she thought of Harold. But then she remembered the map and his sudden interest in it on the way to the airport. Why hadn't he brought it up earlier when they could have discussed it? Her mind was too frazzled with the trip and what she would find in Scotland to worry about a stupid map. Maybe Harold wouldn't even come to Scotland now. The plane rumbled and shook as it built up speed.

"No need to worry, lass."

Startled, Maeve turned. She hadn't heard this man arrive next to her. He wore a long, hooded robe like a monk of some kind. His deep-set eyes had fastened on her knuckles, which had turned white from gripping. "I've never been on a plane this big."

His eyes crinkled when he smiled. "But that is not what you worry about. It is something you left behind, and your anticipation of what you will find in Scotland."

Maeve listened to his archaic accent, wondering how he knew. "I was born in Scotland, but I don't remember it. I was very young when we left. I've been living in Milltown, Massachusetts since I was three. You see, I didn't even know my mother was alive until recently; this visit will be a reunion for both of us..." she babbled on nervously, listening to the change in the engines as the plane lifted into the sky. "My father kept her a secret for some reason I can't fathom." When Maeve met the man's deep indigo eyes she felt lost for a second, her mind going blank.

He watched her, a smile playing around his lips. "MacCuill," he said, holding out his hand.

"Maeve Lewin," she managed to mutter, grasping his rough hand in hers.

"The family resemblance is remarkable."

"Resemblance? Do you know my mother?" Maeve examined the well-worn face, the gray beard that he now pulled his fingers through.

MacCuill nodded, bringing his hand back to rest in his lap. "The first time I saw your mathair, she was a wee babe in the arms of your seanamhair."

Without thinking Maeve knew that the words meant mother and grandmother, but she had never studied Gaelic. "You're Scottish? Your accent seems different."

"Mine is an ancient dialect. I am very old, you see," he added, chuckling to himself.

It was hard to tell how old he was. He seemed ageless, and yet his deeply lined face suggested he was somewhere in his late seventies.

MacCuill frowned, turning toward the aisle where a man had paused next to their seats. When he held up his hand whoever it was headed away.

Maeve tried to get a look at the person, but all she saw was a dark robe. Her heart sped up as she visualized the priest who had purchased her portrait. But why would he be on this plane?

"You need to rest," MacCuill said.

"Oh, I'm fine," she answered because she'd been very much awake just a moment before, but as soon as these words were out of her mouth, her eyelids grew heavy and she had an overwhelming desire to close them.



She was in a dense conifer forest on a narrow trail. A white-haired man carrying a walking stick was ahead of her, moving quickly away. "Wait!" she cried, running to catch up. "It's you!"

"Whom were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Where are we?" A bright glow surrounded the trees, despite the gloom of the forest. She looked up the trail to where the tree line ended, opening onto a wide valley.

"We are in Otherworld. I thought you could use a bit of preparation."

"Preparation for what?"

"This is a place where time stands still, where magic still exists. Look around, Maeve, and tell me what you see."

By now they had reached the edge of the trees. In front of her, a flat plain covered in thick purple heather, bracken fern, and yellow gorse stretched into the distance. "Everything's lit up."

MacCuill nodded. "How it should be here, the way it once was."

When the soft breeze touched her cheek, Maeve breathed deeply, savoring the sweet scents riding the air. Bees buzzed around the flowers, delicately picking up nectar.

MacCuill touched her arm, pulling her attention away from the pastoral scene. "You have been summoned here to restore the balance."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"You are part of an ancient prophecy, Maeve—I witnessed the ceremony to name you. Not name you in the way you imagine, more like naming the force you would become—a blessing bestowed by the moon goddess."

"This is a dream—I mean, it has to be, doesn't it?"

When MacCuill turned his deep blue eyes on hers, her thoughts cascaded back to a dream she'd had of merging with the painted figure that looked so much like her. Running down a wooded path, her mind had opened, expanding into a new and vivid reality. He watched her, as though he knew where her thoughts had gone.

"Do you understand now?" he asked.

At Maeve's nod, MacCuill turned, striding away from her.

Maeve followed, carefully stepping into his footprints as they made their way by burbling streams hidden under thick clumps of heather. Sun warmed her bare arms as she gazed across the radiant landscape.

"See those mountains in the distance?"

Maeve squinted toward the horizon where massive snow-covered peaks lifted into the sky like shining beacons.

"That is *Caer Sidi*, where the moon goddess, *Arianrhod* resides. I have been the guardian of her domain for more years than I can count."

Maeve listened to his deep voice, registering the mingling scents of flowers, the hum and buzz of bees, birdsong in the distance. She was too taken with the scenery to put her questions into words. Instead, she bent to touch the heather, feeling the roughness of the coarse bush under her fingers. If this was a dream, it was one of the most realistic ones she had ever had. When MacCuill spoke again, she noticed a change in tone and the sadness behind his eyes.

"What you see here is how *Otherworld* was. Now I must show you what it has become." Before she could protest, he grabbed her hand and she felt herself spinning away in a rainbow of color.

When he let go, they were not far from where they'd been standing a minute before, but this time there were no bees, no sun, and no flowers. A dark and ominous sky hung low over the flat and frozen plain. Above the peaks to the north, the sky was filled with roiling black clouds.

"Despite my best efforts, the protections are lost and darkness threatens to overtake *Otherworld*. The moon goddess is alone in her castle without the safeguards she has always had. I fear for her and all the creatures and plants that live here. The gods and goddesses

have grown weak, and the water and tree spirits wait in another realm, wondering if they will ever be able to return."

Maeve felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. What could she do about any of this? As she turned to say as much, she woke up.

"Glad to see you're awake in time for breakfast." The flight attendant's teeth looked unusually white as she smiled, deftly pulling the tray holder down and placing the food tray on it.

"Where's the man who was sitting next to me?"

"What man?"

"There was an old man dressed in a robe in the seat next to me."

"I haven't seen anyone fitting that description, and as far as I know, this seat has been vacant for the entire flight."

"But I was talking to him, you must have seen him. I think he was some kind of a monk."

"Maybe you were dreaming. You've been asleep for most of the flight."

She had? Maeve thought about the vivid dream. She could still see MacCuill's indigo eyes and feel his dry hand in hers.

Maeve was still pondering MacCuill's disappearance when they landed. Reaching for her carry-on under the seat in front of her, she was surprised to find a walking stick next to it. She pulled it out, examining the intricate knot carved into the top. It was beautiful, the dark wood smooth, as though worn by the many hands that had carried it.



Maeve's nerves were at a fever pitch as she approached customs. It would only be a minute or two before she was reunited with her mother. She readjusted her pack and tucked the walking stick under her arm, scanning the area just beyond the barrier. A crush of people waited, and Maeve watched the tearful reunions with trepidation. Would she and Finna like each other?

I should call her mother. But that didn't seem right either. Working her way around an embracing couple, she heard her name being called and glanced over her shoulder to the right. A small woman with dark hair smiled her way, gesturing excitedly.

As their eyes met, Maeve dropped her bag and the walking stick, tripping over them in her haste to reach her mother. When Finna's arms went round her, Maeve burst into tears. It was a long moment before she could force herself to let go.

"My dearest, Maeve!" Finna exclaimed. "What a welcome sight ye are, and exactly as I pictured ye."

Maeve gazed into the gray-green eyes. The light Scottish trill touched some deeply buried memory making her throat contract. It seemed impossible that it had been twenty-one years since she'd been with this woman. "I was afraid you wouldn't be here. I left the flight information on some answering machine that wasn't yours—someone named Lily?"

"Lily is my oldest friend. She's kind enough to allow my friends to leave their messages with her. I dinna have a telephone."

"No telephone? Not even a cell?" A flutter went through her. How could they keep in touch when she went back to the States?

"Not even a cell." Finna bent to pick up the bag that Maeve had dropped. "Where did ye get this?" she asked, lifting the walking stick.

"It's a strange story," Maeve began, as they walked together toward baggage claim. "It was on the floor next to my seat and no one claimed it, so I decided to keep it."

"It looks like one an old friend of mine uses," Finna observed, looking carefully at the carved knot.

"Is this friend an old man with gray hair and beard?" Maeve joked.

Finna's eyebrows went up. "Aye. He's called MacCuill, the druid."

"A druid? Really? I didn't know they still existed. Are you saying he was real? I thought I was dreaming. He said he knew you and my grandmother...and then I fell asleep. Oh, never mind—it's all too strange."

“Please go on, I’m always interested in what MacCuill is up to.”

Finna looked so attentive that Maeve related the entire surreal experience, glad that she was being taken seriously. “And when I woke, MacCuill wasn’t there.”

“He’s capable of all sorts of, what ye might call—magical phenomena. He can project himself from one place to another, and so I dinna doubt for a minute that he was on your plane. He left that walking stick so ye would remember.”

“Do you mean he can be in two places at once?”

Finna nodded.

“But none of the flight attendants saw him. I asked.”

“If he wishes, he can cause people to forget they ever saw him. But more importantly, what did ye think of your experience in Otherworld?”

“I—I don’t know. He seemed to expect me to fix everything that had deteriorated, but I woke up before I could question him.”

As they reached baggage claim, Finna turned her attention to the carrousel. It was only a couple of minutes before Maeve’s bag appeared. When Maeve grabbed it, Finna took hold of her sleeve. “Let’s go home and settle in. I have much to tell ye.”

Maeve was surprised by the urgency in her mother’s voice and the way she looked around furtively. On the way out of the airport, Finna stopped abruptly, a warning hand on Maeve’s arm. Her mother’s face was blanched, all the ruddiness gone from her cheeks. “What is it?” Maeve whispered.

Finna pointed toward the escalator where an older man dressed in priest robes had just stepped on.

“Who is that?”

“Someone I hoped I would never see again.”

Maeve stared at the man she’d seen in the gallery. “He came to the opening and he bought the painting of me.”

Finna stared at Maeve, her eyes wide. “He bought it? That is not good.”

“Why not? He paid more than the asking price.”

"Ye didna ken, child. That painting is full of magic and now he has it in his possession."

"I don't understand. How can a painting have magic?"

"That man is your great-uncle, and he is a very powerful sorcerer. There is much for ye to learn, Maeve."

Maeve was too dumbfounded to ask any more questions as she hurried after her mother. She climbed into the passenger side of the ancient Mini Cooper and then Finna drove out of the Edinburgh airport heading west on the A71. The heat was cranked up all the way, but it still wasn't enough to keep cold air from blowing in around Maeve's feet. December in Scotland was definitely not tourist time.

"There's a rug in the back seat if ye wish to cover your legs," Finna said, turning around to reach for it.

"I'll get it," Maeve said quickly as the car swerved sideways.

When Maeve glanced at her mother, she saw a look of fear in her eyes. Finna checked the rearview mirror more times than she needed to, even after they left the city behind. "What's my great-uncle's name?"

Finna turned, her gaze worried. "His name is Brandubh, Maeve. He's the reason you're here."

"I thought I was here to meet you."

Finna tried to smile. "Did ye nae read my letter?"

"I read it, but you didn't say anything about Brandubh."

"I didna wish to frighten ye. Tomorrow is Winter Solstice. We may have time to rectify things."

Maeve stared out the window, wondering what there was to rectify. Her earlier excitement at meeting her mother had been replaced with gnawing in the pit of her stomach.



It wasn't long before they left the main road and entered the small town of Bailemuir. Finna navigated the narrow lanes through the shopping district and then left the city limits,

driving for a couple of miles before turning into a rutted driveway. When she pulled up behind a small house and turned the car off, Maeve's excitement rose. Before her was the cottage in the map, its whitewashed walls glowing in the dusky light.

Maeve climbed out of the car and stopped to breathe in the sea air. The hill sloped away from the where the cottage stood, ending at a horseshoe-shaped cove. Although night was upon them, Maeve could still make out the white foam of waves rolling in and out. A childhood memory surfaced—the simple feeling of being safe and happy. Tears filled her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

Maeve wiped her eyes and hurried after her mother who had disappeared around the corner of the house. She waited in the doorway while Finna went inside to light the kerosene lamps. Something pulled her eyes upward to the sign above the lintel—*Cead Mille Failte*.

"It means 'a hundred thousand welcomes,'" Finna explained, reappearing beside her. "How many times I had to repeat the Gaelic words to ye when ye were a wee lass! Come inside, my daughter."

The interior glowed warmly—not at all like the bright incandescent bulbs Maeve was used to. Glancing around the room, she saw herself as a toddler, walking unsteadily across the wide floorboards—she recognized every knothole and striation. The familiar patchwork quilt covering the four-poster bed against the far wall brought jumbled memories, one on top of the other—snuggling with Finna, birdsong waking her in the early morning, being lifted in her mother's arms, laughter. Glancing to the left, she spied the rustic table where she had eaten oatmeal filled with raisins and sweetened with local honey.

"I added an extra bedroom a couple of years ago. 'Tis more private for guests."

Maeve followed her to a door on the far side of the fireplace. Lifting the old-fashioned iron latch, Finna led the way down two shallow steps into a room with a steeply pitched roof. She lit the lamp and then placed Maeve's duffel on a cedar chest at the foot of the antique wooden bed. A table held an old-fashioned plain

crockery pitcher and bowl for washing. A shallow fireplace was set into the formerly exterior wall that separated the rooms.

"Can ye be comfortable here?"

"I love it, but don't you have electricity?" she asked, looking at the two kerosene lamps.

"No electricity, Maeve. I have the AGA that runs on gas, and the lamps and the fires. I'm sure 'tis rustic compared with what you're used to, but it has its charms. The house stays very warm when the fires are going." Finna sat on her heels to place kindling and small logs on the low grate and then stuffed paper underneath. A box of fireplace matches leaned up against the plaster wall and she removed one and struck it against the box. The paper caught quickly and the dry logs began to sputter.

Finna pointed toward a small recessed door on the east-facing wall. "Through there ye will find the outhouse."

She must be kidding. An outhouse? Maeve must have had a shocked expression on her face because Finna looked embarrassed, her gaze going to the floor as she spoke.

"Everyone tells me I should put in a bathroom, but 'tis terribly expensive and where would it go? 'Twould also entail a lot of digging for the septic and this cottage sits on bedrock. This one is nae so bad as all that—'tis a compostin' toilet. All ye need do is throw in a handful of peat moss from the bucket after ye use it."

Maeve stared at her, unable to utter a word.

"Dinna worry, Maeve, in a couple of days ye won't even notice. 'Tis insulated, by the way. I covered the entire inside with felted wool."

Maeve was already planning where a bathroom could go. And how was a little bit of felted wool going to keep out the freezing temperatures?

"If ye wish to freshen up, there's water in the pitcher, and now ye know how to get to the 'necessary.' Were ye aware that's what it was called in the olden days?"

"No, but it makes sense. What about a shower?"

"That I do have, but I hope ye can wait until the morrow. 'Tis a bit tricky to use in the dark."

What in the world did that mean? Oh well, she could take a sponge bath tonight—it was too cold for anything else. She was glad she packed her flannel pajamas.

“I’ll just go make a fire in the other room and put the kettle on.” Finna left the room and closed the door.



Maeve opened her suitcase and pulled out a sweater and a pair of thick woolen pants. She stripped and washed quickly and then dressed. When she opened the door to the outside to throw out the murky water, she looked up to see billions of stars blinking across the night sky. She had never seen anything like it. Even at her father’s house there were too many streetlights that interfered with stargazing. She stood for a long moment breathing in the fresh sea-tinged air before heading across the crisp grass toward the outhouse. Expecting pitch black, Maeve was surprised to find the interior well lit. A skylight had been built into the roof, the stars winking blue and bringing their brightness with them. The wool that covered the walls smelled faintly of lanolin. There was no smell other than that.

She followed her mother’s instructions to the letter and then left, closing the door and heading back to her room. One last peek at the stars made her realize how happy she would be to use an outhouse every night if it meant a nightly view like this. Before joining her mother in the other room, she added a couple of logs to the fire and then placed the screen carefully in front.

In the other room, Finna had placed covered bowls on the table, the smell of stew making Maeve’s mouth water. Finna gestured, a smile of welcome on her face. All seemed normal, except for the tiny frisson of fear that had taken up residence in her stomach.



When she came back in the bedroom a few hours later, the fire had burned down to coals, but the thick plaster walls had absorbed the heat. She changed into pajamas and crawled into bed, snuggling under the covers. Finna had not answered her questions, telling her to wait until the 'morrow.' "'Tis too much for your first night here," she'd told Maeve. "All will be sorted soon enough."

She hoped so because right now she wished she were back in Milltown.



Chapter FOUR

hAROLD LEFT THE airport feeling frustrated and out of sorts. Maeve treated him like an idiot and dismissed what he had to say. She'd done it before and it was one of the reasons he decided to call it quits the last time. But this felt different. He and Maeve had begun anew, and with their deeper friendship, it seemed important. Maybe they should have kept their relationship platonic. But as soon as that thought presented itself, he knew it was no longer possible.

It was a strange way to look at things, but right now he felt that he and Maeve were destined to be together. Why else would it have happened the way it did? His life had been moving smoothly along until one day he hated what he was doing and began obsessing about Maeve, sure that their break-up had been a mistake. They had years of closeness between them, years of confidences and support. He finally admitted to himself that he was in love with her. It was rotten timing, but there was nothing to be done about it. Meeting her mother had to take precedence. But why did a stupid map have to come between them?

He walked to the parking lot and unlocked his VW bus, his mind on their relationship and how far away she would be. He had his ticket for Scotland, but at this moment, he wasn't sure whether to go or not. When someone knocked on his window, he started, turning to roll it down.

"Are you Harold?" the older man dressed in a cassock asked in a Scottish accent.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I'm Brandubh, Maeve's great uncle. I'd hoped to meet with her while I was here in the States. Where is she off to?"

When Harold noticed the gold ring on the man's hand, he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. It was exactly how Maeve had described it and there was something disquieting about the incomplete knot. There was an aura of threat in the way the man spoke and the look in his eyes. "She's on her way to see her mother in Scotland. I would have thought you'd have known this."

The man shook his head. "I've been here for a week or so, and since I don't own a cell phone, it's hard to stay in touch with family. How long will she be gone?"

"Until after the first. I'm going over to meet her for Hogmanay."

"I see you're familiar with the Scottish traditions."

"My mother is Scottish. Her maiden name is MacAlpin."

Brandubh's eyes darkened even further. "Really? Kenneth MacAlpin was—"

"Yes, I know. Mom seems to think we're royalty or something."

His eyes bored into Harold's until Harold had to look away. It felt like the man could read his mind.

"Maybe I'll see you in Scotland," Brandubh finally said.

When Harold turned to reply, he was hurrying away. Harold noticed he was carrying a bag.

Harold started the car and backed out. He had a very uneasy feeling in his gut. If this man was related to Maeve why hadn't he introduced himself at the opening? And why was he visiting

Maeve's next door neighbor? Maybe Maeve was right—John was having an exorcism, he thought, trying to make light of it. But his gut was saying something else.

On the way home, he turned on the radio, listening to the news before switching to a music station. He couldn't shake whatever was bothering him about Brandubh and finally turned off the radio. What was it about the priest that haunted him? A vision of war flitted across his mind and the person leading the lines of soldiers was none other than the man he'd just met. Where had that come from? And then he thought of Maeve and what she might be getting into. Now he didn't know if he should grab the next flight or just wait for her to come home. But something about his encounter with Brandubh made him want to get to Scotland sooner rather than later.



Maeve did not call that night, nor did she call the next day. Harold checked the news to make sure there were no airplane disasters and then punched in her cell phone number. There was no answer. When Alex called toward evening, Harold answered his cell, hoping Maeve was just angry with him and had let her father know she'd landed safely.

"Harold, have you heard from Maeve?"

"No, sir, I was hoping you had."

"She hasn't called and I have no way of getting in touch with Finna. She doesn't believe in electronic devices."

"I called Maeve's cell, but she didn't answer."

"I have, too, with the same result. I'll let you know if I reach her. Will you do the same?"

Harold spent a restless night, his dreams filled with strange imagery of antiquated war and barren landscapes. When he woke in the morning, nerves spiraled though his stomach. Something was wrong. He tried her cell again, and again he got her message and she did not pick up.

He called Alex who didn't answer either. And then he went to see Gertrude at the crystal store where Maeve had told him she worked.

"Maeve has mentioned you," the dark-eyed woman said after he introduced himself. "Why are you here?"

"Maeve has gone to Scotland, and I can't get hold of her."

Gertrude had a faraway look for a moment. "Do you want a Tarot card reading?"

Harold shook his head, no. "I just thought you might have some insight. Maeve said you were psychic."

"I can't help you if you don't want a reading, Harold."

"Okay, a reading then. Does it have to be Tarot?"

"No. I can read your palm if you'd rather."

"Okay, okay, let's do it." When she led the way into her darkened room he followed her.

"Sit," she ordered, pointing to a chair in front of a small table. She went around and sat down across from him. "Now give me your hand."

Harold held out his hand and watched her eyebrows pull together as she peered down. "You have strong lines here. Something you'll be involved with in the near future seems to intersect with your love line." Gertrude looked up. "Are you and Maeve lovers now?"

"Yes, we are, and I'm worried about her. I've had a few dreams about stuff that makes no sense."

"Dreams." Gertrude looked down at his hand again. "Can you draw a Tarot card from my deck? It would help."

"Sure. I just want to figure this out. It's still a week until I go."

"You're going to Scotland?"

"That's the plan, but I don't know if she wants me to come or not."

Gertrude handed him her Tarot deck. "Shuffle these and then pick a card and place it on the table."

Harold did what she asked and then slapped the Lovers down on the table between them.

"One more, please," she said, looking at the card.

Harold pulled another card and placed the Tower on the table next to the Lovers.

Gertrude nodded slowly. "You and Maeve will be caught up in something bigger than both of you. The Tower is a card of chaos; everything you ever thought was true will come tumbling down. The Lovers points to a strong bond between the two of you. You will get through this, but it won't be easy."

Harold stared at the cards and then looked at the frowning woman across from him. "Does she still care about me?"

Gertrude's frown disappeared as she picked up the cards, slipping them back in the deck. "She loves you, Harold. She told me so. *A little argument won't change that.* Now go and get ready for your trip. And pack some warm clothing and a good pair of hiking boots."

"Hiking boots? Why?"

"I have a feeling you'll need them."

When Harold left her words echoed in his mind. A little argument won't change that. He was pretty sure he hadn't mentioned their argument.



Chapter Five

WHEN MAEVE CAME out of her room the next morning, the mysterious man from the plane was sitting at Finna's table having coffee.

"Hello again," he said, his lined face wrinkling further when he smiled.

"MacCuill is here for our bonfire tonight," Finna said, bringing a basket of bread over to the table. "Sit, Maeve, and have something to eat."

Maeve noticed tension in the room and wondered what she might have interrupted. "Who else is coming tonight?" she asked, reaching for the cup of coffee Finna handed her.

Finna glanced at MacCuill. "We never know who might show up, 'tis different every year. But with the news of your arrival, I would expect a good crowd."

"Relatives, friends?"

"Mostly those who live in Otherworld," MacCuill supplied. "They will want to meet you."

"Otherworld? And what's so special about me?"

MacCuill and Finna exchanged another look. "Did ye nae notice the name carved into the frame of your portrait?"

"The Willow. What does that mean, exactly?"

"The willow bends but does not break."

When Maeve met her mother's serious gaze, she felt afraid. "Is this part of the destiny thing you mentioned in your letter?"

"Aye. Have ye had dreams, Maeve?"

Maeve laughed nervously. "I've had some dreams about kings and running through the forest without any clothes on, wolves and tunnels, and—"

"Kings?" MacCuill's indigo eyes pierced her with their intensity.

"My friend, Harold, was wearing a crown in one of my dreams. There was a war going on and he was carrying a broadsword."

MacCuill glanced at Finna. "The prophecy," he said. "You should read it to her."

"I thought I'd wait until tonight."

MacCuill shook his head. "Better to prepare her. We don't know what might happen between now and then."

"You do realize I'm sitting right here, right?"

MacCuill and Finna turned to her at the same time.

"Sorry, sweet one," Finna said. "I have nae prepared ye for what lies ahead. I had hoped that something inside ye might click, but it seems I was wrong. I'll just fetch the prophecy." Finna disappeared though a door on the other side of the kitchen. When she reappeared a moment later, she was carrying a manila envelope. She pulled a piece of parchment out and began to read.

"It has been foretold and will come to pass in the dawn of the darkest year, that the girl-child, born of Brigid, will return to Other-world. She will be joined by many, but only one of noble birth shall stand by her side—part of a new life.

It will be at the time of the wolf moon when the second full moon rises red and the waters surge in anger and the earth trembles. She will carry the staff of justice. With eyes the color of spring, she will be known to all as the Willow, and her fiery hair will be her flag of truth.

Her strength will be tested against the sorcery of the dark man, her power from the tree that bends but does not break. If she accomplishes the task set before her, this world will again fill with light, restoring balance. If she should fail, the darkness shall spread throughout this world and into the next, plunging all into darkness."

Maeve wrapped her arms around her body. "And who, exactly, is this Brigid? Seems like it would say 'child of Finna,' if it really referred to me. There are lots of women with red hair and green eyes."

"Brigid is the goddess of fire. Because of the prophecy I wanted to name ye Brigid, but Alex refused. In Gaelic, Brigid means 'bright flame.' As a goddess, she represents rebirth, fertility and inspiration—the fire of the soul.' Of course, once the Christians took over, they claimed her, turning her into a saint."

Reincarnation and goddesses—was she supposed to accept what they said without question? "What about the wolf moon and rising twice? What's that about?"

"In this next January, we will have two full moons and the second will be a full eclipse. The wolf moon refers to the time when the wolves come into the villages to look for food."

"And who's the 'one of noble birth'?"

MacCuill stared at her, his eyes twinkling. "Perhaps he is this Harold you mentioned."

"Harold? We...I..." Maeve looked from one to the other. "How can Harold be involved?"

"How indeed," MacCuill said, watching her. "Did you not mention his appearance in a dream?"

"Yes, but that was only a dream."

"Dreams hold the secrets that we cannot see when we're awake."

Maeve puzzled over that statement, trying to calm herself. "And what about my great-uncle? Is he involved in the prophecy?"

Finna nodded, her gray-green eyes troubled. "Brandubh is immortal and has taken over Otherworld and brought war upon an innocent land. The species that live there suffer at his hands. You will meet some of them tonight."

Immortal? Maeve decided not to ask any more questions. Her head felt muddled enough with jet lag and what MacCuill and her mother were telling her. The prophecy had to be a metaphor, but what it meant was beyond her. Harold appeared in her mind and she wished he'd come with her, but then she remembered the argument and anger replaced the longing. He'd probably decide not to come since he seemed so conflicted about their relationship, and the map had not helped. Even though she dreaded talking to him, she had to go into town and find a cell signal and a way to charge her phone.

She was coming out of the bedroom later when she heard MacCuill and her mother whispering. "He has the painting," Finna said.

"Let's hope the wolves can keep him out," MacCuill answered, his head bent to hers.

"Are you talking about the portrait?" Maeve asked, moving toward them.

When Finna opened her mouth to answer, MacCuill put a restraining hand on her arm. "The portrait your mother painted is imbued with spells to keep you safe. Now that Brandubh has it, those spells may come under his power."

"So the wolves and—"

"The wolves were watching out for you, Maeve, protecting you. Brandubh is a powerful sorcerer, and if he is able to control the wolves, there is much to worry about."

Maeve stared at the druid, her mind reeling. What she'd seen had really been there. But what possible harm could Brandubh do? And why would he want to harm her, anyway?"

"He is taking over Otherworld, Maeve," MacCuill said, answering her silent question. "You will need every bit of magic we can conjure to combat him."

"But—"

Finna came close and wrapped her arms around Maeve. "No more now. Come tonight, ye will understand it all."



Maeve was helping Finna with the food for the bonfire when her mother turned to her. "I left a dress for ye to wear tonight and a small gift on your bed. Everyone will be arriving shortly, so now is the time to change."

When Maeve reached her bedroom, she was surprised to see that the gown lying on the bed was exactly like the one in the portrait. Was there magic sewn into it?

After slipping it on and fastening the tiny moonstone buttons, she twirled, feeling the velvet fabric lift and then settle softly against her hips. It was as though the dress had been made for her. Her eyes lit on the small bag. She turned it upside down, letting the contents spill onto the coverlet. In her palm, the moonstone shimmered, feeling almost alive as she turned it over to examine the Celtic knot setting done in gold.

She pulled the necklace over her head, allowing the stone to nestle right above her cleavage. When she looked into the mirror, a stranger's face stared back at her with eyes so green they startled her. She felt transformed, not only in her appearance but something deeper, as though she was shedding some outer skin like a snake, revealing something completely new, a present that had been hidden inside.



The waxing gibbous moon had risen and was emerging over the roof of the house when Finna led the way down the hill to the cove. Was there really fire coming out of the ends of Mac-Cuill's fingers? The gleeful expression on his face as it lit the strategically placed fireworks reminded Maeve of a six-year-old who had just discovered how to strike a match. White, green, and blue sparks flew into the sky, hissing and murmuring like something wild and alive. And then he lit the five-foot-high pile of logs, using the same technique. It roared and whooshed, flames lifting into the dark sky.

As the fire blazed higher, the sound of drums, stringed instrument, and flutes floated eerily out of the darkness. The music grew louder and then a parade of small humanoid creatures appeared within the circle of light, each one playing an instrument. Maeve recognized them from one of her mother's paintings, but in person, they were exquisite, with straight copper hair and upturned amber eyes. They nodded to her, bowing their heads as they went by. Maeve was feeling very strange by this point, as though this was all just a dream. Her fingers grasped the moonstone, which seemed to pulse in rhythm to the sound.

Other people emerged out of the darkness, each one bowing to her in turn before beginning to dance. Why were they all bowing? Men with horns, scantily dressed men, and women with dreadlocks, creatures that looked like apes, and the small people who reminded her of foxes, all moved to the music as though it was all the most natural thing in the world.

Finna approached Maeve, her arm linked with a gray-haired woman taller than herself. "This is Catriona, your grandmother. She has lived in Otherworld for many years. She can answer any questions you might have."

A zillion questions swirled in her mind, but with the music and chanting, now was not the right time to ask. There was something formidable about Catriona, but when Maeve met her gaze she saw love and kindness in her eyes. A second later, she was pulled into Catriona's embrace.

"You have finally arrived," she murmured into Maeve's ear before pulling back to study her. "You are a beauty." She smiled and then turned to join the dancing.

The minor notes of the flutes gave way to the syncopated beat of drums and the dancing grew even wilder. MacCuill played a flute, the deeper tones harmonizing with the others. Food and wine was set up on a table that had materialized from somewhere, probably brought from the house by Finna and the man she was with. She didn't introduce him, and Maeve was too shy to interrupt their intimacy where they stood close together talking.

The night wore on and the dancing continued. The resonant sounds of chanting wafted through the cold night air. Maeve swayed to and fro, her eyes closed. It was some time later that the music abruptly stopped and when Maeve looked around, everyone was focused into the shadows beyond the fire. A tall figure in black stood there, holding a long-barreled pistol.

He stepped into the light, followed by animals that looked like a cross between hyenas and rabid dogs. Saliva dripped from their lolling tongues.

“Happy Solstice, everyone!” he cried, and then he opened fire.

Screams pierced the air as the snarling beasts attacked. The noise was deafening, the sound of terrified shouting and ripping fabric accompanying the growling and frenzied barking. Thick black smoke blocked the view as Maeve ran frantically toward where she had last seen her mother. An arm like a vice grip took her round the neck.

“And where do you think you’re going, my little niece?”

The silky voice made her skin crawl. She tried to slip out of his grip, but the more she struggled, the tighter it became. Through the smoky haze, a horrific scene of the fallen appeared, blood pooling around their still forms. Her mother was not in sight. A sob erupted from her throat.

“Shut up!” Brandubh said harshly. “You are nothing but a sniveling little girl, aren’t you? I should have known you were powerless. That prophecy is rubbish.” His grating laugh filled Maeve with revulsion.

“You’re coming with me, my little faker. It’s time to put a stop to all this pagan nonsense once and for all.” His breath was hot in her ear as he crooked one elbow around her neck and dragged her backward. When she screamed, he clamped his enormous hand over her mouth, his other arm tight around the middle. If she didn’t get his hand to move, she was going to pass out from lack of air. She felt like a rag doll as he dragged her away from the cottage; her legs were like water, her heart beating erratically. When she looked back toward the bonfire, there was only a smoky haze that obliterated her view.

"If you're wondering why they aren't coming after you, I put a spell on them. That portrait of you has come in quite handy—all I had to do was break the charm your mother put in place and it became mine to do with as I pleased. Those wolves guarding you are now devoted to me."

He laughed, the fetid air finding her nostrils and making her gag. Bile rose into her throat and she swallowed, trying to keep from throwing up. A whirring filled her ears and hot anger welled up from someplace deep inside. Her free hand went to the moonstone as she struggled and writhed to get away from him; she could not loosen his grip. Once he pulled her away from the noise and confusion around the bonfire, a dark figure appeared out of the shadows. It was her neighbor, John. How could that be? And then she remembered Harold talking about seeing a priest go into John's apartment.

"Hey there, Maeve. Bet you didn't expect to see me. I got recruited to the cause and you will be the second casualty. The first one is over there in the woods." He laughed, pointing toward the trees. "They're going to wonder about that one."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Brandubh snarled.

"The woman over there. The beasts helped me kill her. Didn't you hear her screaming? It was loud enough to wake the dead. I guess you were busy with your own killing, weren't you? I added a small decoration, one that I think you would approve of: a cross, right in the middle of her forehead."

"John, this is not part of my plan. Do *not* go off on your own again. And hide my gun—it's useless where we're headed."

"You can't use a gun in Otherworld?"

"No, it doesn't work—believe me, I've tried." Brandubh used one hand to dig the gun out of his belt and hand it to him. "Track down the beasts and the deacons and then put the gun somewhere we can find it."

"Aren't you going to kill her?" John asked, his eyes glittering as he stared at Maeve.

"I have another use for her first. Believe me, the killing I have planned will be slow and very painful. She'll beg me to die."

John laughed. "I hope you'll let me help."

"You'll get your chance with her, John. Now go do what I asked you to do." When Brandubh dug his fingers into her neck, Maeve let out a muffled cry of pain. She choked and gagged, feeling like she might faint. Her fingers closed around the moonstone. It was vibrating and felt hot. The whirring in her ears made it hard to hear John's mumbled response as he walked away. In the distance, the sounds of snarling and screaming went on unabated.

"Hurry, John. We don't have all night. Goddamn that idiot, I should never have brought him along."

Colors whirled by Maeve's eyes, making her dizzy. The last sound she heard before everything began to shift and change was fabric ripping as the necklace was torn from her neck.



Chapter Six

THERE WAS NO light, no road noise, no voices, no drone of planes—the silence was so absolute that it hurt her ears. Brandubh was gone, as well as the cottage, or anything familiar. As her eyes adjusted, she began to notice shapes around her—trees so close together that the darkness between them looked impenetrable. Above her was an overcast sky. She distinctly remembered the moon and a sky full of stars. Her hand went to her throat as the memory of Brandubh's cold fingers sent a shudder through her body. Her beautiful necklace was gone.

The horror of what had happened flashed through her mind, and before she could stop it, a sob rose and echoed into the silence like the howl of an animal. She cringed from the sound of her own voice, hoping Brandubh was not right behind her. The dark forest stood silently neutral, with only a whisper of the wind in the upper branches of the conifers.

On the other side of the clearing, she discovered a narrow deer trail and followed it into the shadows. A scuffling sound

came to her ears as she moved down the path, making her heartbeat quicken. The image of Brandubh's wild beasts was still fresh in her mind. Adrenaline raced through her veins and she sprinted into the darkness. After catching her clothing on low-hanging branches, and stumbling over roots for what seemed like hours, she stopped again to listen. With her breath coming in gasps, it was hard to hear anything.

She put her hands on her knees, sucking in air noisily until her heartbeat returned to normal. When she looked up a few seconds later, two sets of amber eyes stared into hers. She shrieked, scrambling behind a tree, these were the wolves she's seen in the painting but now they were coming toward her and the sounds coming out of their mouths was anything but friendly. She backed up as they drew closer, their lips curled, revealing sharp canines, their snarls menacing. "I won't hurt you," she said, moving backward. "I thought you were my friends." She tripped and fell and then picked herself up and ran.

She heard them hurtling through the brush behind her and knew there was no way she could outrun them. "What do you want?" she yelled, stopping behind a tree. But this time, they were not snarling and eyes had softened. "Do you recognize me?" she asked, reaching her hand out. One of them came to sniff her fingers and then licked her hand. It moved its head as if to say, "Follow me."

"So now you want me to trust you?" she whispered.

We are your guardians, she heard in her mind.

Why would she need guardians—unless Brandubh was coming after her. Her heart sped up and when they padded away, she hurried after them. "Okay, I'm coming," she said. The sound of her voice was somehow reassuring as she followed along the twisting trail.

After a while they left the forest, heading down a steep bank toward a stream. The gurgling water rushed by, barely discernible in the moonless night. The wolves headed downstream and she struggled after them, trying not to slip in the mud along the bank. Twice she went down as her boots went out from under

her, the long skirt tangling around her legs when she tried to stand. Both times the wolves waited patiently until she was on her feet again. The landscape changed as they followed the downhill slope of the streambed. Sandstone cliffs loomed up on her left, the pale stone visible despite the darkness. Soon the wolves slowed and headed up a twisting trail, disappearing from view. Maeve quickly scrambled after them. They waited for her by the entrance to a cave. Inside, she found a thick sheepskin on the floor and sank down, exhausted. She fell asleep with the warmth of their bodies lying close beside her.

Maeve dreamed she was in a desolate landscape with a dark, foreboding sky. From where she stood, she could see that large sections of the forest had been burned, the open spaces filled with hacked-off stumps of trees. The hills were bare and dry, and erratic cracks snaked down their sides.

"This is evidence of Black Raven and his armies. They destroy the land in search of precious ores—gold and silver that they sell in the outside world. The people here have always lived in peace and harmony. All the love and appreciation that the plants and trees received every day has been taken away by the fear and hatred that Black Raven and his minions have been fomenting, and this has weakened the spirits. Remember how the plants glowed on our first trip? Well, no longer. This world cannot survive the loss of love."

Maeve turned to see MacCuill standing close. It seemed somehow fitting that he should be here with her. He touched her arm and she was flying with him above the scene. A riverbed lay below, but no water flowed. Crows fed on scattered animal carcasses. Maeve's stomach churned.

"Black Raven and his armies have closed off the normal water supply and are killing the animals for food, wasting a lot of the meat and leaving them to rot. The water supply has always served the people as well as the wildlife, but now he controls it in order to have enough workers. He has made them into slaves." MacCuill pointed toward an enormous animal pen where people were chained, huddled together to stay warm. A group of trolls lounged around a fire on the outside of the fence.

"The guards are the Oillteil, underworld dwellers brought forth to help Black Raven in his exploits. Villagers have been captured, as well as the small ones known as the Crion. They work in the mines—if they refuse, they are killed."

Maeve's mouth went dry. "Can we go back now?"

"There is one more place I need to take you."

They flew on over more eroded hills covered with stumps, finally arriving at a wide valley. "Remember this place—the heather and the bees? This was once the home of the Crion."

Below them, the ground had been ripped apart. Large slashes, like wounds in the earth's skin, looked dark against the massive piles of rubble. Not one living thing could be seen, and all the streams had dried up; the entire area was frozen solid.

"See that hole over there?" MacCuill pointed. "That's the First Village of the Crion."

Maeve followed his gaze. It was as though huge hands had ripped into the earth, pulling it apart and scattering everything they found. Parts of looms and colored wools were strewn about, bright spots of color in an otherwise gray and dismal landscape.

Maeve's stomach twisted. "Where are the people who lived here?"

"Most have been captured and the others have gone deep underground. Their tunnels are vast—far beneath the surface of the earth. We will visit them now."

They flew low for a while and then descended rapidly to end up at a flat round stone set flush with the ground. Maeve looked around nervously as MacCuill rapped three times in quick succession with his staff. The hollow sound reverberated, echoing deep inside. It was only a moment before the stone was lifted, revealing three small figures. Maeve backed away as she took in their alien features.

They chattered excitedly in a foreign tongue and then rushed to embrace MacCuill. Once he released them, he reached back for Maeve's hand, pulling her forward. "These are the Crion I was telling you about."

The druid spoke to them in their language, gesturing toward Maeve. She watched in bewilderment as they turned their triangular

faces toward her, their hands in prayer position. Their large amber eyes held an expression of awe as they bowed low before her.

"What are they doing?"

"They honor you, the one in the prophecy. I have just told them who you are."

"But I'm not anybody special!"

"Yes, Maeve, you are."

His eyes met hers and she felt a charge of energy.

"I'm the Willow," she said in a voice that didn't sound at all like her own. They raised their heads in acknowledgment and then she held out her hands. Their delicate fingers clasped hers.

The tallest of the three said, "I am Corey and this is Aila, my mate," pointing to the small woman with bright copper hair next to him. "And this is our daughter, Dervla." Dervla held out her hand and knelt down in front of Maeve.

"Please don't!" Maeve cried, reaching to pull her up. "I feel so foolish, I—"

MacCuill's booming voice cut in, "Accept who you are!"



They followed the Crion down stairway after stairway. At various intervals, Corey stopped to roll a stone into place behind them. Finally, the stairs ended and she and MacCuill followed the three into darkness.

A few minutes of walking brought them to a large room with a high, domed ceiling. Orange and blue rugs covered the packed-earth floors and lit torches cast flickering shadows against the curved walls. The sound of bells could be heard coming from somewhere close by. "What's that?" Maeve whispered.

"The Crion raise sheep. They dye the wool and weave it into rugs and clothing. Look there." He pointed into the shadows where a doorway led into another room. Maeve turned her head, breathing in the musky odor of droppings and hay. As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she could make out their milling shapes. Every

movement of their heads brought out the dull clank of the bells hanging around their necks—a symphony of sound.

“Do they keep them inside all the time?”

MacCuill shook his head. *“This practice is useful in the colder months since they burn the dried droppings for heat. And it keeps the sheep safe from the marauding Beithir and wolves.”*

Maeve started to ask what the unfamiliar word meant, but was distracted by the loud clang of a gong. She looked toward the corner of the room where Corey was holding a wooden mallet. He hit the brass disc a second time, the sound deafening in the enclosed space. It was only a few moments before the room began to fill with Crion, their eyes going wide as they took in Maeve and MacCuill.

Once the last stragglers came in, MacCuill addressed the assembled crowd. *“I want to introduce the Willow, the one we have all been waiting for. We have come to Otherworld through the dreamtime, but the next time will be to gather the forces to fight for this world.”*

MacCuill finished speaking and a shout went up. To Maeve, the word sounded like *“bway.”* She looked over at MacCuill and mouthed, *“What does that mean?”*

“Buaidh’,” he answered, *“is the Gaelic word for victory.”*

A moment later, MacCuill went down on one knee, pledging himself to Maeve and to defending Otherworld. Around him, all the Crion bowed. At the edges of the room stood creatures that looked like large upright apes. Seeming shy, they held back. Maeve was struck by their oddness and also a little afraid, since there were many of them. *“Who are they?”* she asked, trying not to point.

MacCuill looked their way, nodding in greeting. *“They are known as the Amuigh. Together with the Crion, they are the keepers of the wisdom here in Otherworld. They will never fight, but they pledge to help in whatever ways they can.”* Maeve watched them, mouthing the word, *“amoo”* to herself and wondering how they came to be. They looked back with their intelligent, deep-brown eyes and Maeve felt their goodwill even though they didn’t smile. She nodded to them, acknowledging their presence.

By now, Maeve was very close to tears, overwhelmed by the ceremony and what MacCuill had done. He was now like her knight.

How strange all of this was. It felt like a dream, but then again it seemed too real to be a dream.

MacCuill turned toward her. "It is time for us to go."

Maeve looked around at all the shining faces, the feeling of love and joy here. She didn't want to leave. They smiled, calling out a word that she couldn't understand. She put her hands in prayer position and bowed her head before she turned to follow MacCuill.

"What were they saying at the end?" she asked, as they headed up the tunnel.

"'Taing.' It means gratitude. They were thanking you for what they know you will accomplish here."

Maeve's face went hot. This was not fair to expect of her. How could she possibly—

MacCuill's hand came down on her shoulder, startling her. "Do not think about it, just let it all be. You will be ready when the time comes, rest assured."

Outside, the sky had turned the color of iron. The clouds rolled and bumped as a storm approached from the north, and the cold wind caught at their hair and clothes, blowing wildly.



When Maeve woke, the two wolves were gone. The dream was still clear in her mind and terrifying because of how real it seemed. She sat still for a moment going over the bleak landscape, the Crion and MaCuill, but as the reality of the present took over, the dream images drifted away. Where was she?

It was somewhat light now and she could see the recently ransacked shelves that lined the rounded walls. Shards of glass and pottery were scattered across the floor. A broken flute lay in two pieces, impossible to mend. The acrid smell of burnt wood and decay filled the air. Outside the cave, she couldn't tell the time of day. The sky was a solid gray mass. Looking around for her wolf friends, she wondered if she had dreamed the entire bizarre experience. But then icy wind hit her cheek, and as she

wrapped her arms around her body, she noticed the mud-splattered dress and filthy boots. This was no dream.

Maeve headed upstream, retracing her footprints from the night before. Her only thought was to find her way out of here, back to Bailemuir and her mother. When the stream disappeared under the bank, she climbed across to an open space where a spring bubbled into a deep, natural pool surrounded by rocks. Steam rose from the surface and she tested it, finding the water enticingly warm. But she knew better than to take off her clothes and take a bath in a place where wolves roamed free.

She was still thinking about it when she heard a warble and the whoosh of wings. Orange eyes peered at her from a shimmering feathery shape across the pool. It looked like a large bird was staring at her, but then it morphed into a woman wearing a feathery gray dress.

"I am Corra, the goddess of prophecy, and I bring the Willow a message."

Maeve tried to form words, but could do nothing but open her mouth.

"I know it is hard to hear me or see me because of the changes that have been wrought in Otherworld. You must travel to Rhiannon's castle as quickly as you can. Follow the trail on the other side of the glade to the edge of the forest. Once there, you will turn to the left and follow the rise of the hill until you see the castle towers in the distance. Rhiannon will give you further instructions. You must hurry!"

Maeve cleared her throat, ready to reply, but the apparition had already become translucent and then faded away completely. Her plan to find the way back to Bailemuir receded from her mind as she replayed Corra's message. This was Otherworld, a place she'd been certain was a metaphor. But this was as real as the dead people back at the bonfire. Following instructions from a bird/woman seemed insane, but what else could she do? Maybe Rhiannon could tell her how to get home. *You must hurry*, reverberated in her mind.

At the edge of the woods, a bleak and frozen valley came into view. For one second, Maeve thought about going back but then realized there was nothing back there to help her get home. Before she headed along the ridge, she noticed dark tendrils of a smoke-like substance forming along the ground in the valley below, almost as though in response to her being there. Panic rose in her throat as the dark fog spread and lifted, writhing as though alive. She didn't want to be here and whatever was going on down in the valley seemed malevolent. But Corra had given specific instructions and so she followed them, hugging the safety of the trees, heading left.



When had she started running? Her last thought had been the memory of Brandubh's hands clutching her neck. Now she felt like her body belonged to someone else; her feet barely touched the ground as though there was less gravity. When she ran at home, it did not feel like this.

Ahead was a narrow cliff edge where she would need to make a choice: either continue along the edge of the woods or go down the hill and into the fog. Above the swirling darkness, she could see the spires in the distance. She squinted, recognizing remnants of a castle that reminded her of a picture in a fairytale she'd read as a child: a fortress with golden spires reaching into a cerulean sky. But this castle was in ruins, and the sky here was anything but blue. After a moment of deliberation, she headed down the steep and rocky incline.

Attempting to keep the castle in her sights, she ran straight into the fog and across a sheet of ice, heading toward Rhiannon's castle. Soon the battlements came into view: tall turrets at each of the four corners of the outer walls, barely visible through the thickening haze. They looked partially demolished, with large pieces missing from their base. Inside the keep, the castle was in the same shape, with crumbling towers and rubble in other

places. She tried to ignore the sensation of icy fingers clawing at her as the fog closed in. A deep chill entered her chest and with it, her mind went numb. She looked up to see a monstrous face coalescing within the cloud above her, eyes looking down at her with evil intent, and then paralyzing cold sucked away her breath.



Chapter Seven

GERTRUDE DROVE OUT of Bailemuir in her rental car. Her bag sat on the back seat and she held a sheet of paper in her hand with directions to Finna's house she'd gotten from the pub on the main road. The icy roads made for treacherous driving and she took her time.

A few miles out of town, she made a right onto the narrow driveway next to the rosehips she'd been told about, car tires sliding as she made her way down the muddy lane. When she arrived at the cottage, she parked behind an ancient Mini, turned the car off, and sat for a moment, wondering how to explain her sudden appearance.

Once she headed around the house, she heard voices coming from the little cove down the hill. From her vantage point, it appeared that the three women and two men were placing bodies on canvas litters. They were dressed in medieval clothes, one man wearing a long gray robe, the other wearing loose trousers and a tunic. Maybe she'd stumbled onto some kind of pagan ritual. "Hello?" she called out, hesitantly.

They looked her way and waved before they took hold of the litters and carried them up the hill. Two of the women and the two men headed inside the house while another woman came toward her.

"Can I help ye?" Untidy gray strands of hair fell across the older woman's face; she brushed them back in an irritated manner as she peered at Gertrude curiously.

"Sorry to barge in like this, but you have no phone. My name is Gertrude Russo and I'm trying to find Maeve Lewin. Is she here?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm her grandmother, Catriona." She held out her hand.

Gertrude tried to quell her uneasiness. "I'm a friend of Maeve's from Milltown. She came to me for a Tarot reading."

The older robed man arrived a moment later and held out his hand. "MacCuill." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Gertrude introduced herself, trying to decide if this was a heathen ceremony gone wrong.

"Did ye come because of the prophecy?" Catriona finally asked, green eyes fastening on hers.

"Maybe I did," she said. "Something strange came up in her cards before Maeve left for Scotland, but I wasn't sure what it was all about. I've had several disturbing dreams since that reading, and I felt the need to come and warn her."

"And what exactly were ye plannin' to warn her about?" Catriona asked.

"I don't know. From what I saw, it seemed she was in danger."

Catriona looked toward the cottage. "Last night two of our dear friends were killed and another severely injured. And right after, my brother, Brandubh, kidnapped Maeve."

Gertrude tried to get control of her breathing, her belly contracting at the mention of Brandubh. "Is he a priest?"

"Aye, but a very bad one. He has undermined the mystical parallel world that lies next to this one and is doing his very best to destroy it. Ye are correct about danger for Maeve. Her task is to go up against Brandubh and bring back the light. She is nae prepared, and now that he's captured her, we all fear for her life."

Gertrude was at a loss for words, and it wasn't the mention of a parallel world that had her throat closing up. Brandubh had been in Milltown only a few weeks before and had managed to worm his way into her heart. They'd met in a coffee shop by accident, or so she thought at the time, and had a torrid affair for the entire five days he was there. She'd spent most of those five days in his bed. His seductive words had kept her normal reticence at bay. "You are one of the most beautiful women I've encountered since I became a priest," Brandubh had told her, making her blush. "Otherwise, I would never have considered breaking my vows." After those two statements, Gertrude had been in his thrall, unable to extricate herself from his arms. He'd totally captured her, mind and body.

Brandubh had invited her to go with him when he headed back to Scotland, but she'd declined. With this news, she seriously wondered about his motives. Somehow the subject of her psychic work had come up during their time together, and she'd divulged all sorts of secrets about Maeve and what she'd seen in the younger woman's cards. She mentally cursed herself, wondering if that was how he'd known Maeve's whereabouts. "If I can help in any way, please tell me what to do."

"We're preparing to take the dead home to Otherworld for burial. If ye wish to accompany us, you would be welcome. Come into the cottage and we can have a wee cup of tea before we leave."

Inside, Gertrude was introduced to Maeve's mother Finna, and to Herska, an older woman with wiry, iron-gray hair who appeared exhausted. A stocky man also introduced himself as Mikdal, Herska's husband. The mood was somber, and Gertrude tried to ignore the still bodies of the two small women who lay on the litters. Finna made a pot of tea and they all gathered around the table. When Catriona put her hand on Gertrude's arm, she jumped, wondering what had possessed her to travel to Scotland.

"Gertrude, I hope ye are prepared for what lies ahead. Otherworld is a dangerous place. There are forces at work there that

ye are nae prepared for. Ye will nae find your way out again without help, and none of us will be willin' to spare the time. D' ye understand?"

Catriona's words of warning it didn't stop Gertrude from making up her mind. She was out of her element here, but she had to admit that she would gladly see Brandubh again, despite what everyone was saying about him. Maybe she was in denial, but it was hard to believe he killed these women or that he was responsible for Maeve's disappearance. "I know what I'm getting myself into," she answered, hoping fervently that this was true.



Chapter Eight

WHEN MAEVE WOKE, she found herself inside a cave and covered with a warm sheepskin that smelled of lanolin. A man sat cross-legged in the opening next to a fire, whittling a piece of wood with a hunting knife. Beyond him, a forest of trees stood silent. She tried to sit up, and then moaned as pain shot behind her eyes.

“Take it slow,” the man said placing the piece of wood on the ground and rising. “You’ve had a nasty run-in with the fog, and what it does to the mind is not a pretty sight.”

Maeve grabbed hold of her pounding head. “Where am I, and who are you?”

The man’s coppery skin was lined and leathery, his dark-brown eyes concerned as he watched her. Long, dark hair filled with gray streaks framed a wide face with high cheekbones. He looked strong beneath his clothing made of hides. “I am your grandfather, Eron, and you are in my cave. If I hadn’t found you when I did, you would be dead.”

Maeve shivered involuntarily, remembering the fog and how she felt just before she lost consciousness. She focused on the man in front of her, trying to find some familiarity in his features, but she could discern no resemblance.

"I think this belongs to you? I found it by the spring."

Maeve took the moonstone, staring at him in surprise. "But—how?"

"It will always find the way back to its true owner."

Maeve retied the frayed ribbon ends and pulled it over her head, wondering if Brandubh had dropped it on his way to find her. And why was *she* the true owner?

Eron handed her a bowl filled with soup. "Eat, and when you're finished, I have something to share with you."

While Maeve spooned the liquid into her mouth, Eron disappeared for a few minutes, reappearing with a bow and an animal hide quiver filled with arrows. The fletching on the arrows was striped feathers from some kind of large bird. He held it out and she took it.

Maeve ran her hands along the smooth wood. "Where did you get this?"

"I made it for you."

"For me? How did—?"

Eron chuckled. "You were expected, Maeve."

Maeve pondered that while he taught her how to hold the bow, nock an arrow, and pull back the taut string. It felt like she'd done archery a million times before, but in truth, she'd never done it.

"Aim for that knothole over there," he ordered, pointing to a tree about thirty feet away.

Maeve sighted, nocked the arrow, pulled back, and let it fly.

"Bullseye!" Eron called out, hurrying over to pull it free. "You're a natural."

A moment later, two wolves appeared from the forest, eyes soft as they stared at her. "These are the true owners of this cave," Eron said, placing his hand on one of the wide heads. "They raise their young here. Finiche, the black male, has volunteered to be your guide."

"I have no idea why I'm here or what I'm supposed to do. In fact, I don't really know how I ended up here to begin with." Her fingers closed around the stone against her breastbone. "What's with this stone, anyway? You seemed reverent when you handed it to me."

"This stone is what brought you here, Maeve. You are part of a greater puzzle, and your place in it is just beginning."

"You're talking about the prophecy, right? Finna read it to me, but I just figured it was a metaphor. I mean, really, 'her red hair will be her flag of truth'? Give me a break."

Eron was quiet for a moment. "The prophecy is no metaphor, Maeve. Has MacCuill taken you to the dreamtime?"

"If you mean those weird dreams I've had, then I guess the answer is yes."

"Then you've seen Otherworld before and after what Brandubh has wrought. You are here at this moment in history to bring the light back."

Maeve shook her head and frowned. "Someone told me Brandubh is immortal—how can that be?"

Eron gazed into the distance. "Otherworld is not like your world, Maeve. There is magic here, both good and bad. Brandubh's immortality gives him a great advantage and has caused the gods and goddesses to grow weak. His dark magic is growing exponentially from one day to the next."

"And I'm supposed to fix this—one woman from the real world with no knowledge of Otherworld or how it works? I'm not a goddess." She tried to push her tangled hair away from her face but couldn't get her fingers through it. "Can your knife cut hair?"

Eron looked at her. "It's very sharp. Do you want me to do it?"

"No," she answered, holding out her hand.

Eron placed it in her palm and then stared into the darkness with his eyes narrowed. "Maeve, I fear for your safety if you remain here for long. Listen carefully, for what I have to tell you will help you navigate this world."

As Eron spoke, Maeve lifted up a large swatch of her hair, bringing the blade against it. It cut through her snarled curls like butter; a pile of bright locks collected at her feet.

"I'll start with the Tuatha De Danann since they were the first ones here. They are a fearsome tribe who live in the east by the sea. The name derives from the goddess Danu from whom they are descended. Long ago, they fought with the Sons of Mil who came up from the south and were driven underground, their clans or 'tuaths' scattered. Because they lived in barrows and cairns, the name for them changed to People of the 'Sidhe,' a word that translates to 'mound' or 'thrust.' As I mentioned, they were the first people, and had defeated the evil ones long ago and chased them back into the underworld." He let out a sigh, his eyes growing dark.

"Back then, everything here was held in reverence. All beings lived together in peace. But now, the peace has been shattered. The spirits of water and air have left, and the gods and goddesses are nearly ghosts." His brown eyes met hers. "There are many ordinary farmers and villagers who are fighting for their lives. Knowledge of your arrival will give them heart."

Maeve ran her hands through the short tufts all over her head. "That feels better," she muttered.

"Your being here in Otherworld has already brought a change, a lightening that I know all can feel," Eron continued. "The moonstone will reveal its magic as you travel. It's different for every ancestor of yours who has used it before."

"Not before it worked its magic."

Maeve's thoughts went back to the spring. "The bird goddess who told me to find Rhiannon was ghost-like."

"The gods and goddesses in the Otherworld are kept vibrant by people's belief in them. Brandubh discourages anything to do with what he terms, 'the outdated beliefs,' and speaks only of the one true god. Many spirits have completely vanished, leaving Otherworld even more vulnerable. You arrived just in time."

Maeve scoffed and turned away.

"If you want to survive, you'll have to come to grips with it, Maeve. You were named, and you are now here."

"But if Brandubh's immortal, how can he be defeated?"

"The prophecy does not lie. The people here have been fighting for years, but Brandubh has recruited so many to his cause that there are barely enough left to make a difference. And most of them are simple farmers, not warriors. Of course, I use the word 'recruit' loosely; Brandubh's way has been to offer them work or death. He's killed many. There are also those who believe in him and those who have the desire to become rich, but most are only trying to stay alive. The Crion and the Amuigh will never fight, and many are being used as slaves to work the mines."

"Are the Amuigh the ones who look like apes? I saw them in the dream with MacCuill."

Eron nodded. "They live as hunter-gatherers, moving from place to place as the seasons change. They will die out if the drought here continues."

"In the same dream, the Crion had a ceremony to welcome me to Otherworld."

"Whatever happened between you and the Crion was as real as you sitting here talking with me."

Maeve thought about that for a moment and then looked up at the heavy clouds. "You said something about a drought? I thought it snowed here. Those clouds seem filled with moisture."

"The clouds hold only rage. No rain or snow or even sleet has fallen in the Otherworld for many months. Two springs are all that remain of the water supply. All the rest of the water has been dammed up for use in the mines or has frozen solid."

Maeve watched the light leach slowly out of the sky, leaving a darkness that seemed thick—dense and malevolent. When she rose to move deeper into the cave, Eron's hand came onto her arm.

"You must leave here now," Eron said urgently. "Finiche will find you a horse to ride and he'll watch over you."

“Now? It’s night.”

Eron nodded. “Best time to travel. Let Finiche lead the way until you find your own power.”

Maeve stared at him. “What power? I feel exhausted and slightly sick, not to mention overwhelmed by everything you told me.”

Eron handed her a deerskin pack and then reached for her bow and the arrows. “There is pemmican and water in here. Stay out of sight as much as possible. You will know where to go.”

Once she pulled her arms through the pack and slung the bow and quiver over her shoulder, he reached for her and held her close. “Take care,” he said, releasing her. He gave her a little push toward the darkness that had closed in around them.

Maeve stepped backward away from the fire and then turned to see Finiche’s eyes glowing from several feet away. When the wolf trotted under the trees, she followed him.

The ground was hard, frozen solid under her boots. It was bitterly cold; her gasping breath was white as she hurried forward. Trees appeared out of the darkness and she stumbled over their roots. It seemed as though time had changed into something she didn’t understand. One moment she thought the sky was lightening but then it was dark again, shadows moving under the trees as though they were alien beings. When a ghost-like figure headed toward her, she froze in fear.

“Do not be afraid, Willow. I am the goddess, Airmid.”

Maeve tried to bring the woman into focus. For a moment, the wide leather belt encircling the woman’s tiny waist became visible, many small pouches tied to it, but a second later she disappeared again. It was several more moments before the woman was close enough for Maeve to make out the long brown hair filled with leaves and twigs.

When Airmid reached out, Maeve gripped warm fingers and concentrated on the shining moss green eyes.

“I am here to teach you healing, Willow. You know a lot of this intuitively, but there is much more for you to learn. You must listen very carefully.”

“But I—” Maeve didn’t have time to finish the sentence, her mind taken over by the thoughts Airmid imparted. The knowledge came in thought waves: where to find the herbs, what they were good for, and how to prepare them. It only took a few minutes, but Maeve felt as though hours had gone by, her mind fuzzy and unable to focus. When she looked at the goddess, there was an expression of sympathy in her moss-colored eyes.

Airmid placed her hand on Maeve’s arm. “There is a special herb that can help you at this crucial time. It is called werewolf root, named for the werewolf who shape-shifts from his human form. It will allow you to let go of the past and embrace your destiny. It will give you the strength to rise above the hopelessness that rides on the wind.” She fiddled in one of the pouches and pulled out something that looked like a parsnip with a forked end. “Chew only a small amount, as it can be toxic in larger doses. The rest you can save for a later time. You will know when you need it.”

“Toxic?”

“Do not be afraid, the root will only help you.” Airmid held it out.

Maeve took it from her hand and sniffed. It smelled of earth and moss. When she bit into it, it had the bitterness of certain root vegetables.

“I am the keeper of the sacred spring that brings the dead back to life. If you ever need me, you will find me there.” Her smile transformed her face for a moment, and Maeve got a glimpse of her ethereal beauty, the serenity and acceptance that lay within her lovely eyes.

A second later, Maeve was overcome by an intense headache. She pressed her fingers into her temples, waiting for it to subside. When she looked up again, Airmid had melted into the shadows. The memory of the crow attack in Milltown came into her mind. She’d known exactly what herbs to use on the scratches. And that was before hearing from Airmid. Now her mind was full to bursting with herbal knowledge she’d never known.

In the distance, she heard a wolf howl and realized it was Finiche asking her to hurry. She moved deeper into the forest in the direction of the sound. When she came upon him, his eyes met hers briefly before he turned and loped away. She jogged after him, wondering how long it would be before she could rest because right now her eyes burned, her head ached, and her legs felt weak and shaky.

But then a strange feeling came over her. It felt like the past was fading into a sort of tableau in sepia. She watched it move backward in her mind, growing smaller and smaller until there was nothing but the present moment. Her mind cleared and there was no more fatigue.



Chapter Nine

THE DAY OF Harold's departure grew closer. He felt Maeve's absence like a hollow in his chest and wondered why he hadn't heard from her. Now, when he called, her phone went directly to voicemail. It was either off or dead. In his dreams, he caught glimpses of her red hair appearing and disappearing in between trees in a dense forest, but when he tried to find her, she was never there. He woke from these dreams in a cold sweat, wondering what they meant. He figured they had to do with the physical and emotional distance between them.

His own life had grown even more complicated with his inability to concentrate and his desire to quit his damned accounting business. He felt at a crossroads, with no idea which way to go. He'd always been confident and decisive, but lately, he was plagued with doubts. His parents were supportive of anything he wished to do, his father telling him that going to Scotland would be good for his head while his mother regaled him with more tales of her heritage. She even gave him a book by Nigel Tranter

called *Kenneth* that followed the man's exploits back in the very early days of Scottish history.

On the advice of a Native American friend, Harold had taken peyote to see if the buttons would give him the answers he needed, but all he got from it was a headache and another dream that featured him in some mystical land where a war was going on. He must be reading too much sci-fi.

As the day of his flight approached, he grew even more nervous, wondering if Maeve would welcome him or tell him they were through. When he thought of her, his heart hurt, the memory of her lemony perfume making him frantic. Maybe Maeve had told her mother about their argument and Finna had comforted her by assuring Maeve she could do better. He shook his head, willing these thoughts away. He'd never felt this insecure.

He thought again of the two Tarot cards, wondering what they signified. He knew nothing about the Tarot, but the picture displayed on the one called the Tower gave him a chill. Was it their relationship that would come tumbling down or something even more dire? He constantly worried now, his mind filled with his own doubts and visions of Maeve frowning at him.

He decided to call Alex again, hoping for a different answer this time.

"No, Harold. I haven't heard from her. I'm as worried as you are. At least you'll see her soon. I expect you to call me and let me know what the deal is when you get there."

"I will, sir. And thanks for giving me directions to Finna's house. It sounds like she lives out in the boonies."

"Not too bad—just a few miles out of town. I hope this business with Otherworld isn't on her mind anymore."

"Otherworld? What's that mean?"

Alex sighed. "You can ask her when you get there, Harold. I never actually believed her, but when Maeve told me about the letter—"

"The letter Finna wrote?"

"Finna was obsessed with some magical parallel world she insisted was right next to her cottage. She told me it was safer for Maeve if I took her with me to the States."

"But you didn't say anything about this to Maeve."

"I told her that if her mother wanted her to come, she should—it's time that Maeve met Finna. I still don't know what to think about the rest of it. Finna had some cockamamie idea about a prophecy written hundreds of years ago. I have to admit, I tuned out when she spoke of it."

"Maeve had some old map that showed the cottage and some standing stones and a river. Is that part of it?"

Alex was silent for a long moment. "How did she get it?"

"It came with one of the paintings Finna sent."

"I guess I should have warned Maeve about this. Finna and I used to argue about Otherworld. She would not let it go and insisted that her daughter was destined to save the place when she was older. From what, I don't know." Alex laughed.

Harold felt a sudden panic. "Jesus, Alex. She's older now. And neither one of us can get hold of her? What is this place?"

"It's nothing, Harold. Just some rant from a woman who spends too much time by herself. I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for why we haven't heard from Maeve. And there's no cell service out where Finna lives. Go and have a good time."

Go and have a good time? Harold was about to reply when the phone went dead.



Chapter Ten

MA EVE SLEPT DEEPLY and when she woke the sky was gray instead of black. The wolf was lying next to her in the shallow opening she'd come upon the night before. As soon as Finiche opened his eyes, he rose and stretched and then padded away at a trot.

"Wait!" she called, grabbing a hunk of pemmican before putting the pack back on. She reached for the bow and quiver and looped them over one arm, and then followed Finiche.

Once she caught up to him, he veered off the path and headed toward a ridge, working his way along the edge, his focus downward. In the valley below was a small herd of horses. Finiche's golden eyes met her gaze and he seemed to gesture downward. "Okay. I'll see if I can catch one of them," she said, scrambling down the rocky hill. When she reached the patch of meager grass, several horses looked up, and then a wide-backed black one moved toward her. The mane was thick and tangled, a forelock hanging across perceptive brown eyes. His fetlocks

were heavily feathered, his long tail full of burrs. She reached out to stroke the velvet nose. "Are you volunteering?"

It seemed he was, but she had no bridle, no saddle, not even a halter and rope to hang on to. "This should be interesting," she muttered, trying to recall her riding days when she was thirteen. When she climbed on a rock, the horse came to stand next to her. "Thank goodness for small favors," she murmured in his ear as she clambered on to his back. The horse seemed to know where to go without instruction, heading back up the hill toward where the wolf waited.

It was several hours later that Finiche came to a stop under some spindly trees. The view laid out in front of them revealed burned-out forests and misshapen stumps scattered across a landscape that looked like it had been ripped apart by giants. "Is this where the mines are?" She didn't expect an answer, but when Finiche spoke in her mind, it didn't surprise her that much. These mines were only a small part of what had been done here, he told her in wolf fashion.

She slid off the horse's back and went to the streambed for a drink, but it was bone dry. *What am I doing here?* she asked herself, pressing her fingers into her temples. So far, she'd seen no one, although she'd heard the clash of swords and shouting in the far distance, as well as the rumble of carts going by on the roads that she studiously avoided. Apparently fighting was going on everywhere. Was it her job to put together an army to go against the forces for evil? War was not in her nature, but how else could she stop what was happening? And where in the world would she find enough people to go up against Brandubh?

Purple storm clouds moved menacingly above her. A strong cold wind whistled through the bare limbs of the trees, curling around her neck and making her shiver. It entered her mind like a snake, filling her with fear and dread. In the distance, she could see a fort with a square-shaped courtyard made of newly-cut wood. "Stay here," she told the horse, watching him for a second to see if he understood. He regarded her placidly, as though wondering why she would think he wouldn't.

She headed over the lip of the hill, the wolf right beside her. In the courtyard below, forty or more Crion were chained together, huddling close to stay warm. Large squat beings moved along the outside walls, guarding them. Her mind recoiled, remembering the joy she'd seen on the Crion faces when Mac-Cuill had taken her to the tunnels. A desperate feeling went through her. She was one woman, not physically strong, with no real idea of what she was doing.

She moved backward, knowing there was nothing she could do for them. A padlocked gate held them inside and she did not want to tangle with the guards. She wiped tears from her face and headed back up the hill to where she'd left the horse.

Maeve stood on a boulder and climbed on again. When the wolf loped away, the horse moved into a trot, nearly unseating her until she got the hang of it. Finiche obviously had something in mind, his nose to the ground as he headed toward a narrow tributary that meandered toward the river. Maeve scanned into the distance where mines littered the landscape like open wounds.

They had been following the stream for a while when Maeve heard a keening cry coming from the hill above them. She paused for a moment. It could be a trap. But when it came a second time, she couldn't imagine anyone faking that anguished sound. She left the horse next to the stream and headed toward the sound.

The ape-like creature sat on the ground, its long, furry-brown arms cradling another of its species. When their eyes met, Maeve was instantly aware of the wise intelligence shining out from the deep-set, brown eyes.

"What can I do?" she asked.

But there was nothing she could do and the language barrier made things even worse. The most she could get was that the dead one was her mate and had worked in the mines and starved to death because of lack of proper food—the Amuigh were vegetarians. Maeve was horrified by such callous disregard for life, and said so. The Amuigh, who said her name was Mena,

regarded Maeve calmly with no apparent malice or feelings of revenge. Maeve vowed to free all the prisoners Brandubh had subjugated.



Maeve rode on, her thoughts focused on the pens and how she would manage this dangerous undertaking she'd promised Mena. Her heart felt broken by the terrible sadness emanating from Mena and the hideous cruelty of Brandubh and his minions.

Once she and her animal companions reached the top of a hill, she could see smoke rising from the valley ahead. No encampment seemed to be present, but these valleys were deceptive, hiding circuitous trails into hidden areas. Finiche put his nose into the wind, his nostrils flaring. Maeve slid off the black and headed down the hill, ignoring Finiche's yip of warning.

As she climbed down, a pinewood fire became visible, sparks hissing and rising into the air. Voices speaking a guttural language could be heard. Cautiously, she crawled further until she was looking directly down on their camp. Small, squat beings with large, misshapen heads sat around the fire. Maeve sucked in her breath. They were the Oillteil, dwellers from the underworld come to help Brandubh—the same species that was guarding the fort. When she moved backward, she dislodged a rock, sending a small landslide skittering down the hill. One of the creatures looked up and let out a yell, and then five of them moved toward her. Backtracking, she pulled the bow off her shoulder and nocked an arrow, letting it fly just before she sprinted away. She barely managed to climb on the horse before he took off at a gallop. When Maeve turned to look back one of them was on the ground, dark liquid pooling under him. A sick feeling moved through her body and for a moment she thought she might retch.

Tears trickled down her face as the horse galloped on. If killing these creatures was part of her mission, she was not up to it.

She was resting later when a hand clamped over her mouth. The wolf and the horse were both gone, probably foraging for food. She struggled and fought but something on the rag they pressed against her face made her drowsy. When she came to again, her legs and arms were bound, and her body bumped against the shoulder of the one who carried her roughly down the hill. At least she was alive. Maybe it was the effects of the werewolf root, but she wasn't afraid, only worried about the wolf and the horse. Finiche would surely come looking for her if they hadn't killed him.

But once they reached camp and she heard one of them mention Black Raven, she realized the severity of her situation. She had to escape before Brandubh arrived because she was positive he would kill her. The only reason he hadn't already was because the moonstone diminished his powers.

The one carrying her dumped her on the ground and kicked her in the ribs. Maeve let out a shriek but all that did was cause him to kick her again. She could hear the crackling of a wood fire inside the animal skin tent about ten feet away; smoke was escaping out of a hole in the top. Rolling over gave her a view through the door flap, and she saw one of the Oillteil doing something with a dark-feathered bird. A little later, the crow emerged from the hole in the top of the tent. He fixed her with his bright eye before lifting into the sky and flying away. He was a messenger, she realized, sent to fetch Brandubh. Her arms burned suddenly, the remaining welts seeming to react to the sight of the black bird so similar to the one that attacked her in Milltown. Her stomach contracted in fear. The flap opened and the Oillteil emerged, his piggy eyes fixed on her. His face looked misshapen and grotesque, his mouth turned up on one side and down on the other. Large ears stuck out from his flat bald head, his overlong arms ending in stubby hands and twisted fingers.

"Not very strong, why he so excited about this one?" he asked another Oillteil out of her line of sight.

"I like to kill you, but priest want you for himself." He made a weird repetitive grunting sound that Maeve thought might be a laugh.

"Why am I here?"

"Priest come soon."

When the Oillteil walked away, Maeve worked her hands frantically back and forth, the ropes biting into the broken skin. "I don't deserve to be tortured or killed. Why do you serve this man? He is evil!" she called out.

The creature turned, fixing her with a malevolent stare. "He feed us, he give us power. We help him get power, dig gold."

"He is not going to give you power. He will use you and take all the power and gold for himself."

"Why I listen to you? You work for other side."

"I don't work for anyone. That's the difference between us. I want what's best for all the beings here, including you. I want everyone to have their own power. I want this place to be restored to what it once was."

The creature cocked his head as though listening, and then said, "The priest come—too late now." He began the repetitive grunting again, watching her.

A loud shout came from down the canyon and he picked up a massive wooden club and lumbered away.

Another Oillteil appeared, apparently sent to keep an eye on her. This one was smaller, his beady eyes filled with hate. "Please let me go, I don't want to die." Despite trying to seem strong, tears rolled down her cheeks, but the Oillteil had turned away, interested in the shrieks and shouting coming from the canyon. Maybe he couldn't understand her.

She worked her wrists back and forth, trying to keep from crying out from the pain. One hand was free now—had the guard noticed? No, he was staring away with his back to her. She reached around with her free hand, her fingers clutching the moonstone.

"Ahhiiee..." the Oillteil said, pointing down the hill where a horse with a dark-cloaked rider approached at a gallop.

He was coming for her. The stone burned her hand, but she tightened her grip—something was changing in the air around her. “Grab her!” she heard Brandubh yell, his horse suddenly appearing twenty feet from where she lay. He jumped off and moved his arm in an arc, sending the guard flying. His hand was raised again, his eyes dark with fury when she whirled into the rainbow mist.



A moment later, Maeve was in an unfamiliar rocky desert landscape. Her wrists were bloody, and she had nothing to treat the cuts. She still felt weak and shaky from her close encounter with Brandubh and knew that if she had delayed one second more, she'd very likely be dead. The moonstone was definitely magic—it had saved her once again, but where it had taken her was a mystery.

The world spun when she stood. She waited for the dizziness to pass and then took a look around. Eroded hills covered in hoarfrost stretched for miles in every direction. Clouds scudded by like dark birds. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach as she realized she was truly alone in a place where she didn't know the rules. The map of Otherworld was left behind at Finna's cottage, the fate of Finiche and the horse unknown. She didn't have her pack, her bow and arrows, or the pemmican Eron had given her.

Her skirt was torn, the hem trailing strings from the encounter with the Oillteil. She brushed the dirt off the back, aware for the first time that this dress her mother had given her was magically keeping her warm. Turning in a circle, she waited for some miraculous idea to present itself and tell her where to go. When nothing happened, she picked a direction and began to walk.

A river valley appeared in the distance, and beyond that a flat icy area led toward higher hills capped in white. Winds whipped around her, entering her mind like shadowy beings,

taking her thoughts and tossing them away. Idly, she wondered if this was some aftereffect of the werewolf root. It was as though her mind had been scoured.

The wind abruptly stopped and the meager light drained quickly from the sky. Night fell over her like a dark curtain. Despite the darkness, she continued on. The smooth-looking hills were deceptive, with sharp rocks hidden in the weeds and patches of ice, and she tripped often, bruising her already sore ankles. It was completely silent; no nighttime scuttling of animals, no dark-eyed bats above her in the night sky, no calling owls.

At the river, she bent down to rinse her mouth and wash her face and drank until her thirst was quenched, hoping that the water wasn't polluted. When she searched for a bridge or some way to cross, all she found were dead weeds and rotted cattails. While she stood there wondering what to do, she heard water slapping against wood and looked up to see a small, walnut-shaped boat appear out of the dark mist. A man with white hair to his waist stood in the middle, steering the coracle toward her with one long oar. The little boat was made of split and woven willow, and covered in animal hide. It bobbed in the water like a cork.

He approached the shore and then let the boat drift into the weeds where it came to rest.

"Hello," she called out, glad to come upon another human being, but when she saw his blind milk-white eyes glowing out of the darkness, she backed up.

"Who is there?" he called out.

Maeve hesitated for a long moment, wondering if he was friend or foe. His age seemed to put him in the friend category but she wasn't sure. "I'm Maeve," she finally answered, "also known as the Willow. Can you take me across the river?"

"What is your reason for crossing the river?"

Maeve wondered if this was some trick question. She thought about it for a moment and then answered, "I need to release Brandubh's prisoners." This would certainly reveal what side he was on.

"Climb in," he offered, moving to the back of the boat to give her room. "Normally I exact payment for my services, but it is an honor to take you across." He reached into his patched cloak and pulled out a tiny golden key on a chain. "Rhiannon, the horse goddess, gave it to me for safekeeping. It will unlock the gates." He held it out.

Maeve stepped into the boat and took it from his gnarled and weathered hand, pulling the chain over her head. She sat on the narrow seat, staring into the darkness as he pushed off and headed into the current.

He switched the oar from one side to the other, somehow keeping the odd-shaped boat going in a straight line. His arms were hugely muscled, as though he had done this a thousand times.

"If your goal is to release the prisoners, you are headed in the wrong direction. How did you get here?"

Why hadn't he told her that before taking her across the river? His questions and the way he spoke made her nervous, and she wondered if she should have accepted his invitation. "I was trying to get away from my great-uncle."

"Ah yes, the priest."

"How do you know Brandubh?"

"Everyone in Otherworld knows Brandubh, if not directly, then through someone who has had bad dealings with the man. He was brought forth by the underworld." His voice softened, as though aware of the fear crawling up her spine. "Do not fear me, Willow. I am the boatman, nothing more."

The boatman. She shivered and pulled her arms around her body. "The moonstone brought me here—was it to meet you?"

"Perhaps it was to get the key." He smiled. "Fear not. You will soon learn who you are. As far as finding the prisoners, it will happen when it is time."

Maeve thought about that for a moment. She was separated from Finiche and the horse. She had no idea how far she might have traveled, or even how large Otherworld was. "How did you happen to be here?"

"This river is long and meanders around and through this world. I go where I am needed. You needed to cross at this time, and I am the boatman. Do you understand?"

"No, but don't try to explain anymore, my mind feels muddled enough."

"You will come to understand the way things work here." The boat glided through some reeds and came to rest against the far bank.

Maeve climbed out, her hand going to the key around her neck. "Thank you," she said.

He nodded and pushed away from shore. "Do not lose the key..." he called, his voice fading into the distance. When she looked back, he had disappeared into the mist.



Chapter Eleven

GERTRUDE TRIPPED OVER a tree root and twisted her ankle. It hurt like hell, but she would be damned if she was going to be the one to hold up the group. It was bad enough that her reactions to everything strange they came upon were always high-pitched shrieks of terror or surprise. She had embarrassed herself more than once. This trip in the dead of night, following wolves through the forest, was more strange than anything she could have conjured up: the occasional fire erupting from MacCuill's fingers when they couldn't see well enough to get around brambles and fallen tree limbs, not to mention the eerie howling of the wind that sounded almost alive. But would she rather be back in Milltown? Heavens no. This was much more interesting, even with danger around every corner.

What they had gone through to get here was something she would never have believed if she hadn't experienced it. She and the others had followed MacCuill up the path away from the cottage and then into an unexpected wilderness that ended at

the edge of a river. A mist hung over the water despite the clear blue sky, and there was something unsettling about the quality of the silence at the edge of the bank. But it was when the boat appeared out of the mist that her heart began to beat erratically. The person steering the craft was not of this world, with his milky, unseeing eyes and white hair that flowed to his waist.

Gertrude stared into the opaque water while they crossed, imagining eyes peering up at her. She was glad when they arrived on the other side. But once she had a look around, she realized it did not bear even the slightest resemblance to the world they'd departed from with its malevolent-looking clouds, and the bleakness of the terrain. This was more than just a winter landscape.

By the time they delivered the two fallen Crion to their village, Gertrude was succumbing to jetlag and nerves. Her coat wasn't warm enough, and she felt chilled to the bone. Outside the Crion tunnels, Herska and Mikdal said goodbye, heading off to their village.

Gertrude's thoughts had been miles away when MacCuill abruptly stopped in front of her, and she very nearly ran into him.

"From here on we need to be very careful," the druid whispered. "We are close to one of Brandubh's forts." He moved silently away from the trees, following the wolves down a steep hillside.

Brandubh. My God, was he really living here in this desolate place? Gertrude thought back on her time spent with the priest, remembering the dark eyes that cast a spell on her. "May I join you?" he'd asked, before sitting next to her in the café. It hadn't taken long before they'd made a plan for the day. "You are a beautiful and desirable woman," she heard him say in her mind, her murmured *thank you* and her blush making him laugh. He was one of the best-looking men she'd ever met, despite the priest's robes that spoke of his marriage to God. She'd told herself he was off limits as she listened to his accent, his warm hand on her back sending shivers down her spine. She was in his room

only a couple of hours later. He'd undressed her then, taking his time before pressing her back on the bed. "But you're a priest," she'd whispered when he'd begun his slow exploration. "Priest's have to enjoy life too," he told her, his lips on her neck.

Thinking back on it, it seemed strange that their paths had crossed in the coffee shop in Milltown. She highly doubted that it was a coincidence. And now he had shot two Crion and wounded another, and, worst of all, kidnapped Maeve. She still held out hope that he hadn't done these terrible things because this Brandubh did not bear any resemblance to the charming and solicitous priest in Milltown, who had taken her out to the most expensive dinner of her life. The only chink in his armor had been finding out that he could read her mind, a fact he had kept to himself for nearly the entire time she spent with him. And of course, the night he chose to divulge this, all her thoughts had been centering on what they were doing together in the bed. She shook her head. This was not the time to revisit that particular evening.

She followed the others down the hill, her ankle protesting painfully as it bent to accommodate the grade. She hopped on her left leg, trying to spare her right one the worst of the descent. No one had even noticed that she was hurt. Maybe they couldn't see her, it was certainly black as pitch out here. She stopped for a moment to pull up the hood of her jacket and then hurried to catch up as the small group moved away from her, disappearing from view.

Just as she was about to call out, a hand clamped over her mouth. She tried to scream, but a rag was stuffed into her mouth before she could utter a sound. Strong arms picked her up and carried her silently away. It was too dark to see her captors. There was a nasty smell wafting around her head that she realized was some kind of a sedative. She tried to stay awake but felt herself slipping into torpor.



Gertrude stared into dark, hooded eyes peering down at her where she lay on the frozen ground. “Gertrude! What in hell are you doing here?”

“You tell me. One minute I was walking down the hill and the next... well, someone grabbed me. Wasn’t it you?”

Brandubh bent down and unhooked her from the chain that connected her to several other prisoners. Grabbing her arm, he dragged her into the log fort, leading her into a rectangular room with a long table and chairs. A threadbare carpet lay on the wood floor in front of a wide stone fireplace. “Stand by the fire and get out of those wet clothes. I’ll get you some dry ones.”

Large aromatic pine logs burned hot, sending welcome warmth into the chilly room. Gertrude undressed, leaving on her lacy black bra and matching underpants, ones she’d purchased specifically for the time she’d spent with Brandubh in Milltown. She was standing there shivering when Brandubh came back in the room. He closed the door behind him and didn’t move for a moment, his eyes searing across her bare skin, making more goosebumps rise up. A moment went by, and then another, before he came close and handed her a long, woolen robe.

“So, my dear, you didn’t tell me how you ended up in Other-world. Last I heard you refused to come with me.” His dark eyes regarded her coldly.

Gertrude thought back to his invitation and her decision. She had very much wanted to travel to Scotland with him, but the fact that he was a priest and had broken his vows stopped her. Even though she’d enjoyed their affair immensely, her early connection with the Catholic religion had made what they’d done together shameful and wrong. “You know very well why I said no. And if you remember, I mentioned coming at a later date. But this trip had nothing to do with you. I—I had some strange visions about Maeve. Did you really do those terrible things I heard about?”

“If you’re speaking about the night of the solstice, yes. But they had it coming. I cannot tolerate the pagan celebrations. It goes against everything I stand for.”

His eyes darkened, a scowl bringing his eyebrows together. She realized she was trembling and began to pull the robe around her body.

"You should take a warm shower before putting that on," he said, snatching it out of her hands. He leered at her.

Gertrude wasn't sure what to say. This man was not the same as the priest who'd bedded her in Milltown and knowing he wished Maeve dead made matters even worse. "I would like that," she managed to stutter.

"I imported my own system—crude, but it gets the job done." He crossed the room and opened another door. "Don't be too long, there is very little hot water."

When she walked past him, he handed her the robe and closed the door, leaving her alone in the small room that contained a couple of pipes and a shower nozzle. She heard a click, and when she tried it, the door was locked. Her teeth chattered so hard they hurt, and her throat ached every time she swallowed.

She took off her underclothes and turned the knobs, stepping under the meager stream. She found a small bar of soap and lathered her hair and body. As she was rinsing, the hot water supply began to run out, and she hurried to get the soap out of her hair. By the time she had dried and put on the robe, she was certain she had a fever. Her cough had deepened and now her head was throbbing.

It took knocking loudly and calling out for several long moments before someone unlocked the door. And the man she faced when the door opened scared her with his dreadlocks and dead eyes. When she came into the other room, Brandubh was sitting on a chair with his back to the flames. He looked imposing and powerful, with his feet planted on each side of the chair legs, hands on his thighs.

"Feel better, Gertrude?" His eyes focused on hers, the gaze intimate.

"Yes, but I'm certain I have a fever. Also, my ankle is throbbing."

"Come sit in front of the fire. I'll get you some soup and hot tea. And you need to dry that hair." He put his hand on her forehead before he disappeared through another door. A few minutes later he was back, carrying a mug and a bowl. "So, if you're not here because of me, I want to know everything you saw in your visions and how this prompted you to make a trip across the ocean."

She took a sip of tea, an herbal blend that she didn't recognize. "I read Maeve's cards right before she left for Scotland and what I saw—well—now I know what's going on." She looked at him pointedly, but he didn't return her gaze.

"Do not jump to conclusions about what you've seen. Things are very different in this world."

"Did you kidnap Maeve?"

Brandubh shook his head, turning toward the fire again. "She managed to escape. I'm in the process of searching for her."

"And what do you plan to do if you find her?"

"Don't ask questions about things you don't understand. My plans have been in place for many years, and I won't let your arrival pull me off course." He ran his fingers through his hair, showing his agitation. "The people here are very superstitious, but I'm managing to bring them into the fold."

Gertrude watched his face for signs of the man she knew from Milltown, but couldn't find him. She shivered again and moved closer to the fire. "I don't feel at all well."

Brandubh looked up. "The tea will help you sleep."

Shortly after she finished eating, Gertrude was taken over by extreme exhaustion—she could barely keep her eyes open. Brandubh grabbed her by the hand and put his arm around her waist. "You can rest in my room," he said, helping her out the door and up a flight of stairs. By the time they reached the little room at the top, she felt almost delirious.

"Lie down and let me take a look at that ankle before you go to sleep." As she sank onto the raised sleeping pallet, he reached down and took her leg gently into his large hands. "I have something that will help."

A strong and pungent aroma lifted into the air as he rubbed in a thick and gooey substance. He reached into a drawer and pulled out a piece of silk that he wrapped around her ankle. "This will be better by tomorrow. Now go to sleep. I won't disturb you. I need you to be well."

When she lay back on the thick mattress, he covered her with a sheep's wool blanket. She barely heard the door close before falling into a dreamless sleep.



In the morning, Gertrude was unable at first to remember where she was. Everything had a fuzzy quality to it. At least her fever seemed to have broken, her throat not nearly so sore. She got out of bed, testing her ankle; whatever he had used on it had worked. She walked gingerly to the window and looked out. The sky was the same shade of dark gray as the day before, the small people still chained in the courtyard below. A wave of pity went through her. Here she was ensconced in Brandubh's bedroom while they were still shivering in the cold. Maybe she could talk Brandubh into taking better care of his prisoners. They wouldn't do him much good if they were dead.

Carefully, she headed down the stairs, hoping to find Brandubh in the main room, but when she got to the door, two guards barred her way. "Where is Brandubh?" she demanded.

"Not here," one of the strange-looking creatures said.

"When will he be back?"

He shook his head.

"Can I come in by the fire?" They glanced at each other and then opened the door. Behind her, she noticed a number of filthy men dressed in animal skins emerging from the back of the house and heading out the door toward the courtyard. Their pale amber eyes regarded her like a wolf regards its prey before killing it—she shrank away from them, hurrying into the room.

While she warmed herself in front of the fire, the door opened and one of the guards brought her a bowl of porridge and a mug of tea. Why was she getting this preferential treatment? It worried her, but she also felt grateful. She was sure she would have pneumonia by now if Brandubh hadn't brought her inside last night.



"Gertrude." Brandubh stepped quietly into the bedroom. "What are you doing up here?"

Gertrude turned from the window where she'd been watching the comings and goings of his men. "I didn't know who those men were, and I got nervous. Who is that?" She pointed to a gangly man with dirty blond hair dressed in jeans and a heavy modern-looking down jacket.

"That's John, my right-hand man. I recruited him when I was in Milltown. Remember the man I went to visit? Well, there he is, ripe for my instructions. I have to say John's a wee bit blood-thirsty. The others down there are the duine fiain, the Wildmen." He looked her way and must have noticed her petrified expression. "Don't worry. They are all under my control. Come down by the fire, you're shaking." Brandubh took her hand and led her toward the door.

"It is chilly up here, but this room seemed safer somehow."

"Well, you're right about that, no one would dare disturb you up here. This is my sanctuary." He smiled. "Consider yourself privileged."

His smile was reassuring, but there was something about him here that didn't fit with the man she knew from Milltown—his manner was hardly priest-like, despite the dark woolen robes he wore. "Why was I captured?" she asked, following him down the stairs.

"The Oillteil thought you were Maeve. They are not the most intelligent tribe I've encountered, but now that you're here, I think we can find a use for you."

So that's what the ugly creatures were called. When they entered the main room, John and a group of Wildmen stood in front of the fire, conversing in low tones. A number of Oillteil stood next to the door looking unhappy. As soon as the door closed behind them, everyone stopped speaking and turned, staring at Gertrude in surprise.

"This is Gertrude, my guest," Brandubh announced, heading toward the fire. The group dispersed, their eyes wary. Only John remained, his eyes fastening on hers with an angry glare.

"Get out of the way, John," Brandubh ordered, pulling over a chair. He motioned for Gertrude to sit and then went to the head of the table. "Come everyone. We have plans to make." He settled his tall frame into the chair, waiting for the other men to join him. John sat at the other end facing him, his back to Gertrude.

Once everyone was settled, Brandubh gazed around the table. "John and I have just arrived from the Oillteil camp in the north. It seems our quarry has escaped once again. We need to find her. I want you to divide into groups and begin the search. I've already alerted the men in the barracks, and they will be joining you. One group will head north, one south and one east. I plan to head west with John and a few of my best men. Whoever brings Maeve to me will be rewarded beyond imagining. Does everyone understand?"

There was a mumble of assent as the men glanced around at each other.

"Take the wild dogs and get on with it. I expect you to report back in a few days, and I hope for your sakes that you are successful."

The Wildmen jumped up, exiting the room noisily and pushing roughly into the Oillteil guards on their way out. A few skirmishes started up before Brandubh bellowed, "Stop this nonsense! We need to be united in our cause. John, get the horses ready. I'll join you shortly."

Gertrude watched them, acutely aware of the tension between the men, and Brandubh's thread-like hold on the proceedings. She did not want to be alone with the Wildmen. And

those terrifying, animal-like creatures were about to head off to find Maeve. She hoped MacCuill and the others had found her by now.

After everyone had left, Brandubh came toward her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "How about some dinner?"

An electric charge went through her body and she stood up, letting him steer her to the table. Even with what she knew about him, she was still attracted; it was hard to understand. When she gazed up, he was smiling down on her, his lips curved knowingly. Damn the man and his mind reading!

Brandubh turned to one of the guards. "Bring us food and then tell Brug we'll be heading out within the hour." He turned back to Gertrude. "I'm sorry to leave you again, but as you heard, I have matters of importance to attend to. Will you be all right until my return?"

"As long as the Wildmen aren't around. They scare me."

"Aside from the Oillteil guards, they will all be with me—you'll have the place to yourself."

"May I use your bed again?"

"As long as you don't mind sharing it when I get back. I'll need to sleep for a couple of hours."

"What do you plan to do with me?"

"Nothing, my dear. I'm merely using you for bait. You understand that, don't you? You seem like an intelligent woman."

"So you're hoping that MacCuill and the others will come to rescue me?"

"I'm sure they will."

The two guards returned with steaming bowls of stew and placed them on the table.

Brandubh picked up a wooden spoon and began to eat. "Have some stew, Gertrude, I want you to be completely over your illness. You look pale."

When they finished eating Brandubh pushed his chair back. "I need to leave now. Make yourself comfortable. If you need tea or wine, ask the guard to bring it. I hope to spend time with you later on tonight."

Just before he swept from the room, pulling his dark cloak around him, he turned back to stare at her. She met his smoldering gaze, her body responding in a way that was undeniable. This man was evil and planned to hurt, or possibly kill Maeve. How could she have feelings like this? She remembered what he'd told her back in Milltown, that here in Otherworld he was free to break his vows. She'd felt shame about what they'd done, but here she was again, poised on the brink. Hopefully MacCuill and the others would rescue her before he returned tonight, but there was a warring part of her that wished for something quite different.



Chapter Twelve

MAEVE SPENT A restless night under a grove of leafless birch trees. She knew from her book on the magical properties of trees that the birch was known as the goddess tree and offered protection and renewal, as well as warding off evil, banishing fears, and building courage—all things she needed at the moment. It must have worked, since, despite the layer of frost all around, she had not been cold. She was positive the dress she wore was imbued with an enchantment of some kind, but another part of the answer lay above her where a web had been woven in between the branches. It was not made by a spider and seemed of some protective fibrous material. She puzzled over this, wondering who or what had woven it. Had it happened before or after she curled up under the tree the night before? It was completely dark when she finally succumbed to exhaustion.

A buzz and tinkling had her searching through the trees, but she found nothing—maybe the profound silence was doing something to her hearing. Her mind felt blank and fuzzy with no

energy for figuring things out. She was alive at least, and thankful for that. Her scan of the bleak landscape stretching in every direction brought no insights. She chose a direction at random and began to walk.



Time seemed different here. It was nearly dark again after what seemed to be only a few hours of walking. Her muscles ached from navigating the uneven ground, and there was a painful twinge in her right hip joint. In the distance, rocky hills rose out of the valley and she headed toward them. Hopefully there were caves there, or at least crevasses where she could get out of the cold and go to sleep. By now, the shivering had her teeth chattering, and if it weren't for the dress, she would have long ago given over to the cold.

Harold appeared in her mind and she shook the image away. He held a place in her heart, and she hoped when this was all over they could be together, but at this moment she had to keep her thoughts in the present. If she didn't, there was a good chance she'd end up dead. She had no idea what day it was, or even how many days she'd been in Otherworld. But she had the distinct feeling that forces were at work to help her—at least in this part of Otherworld. She pulled out the werewolf root and took a bite. It was the only thing she had to eat. A moment later the headache hit her, and she pressed her fingers against her temples. By the time it subsided her mind had cleared, any thoughts of Harold gone.

Ahead of her, hills rose and fell in endless waves of ochre and brown. The air was still, the sky a forbidding shade of gray, but no moisture had come out of those heavy clouds. No trail to follow, no people, no animals, no birds, just the countless hills stretching endlessly into the distance. It seemed as if she'd been walking for days.

She ran her fingers through her hair. It seemed like a lifetime ago she'd cut it. Looking down she noticed more tears in her beautiful velvet skirt—covered with grime, the entire hem seemed to be unraveling. She must look like some kind of crazy street person with her chopped off hair and ragged clothes. She laughed, the echo of the alien sound bringing back to her how far from her normal life she had traveled.

The wind came up, sending sharp bits of dirt into her face and making her eyes water. A steep hill led toward the valley, but the hill on the other side was just like the one she was on—no trees, just bracken fern and dead heather. Was she in some kind of weird loop where the same landscape kept repeating, or was she traveling in circles? Her stomach clenched at the thought. She knew very little about how Otherworld worked, pretty much anything was possible. Better to keep going and not think about it. There had to be something different on the other side of the next hill. When doubts entered her mind, she pulled the werewolf root out of her pocket again and chewed off a sliver. It did seem to help.



With the simple rhythmic act of putting one foot in front of the other, her mind grew still, so when she had the vision, it didn't seem odd. At first, she heard a voice in her mind, and after that, flashes of another landscape.

In her vision, she stood on a high hill watching Brandubh and another man approach a wooden structure in the valley. A huge army was marching in the northern valley. She heard Brandubh say, "We're close now. We just need to get rid of the Willow and we'll have this world, and all it offers, to ourselves." And then he was standing at the head of a huge crowd, his voice echoing over the valley. "We will control it all! It is ours now! Bring me the Willow and you will be rewarded!"

A grunt rose from the assembled crowd, and then they chanted words she couldn't understand. Swords flashed as they raised them in a salute to the man who stood before them like a god. Maeve felt his evil and his rage in her own body, as though the two of them had merged. He was training them in the art of black magic, and they were avid learners. She doubled over as bile rose in her throat. Two hundred of his men were housed at the fort, thousands more ready in the north. Maeve recoiled as she felt the darkness in his soul. Brandubh and every one of his men was searching for her, and if they found her, there would be no mercy. A second later, she bent over and retched into the dirt, severing the connection.

After her breathing had come back to normal, she opened her mind again, hoping for a clear message about what to do, but the silence was complete. The only thing she knew for sure was that she couldn't fight violence with violence. She had to find another way.

In the meantime, it had grown completely dark and scanning the immediate area revealed no place to shelter for the night. When tiny lights appeared all around her, she figured she was hallucinating, but when they formed a circle and then fanned out in a line, she decided they were real and there to help her.

The light beings led her across the darkened terrain and up and down rocky hills until they arrived at a cliff face. Maeve followed them through a gap between rocks, her arms straining to pull herself onto a narrow ledge. With a sigh of relief, she levered herself into a cave, sinking onto the dry dirt floor. Shaking with cold and fatigue, she pulled her knees up and under her velvet skirt and fell asleep.



Maeve woke with the sinking feeling that time was running out. The mind meld with Brandubh had shown her the truth. Her fingers traced the key where it lay next to the moonstone.

The prisoners were more important than anything right now, but she had no idea where the forts were. They certainly weren't anywhere around here. Gone was the feeling of helplessness she'd had when she first arrived. Now her only thought was to free this place from Brandubh and reclaim it for the Crion, the Amuigh, and all the others who had lived here in peace.

Maeve sat on her haunches, staring out at the bleak landscape that stretched before her. Every muscle in her body hurt, and she was so thirsty all she could think about was water. But everything in the immediate vicinity was frozen and dry. Her stomach rumbled as her belly complained about its emptiness. Something had brought her here, a force that she couldn't comprehend. The light beings were part of it. She turned away from the desolate scene and studied the inky blackness at the back of the cave. It seemed deeper than she originally thought.

A faint breeze brushed her cheek as she moved into the darkness. The tunnel narrowed and she had to crawl, inching her way along in the pitch black. She had never liked tight places—closets with the door shut or elevators crowded with people—and panic rose in her throat. She was moving backward to get out of the claustrophobic space when she saw the lights coming toward her from deeper within the tunnel. When they reached her, they hovered around her head and then turned and headed down the tunnel. She followed them, hoping it would widen soon. When the tunnel made another sharp bend, she felt the wind again, stronger now. The roof widened out and she stood up, following at a crouch as they led her downward. She continued on. "What now?" she wanted to ask them, but once she arrived at the opening, the light beings disappeared.

Maeve could hear the burble of water. There were trees here, and although they were leafless, they did offer a modicum of protection from the cold and wind. She scrambled down the rocky hill. At the stream's edge, she kneeled, looking carefully into the water and sniffing it. It was running over rocks and had a fresh clean smell. She leaned forward, cupping her hands, but an image in the water had her gasping in fear. She pulled back and

then cautiously leaned forward again. This time, she was prepared for the gaunt-eyed woman with uneven tufts of hair, the pale face covered in mud. But the brooding expression in those eyes was very different from the Maeve she was used to seeing in the mirror. Giddy hysteria came over her and she laughed aloud. "I fit right in, don't I?" she asked, looking around. But there was no answer.

Using a small piece of hem for a washcloth, she washed the mud and tears off her face, and then scooped cool, clear water into her mouth, savoring its sweetness as it slid down her parched throat. Downstream, the bank had been dug out, and piles of slag littered the edges. Her gaze traveled uphill to the rough-hewn tree trunks that had been cut as supports for a mine. Muddy rivulets of dirt and pebbles ran into the stream, clogging the flow. With her hands, she cleared the mud dam that had formed and dug out a trench to divert the water. When she was finished, she walked up the hill, looking back to admire her handiwork. The water leaped downstream with a happy, gurgling sound and she had the distinct impression that it was thanking her.

Shrieking pierced the momentary serenity, jarring her into action. It was coming from the hill above and she began a careful ascent. At the crest of the hill, an intricate and unusual wooden fence came into view. She followed its graceful contours until it disappeared over the rise. From here, the yelling was louder and there were shouts of pain and high-pitched screams. Goats and sheep grazed calmly on the grassy hillside, seemingly unperturbed by the noise and chaos.

As she crept along the fence line, the silver glint of a knife caught her eye. A second later, a terrible scream rent the air as the blade found purchase. Maeve skirted the hill, making her way by the fighting. She climbed through a break in the fence and then hid behind a thick grove of unfamiliar trees. Her heart thumped unevenly, her rasping breath loud in her ears. From her hiding place, she had a clear view of bodies and blood. She crept toward the closest one and reached out to check for a pulse.

"The man's eyes went wide as he tried to sit up. "Who are ye?"

"I'm Maeve. I'm here to help. Where are you hurt?"

He searched her face and then fell back. "I think my leg is broken."

"Can you walk if I support you?"

"I can try, but I suggest we do this quickly before the Oillteil see ye." He looked nervously in the direction of the noise.

Maeve grabbed his hand and pulled him to a sitting position.

"There's a small building back there where we will be safe," he told her, gesturing toward a narrow path. Maeve helped him stand, supporting him as he put his arm around her shoulders.

A small wooden structure came into view, flanked by two of the same kind of trees, their interwoven branches forming an elaborate arch.

"The spirit house is a sacred place," he said, watching her closely as he opened the door.

Maeve pushed it the rest of the way open with her foot and helped him inside.

As soon as they were over the threshold, he let out a heavy sigh. "Well, at least I know you're not one of them. Evil canna cross this threshold."

Maeve looked around, her gaze coming to rest on a wooden bench running along the wall. She supported him there, helping him sit down. From the center fire pit, the smell of sage and burning wood reached her nostrils. Smoke rose delicately, exiting through a small hole in the roof.

"Is Brandubh involved in what's going on here?"

"How do ye know about Brandubh, girl?" His eyes were wary, a frown on his face as he looked her over.

"I—I've seen what he's been doing. He's holding people hostage and destroying the land."

The man stared at her for a while, as though assessing whether she was telling the truth. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision. "Brandubh is not here in Rowan at the moment, but these Oillteil who fight us are in his employ. Some people in

town dismantled part of the fence to let them in. They will not get away with this again," he muttered, his face grim. A second later he turned pale, a moan escaping his lips.

"You should stretch out for a moment. I need to look at your leg." Maeve rolled up a piece of burlap, placing it near his head for a pillow. "It must be terrible to know that your friends have been conspiring with the enemy."

"That's the worst part of it." He lay back with his eyes closed, his mouth a line of pain. After a moment, he continued. "Many years ago we had the same sort of trouble. The people responsible were punished by the villagers and vowed to never do anything like this again, and yet they were the very same ones who helped the Oillteil."

"Why did you trust them?" Maeve asked, carefully rolling up his pant leg to examine the wound.

"Because they assured us of this."

"And the entire village believed them."

"Of course, why wouldn't we? Brianag was, and is, a healer and part of our community. Pryderi is the son of a goddess. And besides that, there was some magic at play the first time around—some sort of sorcery. We all know each other here, and we have to trust one another. Without that, we have nothing." He closed his eyes, his forehead furrowed in pain. When he opened them a moment later, he held out his hand. "I'm Roc."

Maeve grasped his warm fingers, gazing into pale blue eyes. He was older than she had at first thought, his skin deeply lined beneath the thick gray beard. "So what finally happened to this Brianag?"

"She was banished to the outside of the fence, but over the years, her transgressions were forgiven and she moved back inside. Ye must understand that it was another entity that came through her the first time—an evil that none of us could have predicted. 'Twas not her own doing."

"And Pryderi?"

"Aye, he is the goddess, Rhiannon's, son, but ye would never know it from his actions. We have nae control over him. With his

powers, he comes and goes as he pleases. I havna seen him for years, but by the looks of it, he was instrumental in this break-in."

She felt carefully along his leg. "How long has the fighting been going on?"

"Many years, but this attack, only a few days. We've barely managed to keep them from gainin' control of the village. I'm nae sure what it is they want. They seem to be in a kind of frenzy."

Maeve wondered if this could be a plot to capture her. Maybe Brandubh was on his way—maybe he had seen inside her head when they melded and knew exactly where she was. She pressed her hands against her temples to stop the headache that had just begun. "What is this village called?"

"This is Rowan. I thought ye knew this. Where did ye say ye came from?"

Maeve shook her head, ignoring the question. Her mind spun in circles, trying to get hold of why she was here. "What do they gain by attacking Rowan?"

"This hill is a strategic spot, and the rowan trees have many magical properties—'tis how we've kept ourselves from harm. Ye must have noticed that we have water here. Most springs are polluted or dammed up." Roc winced as he tried to shift his position. "Rowan is one of the last bastions in Otherworld that hasna been mined or clear-cut. The trees will nae permit it.

"But I saw a mine just down the hill," Maeve said.

Roc looked her way with a puzzled expression, and then his eyes lit up. "Aye, 'tis an old one from early days. Not in use now."

Maeve thought about the dammed up streambed, the evidence of recent activity. Perhaps Roc hadn't left this village for a while. "What would happen if they tried to cut down the trees?"

"They wield their branches like weapons."

In her mind's eye, Maeve pictured angry trees pulling up their roots, their limbs swinging like clubs. She turned back toward Roc, watching his face contort in pain. "Try to relax. I'll see what I can do for your leg." Maeve placed her hands around his calf and closed her eyes, concentrating on drawing out the

pain. Energy coursed beneath her fingers as she envisioned golden light.

"That feels better. Are ye a healer?"

"I've never been a healer, but Airmid filled my mind with her knowledge." Maeve laughed. "Now I know all about plants and where they grow and all sorts of stuff—it just comes to me."

Roc stared at her for a long moment, and then his eyebrows lifted in recognition. "Now I ken who ye are. Your mother and grandmother came through here many years ago. You're the Willow from the prophecy." He smiled, his over-bright eyes trained on her.

She smiled back. "The light beings led me here. Have you ever seen them?"

"Only once a very long time ago. Ye may have been brought here to stop the Oillteil from takin' over the village."

"It's more likely that my being here will bring Brandubh. I'm sure he's tracking me."

He shook his head. "Brandubh is nae here, nor anywhere close. If he were, we would have seen him by now."

"I hope you're right. I would hate to be the cause of more injury."

Roc gazed at her as if in awe. "I've been hearin' about ye for a very long time. The Otherworld has been waitin' for your arrival."

Maeve stared at the fire. "The boatman gave me the key that opens the locks where Brandubh keeps the prisoners. I was planning to go there, but I ended up here instead."

Roc nodded. "The prophecy points to the time of the second full moon, but we havna laid eyes on the moon for many a season. Perhaps that is when you will release the prisoners."

"I hope it's sooner than that since it's weeks away, or at least I think it is. Where I live two full moons in the same month are known as a blue moon. We have a saying, 'once in a blue moon.' It means something that almost never happens. What is the significance here?"

"The two full moons represent doubling of power—your power."

Maeve thought about that for a moment. Airmid had told her she was a healer, and whatever the goddess had imparted seemed to have taken root. When she felt his leg again, she noticed the swelling had diminished considerably. “I need to make a splint.” Ignoring the doubt that arose about her diagnosis, she set to work ripping off part of her trailing hem. “Where can I find a straight branch of rowan wood?”

“Around back you’ll find a grove of small trees. Just give thanks before you break a twig—the rowan is sensitive and doesn’t like to be desecrated without a reason.”

Behind the house the trees had formed a small circle around some ancient standing stones. Their limbs were leafless, covered in reddish-orange berries that stood out against the glowing cinnamon-colored bark. She placed her hands on a trunk and asked permission to cut a branch for Roc. The answer came in the way of a wind that bent the branches toward her. She grasped one and waited again, thanking the tree for its graciousness. Before she snapped the branch, she heard a whisper in her ear—a *yes* without words.

“My leg pains me again,” Roc complained when she arrived inside.

“This should help.” Maeve found a hatchet in the corner and managed to split the wide limb into two fairly even pieces. She took one and placed the flat side under his leg, and then ripped a small piece of hem to tie it in place. When she was finished, she held her hands lightly on the break, visualizing golden light.

“That feels much better,” Roc mumbled with a sleepy sigh. “If you don’t mind, I think I might take a short nap.”

She watched him for a minute and then the name of an herb popped into her mind. “Before you go to sleep, Roc, do you know where I might find solomon’s seal?”

“Aye,” he answered, his eyes drooping. “Just along the street, two doors down, you’ll find the healer’s house. I dinna ken if he’s there now, but his name is Janus. Just ask him for what ye need.”

Maeve left the spirit house, following the path to the street. The fighting was far away now—just a low din in the distance.

When she came to the house Roc had described, she knocked; when there was no answer, she opened the door. "Hello, anyone here?" Along the wall, a wide shelf held tinctures, jars of herbs, and salves labeled neatly in black pen. This Janus must be a very organized man, she thought, moving down the line to S.

The root needed to be boiled in milk, and she searched the house in vain, finally concluding that there must be a spring-house close by where the cheese and milk were kept. Sure enough, a short trip behind the house revealed a small chamber dug into the hill. As she opened the latch, a mossy earth smell wafted out from the dark empty hole where water should be bubbling up from the underground spring. Hadn't Roc mentioned that the springs here were intact? He hadn't known about the mine at the bottom of the hill either. What else was the man in the dark about? Maybe his assurances that Brandubh was nowhere around were also not true. Behind the spring, a dirt shelf held several jars, and she lifted one and pulled off the cloth top to check the contents. Her nose wrinkled in distaste—definitely goat's milk. At least it wasn't sour.

Back in the spirit house, Maeve sat on her heels next to the fire. A few dried cedar limbs had been stacked by the wall and she placed them in the coals, watching the sparks fly up and out the small hole in the center of the roof. The air filled with the pungent aroma of burning needles. Once the flames had settled down, she placed an iron pot on the hook over the fire. Dropping the root into the milk, she waited for the mixture to come to a boil.

"It's almost ready," she said, as Roc began to stir. Another piece of hem became an oven mitt as she lifted the pot off the fire. Once the concoction had cooled sufficiently, she undid the binding on his leg and smoothed on the warm paste.

"Can you rest a bit more? It's the best thing for you."

"Yes, I'm sure I can. The fire is warming up my old bones."

After she spread all the paste and tied another strip of hem around his leg, she left Roc and made her way down the street in search of more wounded. Many houses were burning, and

she could hear hysterical shouting coming from within. It was impossible to help them with the doors and windows impassable. She watched in dismay as the wind picked up burning cinders and carried them from house to house, quickly catching the neighboring thatch on fire. Where was the well? There needed to be an effort to stop the spread of fire. But then again, if the spring was dry, the only source would be the stream at the bottom of the hill, and that was too far away for a bucket line.

Through the billowing black smoke Maeve saw a woman emerge from a doorway and run for the trees. Maeve followed, reaching her just as she collapsed. "Let me help you," Maeve said, kneeling next to her.

"Who are ye?" she asked, her eyes wide with distrust. The woman was covered in soot, with red blistering burns lining her arms and neck.

"I'm Maeve—also known as the Willow. The one from the prophecy?" she added, as the woman continued to stare at her suspiciously.

"Hanna," she finally said.

Maeve helped her up and they made their way slowly to the healer's house where she had access to the herbs and salves. Maeve settled her on the floor next to the fireplace and set to work building a fire. Once the logs caught, Maeve searched through the jars, looking for nettle. As she was kneeling down to treat the woman, the door flew open and a man entered.

"I'm Janus," he said. "I live here," he added, his eyebrows raised. "Where did ye appear from?" His gray eyes regarded her calmly.

"I'm Maeve. I came through the tunnel. I—I didn't know where else to take her, since the spirit house is so small."

"Glad to make your acquaintance," he said, holding out his hand. "Have ye laid eyes on an old man with a beard?"

Maeve smiled. "You mean Roc? He's the one who pointed me here. He's resting in the spirit house."

"Ye are a healer," Janus said, watching her place nettle leaves on Hanna's burns.

Maeve didn't answer, carefully tending to the injured woman.

Recognition lit up his eyes. "You're Finna's daughter! She was pregnant and very sick when she came through Rowan."

"She didn't tell me about that," Maeve answered, feeling uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

"Ye resemble your grandmother, Catriona," he added. His eyes went wide. "The prophecy! I should have known from the first moment I laid eyes on ye."

Maeve ignored his stare, turning back to Hanna. "Do you have herbs for her chest? Possibly agrimony—she's breathed in a lot of smoke."

Janus pulled his eyes away from her face and went to the shelf. He searched for a moment and then brought over two jars, setting them on the floor by where she kneeled.

Maeve grabbed a pillow off a chair and folded it in half, placing it under the woman's head and upper back. "This should ease your breathing a bit."

Hanna's face was white with pain, her eyes wild. "My husband—my bairn—have ye seen them?"

"Not yet. Janus will take care of you while I go look for them," she said, glancing up at the man hovering close. "How old is the child?"

"She's eight—long blonde curls, ye can't miss her. And my man, Jake, he's—"

"I know Jake," Janus interrupted. "Maeve, ye stay here. I'll find them." Janus left quickly, slamming the door behind him.

"Do you mind if I rub some salve on your chest? It will help your breathing."

Hanna shook her head and closed her eyes. Maeve unbuttoned the top of her dress and applied the salve, glad when the woman's labored gasps became more even.

"Thank ye," Hanna mumbled, turning on her side.

A few minutes later, the door flew open and Janus entered, supporting a man carrying a sobbing little girl.

"Dana, here's your mother—see?" Janus coaxed.

When the man put the child down, she let out a happy cry, rushing to cuddle with her mother, but the fabric of Hanna's dress on Dana's blistered cheek had her screaming in pain. "Dana, Dana," Hanna cried, "my bairn..."

"Come, Dana," Maeve urged gently, arranging a place for her on the rug close to Hanna. "We need to treat those burns." Maeve applied nettle leaves directly to the girl's skin, gratified when she began to relax. A few minutes later, the child was fast asleep.

On the other side of Hanna, Janus worked on Jake, who had a deep wound between his ribs. A jagged line of flesh oozed blood from where an arrow had been roughly pulled out. He glanced at Maeve. "I need yarrow, and could you heat up some water?" He pointed toward the fireplace where an iron rod supported a kettle.

"Where's the water?" Maeve asked, hoping she wouldn't have to travel down the hill to get it.

Janus pointed toward a heavy crock on the counter. Maeve filled the kettle and built up the fire, swinging the iron arm over the flames. It wouldn't take long. When steam began coming from the nozzle, she looked around for tongs or something to keep from burning her hands. How did these people manage, she wondered, ripping another long piece of velvet from her hem. Doubling it over, she reached for the handle, bringing the kettle over by Janus.

"Pour," he ordered, nodding to a small bowl next to him.

Maeve did as he asked, and then stood next to him, watching as he cleaned the wound. "That needs to be stitched up. What do you use here for a needle?"

Janus nodded and then went to his shelves, bringing back a wooden box filled with thorns and bone of various sizes that had been fashioned into needles. "I'll fetch ye some clean flax," he said, rummaging through another small box.

Maeve picked out a narrow thorn with a small hole drilled through it. Once they had thoroughly cleaned the wound and staunched the blood, Maeve encouraged Jake to take a good

swig of the brandy Janus produced. When he handed the bottle back, she poured some directly on the thorn and then on the wound. The alcohol would kill any lingering germs. Maeve's hands shook as she pulled the flaps of flesh together, lining them up correctly. She breathed deeply in and out until her hands were steady, and then set to work. She knew that every time she pushed the thorn through his skin that she caused him great pain, but Jake did not flinch or cry out.

Once Jake was resting, Janus and Maeve had a talk, deciding to search together for more injured. When they left the house, dark smoke billowed across the rooftops. Many houses had already succumbed to the flames—dark charred hulks. "Isn't there some way to put out the fires?"

"Until the Oillteil leave, I'm afraid there is nothing to be done. Our wells have dried up and we canna waste what little water we have. We rely on the small stream at the bottom of the hill for all our needs."

When they came upon an injured Oillteil, Maeve left the path. She kneeled next to where he lay under the trees checking for a pulse. The creature was barely conscious, his breathing labored and shallow. When she looked around for Janus, he was several yards away, walking quickly down the street. "Can you help me?" she called out.

He turned back, shaking his head in protest. "What can we do for him?"

"Take him to your house where the supplies are."

His mouth fell open. "We canna do that. We have villagers there, what do ye think they'll do if we bring in an Oillteil?"

"Don't you have an extra room? He's severely injured." Maeve pointed toward two deep gashes in the creature's arm that were still bleeding. "He'll bleed to death if we don't get this stopped." Maeve ripped a piece of hem and tied it tightly around the wound. "We need to hurry."

It took Janus a few moments before he headed back. When he reached her, his face was closed and angry. They had raised the creature to a sitting position when a voice seemed to come

out of nowhere. “What are ye doin’?” A soot-covered man stood next to them, his eyes wide with horror.

“He’s injured. We can’t leave him here to die.”

“He’s the enemy. Look how many of us he’s killed.” The man gestured wildly, pointing out several motionless bodies lying in the dirt.

“He’s a living being. I don’t care if he’s the enemy or not. Maybe you’d like to assist in finding other *villagers* who need our help. If you choose to do so, bring them to the house just there,” Maeve said, pointing up the street. Without answering, the man turned away. Maeve watched him for a moment and then turned back to the problem at hand. “If you can take his shoulders, I’ll get his feet.”

Janus didn’t say a word as he pushed his arms beneath the Oillteil’s back. The creature grunted once as they lifted him, and then seemed to pass out.

In the cottage, they carried him into another room, placing him on a rug by the fireplace. Janus left the room, letting Maeve build up the fire. The Oillteil looked green, and she didn’t know if this was his normal color, or if it was due to blood loss. He had regained consciousness and watched her warily as she worked to get the logs burning.

“What is your name?” she asked, wondering if he spoke English.

“Name Oak.”

“Well, Oak, do you feel dizzy?” She pantomimed what dizzy felt like.

He nodded, his eyes darting from side to side.

Maeve worked on the deep gash in his upper arm, cleaning it with hot water that Janus brought in. She placed agrimony leaves directly on the wound. “Oak, I need to get a blanket for you. I’ll be right back.”

In the other room, Janus whispered, “How is he?”

“I don’t know. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“I still think this was a bad idea.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say this since you’re a healer.”

Janus didn't answer and a long moment went by. "Where did ye obtain your knowledge of herbs?" Janus finally asked.

"You won't believe it if I tell you."

"Try me."

"I studied herbs when I was in college, but Airmid imparted all sorts of information when I first arrived in Otherworld. Now, I just seem to know things, things that I never had any inkling about before."

"Airmid, the healing goddess," Janus said thoughtfully. "I have yet to meet her."

"Where do you keep the blankets?"

When Maeve went back into the other room, Oak had fallen asleep. She covered him with a blanket and closed the door softly behind her.

"Janus, I'm going to look for others who might need our help. Will you come with me?"

He nodded, his eyes on the closed door between the rooms. "There are friends of mine still out there but first I want to check on Roc."

"I'll be down the street."

"Be careful, Maeve, the Oillteil are still burning houses—stay out of sight."

He turned to the cabinets and pulled out a heavy padlock. "This will assure safety," he muttered, placing it around the latch. "I woudna wish trouble before we return."

Maeve shook her head in exasperation. There was no way Oak had the strength to do anything. They exited the house together, Janus turning right and Maeve left.

"I'll catch up with ye," Janus called over his shoulder. "Be careful."

Maeve headed down the street toward the fire and smoke. From what she could see and hear, the fighting had moved at least a mile away.

"The old man's fine," Janus said, joining her a few minutes later.

Maeve glanced his way, noticing the deep lines on his face, the thinning gray hair. Could Roc be that much older than Janus? She wanted to question him about her mother's illness, and what Roc had told her about that long ago visit, but now was not the time.

When they came upon more injured Oillteil, Janus made no comment, only bending to help her carry them back to the cottage. They made several trips.

"I'll just take one more look around," Janus said from the doorway after they'd settled another villager in front of the fire. "Ye look worn out, lass. Stay here and tend the wounded. I'll be back shortly."

Maeve was happy to comply. Her arms and shoulders ached from the heavy lifting, and she felt exhausted beyond measure. She checked on the four Oillteil, glad to see that the valerian tea she had administered had put them to sleep. In the main room, several small children were crying—more frightened than hurt. Some of their parents had not yet been found.

Maeve was attempting to soothe them when Janus burst into the cottage, his arm around a young woman. A dress hung in tatters around her thin form, her legs and arms covered in cuts. Despite her injuries, she brought the welcome news that the remaining Oillteil were gone, defeated by the villagers at the outskirts of town. The hole in the fence had just been repaired, she told them, but there were many people who had been burned trying to escape the fires that raged on uncontrolled.

After the woman finished her tale, she slumped into a chair, her face haggard.

"This is Sara, for any of ye who might not know." Janus smiled toward Maeve, his hand protectively on the woman's shoulder.

When Maeve came close to examine Sara's wounds, Sara said. "My wee bairn is missing. I fear for her. As soon as I rest a moment, I'll go and search again."

"You'll do no such thing," Janus said sternly. "Stay here and let Maeve treat your wounds. I'll check for her." He left the

house looking determined, but as soon as the door closed, Sara began to cry.

"He'll find her," Maeve said, placing comfrey leaves on the many cuts covering her legs. She helped the woman stretch out, and then treated her arms, rubbing salve into the burns.

Sara couldn't settle, her gaze on the door. Her eyes were wild and bloodshot, her face pinched with worry. Maeve put her hand on the crown of her head, pressing down firmly. "Try not to worry. You need to concentrate on your own healing." Maeve lessened the pressure, feeling energy course into her fingers. "Imagine all the pain and worry going into my hands," she whispered, placing one hand on each side of the woman's head. Sara gazed up at her and then closed her eyes.



By this time, the room was full of bodies, the pungent odor of salve and herbs heavy in the warm, closed-up space. Maeve cracked a window and then checked the fire in the other room, adding another log. After that, she busied herself chopping vegetables for soup and trying to ignore her burning eyes and the shakiness in her legs. Soon the aroma of barley, onions, carrots, and potatoes mingled with the strong scent of medicinal herbs.

Just as she was about to serve the soup, Janus came in looking disheveled and upset. He had not been able to find Sara's child and clearly felt terrible about it. He went to kneel by Sara, who threw her arms around his neck and burst into tears. Maeve heard him say something about being glad that he hadn't found the child hurt or dead, but those words, meant to soothe, only made her cry harder.

Maeve served soup to all who could eat, helping those who were too weak to raise a spoon to their mouths. The Oillteil were still wary and afraid of her, she could see it in their pig-like eyes, but she put on a friendly expression, and tried to ignore the sour smell coming from them. She spoke in a soothing

tone to the ones who didn't speak her language, using gestures to encourage them to eat. Once she had served Sara and Janus, she ladled a small bowl for herself; it had been a long time since she'd eaten.

Gazing around the room filled her with a deep sense of gratitude and peace. There was a faint glow shimmering around each person. She'd read about auras, but she'd never been able to see them. Janus and Sara were conversing in low tones, their heads close together. Pale rose light surrounded them, becoming stronger every time their eyes met. As they talked, he placed his hand on hers. Her thoughts went to Harold and what they had felt for each other before she left. Her thoughts went to Harold and what they felt for each other. These two were in love, and love was a powerful force. This was what she had to harness in order to defeat Brandubh.



Chapter Thirteen

GERTRUDE FINALLY FELL into a restless sleep, only to be awakened by the sound of a heavy boot on the floorboards. She sat up and looked toward the door.

“Sorry to wake you, my dear, although I am glad for some company at this moment.” He lit a candle and brought it over to the bed.

“Were you able to find Maeve?” she asked, afraid of the answer.

“No, the witch is quite elusive. Eventually, we will find her.” Brandubh sat down on the bed and took his boots off. He turned toward her, but the candle was behind him and she couldn’t discern his expression. “If I were a gentleman, I would sleep on the floor, but we both know that is not the case, don’t we?”

A shiver went through her. What should she say? She smelled his musky odor and her body responded. An image of his arms around her went through her mind and she sucked in her breath, trying to will it away.

He raised his eyebrows, leering at her as he removed his cassock, placing it carefully over the chair. When he pulled off his

wool undershirt and long johns she couldn't keep her eyes off him.

He smiled and moved toward her. "I see your attraction has not diminished," he said, sliding in next to her. Heat rose from him, along with the scent of healthy sweat. She tried to move away, but he was too close now, inside her personal space, and electricity sparked between their bodies.

When he bent his mouth to hers, she flinched, moving backward. "What is this now? You think you can refuse me?" He pressed his mouth against hers, his tongue prying her lips apart. Before she could protest he'd pulled off the robe she was wearing, his greedy gaze moving across her nakedness. He lifted her like a doll, pressing her body against his. Waves of desire coursed through her as she felt the press of his skin and his hands moving across her back. He cupped her buttocks, pulling her even closer. When she moaned, he pushed her away to lie on her back. He watched her, his eyes dark. She moaned again, reaching up to pull him toward her.

And then he was on top of her, his chest pushing against her breasts, his hips against her hips. He parted her legs with his knee, his dark eyes watching her as he pushed inside her. She let out a gasp and then another, feeling the heat rising from their bodies as he sank deeper and deeper. Her breath came in gasps; all thought of who he was and why she shouldn't be doing this, were lost as he worked her into a frenzy. After they were satiated, he brought her tea and stroked her naked body as she drank. She almost purred as his hands moved along her overheated skin.

"You are beautiful, Gertrude. I can't resist your charms, even though this is bad timing for me." He lifted her long hair and kissed her neck. Before she could catch her breath, his lips were on hers. And this time there was no hesitation as their bodies met, devouring each other as though they'd been lovers forever.

When it was over and they lay spent in each other's arms, he told her he might need her help in the future, that the two of them were connected now, their minds linked. She gazed

into his eyes. How could she deny him? Fate had brought them together.

"I have a gift for you," Brandubh told her. From a drawer, he brought over an exquisite necklace made of silver—she recognized at once the symbol for the triple goddess inside a circle. At the very center lay a red jewel. When he hooked it around her neck, it fell heavily into the hollow between her breasts.

She ran her fingers over it, touched by the gesture. "It's beautiful. Where did you get this?"

Brandubh smiled. "It's a family heirloom."

A short time later, she fell asleep in his arms.



When Gertrude opened her eyes again she was lying outside, next to a fire. A short distance away, a ring of standing stones cast shadows along the ground. As her eyes adjusted, she recognized the faces of Finna and MacCuill. Catriona was sleeping next to a man Gertrude had not seen before. Other sleeping shapes lay on the other side of the fire. She had been 'rescued', she thought wryly, and this was not the outcome she had hoped for. The last thing she recalled was drinking a second cup of tea after their last—good God, what was she going to say to MacCuill and the others?

When she stood, she noticed she was wearing the long robe that Brandubh had given her; she had been unclothed when Brandubh brought in the second cup of tea. A little thrill went through her as she recalled the glow of his skin in the candlelight, his dark gaze on hers. How could this be the man everyone spoke of—the evil force in Otherworld?

A flush came into her cheeks. Had they found her naked in his bed? And what had they done to Brandubh? He didn't seem the kind of man who could be easily outwitted. The tea must have had quite a sedative effect for her not to awaken en route. And why would Brandubh sedate her? A warm sensation

moved through her lower belly as she recalled the night's frenzied activities.

She moved out of the protective circle of stones, heading toward the trees to relieve herself. Four wolves were there, and she heard a low rumbling growl coming from one of them. She wondered if the animal knew what she had just done. *Don't be silly*, she said to herself. But it was looking at her with what she would call a relatively unfriendly expression. "Hello, wolf," she whispered. She reached down to pat the large gray head, but when her hand came close to his muzzle, he snarled, exposing large white teeth. She pulled her hand quickly away and then moved behind a tree, keeping an eye on them as she raised the robe. When she walked by them a few minutes later, they ignored her, their eyes closed. She took her place back by the fire, settling down to think.

A little later, the stirrings of the others woke her—she must have fallen back asleep. Her insides churned when they turned their expectant faces toward her.

"Good morning, Gertrude. Glad you're with us again." MacCuill smiled, his gaze warm. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right," she stammered, trying to sound normal.

"Come over by the fire, we've made tea," Catriona invited, motioning to a spot next to her. The Crion passed a cup between them, sipping delicately.

Gertrude took the cup and sat down, concentrating very hard on her tea.

"Did ye see Maeve?" Finna asked.

"No. She wasn't there. I overheard talk about her escaping from some camp."

"I'm Maeve's grandfather, Eron."

Gertrude turned to the dark-haired stranger leaning forward with his hand extended. She took it, trying to smile.

"Maeve was with me before she was captured. I should have gone with her."

Gertrude pressed her released hand into her other palm. She looked down.

"I'm so sorry ye had to go through that ordeal," Finna said, her eyes searching. "Did Brandubh hurt ye?"

There was silence as they waited for her response.

Gertrude drew in a breath. "No, he didn't. He was very kind to me. I don't know why—"

"We found you, umm, in a rather compromised state," Eron interrupted. "Do you have any recollection of what happened?"

"I think he gave me some kind of sleeping potion," she answered quickly. "It must have been in the tea." Her cheeks burned.

All eyes were on her. Even the small Crion were staring at her now. Catriona watched her, her head cocked to the side as though she was listening to something that no one else could hear. Gertrude smiled around at the group. "Honestly, I feel pretty good. Brandubh put some salve on my ankle and it feels completely healed." She picked up her leg and moved her ankle in a circle. "What happened to him when you rescued me?"

"I knocked him down and put a short spell on him while Eron carried you out of there," MacCuill answered. "Surely you can tell us a bit more about the two full days you were there."

Was that a suspicious look she saw in the druid's eyes? Her insides quivered. "He was making plans to go after Maeve with the Oillteil and those other wild-looking men with the dreadlocks. They all took off, but they couldn't find her, and he came back. He left me alone at the fort for most of the time. I was sick after being out in the weather, and when he brought me inside, I just rested and recovered until you rescued me." That was mostly true, she thought, wondering why her heart was beating so fast.

"Sick?" Catriona asked, looking skeptical.

"I got a fever from being out in the freezing cold. I thought I was going to get pneumonia." She coughed to prove her point.

"And where did ye get that necklace? I dinna remember ye wearin' it earlier."

Gertrude's fingers went up to the spiral. If she'd been thinking clearly, she would have removed it earlier to avoid questions. Her face reddened as she tried to come up with a good answer.

Finally, she went with the truth. “Brandubh gave it to me. He said he found it somewhere and had no need for it.”

Catriona shook her head. “‘Tis awfully fine to be given freely to a complete stranger.”

Gertrude glanced her way. “I thought so too, but he insisted.” She tried to laugh, but it sounded forced. “I just couldn’t turn down such a nice piece of jewelry.”

A long moment of silence went by.

“Well, I’m glad he took you inside, Gertrude,” MacCuill finally said. “It’s more than he did for these poor Crion.”

“We need to get these people back to their home,” Eron added. “As you can see, a few of them are not at all well, and the rest have been severely stressed from lack of food and water. And as you mentioned, being exposed to the cold for days on end.”

Gertrude met the man’s eyes, hoping she imagined the accusatory look there. Why hadn’t she tried to help the Crion? Surely she could have convinced Brandubh to bring them under a roof. Even the horses had a roof over their heads. She looked into their pale faces and heard a lot of them sniffing and coughing. Two of the women were still lying down, curled up close to the fire. She felt a pang of regret at her selfish behavior. She should have mentioned something the first day—before their physical encounter wiped all reason from her brain.

Catriona pulled a bag of herbs from her pack, placing leaves into a shallow bowl of water over the fire. When they had soaked for a moment, she pressed them onto the women’s upper chests. “They all have chest colds, but Mira and Tari are the hardest hit. This catnip should help.” She murmured something to the two women in their language, and then went back to the fire to brew more tea.

“I hoped we would have found Maeve by now,” Finna muttered. “Goddess knows where she is.” Finna’s hand went up to wipe the tears from her face. A second later she had a coughing fit.

MacCuill turned to the Crion man behind him, conversing quietly. At the end of the conversation, he translated for the rest

of the group. "The burial ceremony is in two day's time. Their tradition is to carry their dead on ceremonial beds that will be burned in the bonfire. But first we need to get these people home so they can rest. They will insist on being a part of this tradition, and the Dolmen is a long way from the second Crion village."



They left camp around midday, going slowly because of the sick and injured Crion. As the day passed, Gertrude struggled to put her mind on other things, but she could not get Brandubh out of her mind. She was positive everyone knew what had happened between them. If she was naked in his bed, what other explanation could there be aside from rape? Scenarios kept popping into her mind, stories she could tell them to explain why she'd been undressed. And behind all her thoughts was the memory of their wild coupling, her feeling, despite what she had learned, that he was her soul mate. Physical longing plagued her, and she wondered if Brandubh was feeling the same way. He had warned her that their minds were linked now. And yet underneath these thoughts was her guilt for what she'd done. She had never felt so conflicted.

In her life at home, it was she who read the cards and interpreted what the fates were saying. Now it was as though all her self-control had disappeared, blowing away with the strange energy-sapping wind they had encountered on the long walk. This turn of events was not what she'd expected when she made the decision to fly to Scotland. Maeve had been first and foremost on her mind, and now she couldn't stop thinking about Brandubh. Maybe he was doing this to her, placing himself in her mind to keep her under his control.

It was nearly dark by the time they reached the Crion village. They were warmly welcomed, the sick Crion fussed over and then taken away to the healers. Gertrude and the others were

shown into a room with soft sheepskin beds covered in bright woven blankets. Food was brought on trays—soup and bread—and shortly after that, they all went to bed.



In the morning, the village was bustling, shrill voices echoing off the tunnel walls as the Crion prepared for departure.

“Today, we will accompany the Crion north to the Dolmen,” MacCuill announced, translating what he had learned from the woman who had brought the morning tea. “The ceremony will take place tomorrow.”

Gertrude had changed into another pair of jeans and a sweater, but her warm coat had been left behind at Brandubh’s fort. The long robe lay on the bed and she picked it up, bringing it to her nose. A faint musky odor clung to the wool, bringing a sense memory with it. She rolled it into a tight ball and stuffed it into her pack, a blush creeping up her chest and neck. When she looked up, everyone was busy packing their belongings. She released a long breath and turned to finish her tea.



It was late afternoon by the time they arrived at the sacred spot. The ceremony had been planned for the following evening, so Gertrude and the others made camp under spindly trees on the downward slope of the hill. The Crion took shelter under and around the Dolmen at the top of the hill.

That night, the temperature dropped below freezing, turning the fog to hoarfrost that sidled its way under blankets and clothes. When morning finally arrived, the weary travelers woke to a sky full of dark clouds. The Crion were already busy gathering firewood for the bonfire, the unearthly silence broken only by the snap of twigs and limbs as they were taken.

Gertrude huddled next to the meager fire MacCuill had managed to coax into existence, wondering why she had been so excited to come into Otherworld. At this moment, she longed for the comforts of home, and if it weren't for this obsession with Brandubh, she would certainly try to find her way out of this dank and dreary place. The cough was still with her and had kept her up for most of the night. Catriona had not offered to help her in any way. She knew the woman was an herbalist, she had seen her treat the Crion.

After a breakfast of tea and stale bread, the search for wood for the bonfire began in earnest. After laying a hand on her forehead, MacCuill told Gertrude to take it easy, saying that she might have a slight fever. But after an hour or so of watching the others struggle through the frozen trees, she felt guilty and got up to help. The search took them far from the hillside and was made difficult by the ice that lay across the ground, but despite that, the pile at the top of the hill grew. MacCuill used his magic to dry the wood so it would burn easily once the time came. The horrid frozen landscape, her worsening cough, and the idea of burning people up in a bonfire had Gertrude's thoughts traveling backward to the stories her gypsy mother had told her about the gypsy holocaust during the Second World War—this entire scenario seemed repulsive and macabre.

At dusk, the procession started up the hill, MacCuill in the lead. He wore his white robes, ghostly in the swirling mist and fog. Behind him came the elders, holding the burning torches high, and behind them, the Crion carried the beds of woven willow supporting the tightly wrapped bodies of the dead.

Eighteen stones made a ring big enough to hold a hundred people. The burial chamber stood on a small rise above the circle, comprised of two ten-foot-high standing stones with an enormous slab across the top. A wide altar stone lay on the ground beneath. After the day of silence, the chanting voices of the hundred Crion seemed deafening. Many piercing cries of sorrow were interwoven within the song that was repeated over and over, their special way of singing the dead into their next

life. Gertrude, Finna, and Catriona followed behind the Crion as MacCuill made his way through a gap in the stones toward the center of the circle.

Once the willow beds were placed on the pyre, the wood was lit with rush torches, bursting immediately into flame. MacCuill's voice echoed out over the sound of the flames. "May your journey be swift, and may you return soon!" After these words, he knelt on the ground in front of the conflagration and played his flute of alder, a song full of aching sadness. After he put his flute away, the keening voices began once more, mingling with the sound of crackling wood as the blaze burned hot, flames lifting into the dark sky. The mourners continued their song until everything had burned away, leaving only ash. Once the ashes had cooled, the elders scooped them into ceremonial vessels that they placed on the altar stone.

As if on cue, the wind came up, lifting the ashes in a swirling spiral and dispersing them in the four directions. It was at that moment that the moon goddess, Arianrhod appeared, at first as an owl and then as a woman, her golden hair a shimmering nimbus against the darkness of the night. At first, her figure looked faint and indistinct, but as the Crion acknowledged her with shouts of joy and awe, she became more solid. "I will take them to the stars until their rebirth!" she called out, her voice sweet and lilting. "This is the night of the full moon when the prophecy begins. It is the time for rejoicing, since the Willow is now among us. When these souls return to Otherworld, it will be a better place. The second full moon of the prophecy is nearly here."

Gertrude watched from a safe distance, feeling nothing but the cold that had seeped under her clothing and into her bones. The entire ceremony sickened her, and now with the appearance of the goddess, she only wanted to be somewhere warm and secure. Forget the prophecy—forget Otherworld. She hated it here.



Chapter Fourteen

hAROLD PICKED UP his rental and drove on the A71 toward Glasgow. Maeve had not been at the airport to pick him up and he wondered, for the millionth time, if he should have made the trip. The tension he felt between them had grown since his meeting with Gertrude, and now he was convinced that Maeve didn't want him here at all.

The directions Alex had given him were definitely outdated. More modern roads had been built in his absence and it was getting confusing as hell. He pulled off on a side road and consulted the map the rental agency had given him, trying to get a handle on which route to take. He finally decided to pick up the A82 outside Glasgow, hoping he wouldn't be caught in some snarl of city traffic.

He arrived in Glasgow before rush hour and sailed through, turning off at the exit for the A82. It was an A road but only two lanes, and by this time, it was growing dark. There were no streetlights and he was becoming increasingly tired. He needed to stop somewhere and get a cup of coffee or find some place to

spend the night. He had seen a sign for the small village of Luss on Loch Lomond and thought he would check it out, see if there was a motel.

When he turned off the main road, it dawned on him that, unlike the U.S., there were no cheap motels stuck out on the roads and lit up with bright neon signs. It was then that he remembered the GPS that came with the car and he switched it on, giving the satellite a moment to connect. There was quite a list of hotels in the area and he ran down it, checking the prices. The dollar-pound ratio was not in his favor. He finally found a youth hostel on the other side of the Loch at a reasonable price and turned his car around to head toward Rowardennan.

Driving through the villages, he came upon revelers carrying torches and singing as they walked along the narrow streets. This was the first of January, was it still the New Year celebration?



In the morning, Harold looked out his picture window at a breathtaking view of the Loch. The area around Loch Lomond was mountainous, with high peaks covered in snow, the dark water reflecting them back like a mirror. A slight mist lay over the still lake, giving it an otherworldly feel. He stood there for a long while, feeling lost in time.

While eating his breakfast of ham and eggs in the dining room, he was regaled with all the customs related to the Hogmanay celebration. The word had various meanings from derivations in other languages, including “holy month” and “new morning.” It dated back centuries and was solely a Scottish tradition that had come about because of the distrust of Christmas, which in the early days was seen as “popeish and full of superstitions”—in other words, a purely Catholic holiday. It wasn’t until the 1960s that Christmas was celebrated in Scotland. The gift-giving and feasting before that had been between the thirty-first

of December and January second. When he asked about the name and if it had anything to do with hogs, his question was met with raucous laughter.

He left Rowardennan around nine. The proprietors had been helpful, giving him directions and shortcuts to Bailemuir. The day was chilly and overcast with a slight mist that caused him to turn on his windshield wipers every few minutes. He felt wired from coffee and nervous about his reunion with Maeve. On one hand, he couldn't wait to see her, and on the other hand, their argument on the way to the airport still haunted him.

He drove fast once he got on the main road and made good time; by ten-thirty, he was turning off the A83. From here, he estimated another forty-five minutes if he didn't run into slow traffic. The countryside was crisscrossed with low stone walls, behind which many different breeds of sheep grazed. It was cold, but the early morning frost was already long gone and pale sunlight was sneaking through the dispersing clouds.

As he drove through the picturesque villages, he thought again about Maeve. He was nervous about seeing her. As the landscape changed and the houses grew more rustic, he had the distinct impression that he was heading back in time and was unnerved by all the images that raced through his mind. Possibly, the images were from reading the historical novel *Kenneth* about the first King of Scotland. The book had been recommended by his parents to give him a taste of Scotland's distant past before he embarked on his trip. On his last visit to their house, his mother had entertained him with tongue-in-cheek tales about King "Cineath" MacAlpin's exploits. Gazing at him with a sly smile, she'd also told him that the succession to the throne in Scotland had always been matrilineal. MacAlpin's mother was thought to have been a Pictish princess.

Harold had taken a lot of what she claimed as harmless story telling. But he didn't think the scenes in his mind came from the book or her tales, they were too clear—sword fights, wild half-naked men painted blue running across green fields, men dressed in chainmail with spiky light hair, mud, large scruffy

hunting dogs, horses—a muddle of unconnected events. They seemed like memories more than anything else. And the closer he got to Bailemuir, the stronger they became.

He tried to concentrate on where he was going after he swerved off the road to avoid hitting a rabbit. He didn't want to miss the sign for the small side road that led to town. He slowed down just in time to glimpse a tiny wooden sign pointing to the right, Bailemuir printed in small block letters. He took the turn and drove down a narrow one-lane road with turnouts for traffic coming the other way.



After asking in several stores for a map, Harold went into the local pub. The smells coming from the kitchen convinced him to have a quick bite. It wouldn't do to arrive starving at Finna's house. While he ate at the bar, he asked the proprietor if he knew Finna.

"I do indeed," the man chuckled.

After getting directions to Finna's house, Harold picked up the local newspaper, noticing an article about the odd death of a local woman. He scanned down the page. The authorities thought the woman had died from wounds incurred from some kind of wild dog that had been spotted in the area around the time of the solstice. Apparently, the woman had gone for a walk the morning of December twenty-first and had never returned. Some local teenagers had found her body, and according to the article, the authorities were continuing to investigate. A cross had been carved into her forehead, which suggested some sort of ritualistic murder, possibly a satanic cult. Until they figured it out, they warned people to stay out of the woods.

Harold felt a chill as he finished up his lamb stew. He left money on the table and hurried to his car. He pressed down on the accelerator as he left the city limits. Wind began to blow, and then the sky opened up, sending ice pellets slamming against his

windshield. Foreboding had adrenaline racing through his veins. He turned on the wipers, peering into the darkness. His tires slipped as he rounded a sharp corner and he pressed his foot on the brake. It was then he noticed the bright orange rosehips the barkeep had mentioned and slowed down, turning into the narrow unpaved lane.

Behind the cottage, he saw an old mini and another car parked next to it. He slid his rental into the remaining space and shut off the engine. He sat for a moment trying to bring his heartbeat to normal, watching ice coat the windshield as he wondered if Maeve would be happy to see him. Finally, he put his coat on and opened the door, pulling the hood up before reaching into the backseat to get his backpack and guitar. The duffel would have to wait.

There were no lights in the windows. All he could hear was the hiss of the ice hitting the flagstones and the low roar of the ocean. His mind took in the eerie silence, the dark cottage. All of a sudden he was running, his feet slipping on the ice-covered grass at the front of the house. He reached the door, knocked hard, and was surprised when it opened under his hand.

He pushed against it and called out, "Hello? Anybody home?" The interior was dark as a tomb, his search for a light switch futile. He pulled matches out of his pack, lighting one and looking around. A kerosene lamp sat on a table next to the fireplace and he removed the chimney and lit the wick. Soft light flooded the empty room.

It was warm inside the house, which he took to mean that the inhabitants must be close by. After he had a look around, he noticed the AGA against the wall in the kitchen that served as both heater and stove. He was familiar with this appliance since his parents had one when he was growing up. There were partially filled cups and dishes left on tables—the place looked as though everyone had left in a hurry. From the amount of dishes, it seemed as though several people had been here. Well, that made sense—Maeve, her mother, and her grandmother. Feeling a need to be active, he carried the dishes to the sink and used the

hand pump to wash them. The water was ice cold but he continued, not wanting to stop to figure out how the hot water worked.



After he'd washed and stacked the dishes, he made a fire in the fireplace, using kindling and the dry wood in a copper bucket on the hearth. Once it was going, he pulled out his old Gibson and sat cross-legged in front of the fire, his fingers running through a blues riff that never failed to calm him down. He was sure Finna and Maeve would walk through the door any minute—they must have gone into town.

As it grew darker, he placed his guitar to the side and lit another lamp. That was when he noticed that the bed against the far wall was unmade. When he examined further, he saw stains on the sheets that looked like blood. He didn't want to think about what this might mean.

The amount of blood on the bed was negligible, but still, it was blood. Something had happened here. Where was Maeve? He pulled his cell phone out to call the police but there was no signal. The storm had increased and the sound of cracking limbs and the thump as they broke off and crashed to the ground made him reconsider his idea to drive back into town to the police station.

He made himself a cup of tea and sipped slowly, letting his mind wander down strange roads. He was extremely unsettled by the empty cottage, the extra dishes, and the blood. His eyes began to droop from jet lag and coming down from the excitement about reuniting with Maeve. Where should he sleep? Somehow, lying down in that unmade, bloody bed didn't appeal. It was then that he noticed the small door to the left of the fireplace.

As soon as he opened the door, he smelled Maeve's citrusy perfume. His heart raced as he imagined her hurt or worse in the rumpled bed. But she wasn't there. Her suitcase was on the

floor, clothes were strewn, lying over chairs and on the bed. He puzzled over this, trying to make some kind of sense of it all, but his mind wasn't working properly. There was nothing more he could do tonight. The storm would pass by, and as soon as it did, he would drive into town to the local police station. He fell asleep in his clothes, the sound of the wind and rain beating against the windows.



Chapter Fifteen

“**I** SEE YOU’RE STILL working. I hope ye got some rest yourself. You’re going to wear yourself out, lass.”

Maeve turned at Roc’s voice, glad to see a sparkle in his eyes. He seemed a lot better this morning, without the gray pallor of the day before. “I slept, don’t worry. And you appear to feel better too.”

Roc smiled, his blue eyes lost for a moment in the wrinkles. “If I could walk on this leg I’d get back to my studio.”

“Studio? What do you do?”

“I’m a woodworker.”

“Ah, now I know why your hands are so rough. What kinds of things do you make?”

“Furniture, jewelry, ye name it, all out of rowan wood.”

Maeve smiled and then turned back to the fire, adding a couple of logs. The stack was dwindling; she would need to gather more. “How about some tea?” she asked, standing up and rubbing the sore muscles in the small of her back.

"I would love some, but I dinna wish ye to wait on me. Maybe ye could find me a walking stick and I could get around on my own."

"Not yet. Your leg needs to be immobile for at least another day or two before you start putting weight on it. If you need to use the—" she couldn't think of what to call the toilet, "Um..."

"The necessary?" he finished, smiling.

"Yes, I can help you to wherever—"

"Thank ye, but I'll get there on my own. If I canna manage that, then—I should be put out of my misery." His eyes twinkled and then he laughed.

"All right, I'll find you a walking stick. Too bad I don't have the one MacCuill gave me." As Maeve spoke his name, the door flew open and MacCuill was standing there, a walking stick in his hand.

"Wow! How did you do that?" she asked, staring in amazement.

"Timing is everything," MacCuill chuckled. "And how are you, my old friend?" he asked, heading over to the bench. He handed Roc the walking stick and then sat down, his back to the wall.

"Could be better, but without Maeve's help, I would be a lot worse off."

"Maeve, I came to warn you that Brandubh and his men are riding in this direction. You will need to leave here before they arrive."

"He won't be able to get in, will he?"

"He knows black magic, Maeve—tricks the Oillteil do not share."

"I'll stay until everyone here is sufficiently healed."

"Are there others you have not treated? I was in Janus's house and saw all of your good work. Those you healed are on the mend. The few left will be in Janus's capable hands. Without you here, Brandubh has little reason to fight these people. You are all he wants."

Maeve stared into the distance. "My plan is to release any prisoners I find, but getting to where they are is another story."

"And how did you come to be here?" MacCuill asked.

"I—I held the moonstone and—I don't know, really. Are you saying I can think of where I want to go and the stone will take me?"

MacCuill cocked his head to the side and raised his bushy eyebrows.

The door opened. "I brought your morning tea," Janus announced, kicking the door shut with his foot. "Sara is preparing porridge for breakfast." He handed Roc a mug and then held one out to Maeve. "Everyone in my house is feeling better this morning, but I havna divulged to the villagers that there are Oillteil in the other room. I'm afraid of what might happen." He glanced toward Roc, as though to ask for his support in the matter. "I have to say, when I checked on them, they seemed less hostile. They're still weak and Oak needs stitches—I plan to do that after breakfast if he'll let me." His eyes went to Maeve. "Ye might have a better chance since he seems to trust ye, lass. Come over for porridge when ye finish your tea." He started toward the door and stopped, turning to face them. "I almost forgot the best news of all. We found Sara's daughter early this morning and she's fine."

When Janus left Maeve whispered a small prayer of gratitude to the universe. "I have to have a plan for the Oillteil before I leave. I can't leave Janus to deal with them."

"Are they well enough to leave on their own?"

"I'd say yes, but what if they re-join Brandubh? I'd rather they didn't do that."

"Take them with you." MacCuill's indigo eyes twinkled.

Maeve frowned. "How does that work?"

"You'll figure it out," MacCuill said, turning toward the door.

"Wait! What about Harold? Does anyone know if he arrived? If he did, he must be frantic by now."

MacCuill shrugged. "Whatever happens is up to destiny. You've begun your journey, and if Harold is part of the prophecy, he's begun his."

"But what do I do now? Go and find him, or release the prisoners?"

MacCuill turned from the door, his gaze meeting hers. "Do you think I have the answers? I did what I could to show you what you were up against here, but other than that you are on your own. I am merely an advisor."

Merely an advisor?

MacCuill left the spirit house and closed the door, and when she pushed it open to ask another question, he was gone. She turned back to tend the fire, her mind whirling. MacCuill was the one who took her to Otherworld in the dreamtime and introduced her to the Crion. He had to know more than he was saying.

"You can leave us now, lass," Roc said, breaking into her reverie. "We're well enough to get on with our lives. As MacCuill said, Brandubh will not bother us if you are gone."

Maeve met his gaze, noticing the hazy glow that emanated from him. "What do I do about the Oillteil?"

"I would suggest getting them out of Janus's house. He is not as tolerant of those who have done us harm."

Maeve nodded slowly, wondering if the stone could carry all of them to another place in Otherworld. It was time to find out.



Chapter Sixteen

hAROLD WOKE IN the morning with an overwhelming urge to pee. He jumped out of bed, wondering where the bathroom was, and then decided to do the easiest thing, opening the door to the outside and pissing into the cold morning air. He stood there for a moment, breathing in the smell of the sea. Above him, the sky looked ominous and gray—another day of storms. He shivered and closed the door. Breakfast was the last thing on his mind as he searched for his car keys. He had to get the police out here to do a thorough search.

The view out the window in the predawn light revealed wild waves coursing in and breaking on the sand. At least the rain and sleet had stopped for the moment. He decided to take one quick look around before heading into town.

Examining the area in front of the cottage revealed the remnants of a bonfire, an enormous one by the looks of it. Because of the storm, any footprints were long gone, but the smell of burned wood lingered, mixing with the damp salt air. He poked

around but all he found was charred wood and ash and something that looked like spent fireworks.

When an object outside the fire circle caught his eye. He went to examine it—a wooden flute with a simple, carved fetish, well made, a piece of art, really. He picked it up and wiped off the mud and snow on his jeans. Something dire must have happened here to cause this valuable instrument to be left behind. He scanned around, becoming more and more afraid for Maeve and her mother. And then he remembered the newspaper article about the poor dead woman with the cross carved into her forehead.

He turned and ran for the cottage, heading into the bedroom for his warmer coat. He grabbed his cell phone off the bedside table and stuffed it in his pocket.

As Harold hurried toward the front door, he noticed the map sitting on a table against the wall. He picked it up and examined the markings again, something shifting inside him. Some deep part of him recognized it, as though he'd been involved when the thing was originally drawn. Impossible, he thought, shaking his head, but there was no denying the feelings that were running through his body. A voice inside his head told him that this map would lead him to Maeve. Should he head into town or follow the clues on the map?

He packed quickly, putting in the cheese he found in the fridge and adding the apples and bread on the counter. He added a Swiss Army knife, matches, and a coil of rope that he found under Finna's sink. Candles caught his eye on the shelf above the stove, and he threw those in as well. If he had known he would be following some ancient map into some godforsaken wilderness, he would have packed his lightweight camping stove.

Under the sink, he found some gauze and a jar of salve. The contents smelled vaguely mentholated. He added it to his bulging pack. When he stood up, a piece of parchment revealed itself underneath a table against the wall. He picked it up and read the words written there. *It has been foretold and will come to pass in the dawn of the darkest year...*

What in the world was this, then? Some silly thing Finna must have shared with her daughter—maybe this was the craziness Alex had mentioned. But as these thoughts hurtled across his mind, another part of him knew what this meant. “Damn it to hell!” he shouted. “I have to find Maeve!” He threw the parchment down and raced out the door, all thoughts of the police falling by the wayside.

Harold quickly became out of breath. His apprehension, accompanied by jet lag, had taken a toll on his normal stamina. Every so often, he checked the muddy and snowy ground for prints, but so far he hadn’t seen anything other than rabbit, squirrel, and raccoon tracks leading across the trail and into the woods. He called out a couple of times, but heard nothing in return, just an eerie stillness. He walked, letting his heartbeat return to normal, and tried to marshal his wild thoughts.



Harold stopped, his hands on his thighs. The adrenaline had long since worn off. He squinted, trying to see the end of the trail. As he closed his eyes, Maeve’s face loomed into his mind, and he had such a pang of longing that he almost doubled up. Where was she? He couldn’t lose her, and the thought propelled him to his feet again. He glanced down at the map and then looked around, noticing for the first time a group of worn standing stones. When he went to examine them, he saw that the markings on one matched the markings on the map. When he put his hand on the ancient symbol, something seemed to shift around him, everything growing hazy and indistinct. A second later, he was running down a hill toward a river.

As he closed the distance, he wondered what he would find on the other side of that murky looking ribbon of water. A wall of mist lay over the opaque surface, obscuring the far bank. He was still contemplating how to get across when a coracle glided toward him out of the fog. The boat came to a stop in the reeds,

the ancient man who directed it gesturing to Harold. It was obvious he couldn't see, his eyes glowing white in the gray mist.

"Get in, Kenneth," the boatman insisted.

Harold stepped into the little boat, feeling a niggle of recognition, but the flash was gone before he could get hold of it. "I go by Harold, but how did you know my middle name is Kenneth?" he asked, dropping onto the narrow wooden seat.

"You are the one in the prophecy."

"What prophecy?"

"The prophecy that names the Willow. You are the reincarnated first king of Scotland, the one of noble birth."

"Are you talking about that poem or whatever it was? The red flag of truth and wolves and fire?"

The man said nothing but seemed to stare right through him.

"I'm certainly not of noble birth," Harold declared emphatically, trying to look away from the strange eyes

"Do you have something for me, Kenneth MacAlpin?" the boatman asked.

"Something—like what?"

"Something to pay for my services."

Harold reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a coin, placing it in the man's gnarled and weathered hand.

"That will not do. This coin means nothing to you."

Harold took the coin back. He thought for a moment and then pulled his Swiss Army knife out of his pack. He didn't want to part with this; it had been a gift from his father, and it was extremely useful. Reluctantly he placed it in the man's hand.

The boatman's fingers closed around the knife. "Now, Kenneth, I must tell you a story."

Harold stretched out his legs and leaned back as the boatman pushed off and began to row across the river. The words drifted into his mind like a childhood story—far-fetched and whimsical. As they passed into the mist, Harold felt dizzy for a few moments, disoriented. He missed a sentence or two as he tried to reclaim his equilibrium. From a distance, he heard the

boatman saying, "...it may take some time for you to remember me or the experiences we've had together, but as you become oriented to this world, your memories will return. We fought side by side a long, long time ago, and killed the hoards that invaded Otherworld. What we did brought the tribes together, tribes that declared you to be the rightful king. I was there when you were crowned."

His voice droned on, bringing scenes of the past to Harold's mind. He saw himself riding a gray horse, his sword flashing, the gush of blood as it bit into flesh.

"What is happening now," the boatman continued, "is not unlike what happened before, except this time the invaders are from the Underworld and led by a man who should have died long ago. Brandubh is immortal and, without the power of the gods and goddesses, he cannot be defeated. The Willow is here to work in tandem with you and with them. You and the Willow have been foretold to bring the light back to a world that has grown dark."

By the time they reached the other side, Harold was even more lightheaded, his thoughts scattered and erratic. He got out of the boat forgetting to thank the boatman or even to say good-bye. When he looked up again, the coracle had disappeared into the mist. Harold knew all about this first King of Scotland because he had just finished reading a book about him, but trying to swallow the news that he was this man seemed beyond preposterous. Kenneth MacAlpin had been alive a thousand years ago. When he mentioned this fact, the boatman had said, "Not quite. We fought together eleven-hundred and fifty-eight years ago, in 847 A.D." That would make the boatman how old?

Harold laughed, but something nagged at him, something that wanted to come to the surface of his mind. He'd always attributed his fascination with the history of Scotland to his mother. He shook his head and pressed his lips together. This was not really worth thinking about and what difference did it make, anyway? *Only the fact that, if he was mentioned in the prophecy, he belonged here—he had a job to do.* He stood on the bank

staring into the mist. On the other side of the river, everything had seemed somewhat normal, but now—this was no longer just about finding Maeve. The stakes had grown exponentially in a matter of a few minutes. He'd been called into Otherworld by forces he couldn't explain. If Maeve was some high priestess who had been named in a prophecy, she could surely take care of herself—or could she?



Chapter Seventeen

MAEVE'S HEART POUNDED in her ears, her eyes closing as vibrant colors swirled by at an alarming rate. When she landed, she didn't move for several minutes, her hands on her chest as she gazed around. She had done what she assumed would bring her to the prisoners, but it seemed the stone had something else in mind. Maybe her thought of *take me where I can be of the most use* had brought her to some other dire situation. Around her, she heard the grunts of the three Oillteill she'd actually managed to bring along. They looked dazed and unsure, their small eyes darting around in fear.

"It's okay," she told them. "We're all right. Tell me again what you told me back at Rowan," she said, staring at each one pointedly.

Oak nodded and turned to his companions. "We pledge to you."

"The guards we'll face are your people. How will you deal with that?"

"You save us. We serve you," Oak said strongly. The others grunted their assent.

Unfamiliar forest lay behind her, silent and dark. This was not where she'd seen the fort. She brushed herself off, letting her thoughts drift away. The stone had brought her here for a reason. She took one last look at her companions and turned toward a narrow trail that led under the trees. It was one of the few forests she'd seen that hadn't been clear-cut, the pungent smell of pine resin sharp in her nostrils. She was just thinking about how safe she felt when a twig snapped. She turned left and came face to face with a tall, russet-haired woman.

The woman smiled, pulling a dark shawl around her body. "'Tis difficult now to come here, to be present in the flesh. I do not have long. I am your ancestor, Brigid, and I have been called back to help you in your quest." Her fingers were long and covered with rings of semi-precious stones. "I was the first to hold the moonstone. With your incarnation, the circle has closed."

Maeve put her hand up, reassured by the stone's presence around her neck.

"Otherworld is poised on the brink of destruction. If you hold the stone in your palm, it will always show you where you need to go. This next phase is for you and you alone to accomplish."

"But the prophecy said many—many would be by my side to help me."

"Many will come because of who you are." Her gaze traveled to the Oillteil huddled behind her. "This has already begun. Keep your focus on your purpose and do not let what rides the wind divert you."

Maeve waited for more but the woman began to fade, drifting away until there was nothing left. She heard the words, "Remember, we are linked," and then there was silence.

Maeve stared at the place where she had been, her eyes filling with tears. This woman was her ancestor. She felt connected to her as though they were mother and daughter or maybe even sisters. But there was no time for wallowing. She had to move

forward, despite the worries that crowded into her mind. She took the moonstone from her neck and stared into it, and when a line appeared on the opaque surface, she followed where it led.

She was about midway up a steep hill, dark conifer forest to her left and a dry riverbed along the bottom, when she heard raised voices. "Stay here," she mouthed to Oak, motioning for the Oillteil to hide. As she made her way cautiously toward the sounds, a small, rustic village came into view. An imposing house with a wide chimney of river rock sat at the very top, and next to it stood a church of equal grandeur with a great iron cross on its steeple. The area of forest behind had been clear-cut, leaving at least a hundred stumps behind.

Tentatively, she moved closer, trying to hear what was going on. This landscape wasn't familiar; it didn't look like the area of the holding pens she and Finiche had discovered. Where had the moonstone taken her? She hung back behind a spindly tree and peeked around the trunk. From here, the only people she could see were women, and they did not look well. She heard deep coughing and noticed that many faces were red and splotchy. The arguments seemed pointless, almost like the people were just arguing for the sake of arguing. She patted her pack where she had stuffed the bags of herbs, tinctures, gauze, and salve that Janus had given her. Time to make her presence known.

Maeve stepped out and called hello, watching the woman stop in their tracks to stare at her suspiciously. "I'm Maeve," she said, walking toward them and hoping her smile would put them at ease. But their expressions were terrified now, as though they didn't understand English—and that was certainly possible.

"I'm a healer," she said, moving closer, and thinking how strange it felt to say this.

"We take care of our own here, we dinna need anyone from outside tellin' us what to do," one of the women said. "The priest will be back to help us soon enough and in the meantime, we have his mother."

His mother? Maeve scanned nervously up the hill. "Where are your men?"

"They went with the priest. They work in the mines and they fight with him against the badness, the pagans."

Maeve felt tingling on the back of her neck. A clear image of being tied to a tree and stoned to death appeared in her mind. "A lot of you seem sick. I can help until the priest comes back. I have herbs with me, healing herbs. When do you expect him?" Maeve tried to keep her tone even, resisting the urge to look up at the enormous church at the top of the hill.

"He didna say. Why should we trust you?"

The woman who spoke seemed to have some authority here. In her mid to late thirties, she held herself stiffly, as though her back hurt. When she grimaced and reached for her hip, Maeve's suspicions were confirmed.

"Is there no healer here?" From Maeve's limited experience, it seemed that each settlement had someone with abilities in this area. Probably, Brandubh had banished or killed the woman—if there ever was one.

"She died a while back from the cough that has taken over the village."

"What's your name?"

"I am Sorchá." The woman glanced around at the others. "What say you to this woman. Shall we see what she has to offer?"

There was muttering, their glances going to Maeve. After a few moments of deliberation, one of them nodded.

"I will show ye the healing house," Sorchá said, leading the way toward a group of ramshackle huts. Maeve and the other women followed. When Sorchá entered a small house with a burlap sack for a door, Maeve headed in after her. It was freezing cold inside, no fire burning in the hearth. Bunches of dust-covered dried herbs hung from a small beam that ran across the ceiling, and there was a musty smell, like rat or mouse droppings. The other women waited outside, their whispered voices becoming louder.

"They seem suspicious. Will they let me help?"

"Tis difficult to say. More than likely, they want to wait for the priest. He told them they will only get well when they stop

sinning, but I dinna ken what he means by this." Sorcha's gaze went into the distance for a moment. Turning back, she moved closer to Maeve. "I pray every day to understand. The women are good and do everything he asks of them," she whispered, her eyes troubled.

"How many live here?"

"Many of the women have succumbed to the illness, but others have grown old overnight and died. We have nae understandin' of why this happens. It seems to take the younger ones. We are down to less than forty, including the men."

Grown old overnight? "Sorcha, where are the children?"

Sorcha gazed down, her hands coming to rest on her narrow belly. "We can nae longer bear children and our numbers have dwindled because of this." The woman's eyes filled with tears.

"Maybe it's because you haven't enough to eat," Maeve suggested. She knew that restricted diets could cause a drop in fertility, and these women were all bone thin. As her eyes met Sorcha's, she remembered her first trip into the Otherworld with MacCuill. It had been a paradise before Brandubh took over. If this place and these people weren't healed soon, there would be nothing to save.

Maeve put a tentative hand on her arm. "Sorcha, can you convince these women to let me help them? I know what the priest told you, but this isn't true, you are not sinners, you must believe this. I can heal them, but we must act quickly before he returns." She pawed through her pack, bringing out the herbs and salve.

Sorcha watched her, trying to wipe the tears from her face with her apron. Muddy streaks remained, leaving her cheeks dirty and swollen. She stood straight again, her hand on her right hip.

"A number of years ago a flock of crows flew into the settlement here. They were frenzied and pecked two children to death and injured many others. The priest told us they came because of our sins, and that if we didna do as he commanded they would come again. The elders of the village remember a similar

thing happening twenty or more years ago, but that time was much worse—the villagers were burned up in a terrible fire. ‘Tis why he chose this place to build the kirk. ‘Tis hallowed ground now. We are privileged that he picked this spot for his home.”

Obviously, the crows were under some enchantment. They weren’t by nature evil birds. Her thoughts scattered back to her encounters with them in Milltown. Could those birds have been under Brandubh’s power?

“Are there any other priests here that you’ve encountered?”

Sorcha shook her head. “Brandubh is the only priest that I ken, but he has many deacons in his employ. They come with him sometimes and visit us occasionally when the priest is gone.”

Maeve stared into the distance. She hadn’t come across anyone fitting this description, nor had Eron or the others mentioned them. “Sorcha, what you feel in your heart is important, not what anyone else tells you.”

“But I am a sinner.”

“What makes you say that?” This conversation was going in circles, getting nowhere.

“I have blasphemous thoughts. I doubt things. I think badly about the deacons, what they do with the women, what they expect of me. I ken ‘tis important for the continuation of the settlement, but...” Sorcha’s face turned red and she looked away, kneeling down in front of the fire pit. She placed a few twigs on top of the cold ashes, getting soot all over her fingers.

“What do you mean? What do the deacons do?”

“They only want to help us,” she mumbled. “Our men are gone—and the priest knows what’s best for us,” she added quietly, glancing over her shoulder at Maeve. “He wishes us to conceive.”

“What are you saying? No, never mind, I know what you’re saying.” Maeve recoiled with disgust and outrage. Who were these so-called deacons? Had they come from outside this world? Maybe John was one of them.

“And besides, we are all born sinners and we need to atone. This is why we have no bairns,” Sorcha continued.

"We're innocent when we're born, how could it be otherwise?" Maeve's hands shook with outrage and frustration. They were brainwashed. "If I were to tell you something about why this world has grown so dark, why the sun never shines, why the women cannot conceive a child, would you listen?"

Sorcha gazed at her for a long moment, finally nodding.

"Brandubh has done something here, something that has to do with black magic. He has made you believe things that are untrue, caused you to doubt your own intuition. This is why the women cannot conceive. This thing with the deacons is reprehensible. They are taking advantage of you. Has anyone of you conceived as a result of this? If you let me help, I assure you that once these women have their men back, they will be able to have babies."

Sorcha stood up, staring straight into Maeve's eyes. "No bairns have come yet, but they tell us it takes some time to heal what ails us."

Maeve listened to Sorcha, the tone of confidence with which these words were spoken. A frisson of doubt went through her. How could she countermand the spell that Brandubh had cast? Maybe with good food and herbs for fertility she could start them on the road to recovery, but from what she could see, there was little to eat here. Searching through her pack again, she pulled out what she'd taken from Rowan—several apples, a large wedge of cheese, a loaf of bread, and a bag of oatmeal.

"Take this, Sorcha. It isn't much but maybe I can find a way to get you more." Maeve put three apples, half the loaf of bread and the cheese on the floor next to the fire, her thoughts going to her bow left behind at Eron's camp. It would have come in handy right about now, although she had yet to see a rabbit, a deer, or a wild boar. A feeling of helplessness went through her as she realized the enormity of the task she was faced with.

"On second thought, will you and the others come with me? I can keep you safe." Maeve wondered exactly how she would accomplish this, but let the worry drift off—she would find

a way. "You need to find yourselves again, to connect with the goddess and the earth, our mother." Maeve was astonished as this statement came out of her mouth—the words didn't seem her own.

Sorcha was kneeling again and had managed to coax a meager fire into existence. She rose and wiped her hands on her filthy apron and then turned to Maeve. "Ye dinna live here and havna authority. Without the priest, everyone would have perished. He helped all of us recognize the evil we carry inside, to repent and mend our foul and corrupt ways. We had worshiped at the altar of false prophets before he led us to salvation. We must listen to him and do as he says."

"You're right, I don't live here, but I do know this priest. I know he's a bad man—you must believe me. He's not a true representative of the church. He's distorted the teachings to his own end." When Sorcha didn't answer, Maeve let out a long sigh. The woman didn't seem to be taking in what she was trying to say. Maeve looked down at her hands, wondering why they were tingling. A second later, words poured out of her mouth unbidden. "You must have noticed how the sun never shines, how scarce the water that used to flow abundantly. Look to the stream at the bottom of your hill—did it not rush with clear, fresh water? Is that not where you filled your buckets?" Maeve was not familiar with this area or how much water they did or did not have. And the speech patterns of this entity were not hers. When she looked down again, she noticed a faint imprint of another hand, the fingers adorned with several heavy rings. Before she could make sense of it, the image was gone.

"Hello. What do we have here?" The burlap parted revealing an older woman, her gray hair in a bun on top of her head.

"Sorcha, what have you been saying? You know how we frown on this sort of thing."

Maeve stared, unable to utter a word. It was as though something had clamped over her mouth. She struggled to get control of herself to no avail. When she glanced at Sorcha, the young woman's face had gone white, her eyes wide.

The woman smiled, showing straight white teeth. She addressed Maeve in a kind voice. "I am Adair, your great-grandmother. So sorry Finna couldn't be bothered to introduce us. I've been looking forward to this moment for such a very long time."

She reached forward to grasp Maeve's shoulder, her fingers digging in painfully. Maeve felt as though her energy was draining out. She pulled out from under the woman's claw-like hand, gasping for breath.

"What's the matter, dear? The cat got your tongue?"

Again the winning smile, the look of total innocence. Maeve stood transfixed, her mind telling her not to trust this woman, but another voice assuring her that Adair was harmless. "I—I didn't expect to see you here."

Adair laughed. "This is my home. Didna Sorcha tell ye this? These women are all under my care. What is it ye wish from them, Maeve?"

"They seem sick—I thought I might—"

"Ye might—what? Heal them?" Adair laughed again, a grating sound. "I told ye, they are under my care."

Maeve glanced toward Sorcha who stood with her hands folded across her belly, looking down. "Sorcha, do you want me to go?"

When Sorcha looked up, her eyes were blank. "If Adair says so, then I agree."

Adair was blocking the door to the outside, her arms folded across her chest.

"I guess I'll be going then," Maeve said, moving toward the opening.

"But my dear, surely ye ken that we canna allow that." Adair opened the burlap and called out, "This woman is a witch, and ye ken how we deal with witches!"

Somehow, Maeve managed to get by her, stumbling toward the crowd of women outside.

"Stop her!" Sorcha yelled, running out the doorway with her fist raised. Adair watched Maeve, her lips curled into a delighted smile.

When a rock hit her temple, Maeve took off running, heading down the hill toward the dry riverbed. She crossed a rickety wooden bridge and headed up the path on the other side. A minute later, a searing pain in her side had her doubled up. She frantically struggled to catch her breath, watching the women race across the bridge. The rocks they held were jagged and big enough to cause serious injury. Maeve took off, not waiting until they were in throwing range. The pain in her side felt like a knife blade—she gasped for breath—how were these weak and sick women managing to gain on her like this? But when she turned back, she noticed Adair, her hands weaving patterns in the air, her lips moving silently. Terror shot through her, sending adrenaline coursing through her veins. Maeve hurtled away, her fingers closing around the moonstone. The shouts were too close now—she couldn't outrun them. Another rock hit her square in the back, knocking her down.

Adair was suddenly there, her right hand reaching to help Maeve up. "I will nae hurt ye, my dear."

Maeve hesitated, her mind confused. The older woman looked so benign, her smile so sweet. They were of the same blood. But then she noticed the enormous rock in Adair's other hand. She tried to pull away, but the woman's grip was like iron. Adair's hand was coming toward Maeve's head, the rock ready to split her skull in two. But the whirring had begun, the sound loud in her ears.

She heard Adair's frustrated scream just before she was whisked away inside a blur of color. A second later, she was on the ground near where she'd left Oak and the others. "Come on!" she called, running back the way they'd come. She heard the Oillteil pounding after her as she put distance between herself and the sorceress, but she could hear yells in the distance and knew they were not far enough away. The sorceress knew exactly where she was, and if she caught up with them, Maeve was sure Adair would not hesitate to kill her.



Chapter Eighteen

THERE WAS NO real path to follow, no sunlight to clue her into what direction she was going, but she kept on, the image of Adair moving her forward. The Oillteil crashed through the brush behind her, attempting to keep up. They were not runners by nature. Something about their presence, and the knowledge that they had joined her cause, gave her courage.

When they came upon another group of Oillteil, Maeve hid, afraid of what her three might do. She watched from behind a tree as they conversed in their guttural language, wishing she could understand what they were saying. Adair appeared as if by magic, her narrowed gaze taking in the group. Maeve saw her gesturing and knew she was asking where Maeve had gone. But Maeve had grabbed hold of the moonstone, pleading with it to keep her hidden. Apparently it worked, because Adair left shortly after that, disappearing in a small dust devil.

Still she waited, wondering how this would play out. Would her three decide to join their own kind? Her question was

answered a few minutes later when the newcomers headed off and disappeared under the trees.

"What did you say?" she whispered, leaving her hiding place.

Oak made the lopsided expression that counted as a smile. "Said we were scouts for Brandubh."

Maeve let out a long sigh, tears of gratitude pricking her eyes. "Good thinking, Oak. Thank you." She almost felt like hugging the brute but decided it was better not to. This was how she would win here, by drawing the enemy to her side. Her skirmish with Brandubh's mother had cemented her resolve, especially knowing what those poor women were going through. She would save all of them, but not right now. When she examined the stone, it revealed a line that traveled across its surface. She signaled to the three Oillteil and followed it, reminded of the GPS map on her iPhone.

When the forest ended the path meandered across a ridge and down the other side. Scanning the immediate vicinity, Maeve was not surprised by the denuded hillside with no signs of life. The area was familiar. One of the forts was close by.

She moved cautiously toward the edge of the ridge, signaling to the Oillteil to keep quiet. Her heart contracted as she made out the high fence below, the huddled people shivering inside the enclosure. Oillteil and Wildmen wandered around the outside, talking in low voices. There were at least six of them and maybe more.

When a wind came up, whirling around her, she remembered Brigid's warning. She breathed in and out slowly, letting go of the defeatist thoughts crowding her mind and clouding her judgment. *You can do this*, a voice whispered in her ear. Luckily, some scraggly trees had been forgotten in the haste to cut down every living thing. Using the trunks for cover, she moved further down the hill until she was close enough to watch the comings and goings. Behind her, she heard the footfalls of her companions, their heavy breathing as they settled in around her. "Those are your companions down there. Do you wish to join them?" she whispered.

They shook their heads, and after what had just happened, she believed them. "Oak, in a few minutes I want all of you to go down and distract them. If you can get them to move away from the gate, I can unlock the padlock and let the prisoners out."

Maeve stared around at the growing darkness, aware again of how oddly time moved here. It didn't seem that many hours since she'd been in Rowan. Maybe there were several time zones that she crossed when she used the moonstone. In any case, the darkness would help with her plan, but she had not planned out what would happen next. The prisoners were surely too weak to make a fast getaway. The moments went by slowly as she waited to make her move. The frozen ground bit through her dress and bare legs. She heard the Oillteil breathing, waiting for her signal.

A yell from below startled her and she squinted into the darkness. Two more Oillteil guards had arrived and appeared to be arguing with one of the Wildmen. A deep growl came from one of the beasts, and when she peered down, she noticed that their heads were turned her way, noses in the air. Maeve moved behind the Oillteil, hoping their familiar smell would be less worrisome and hoping the breeze was going in the other direction. If they came up to investigate, she could never outrun them. The beasts were fighting now, and their frenzied barking had her scrambling back up the hill, the Oillteil following. Getting herself killed at this juncture was not an option.

At the top of the ridge, she paused, trying to take in enough breath to stop her heart from hammering. Her mind called out to Brigid, hoping for some insight, but the only answer was a cold whistling wind that entered her mind, leaving her breathless and freezing. *Get a grip*, she told herself firmly. When she looked around, the Oillteil were watching her, waiting for her command.

The darkness seemed to thicken and grow heavy. It was getting close to the time when she must act—the prisoners had to be released tonight. If she waited, there was the possibility of Brandubh's return.

The wolf was silent in his approach, and Maeve only looked up when she saw a dark shape out of the corner of her eye. When Finiche came to a stop in front of her, Maeve's arms went round his neck and she buried her face in the thick ruff of fur. *I'm so happy to see you*, she whispered. Around her, she could hear nervous grunting and the sound of scrambling as the Oillteil tried to move away. "The wolf is my friend," she said in a hushed whisper. It was time to act.

Maeve signaled to Oak, urging him down the hill ahead of her with the other two. She followed with Finiche, waiting in the shadows until the guards saw the Oillteil. A shout went up, followed by the sound of hands slapping backs and the repetitive grunting that constituted laughing. Oak and his companions knew these guards and were being welcomed. When they all moved toward the door to the fort with the beasts milling around them, she and Finiche headed down.

The wolf met her gaze and then moved away, slinking toward the back of the fort while she crept toward the front. When she arrived at the gate there were only two guards left on watch. When one of them called out some guttural utterance, she flattened herself on the ground. A few minutes later, she heard an eerie howling from the back of the fort, and both guards left their posts to investigate the disturbance. A minute later, there was yelling and the yips of wolves.

There was no time to lose. She fit the little key into the lock and swung the gate open. The Crion looked up in surprise as she sprinted toward them. A few recognized her from her trip into the tunnels with MacCuill, and an audible sigh moved through the group. She fitted the same key into another lock and undid the chain, pulling each one free. She was almost to the end when the Oillteil guards returned. "Go," she whispered to the ones who were free, but they didn't want to leave their friends.

"Hey!" came a loud shout as one of the guards spotted her. She had a moment of paralyzing fear as she realized they were blocked in. A second later, the wolf came running through the gate. His lunging snarls kept the guards back while she and the

Crion made their way quickly around them. Two more wolves appeared, circling the guards with teeth bared. A minute later, her Oillteil appeared armed with clubs. They fought with the guards as Maeve grabbed the hand of one of the Crion and pulled her toward the open gate. She was glad to see the others hurrying behind her. Horses were trotting around the side of the fort. Where had they come from?

Chaos ensued when the wolves attacked the hyena-like beasts who had appeared from the fort with the Wildmen. Maeve took the opportunity to inch toward the gate, gesturing for the Crion to follow. When a group of Wildmen blocked her way, she shouted for them to move, her only thought was getting the Crion to safety. The wolves circled around the Wildmen, jumping forward to nip at their legs. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Oak with a club in his large hand, fighting with one of his own. From the other side of the gate, an arrow whizzed in, hitting Maeve in her upper thigh. She screamed and fell. "Go, go!" she cried to the Crion, pushing them away as they tried to help her up.

By now, the shouting and snarling was deafening as the wolves and beasts fought. It was hard to tell who was winning. The Crion were trying vainly to get away, but a lot of them were too weak and sick, barely able to walk, much less run. More horses appeared, Finiche herding them toward the gate. Maeve got his message—put the small ones on their backs. Struggling to stand, Maeve worked her way to the gate, pressing herself between the fighting animals and the fence. Her leg was forgotten in her fervor to help the Crion, lifting two onto each horse. Once they were secure, she whistled and Finiche reappeared, nipping at the horses heels as he urged them into the night.

Arrows were still flying, coming from the Oillteil outside the pen. Several Crion fell but Maeve could do nothing to save them since the gate was completely blocked with Wildmen. When another bolt from a crossbow dug deeply into her hip, Maeve went down without even breath enough to cry out. This time she could not get up. The Wildmen watched her,

their frightening eyes the last thing she saw before sliding into unconsciousness.



Maeve opened her eyes, staring in surprise at the Crion men and women who surrounded her. Deep woods lay all around them, a fire burning close by. In the distance, she could hear the sounds of fighting. When she tried to move, pained seared through her.

“Twella, twella,” one of the Crion men said, hurrying over. As she struggled to get up, he pushed her back, pointing to the wounds in her leg.

They had stripped off her filthy dress and gotten both the arrow tips out, but the gaping flesh needed to be closed and stitched. She moaned as a fresh wave of pain hit her and then she motioned for her pack. A Crion woman brought it to her and the others made a circle around her. They crooned their sympathy, eyes trained on Maeve. The sight of their reed-like bodies, tattered clothes, and pale faces brought Maeve to tears, overcome by their selflessness.

They drew closer, the soothing purr-like sounds calming her until she fell back, unable to do anything more for herself. The pain had obliterated everything from her mind. When one of the men handed her a piece of willow bark to chew on, she didn’t argue. As the pain receded, she was able to extract the yarrow leaves from her pack, which she placed on both wounds. The Crion came closer and closer, forming a tight circle around her. They rocked back and forth making the strange purring sounds as they stroked her lightly with their hands. Maeve’s eyes closed.



It was the next morning before Maeve woke up again. She was lying on her back next to the fire, her body covered with a

thick sheepskin. The Crion men and women sat together talking, their melodic voices like a lost song on the edges of her consciousness. Seeing she was awake, a few of the women came to sit by her and one of them handed her a gourd filled with tea. Gingerly, Maeve pushed into a seated position and reached for the gourd. When she examined her wounds, she was surprised to see they were closed, with only a thin red line to indicate where they had been. Her hip was barely painful. "How?" she asked, pointing.

They all smiled widely and then one of the women spoke. "We have a special gift, but you are a true healer."

"I didn't do this."

"With our help, you healed the wounds."

"The sounds? That's what you do?"

"The sounds are a vibration that encourages the body—it is our way. But where you found us, the guards would not allow it. That is why we are all sick now. I am Rea." The small woman smiled, her amber eyes nearly hidden by straight copper bangs.

Maeve took the small hand she held out, thanking her. After finishing her tea, Maeve tried to stand, but a wave of dizziness came over her.

"The Willow should rest today. The healing is not complete." Rea's upturned eyes regarded Maeve gravely.

"I need to check on the wolves, and where are the Oillteil who were with me?"

Rea pointed to where Oak and the others huddled together and then held her hand out to help Maeve up. Once she was on her feet, Maeve went to check on Finiche, finding him with the rest of the wolf pack a short distance under the trees. Maeve examined each wolf in turn, but aside from a few minor scratches and a cut ear or two, their thick fur seemed to have protected them. She wasn't sure how it happened that Finiche brought all of them along, but their participation had kept the beasts at bay.

Once Maeve was back by the fire, Rea told her that the night of crooning had not only helped Maeve but the rest of

the Crion as well. Maeve surveyed the group, surprised at how much better they all appeared. Their methods might be strange but they worked. She encouraged the Crion to go home where they would be safe from Brandubh. Rea translated her message but when she finished, there was low disgruntled murmuring amongst them.

"They plan to remain with you," she translated. "After what happened at the pens, they wish to help you in whatever way they can."

"What did happen? I remember the arrow and being unconscious, but how did we manage to get away?"

"The black horse carried you here. We helped get you up on his back."

"The black? He's here?"

"He is with the others. They are foraging for food."

"Rea, your people can't remain with me. It's too dangerous in your weakened state."

"We will be safer with you than in our home. The tunnels were ransacked and all our families have disappeared. We hope they've found a safe place, but they could all have been taken prisoner at another fort."

Maeve shuddered, wrapping her arms around her body. Rea took one look at her and disappeared, returning with her dress, which looked surprisingly clean. She also produced a pair of hand-knit wool tights. "Thank you," Maeve said, pulling the dress over her head and putting on the tights. They fit her perfectly. "Where are your sheep?" she asked, knowing that the wool came from them.

Rea shook her head. "Most have been killed for meat, and the others—they wander lost. It would be good to have their milk right now, but to find them would take much time."

"Maybe we'll come upon them as we travel. Are we very far from your tunnels?"

Rea nodded, her eyes sad. "At least a full day of walking and no one here is up to that. Many of our group died back there and many others are severely hurt."

Maeve thought back to the grizzly scene at the pens. There had been no proper burial—the bodies had been left there to rot.

Rea pointed toward the right where several forms lay close by the fire. “Tian and Sang are the worst hit. Their wounds are deep, and I fear for them.”

Putting her mind on the present, Maeve followed Rea. The two of them examined Tian and Sang and the others, setting up the purring circles. Maeve used herbs on their wounds as well as her healing hands. A lot of them were dehydrated and had developed nasty chest colds.

Once everyone was resting, she went with Finiche in search of food and water. Her supplies of cheese and nuts brought from Rowan would not last long with this many mouths to feed.

Finiche led her across the hills to a place where Eron had set snares. “Where is he?” she asked the wolf, but he either didn’t know or didn’t answer. The few skinny rabbits they found would at least bring sustenance, but she hated the idea of it. But that night, when the smell of roasting meat came to her nostrils, her appetite surfaced and she was glad to have them. As far as water was concerned, she was only able to find one running stream and it was barely a trickle. At least she was able to fill two large water skins. She heated the water over the fire, hoping to purify it.

Early the next morning, she had a bout of nausea, leaving camp to retch under the trees. Her eyes watered and she had to lie down for a moment, waiting for it to pass. The rabbit must have been rancid. Who knew how long it had been dead?

On her way back to camp, she heard the distinctive low hum of the Crion women. She followed the sound out of the shelter of the trees and down a short slope that led to a frozen creek. The women straddled the stream, their eyes closed. Maeve stayed there as the sounds grew stronger, reaching a crescendo and then fading away. The silence that remained seemed charged, small waves of air bouncing against her face. What they were up to was powerful. The women opened their eyes and rose as one, heading away from the stream. Rea motioned for Maeve to join them.

"What were you doing?" she asked, scrambling after them. They were heading away from camp, following the streambed as it meandered downhill.

"We try to bring back the water spirits."

"Where are you going now?"

"We need to replenish our stores of roots and mushrooms. We will show you how to find these things."

Rea lowered her eyes, her hands in prayer position before turning to follow the others. The women headed up a hill and into a hardwood forest. There was a hush under the canopy, shadows crowding out what meager light there was.

Rea stopped in front of an enormous beech and began breaking off chunks of some large fungus at its base. "This is agarikon, good for the chest affliction we have. I am glad it still grows here."

Rea and the other women removed pieces and placed them in the small woven bags slung over their shoulders. Maeve followed them under the trees where they dug hazelnuts and walnuts out of the frozen ground, using implements the size of spoons and made of wood. In another area, they pulled out some kind of a root. Maeve kneeled to help them, her hands going numb as she worked through the hard dirt. "How do you know where to find them?" Maeve asked, wondering why she had no knowledge of these healing mushrooms.

"They grow wild in these woods. Some have rotted now because they've frozen, but many can be harvested."

Once they arrived back at camp, the men had stoked the fire and water was heating. In went the roots and the leftover bones of the rabbits, as well as the watercress and dried algae they'd gathered. The Crion, including Tian and Sang, seemed to feel better, chatting among themselves in their language and leaving Maeve free to think about what to do next. The positive energy of these small people had buoyed her spirits.

After the meal, she quietly left the fire and headed into the woods. She whistled for Finiche and then skirted the camp to avoid alerting the Crion; searching for more holding pens was something she had to do on her own.

Finiche led the way with his nose in the air. When he caught the scent of fire, he was off, running ahead of her and disappearing from view. She caught sight of him at the top of the next hill. Behind him, a barely visible line of smoke rose into the night air. She jogged as fast as she could, but when her hip protested she had to slow down.

They skirted by a battle, the sounds and sights very similar to what Maeve had seen in her dream. She wanted to help the fallen but knew it was impossible. Many Oillteil and a few Wildmen were fighting what looked to be simple farmers wielding shovels and other tools. A couple of them had bows and arrows but they were no match for the swords and clubs the Oillteil and Wildmen carried. Maeve felt sick as she watched the farmers go down, landing in a pool of their own blood. Finiche whined and licked her hand and she turned away, following him along the ridge, her heart heavy.

It was completely dark by the time they reached the second fort. It was similar in shape and size to the other one, built in the valley with defensive hills on three sides. A well-used road snaked from the entry gates, heading around a bend and disappearing into the night shadows. Maeve listened carefully for the sound of horses but could only hear the whistling wind that blew across the hilltop.

In the holding pen below, she could see a few men and several Wildmen sitting in groups next to the fire. There was only one Oillteil guard and Maeve wasn't sure if he was there for protection or to keep them in. She waited for the guard to leave, hoping he would have to relieve himself at some point. After about a half an hour, he got up and walked into the woods, yelling something unintelligible over his shoulder. Maeve took her opportunity, climbing quickly down the bank.

The gate was unlocked, and when she swung it open, it squeaked. Everyone inside turned, their stares hostile. "Please come with me, I can get you out of here," she whispered. "I have food and water at my camp." No one spoke, making her wonder if they understood. She pantomimed them following her out, bringing her hand to her mouth in the gesture of eating.

Finally, one of the men stood, his dark eyes trained on her. "Why should we go with you? We get enough food here, and after this fight is over we will be rewarded."

"Rewarded? With what?" she asked, moving closer. "Your homes have all been destroyed. I've seen the villages that have been burned and looted. Your livelihood is gone. Where are your wives and children?"

"They wait for us to come back with the gold and silver that has been promised. If something has happened to our homes, the dark man will rebuild them."

"Where is your village?" Maeve asked, glancing nervously over her shoulder. She thought she could hear the heavy sound of galloping in the distance.

"Our village is where the big church sits on the hill. Our families wait for us there."

After more discussion, Maeve realized that most of these men were from Sorcha's settlement. She relayed Sorcha's information about the deacons and what was going on there. They stared at her in disbelief until she described Sorcha and the details of their conversation. Angry muttering ensued as they took in the news.

"How do you know this?" one of the men asked harshly, glaring at her from under bushy eyebrows.

Maeve went through the story again, adding descriptions of the individuals that she could remember, describing the coughs and the rashes that covered the women's faces, and how thin they all were.

There was a lengthy silence and then one of the men said, "We need to get home." He stood and gathered his belongings. The others looked at Maeve and then got to their feet as well.

Almost all the villagers left with her, as well as a few Wildmen. They crept out the open gate before the guard returned. It seemed almost too easy. As they climbed the hill, she expected an ambush, but none came, but down in the valley, she heard horses again, closer this time. Whoever was coming was riding hard.

Maeve was uncertain as to why the Wildmen came along and hoped they didn't have some sort of treachery on their minds. She found their dreadlocks and feral eyes disconcerting, and because of the language barrier, she had no way of knowing what was on their minds. From the top of the hill, she looked down at the pen, noticing the three Wildmen and two villagers who remained. They sat around the fire as before, hunched against the cold. In the distance, she could see dust from the approaching riders. It had to be Brandubh. She hurried into the dark night.



Before dawn, Maeve stumbled out of camp to retch in private. This was becoming all too common, she thought to herself as she tried to rinse her mouth out with the tiny bit of water left in her water skin. What had she eaten last night? Everything here could be laden with bacteria—she couldn't waste water to clean the food before they ate it.

She reached camp just as a group of Wildmen and Crion headed out to hunt for game. They watched her warily as they slung bows over their shoulders, securing the hand-made quivers on their backs. The Wildmen were expert hunters, skilled in archery and also with the knives they used to skin and dress the rabbits and other animals they killed. After they were gone, Maeve searched out Rea, asking the woman where to look for more tubers and greens to add to the stew.

"To find the roots, you must be in the forests that carry the nuts. The tubers were planted long ago by the Amuigh."

"The Amuigh planted them? Rhea, where are the Amuigh imprisoned?"

"The Amuigh move from place to place, planting in order to harvest the next time they come through. There may be a few at the fort to the east—the holding pen is close to one of the mines. I have not seen many of their kind for some time." Rea

turned sad eyes to Maeve. "They are gentle creatures who have no defense."

"If they are being held somewhere I would like to release them."

"The wolf could help with this, as well as locating the tubers—his sense of smell is more acute. This orange food is particularly good for you now," she added with a smile, staring pointedly at Maeve's belly.

"What are you talking about?"

"The little one you carry."

"The little one?"

"And we must find our sheep—the milk would be most helpful."

Maeve's mind reeled as she registered the symptoms she'd been having. Despite her increasing thinness, her breasts had grown larger and had been sore for some time. She placed her hands on her lower belly and scanned back to her last period, but couldn't come up with a date. It had been over two months for sure. Hadn't they used birth control? She thought back to the intense and passionate encounters, trying to recall if Harold had used anything. He must have thought she was on birth control pills. How could she be so stupid?

Adrenaline shot through her at the thought of what she had to do here, the danger for this unborn child. If she were home, she could consult with Harold and come to some agreement about what to do. Abortion would be an easy option considering how new their relationship was. Her thoughts about having a child were vague, to say the least, but she was positive she wouldn't have planned to have a baby now. Had this been mentioned in the prophecy? She couldn't remember much of the wording, only the feeling of responsibility the document engendered. Being pregnant was a further responsibility she had not counted on.

"How did you know?"

"You have a glow about you—light shines from your eyes." Rea laughed, a high tinkling sound. "And I have heard you in the

woods before dawn. This new life you carry is special, a gift. We have not been able to conceive.”

“No babies? How long has it been?”

“Since the spirits began to desert us. But now, with your baby, there is hope.”

Maeve’s solar plexus contracted as her mind grappled with this new development. How could she carry a baby to term here? And did she even want to? According to Rhea, as well as the women at the settlement, no women had done so in years. These women must have some herbal remedy to cause miscarriage. She counted up the months in her mind—at least six more. Would she still be here in six months? Tears welled as the real meaning of that question went through her mind. This was not part of her plan—but then again, being here in Otherworld hadn’t been part of her plan either. And what would Harold think? In all the years they’d known each other, they had never discussed having a baby—why would they? Harold was in the middle of a career change. This pregnancy could signal the end for them. And by the time she got back, if she ever did, it would be too late to do anything about it.

“Rea, you must know a way for me to—I mean, I can’t be pregnant now with everything I have to do! Is there an herbal remedy that—?”

Rea patted her arm. “This one shall be born.”

Maeve stared at the small woman. “Is this child mentioned in the prophecy?”

Rea nodded. “This baby is ‘the new life.’”

New life? Maeve had no recollection of those words.



As the rest of the camp woke, Maeve made the morning tea, struggling to get control of her emotions, which were all over the place. She pulled out the sack of oatmeal from Rowan out of her pack, adding the last of it to a pot of water over the fire.

Coughing and moans reached her ears as she stirred the mixture. The people here still needed her attention, whether she was pregnant or not. Maybe one of the other women would help her get rid of it. It just wasn't the right time for bringing a baby into the world.

After breakfast, Maeve searched through her stores, supplying the men from Sorcha's village with catnip and ginger root, as well as some of the agarikon, which she determined had anti-viral properties. All these herbs could help the poor women in the settlement as long as their condition wasn't due to some horrible spell cast by Brandubh and his mother. The men from the fort looked grim as they took her offerings, packing the herbs away in their woven bags. They left without a backward glance, walking into the woods and disappearing into the gloom. Maeve's mind cast ahead to their reunion, wondering what would happen now that they knew all about the deacons. Would they take it out on their women or confront Brandubh and Adair? It was not a pleasant daydream.

The Wildmen and other men who remained conversed with the Crion in their language, elaborating with hand gestures. Maeve watched them, realizing that these men were the ones Eron referred to as the *duine fiain*—the wild ones who had no leader. These strange men with their wild hair and odd eyes no longer caused Maeve to look away in fear. It seemed as though their forbidding expressions had softened.

Due to the hunting prowess of the Wildmen, they feasted on fresh rabbit stew that night, giving the bones and entrails to the wolves. After eating, the newcomers stretched out beyond the circle of Crion, allowing the small ones proximity to the fire. Her small band of *Oillteil* lay a distance away. The wolves made up the outside circle, keeping watch as everyone huddled close together under whatever extra coverings they could find to keep out the cold. With no sun to warm the ground, the nighttime temperatures were dropping, growing lower every night.

In the morning, Maeve woke at first light, but this time she was prepared for the nausea. She put a small piece of stale bread

in her mouth, chewing slowly, her gaze wandering the camp. Despite the hunting and gathering, their food stores were nearly gone. The stream where they had filled their skins was dried up and frozen solid. Over a meager breakfast of leftover stew, she made her announcement. It was time to move on.



Maeve led the way along the edge of the forest in order to keep an eye on the canyon below. The valley widened as they traveled north, and from their vantage point, they had a clear view of the many bodies left to die and rot on the frozen ground below. Crows pecked at them, the cawing harsh in the frosty air.

When Maeve started down the hill, Rea grabbed hold of her arm. "It is too dangerous!"

Maeve gazed into Rea's worried eyes. "Finiche will come with me." Maeve waited for the wolf and then headed away again, but this time a handful of Wildmen pulled out their knives and followed her at a crouch. Maeve found a narrow deer trail leading to the valley floor. Once she reached the bodies, she turned away to be sick. Dead villagers, Crion, Amuigh, Oillteil, and Wildmen were strewn about like rag dolls. On a field of green, flags with the black auroch lay muddied and torn—the emblem of the red-haired men from the east. Other bright banners of yellow, blue, and orange lay crumpled in the dirt.

The crows circled and swooped down to land on the bodies as she searched for some sign of life. "Go!" Maeve screamed, waving her hands. An angry black cloud of birds lifted into the as they waited impatiently to resume their feast.

"Here!"

Maeve looked up at the cry from the Wildman. She hurried over to see what he had found. Lying at his feet were several men with fair hair who were very close to death. "What is your name?" she asked the Wildman who'd found them, realizing he could understand her.

"Soru," he said, his finger touching his chest.

"Soru, can you get me some branches from the trees up there? We need a way to carry these people." Maeve reached in her pack, pulling out a ball of thick twine—another present from Janus. "We can make litters to carry them." Soru watched her, his eyes suddenly lighting up. He nodded, called to his friends and then headed up the hill.

While they were gone, Maeve found several Crion, Oillteil, and Wildmen who were also near death. She placed her hands on them, concentrating on building the heat in her palms in order to push the energy and warmth from her own body into theirs. This method had worked at Rowan, but the injuries had not been so severe.

When Soru and the others returned with their arms full of pine boughs, Maeve twisted the twine around them and weaved it in and out for strength. When she was finished, Soru pulled out his knife and cut off more twine and then he and his friends made several more.

Since it was not possible to bury the dead, the Crion scrambled down the hill to speak the special prayers—saying them for all. The wolves acted as sentries, strategically placing themselves along the valley floor. When the Crion voices lifted into the air, singing the special chants, unchecked tears made their way down Maeve's cheeks. She didn't even try to wipe them away, her mouth opening to emit her own grief, a sound that surprised her with its intensity.

The litters were not strong enough to carry the larger bodies of the Oillteil, and so the Wildmen and Oak and his friends slung them over their strong shoulders like sacks of meal, their arm muscles bulging. They were all part of her group now, helping in whatever way they could. Once they reached the woods, the crows rose from their roosts, flying down to settle on the remaining bodies. Maeve turned away from the grizzly sight, afraid she might be sick again. By tonight, the bones would be picked clean, and after the cold night, they would be gone,

dragged away by the foraging wolves, lynx, foxes, and other meat eaters who still managed to survive in Otherworld.



It was deep night when they finally came upon a suitable place to camp. Without being asked, the Wildmen set to work, building a shelter to house the sick and injured. It resembled a beaver den when it was completed, with a hole in the center to let out the smoke from the fire pit. Maeve and the Crion women worked together to treat the wounds of two Oillteil men, as well as the injuries sustained by the tall ones with red-blond hair. They were known as the Tuatha De Danann, Soru told Maeve. These were the men Eron had told her about, the first people to live in Otherworld.

Later, one of these same men introduced himself as Dirg and talked to her quietly while she worked on him. “We have heard of your coming for a long time, Willow. But I never would have believed it until I laid eyes on you. When I am well, I will fight for you.”

Maeve smiled. “I would rather find another way of defeating Brandubh.”

“Another way? What other way is there?”

“We can bring the men who serve him to our side. If we bring enough, he won’t have an army.”

Dirg laughed. “I wouldn’t say it couldn’t be done, lass, but it seems mighty risky.”

Maeve lay awake that night thinking about Otherworld and what she was up against. Each time Brandubh fomented the hatred that led to killing, he diminished the natural resistance of Otherworld. As his men cut down the forests, ripped apart the earth, and extracted the gold and silver to sell outside this world, it weakened the invisible web that held Otherworld together. The land itself was where the real riches lay, and each time it was ravaged and destroyed, it lost more of its essence. The spirits

had fled, the gods and goddesses were almost ghosts; no one remained to heal the damage.

She sat up, her gaze going to the different factions of the growing camp. The shelter held the very sick ones, keeping them warm. Around the fire, on the outside, her original group banded together, sleeping in a close circle made up of Oillteil, Wildmen, Crion, and villagers. They had become friends. Behind them were a few injured Oillteil and Wildmen who were not known to the others. She assumed they worked for Brandubh. Even further from the fire were the Tuatha De Dannan, or Sidhe. What would happen once the members of the enemy were healed—would they turn on Maeve or would they join her cause? She needed many more on her side to win back this place.

As night deepened, she allowed her thoughts to stray to Harold, imagining telling him about the baby. She cringed, thinking about the enormity of what this meant for her future and for Harold. It was crazy to even consider having a baby now. She was too young and this place was too dangerous. Soon it would be too late to do anything about it—unless she could convince one of the other Crion women to help her.

When she finally fell asleep, she had a vivid dream.

Ahead of her, going down a steep tunnel were several Oillteil. She looked back, noticing that others followed her. They looked grim holding clubs, their eyes focused on her.

"Where am I?"

An Oillteil behind her grunted, pushing her in the back and making her stumble. Trying to right herself, she was able to see ahead where the tunnel ended, opening into a large cavern filled with Oillteil. She heard a voice that sounded familiar speaking English.

It was only a moment or two before they reached the opening. She was pushed violently from behind, landing in a heap at the speaker's feet. Looking up, she realized it was Brandubh. A cold shiver went through her body.

"Glad to see you here," he said, reaching down to help her up.

"Where is here?" she asked, looking around. There were niches in the stone walls filled with statues of gargoyles and other

demonic-looking icons. In the distance she could hear moans and cries of pain and the splash of water.

"You are in the underworld. And I hope to convince you to stay." Brandubh looked around and then called out in a loud voice.

"Mother? Are ye back there?"

"I'm here. What do you want?"

"We have a visitor, an important one."

A moment later, Adair appeared, her eyes fastened on Maeve.

"Ha! What a surprise. Come, my dear, let me show you around."

When Adair reached for her, Maeve was unable to stop herself from grabbing the older woman's hand.

"Isn't this nice." Adair pulled Maeve forward, heading into the dark recesses where the noise was coming from. At the edge of a precipice Adair stopped. "Down there are the souls of those who have died." She led Maeve to a narrow and slippery flight of stairs carved into the rock. "The section down there holds the souls of the damned. The Oillteil make their home here in the underworld in a deeper chasm leading to tunnels they use to access the surface."

Maeve followed the older woman down, the horrible noise becoming louder with each step they took. "You can hear them now, can you not? They are the lost, full of misery and despair—and will remain like this for eternity. And you, my dear, will be joining them very soon."

Maeve wanted to pull away from her but it was as though she was linked to the woman, with no will of her own. She followed obediently, her terror rising the closer they came to the origin of the voices.

"Here we are," Adair said suddenly, letting go of Maeve's hand. "Look down there and you will see your new home. That is what we've planned for you, my dear." Adair pushed Maeve in the back, sending her tumbling down a steep rock wall. She landed at the bottom, her gaze going to the endless throng of people just ahead of her. Their pale faces were distorted in expressions of anguish, their arms lifted as though in supplication. They all gazed upward as though some benevolent entity might come to their rescue. Behind

her, the sheer wall of dark rock rose like a pane of glass. There was no way out.

Maeve pushed herself to standing and headed toward the throng, but when she tried to talk to them, they paid no attention to her. Before she knew what was happening, she'd been pulled amongst their milling bodies, sucked along as they moved to and fro. Terror entered her like a dark angel, her thoughts scattering like frightened birds. Her mind was numb, filled only with despair and fear. She became part of the group, her own arms going up in supplication, her pitiful cries joining theirs.

A long time went by before she noticed the water, the roar as it disappeared into a maw of black. The group had brought her close to the edge and now she slipped away from them, letting herself fall into the dark depths. At first, she was sucked into a sort of vortex, but then she realized she was moving away from the pleading cries of pain, breathing in air despite being under the surface. Reaching the falls, she let herself go, relaxing completely as she fell with the rushing water. She landed in a warm pool that overflowed, heading in rivulets going in different directions. She cupped her hands, taking a long drink and soothing her parched throat.

Climbing onto the dark rock surrounding the pool, she gazed at her surroundings, trying to get her bearings. Several yards from her, another wall jutted into darkness. Searching at its base, she discovered a narrow ledge of rock. Below her, a chasm yawned into inky blackness and from it came clanking and the sound of heavy objects being dragged across a hard surface. Hugging the wall, she edged along the ledge, following it until it ended. To her right, a river ran by noisily, and in the distance on the other side, she could see a slight glow. She had to find a way out of here.

At the river's edge, she contemplated her next move. She could follow the river downstream or swim to the other side. A voice came to her, silvery and melodic. Female, she thought, and singing. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the river. She stepped in, expecting it to be warm, but the water was ice cold, numbing her feet and legs. There was no choice but to immerse herself and swim. Once in the river, her breath was sucked away. The cold current

took her downstream, and it was everything she could do to reach the other side.

It took a long time before she reached the bank, and she was barely able to pull herself out of the water. When she stood, jagged rocks cut into her feet, making them bleed. Trying to catch her breath, she stripped off her shoes and socks, surprised to see blood coming from several places. A minute or so later, she heard the voice again, looking up to see a ghost-like figure moving toward her.

"You have reached the realm of the gods and goddesses," the woman said, taking her hand to help her up. "Not many make it this far."

"But where is this? I thought I was in the underworld."

"This is Anwnn, but you have gone deeper, beyond the fear of death and the hell that is Uffern. Here, we wait for our opportunity to rejoin the world. This is not a terrible life; it is only the darkness that is hard to take. Everyone must come here to discover the hidden, to understand what lies beneath the surface. This is where the spirits wait for mankind to wake up. I am Cerridwen, the keeper of the cauldron in which knowledge and inspiration reside. If you would like a drink, I will lead you there."

Maeve gazed into her golden eyes, amazed by the benevolence shining out. "Yes, please, but I have to get back. I have work to do."

Cerridwen nodded. "Now is not the time. You carry a child who will one day help another world. Take care of her. Now, you will return to the surface, and when you do, remember all you have seen here. It will empower your journey."

Maeve woke suddenly. Her body was cold, as though the dreamscape of dark rock and icy water had entered her veins. A sound escaped her lips before she could stop it, sort of a low moan, bringing Rea running.

"What is it?"

"I had a terrible dream." As Maeve recounted the dream to Rea, the Crion woman took Maeve's cold hands between her own. By the time the story was finished, Maeve was calm, her hands and fingers tingling with warmth.

“That is a good dream, Willow. You have now visited the underworld, spoken with the goddess of the cauldron.” Rea’s eyes sparkled with merriment. “Next time you might even take a drink.”

When Rea left, Maeve examined the bottoms of her feet, surprised to see tiny cuts all over them. Her hands went to her belly, remembering Cerridwen’s words.



Chapter Nineteen

hAROLD LOOKED CAREFULLY at the map. He had been walking for days and felt like he was getting nowhere. Nothing too strange had happened so far, other than the weather being very nasty and cold. Wind was a constant, the landscape depressingly bleak. He traveled along the edge of the forest trying to keep warm, but he was afraid to go too far under the trees in case he missed the approach of a person, enemy or otherwise.

There had been lots of time to puzzle over what the boatman had told him about Kenneth's participation in the battle that drove the marauders out of this place so many years before. He believed in reincarnation, but he didn't have a feeling one way or the other about Kenneth MacAlpin. Still, he had to admit the strange thoughts he had on the trip from the airport seemed to spring out of nowhere, and the pictures in his mind had been pretty vivid. Right now, he just wanted to figure out what he could do to help Maeve. Finding her would be a start.

He was fairly certain that he and Maeve were not going to be using the return tickets home and that her father would worry.

He wished he had thought to call someone before he came into Otherworld. His cell phone did not work here.

He came upon a stream that actually had water and took the opportunity to fill his water bottle. He broke the ice, scooped up water, and threw in an iodine tablet. When he stood up again, there was a man riding toward him from the hill on the other side. He was leading another horse and heading directly for the stream. By now, the man had seen him and Harold didn't know whether to wait or run for the trees. Something told him to wait, so he stood his ground, trying not to feel nervous. The stranger was middle-aged, stocky with gray hair and a beard covering part of a lined and ruddy face.

"Halloo!" he called out loudly.

"Hello," Harold called, raising a hand in greeting.

The man crossed the little creek, breaking through the ice with the horses and then dismounted to let the horses drink. "I'm Mikdal," he said, extending his hand as he came up to Harold.

"Harold." Harold grasped Mikdal's calloused hand.

"Should I ken who ye are?" Mikdal asked.

"I'm Maeve's partner in this venture. The one of noble birth, from the prophecy, if that means anything to you."

Mikdal's eyes lit up. "I should say it does. I met Maeve the night of the solstice. I've heard she is here in Otherworld, but I have yet to come upon her."

The man seemed jovial, a mood that Harold would not have expected. "I have a map that Maeve gave me—"

"I will accompany ye," Mikdal said brightly. "I've just now run off from Brandubh's men. They've been forcin' me to make weapons for 'em, takin' advantage of my skills with a forge and iron. After my escape, I went back to my village to find my horses. The place has been ransacked, but the people are drif-tin' back, at least the ones who survived. Thank goodness these beasts remained close and didna get taken." He reached over, affectionately slapping the rump of the horse he had been riding. "Now I'm on my way to find my wife."

"What happened to your village?"

"Burned to the ground. Why don't ye get on Argyll here."

Harold looked at the big piebald. He was enormous, black and white, with feathers on his fetlocks and a tangled mane of white and black that hung down his muscled neck. A halter and lead rope was the only thing he wore. It was obvious by the padding on his flanks and his heavy muscling that he had been well cared for.

"Dinna worry about this one," Mikdal said, noticing Harold's dubious expression. "He's as gentle as a bairn. Take him over there to mount." Mikdal pointed to a large boulder close to where the line of trees began.

Harold took the proffered lead rope and led the horse up the hill. Argyll waited without moving as Harold climbed on the rock and then lowered himself onto the wide back. He held the lead rope in his hands, wondering how this was going to help steer the big guy, but as Mikdal put his foot in the stirrup and swung onto his horse again, Argyll turned to follow.

"I say we head to the spring," Mikdal said, turning around in the saddle. "Maeve could be there since it is one of the only ones still flowing."

"I bow to your knowledge of this place," Harold replied.

It was early evening before they reached the narrow path that led down the hill to the spring. Harold had learned all about Mikdal and Herska, how they knew Maeve's mother and grandmother and some of the past history. The time had passed by quickly with the companionship of the loquacious older man.

Mikdal dismounted and tied the reins in a knot to keep them from slipping over the horse's head. "We can leave the horses here."

Harold slid off, wincing as his feet hit the ground. He left Argyll and followed Mikdal down a steep and winding trail.

When he reached the bottom, Mikdal was standing stock still staring at the charred stumps and jumble of rocks and rubble. A caustic stench lingered in the air. "What happened?"

Mikdal looked puzzled as he ran his hand over his beard. "It looks like an earthquake, but it also seems manmade. I doubt

that this fire started by itself." He walked over to examine the hole where the spring had been. "Look at the spring itself. Someone has deliberately ruined this place."

Harold examined the broken pieces of rock. They looked as though they had been destroyed with an enormous sledgehammer. No water trickled from anywhere. "I don't like the way this place feels." He glanced nervously in Mikdal's direction.

"I was hopin' I would find my wife here, since last I heard she was travelin' with Finna and Catriona. Looks like I was wrong."

The two men stood together in silence until Mikdal let out a long sigh. "I suppose we should head out before it gets dark."

They moved up the path and remounted the horses, heading left along the edge of the woods.



"Kenneth, you are awake!"

Harold heard the voice as he opened his eyes. A transparent body floated toward him like a diaphanous cloud. The woman moved in and out of focus as she came up to him, gazing into his eyes. He had an odd sensation of being two people at once as he recognized Rhiannon, the horse goddess. He watched himself get up and go down on one knee in front of her, taking her hand in his and placing his lips there. This woman was his lover, his heart friend.

"This is not your current life. Please rise," Rhiannon entreated with a sad smile.

Harold was caught in the middle of emotions he couldn't sort out and stood staring at her in confusion. He felt deep sadness and regret at what she had just revealed, and then a sudden flash of relief. How had he ended up here? The last thing he remembered was riding along the edge of the forest with Mikdal. He looked around. He had been lying on a settee that was broken down and covered in tattered brocade. The rest of the room

was in the same disarray, tables overturned, broken bits of pottery and other debris scattered across the floor.

"Where is Mikdal?"

"The man is having something to eat. At least I am still able to provide food for my guests. I have something for you, Kenneth, something you left behind the last time we were together." She went to a long table against the wall behind him and picked up a leather scabbard and brought it to him. As he watched her she began to solidify, her golden gown coming into focus as well as the lovely violet eyes he had marveled over in the past.

"Your presence here has made me stronger," she said, noticing his rapt expression.

Harold pulled the sword out of the ancient leather scabbard. It shone dull silver in the muted light drifting through the narrow windows and had several nicks from previous battles. He had an unexpected image of himself on horseback fighting in some long ago war with Rhiannon by his side. He had loved this woman. He felt his face grow hot with the memory of their intimacy.

"I see that you have remembered," she said, her beautiful eyes filling with tears. "I had not expected to see you again. I will not tempt you, as I know that in this life you are pledged to the one who calls herself the Willow. You have your own destiny to follow."



The door at the end of the room opened and Mikdal appeared. "Glad to see ye back in the land of the livin'," he commented as he came over and sat down. "Thought I had lost ye."

"I can't remember what happened."

"'Twas the fog. The nasty stuff takes over your mind and wipes it clean. Lucky we were so close to the castle here."

Rhiannon had left the room and now returned with a platter that she put down on the low table in front of Harold. "Eat,

Kenneth, and then be on your way. This food will give you strength for what you have to face. I must warn you that my son Pryderi is involved in the evil that has taken over Otherworld. He is in league with Brandubh and will stop at nothing to get rid of me and the other gods and goddesses. He lusts for power."

"Isn't your son a god?" Harold asked, remembering his mythology class.

"He is a demi-god, half human, and this is why he has not lost himself as I have. He has many powers and will use them to destroy our way of life. You must ride north to find the Willow. She needs you by her side."

Harold felt muddled and confused. Images raced through his mind: battle scenes and memories of he and Rhiannon making love on a sumptuous brocade-covered bed, her dark hair spilling out over the fabric. He felt split and strange. "How many days' ride is it?" He didn't recognize the sound of his own voice.

"Many days. Go now, and head toward the furthest mountains. You have not a moment more to spare." She rose and led the way outside to the keep where Argyll and Mikdal's horse, Mistral, stood waiting. As Harold turned to say good-bye, she reached up and kissed him on the mouth. His arm slipped around her back, drawing her close as his tongue sought hers. Desire swept through him as he felt the warmth of her full-breasted body against his. He fought for self-control.

As they pulled apart, she stared at him with eyes full of unshed tears. "You must go now, my dearest Kenneth. Know that I will never forget you."

A pang of regret went through his chest. "Nor I you, my lady," he said in his new, unfamiliar voice. He lifted his arm in a wave as he mounted Argyll and led the way out of the castle keep.

"Ye have nae recollection of what happened, do ye?" Mikdal asked as they left the castle behind.

"No, I guess not," Harold replied, feeling puzzled.

"Ye insisted that we find Rhiannon and would nae be dissuaded. 'Tis how we ended up here."

Harold stared at him. "Why would I do that? I thought we were heading north."

"I dinna ken, perhaps it was so ye could retrieve that sword," Mikdal observed, gesturing to where it hung from Argyll's saddle. "Or maybe 'twas to get the tack. Riding bareback can be painful as I ken ye've found out." He chuckled. "Or maybe 'twas Rhiannon herself ye were lookin' for. Ye've obviously *known* each other."

Harold's face grew hot. "I don't understand any of this," he said in confusion.

He looked at the saddle and bridle Argyll wore. "So we got these from Rhiannon?"

"Aye. So what should I call ye now, Harold or Kenneth—or milord?"

"I'm Harold. At least for the moment." They rode on in silence, images invading Harold's mind. He was with Rhiannon in her castle—it was beautiful then, filled with light from the sun streaming through the tall windows. He lay on a high bed, his arm stretched out toward Rhiannon by his side. When she moved on top of him, her hair fell on his chest, tickling him. He grabbed her arms, holding her strongly so that she couldn't move. They had just made love and he was getting ready to leave—something that happened often. He didn't want to go. Instead, he wanted her again. He stared into her violet eyes, feeling the pulse of blood moving in his veins as he grew more and more aroused. She was naked, her full breasts pressing against his chest. Harold shook his head, trying to clear the visions—this was not him, it couldn't be. He let go of the reins and grabbed his head with both hands.

"What is the matter, man?"

Harold turned to face Mikdal, wondering if he wanted to share his thoughts, but then he decided that if he talked about it, maybe the images would go away. "It's the memories. All this stuff with Rhiannon—it's totally freaking me out."

Mikdal laughed. "Enjoy it while ye can, 'tis nae every day ye can kiss a goddess, especially one as comely as that." He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Harold had to laugh at Mikdal's expression. The man was right. All of this was in the past anyway. As Rhiannon had reminded him, Maeve was his woman in this life. When he thought of Maeve, his feelings for her rushed in, replacing the earlier vision.



"I can accompany ye nae further," Mikdal said an hour or so later, reining in his horse. "I must find my wife. I have the sense that she may have gone back to Clachencreid, especially after what we discovered at the spring. In any case, my destination lies in the opposite direction."

They had crossed the fog valley safely and were now headed due north. Harold turned toward his new friend. "Thank you, Mikdal, for the loan of your horse and for your help."

As Harold swung his leg over to dismount, Mikdal put his hand up. "Keep Argyll. He's my plow horse, and I have nae use for him at the moment. And besides, he eats too much." Mikdal chortled.

"Are you sure?"

Mikdal nodded. "He's strong and can help with all sorts of tasks. I'd feel better knowin' ye had him. I hope ye ken what ye're doin'. This has become a very dangerous place."

"Maybe Kenneth can help me." Harold grinned and then watched Mikdal turn and ride away in the other direction.

"Good luck, milord," Mikdal called over his shoulder. Harold heard his laughter as he disappeared into the trees.



Chapter Twenty

THE COLD INCREASED with each day, making it impossible to ever feel warm enough. Firewood was damp and sputtered without giving off ample heat. The frost, a spider web of gray that coated everything, lent its special ugliness to the landscape. Dark clouds scudded across the sky, heavy with promise, but by now, Maeve knew nothing would come of it. Oh, how she longed for the salt tang of the sea, a gentle rain, even snow or sleet would be welcome. Everyone was constantly thirsty, searching the crevasses and creeks for ice. Maeve's water skin had been empty for many days, her only liquid the tiny bit she got from ice and frost. The wolves scouted ahead, always on the prowl for water and game. Maeve and the others followed them into the deep gloom of the forest, sometimes coming upon old homesteads that had been burned and looted. They searched through the rubble for useable items—tools, potatoes, and apples—withered and dry, but edible. And sometimes they found a little water left behind in crockery jars.

As they traveled northward, earth tremors became a regular occurrence, sending rocks and debris flying, scaring the animals and opening up deep chasms in the frozen ground. Brandubh's armies marched in the valley below in alarming numbers. It was difficult to keep going, to not be taken over by the despondency that rode the air. Maeve was exhausted and could not let go of her rising anxiety. It didn't matter how far into the forest they got, she could still hear the steady drumbeat of the marching troops, her own heartbeat keeping time in her ears, and all she could think about was what in the world she could do to stop the killing and heal the land. Most of the time, her mind was so agitated she could barely think.

Their retinue had increased, with several wandering farmers and their wives joining them. Their homes had been burned, their livelihoods gone, along with their animals and all their household goods. They gave horrific accounts of the looting and killing going on across the land.

With all the mouths to feed, food supplies were running out and Maeve was despairing of what to do. She discussed this with Dirg, who was still with them, as well as Soru and his Wildmen friends. Dirg knew about some secret hoarding places, saying he thought he could lead the group to one of them if he could get his bearings. Much to Rea's dismay, Maeve, Soru, and Dirg had headed out after dark several times, scouting for miles, but so far Dirg was at a loss. He told her that if they reached the river, he would know where he was. The Wildmen were still able to find an occasional squirrel or rabbit, but game was becoming increasingly scarce. Out of desperation, they had begun heading into the valley to pick up deer and other animals that had died of starvation, bringing them back and cooking them before the crows had a chance to pick their bones clean. Maeve was as hungry as everyone else and didn't turn away from the rancid meat.

She shuddered at the thought of spending her life in this gray and frozen wasteland. And what of the child she carried? Fresh tears filled her eyes as Harold's face loomed in her mind. She had finally spoken with two other Crion women, but their

reactions to her questions about herbal remedies were met with horrified stares.



“Catriona?”

Maeve had been scouting ahead for a suitable place to shelter and turned to see a gaunt old man with sunken eyes staring at her. He had appeared out of nowhere, putting Maeve immediately on the alert.

“I’m Maeve,” she answered carefully. “But here I’m known as the Willow. Catriona is my grandmother.”

His eyes brightened. “Of course! I’m an old friend of your grandmother’s—Duncan Kincaid.” He held out a hand misshapen from arthritis.

Maeve took it, feeling all the knobs and bones. “Where did you come from?” she asked, looking around.

“I live in a cave just down there,” he said, pointing to the escarpment that led along the edge of the cliff. He chuckled. “I’ve grown adept at hiding myself in these times of war.” He gazed away, his expression turning sad. “My village of Tiadhan has been decimated and most of my friends killed. ‘Tis a wonder I’ve managed to stay alive. Where are ye headed?”

“North. We’re searching for victims of Brandubh. I have quite a few people traveling with me.”

“I would be pleased to come along. I have nae food, but I can tell stories to entertain or help with whatever ye set me to. Do ye ken where your grandmother is? I havna seen her for many a year.”

“Of course you can join us. As to Catriona, the last time I saw her was on the night of the winter solstice just before I ended up in Otherworld.”

“Your grandmother and I—we go back a long time. And the last time I laid eyes on your mother she was pregnant. With you, I would imagine.”

Maeve noticed that his eyes had lost some of their dullness and he was not quite as bent over as he had been. She worried for a second about sorcery—she was sure Adair could shift into whatever she chose. “Where was that?”

“Finna and Catriona were on their way to the Glass Mountain for the blessing ceremony. They spent a night with me on the way.” He stared into the distance. “My life was wonderful back then. Now I have lost everything to the pillagers who burned down my town.”

His despondent expression and the sincerity she could hear in his words took away her doubts. “I travel with others in the same plight, Duncan. Maybe there are some with me whom you know.”

“Where is the rest of your group?”

“They are a short distance behind us. I wanted to scout out a possible campground before nightfall. My wolf is up ahead.”

“Your wolf? Aye. Catriona had an uncanny gift with wolves as well. If you follow me, I might be able to find you a safe place to shelter,” he added, picking up his walking stick.

Maeve watched him hobble away. “What happened to your leg?”

Duncan turned. “I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got caught in a fight. The wound has never properly healed.”

“Can I take a look?”

A confused expression passed over his features. “If ye wish to. ‘Tis only a slight bother. I’ve become used to it. Do ye have some medicine along?”

Maeve held out her hands. “Just these.”

He hesitated for a moment before lowering to the ground. He pulled up his ragged trouser leg, showing her the swelling and purple bruising around his knee.

Maeve squatted next to him. Her mind was full of worry about her followers and it took a few moments before she could clear it enough for the healing power to come through her hands.

“Now Eron, he was a right good man. Have ye met him? Of course ye have—he’s your grandfather. He...”

"Duncan, I don't mean to be rude, but I need to concentrate."

"Ach, how stupid of me. I'll keep my big maw shut for a while then."

Maeve placed one hand on each side of his knee, asking the spirits to aid her. Her hands grew hot as she focused on removing the swelling. For a long time, nothing happened and then she felt a change under her fingers.

"Ah, much better," came Duncan's comment. "I think ye've done it, lass." He looked up at her, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

"You didn't think I could."

"Well, let's just say I had my doubts. I've only known one real healer and he is your grandfather."

Maeve smiled. "So wouldn't you think I might have inherited the gift?"

Duncan shook his head sheepishly. "These last years have turned me into a pessimistic man. I used to be the happiest person ye would ever meet, but lately I dinna trust anyone."

"I understand completely. Let's test your leg, shall we?"

Duncan stood and took a couple of tentative steps. "Like new. I dinna think I need this anymore." He threw his walking stick into the bushes, did a couple of dance steps and then strode happily away from her into the forest. He began to whistle a dance tune, the lively sound dispersing the gloom.

Maeve called out to Finiche, and then followed him, a tendrill of joy making its way into her psyche. But then she remembered the baby and the impossibility of what she was faced with and her mood plummeted. She hurried after Duncan, hoping to absorb his lightness of heart again. Having him along would be good for the group and good for her.



Chapter Twenty-one

GERTRUDE STOPPED AT the same spot where she had camped earlier with the others. It was a protected circle of stones along the route that led to Brandubh's fort and would give her shelter for the remainder of the night. She'd been traveling for what seemed like hours, but of course it was impossible to tell since she had no watch. Somehow she'd remembered several landmarks from that earlier trip, but still it amazed her that she had found the place at all. Brandubh must be psychically leading her to him.

She thought about the urgent feeling that had awoken her in the middle of the night, causing her to pack her things and take off without telling MacCuill or the others. Something had happened to Brandubh or was going to happen. She had to find him. But first, she should consult the cards. She rifled through her pack, searching for the Tarot deck, her hands frozen and stiff. It seemed like ages since her time with him at the fort. Ever since the burial ceremony, Catriona and Finna seemed determined to find Maeve, even though Finna was coming down with a

cold and there didn't seem to be any clue as to where the young woman was.

MacCuill had disappeared after they left the Dolmen, saying he had matters to attend. Eron had appeared for a day or two and then headed off again, much to Catriona's annoyance. The older woman grouched around for two full days before accepting the fact that her lover wouldn't be back for a while.

An older man had found them later that same day, telling them about Harold's arrival in Otherworld. He also mentioned something about past lives and reincarnated kings, but Gertrude tuned out. Mikdal was searching for his wife, Herska, the wiry-haired woman Gertrude remembered meeting at the cottage. But Gertrude knew that Herska was off searching for Mikdal so they might never find each other in this crazy world. The man left the next morning, riding out before dawn.

Gertrude was sick to death of going in circles and listening to the two women bitch about how horrible Brandubh was. All she could think about was her time with the priest—and hearing about the man's exploits from those two was making matters worse. She had to find the truth out for herself.

Pulling out the worn cards, she found the Queen of Pentacles and put it in the significator position. It was the one that represented her: the dark-haired, dark-eyed woman. As she shuffled, she thought about the question. *What was her connection to Brandubh?* That was a good place to start. Cutting the deck into three piles, she picked them up in the opposite direction.

A deep shiver went through her as she turned over the first card, placing it across the Queen. *The Devil*. It was the card in the placement representing the atmosphere and influences at work around her question. The devil symbolized domination of matter over spirit: black magic—exactly what was happening here in the Otherworld. She stared at the card nervously, wondering whether to continue, but decided she had to know what was going on.

She drew the next card and placed it across the first: *The High Priestess*. This card represented the opposing forces,

whether for good or evil. Maeve came into her mind as she stared at the image. This was a card of knowledge: instinctual, supernatural, and secret. And the fact that it opposed what Gertrude was asking made a lot of sense. A feeling of guilt went through her. She was involved with Maeve's enemy. The third card represented the foundation or basis of the matter, something she had already experienced. She drew the card and turned it over: *The Lovers*. So they had been together before. This card proved it. But then she realized it could be referring to their very recent encounter. Reading her own cards was so much more confusing than reading for others.

The fourth card represented an influence that had passed or was now passing. She drew the card, holding her breath: *The Moon*. This card was confusing. It had to do with intuition, dreams and deception, or secret foes. But it was reversed and so had an entirely different meaning. She was not sure what it signified. Maybe it had to do with spying for Brandubh—being used by him. Her hands went up to the heavy necklace hanging between her breasts. She was fairly certain that it had magical powers and linked her with Brandubh, but she wasn't with Maeve so what difference did it make? They had a deep connection with or without this jewel around her neck.

The next card represented an influence that might come into being. She turned it over: *The Tower*. This card could spell disaster for everyone and then again it could refer to the changes that were necessary to bring back the balance. It stood for the war between lies and truth and signified that any false concepts were going to come tumbling violently down. But what did it mean in terms of her connection to Brandubh? She hated to think.

The sixth card signified what would operate in the near future: *The King of Pentacles*, a dark-haired, dark-eyed man. Brandubh. But it was reversed, and in this position, it referred to the perverse use of talents. Double-dealing. This was not looking good.

She drew the last four cards and placed them on the right side in a line above the cross. The seventh was *The Nine of*

Swords and represented her fears. It pictured a woman grieving with nine swords hanging over her. It meant doubt and suffering and could sometimes mean the death of someone you love. Did this mean Brandubh was going to die? She wished she had never started this. All she really wanted to know was whether they had been together in some previous life, but so far that question had not been answered.

The next card represented the opinion and influence of friends and family. She turned over *The Two of Swords*. The picture was of a blindfolded woman surrounded with swords and a castle in the background. The interpretation could vary, but in this case Gertrude was pretty sure it meant she was going to be ostracized, either by Brandubh or the others. By now, this had probably happened, considering she had run away to get back to Brandubh. She hoped they did not come looking for her this time.

The next card represented her hopes and ideals and she knew what it would be. *The Two of Cups*, a card that represented the beginning of a love affair: harmony and cooperation.

The tenth card would tell the outcome of the matter, and Gertrude waited for a moment, wondering if she even wanted to know. When she finally turned it over, she was prepared for the worst. It was *The Eight of Cups*, which could mean several things: rejection or decline of an undertaking—maybe disappointment in love. It was not encouraging.

There was still no answer as to whether they had been together before. Once she reached the fort, she hoped to get some answers from him. Did he feel the same way she did? But what if he wasn't there? She didn't want to be captured again by the Wildmen or Oillteil. He might not ride to the rescue this time.

As night deepened, she took off her warm jacket and put it underneath her and then slipped Brandubh's warm robe over her clothes, curling up in a ball with her feet tucked inside. She tried to sleep, but images kept going through her mind: Brandubh's angry face, the Wildmen in strange clothing, maybe leather

armor? Wild-eyed horses, a dark sky full of storm clouds. Well, that was nothing new. As she drifted into a restless sleep, she had the strangest feeling that her mind had been taken over by something far beyond her control.

Gertrude was dreaming about wet dogs. She opened her eyes to see two wolves lying next to her. Their warmth had probably kept her from freezing to death, she thought, registering the frost that lay over her body, and the chill wind that was causing her teeth to chatter. When they noticed she was awake, the wolves jumped up and nosed her, as if to say, "Come along with us." "No, I'm not coming with you. I'm heading the other way," she said as they stared at her out of lambent eyes. She tried to ignore them as she collected her things and got ready to go.

Thick fog had settled over the surrounding landscape. She was already cold and the prospect of this day did not appeal. The wolves followed her down the hill and then stopped and whined, turning back toward the forest. For a moment, she considered going with them.

"No," she finally said strongly, as Brandubh appeared in her mind. She walked purposely away, and when she glanced over her shoulder they had disappeared.



The following morning, Gertrude woke to find herself in a small cell with her hands tied behind her back. The details of the day came back, along with a splitting headache and terrible thirst. The Oillteil had grabbed her the minute she had come in sight of the fort, taking her roughly and dragging her the rest of the way down the hill. They had thrown her in this dank space despite her insistence that she was a friend of Brandubh's, acting like they couldn't understand a word she was saying. A lump had formed on the side of her skull where one of them had hit her with his club. So far no food or water had been brought, and

not only was there no place for her to urinate, but there was also no way she could with her arms pinned the way they were. She called out until her throat was hoarse to no avail.

She was dozing when she heard someone open the heavy door, and in the next moment, a backlit form stood over her.

"What in hell are you doing here again?" Brandubh sounded angry. "One of my men managed to get a message to me. I was engaged in the north, and I am not at all happy about this diversion."

Her original feeling of elation fled, and it was all she could do to respond. "I had to come. After what happened between us, I—"

Brandubh interrupted. "What do you think happened between us?"

The timbre of his voice seemed different. Gertrude moved so she could see his face. His brows were pulled together in a deep frown, his lips forming a thin line. A cold feeling went through her chest. "Well, we—"

"I expected you to be my spy," he said, yanking the necklace from around her neck. He stuffed it in his pocket.

"I thought you could read my mind."

Brandubh made a derisive sound. "Your mind is too full of nonsense, like how we might have been together in a past life, and how we're *soul* mates. The stone gave me information I needed, like where Maeve is, and what that crowd of people you traveled with was thinking. We'd better have a chat but it's too damn cold out here to think."

He grabbed her by the arm, none too gently, and she staggered to her feet. He pulled her from the cell and untied her bonds.

"How did you get here so fast? I was planning to come to you, but then your guards didn't understand I was on your side."

He laughed. "I'm a sorcerer with magic at my fingertips—didn't you know that?" he answered, ushering her through the door into the warm room. He pushed the guard out of the way with his elbow. "Do you know the whereabouts of Maeve or her

mother and my sister?" He frowned down at her as he gestured toward the chair.

"The stone didn't tell you?" she asked, staring at him, but he didn't respond to her joke. "I was with Catriona and Finna and a man named Mikdal before I came here. I haven't seen Maeve, but a friend of hers has come into Otherworld. A man called Harold." She sat down and rubbed her wrists where red welts had appeared.

"Harold? What does he have to do with anything?"

"He's Maeve's lover from Milltown, and according to Mikdal, he seems to think he's a reincarnated king called Kenneth."

"Kenneth MacAlpin?" Brandubh stared into space for a moment. When he turned back, she didn't like the look in his eyes. "And where is this Harold now?" he asked.

"I don't know. Mikdal left him on the north side of Rhiannon's castle, he—"

"Shut up for a minute; I need to think. Rhiannon's castle—and then what are his plans?"

"The only thing I know is that he's looking for Maeve."

"It was stupid for you to come here. Don't you think they'll try to rescue you?"

"I hope not, but I suppose they could—"

"You hope not?" Brandubh laughed nastily. "Do you think traveling with me will be a walk in the park? I'm not here for you, Gertrude, I'm here to take over this place and get rid of those who are trying to stop me. Do you have any idea how powerful I am?" He waved his hand at the fireplace and fire burst forth, flames licking upward.

When he looked at her, the expression on his face was terrifying, as though he could point a finger at her and she would die on the spot. Fear rose in her throat. "I had a vision—" she began in a small voice. Pain knifed through her heart, and she wondered if he was doing it. When she looked at him, he was smiling.

"Did you feel it, Gertrude? It could be a lot worse than that."

This was not the same man she had been with two weeks ago. She clasped her hands together trying to stop their shaking. "I wanted to—"

"Wanted to what? Tell me what you saw in your *vision*."

"I didn't really see anything. It was more of a feeling, like you'd been hurt in some way, but I don't know the details."

Brandubh frowned. "We need to go. The battle has begun and I must be there to direct my men." He stood up and pulled her up by her hand. As she rose to her feet, she lost her balance and fell into his arms. For a moment, she could feel his strong heartbeat, the heat from his body. She felt weak, her mind going to their last encounter.

He pulled away from her abruptly and strode toward the door. "Come on," he said impatiently.

"Can I use the facilities before we—"

"Go," he said, waving her in the direction of the bathroom as he turned to the Wildmen and beasts waiting by the door.

She ran inside, finding her way to the little bathroom. The toilet was not much more than a hole in the ground, but it would do. A shelf against the wall held a straight razor and a small brush and a bowl for lather. A round mirror hung on the wall above it. The reflective glass showed a woman with wild eyes, dark hair full of tangles and bits of leaf and twig; she looked like the gypsy she'd always pretended to be. Her hair was too full of knots to run her hands through and she gave up. Instead, she practiced facial expressions that would hide her fear. A minute later, she hurried outside. This man scared her and it wouldn't do to keep him waiting. As she came through the door, John appeared from the back of the fort leading three horses.

"Get on," Brandubh ordered gruffly, pointing toward a very thin dark-brown animal with soft eyes. He held the reins out to her and then he and John mounted the other two.

Gertrude struggled with the stirrup trying to hoist herself up.

Brandubh dismounted and gave her a boost, remounting his own horse quickly. He glared at her and then kicked his

horse viciously with his heavy spurs, urging it into a gallop. John spurred his horse after him, leaving her behind.

Gertrude knew nothing about riding, had never been on a horse. But as the men got further away, her horse paced and then took off, rapidly closing the distance between them. She held on to the pommel with both hands trying to stay on. Her knuckles were white by the time she caught up with them. Brandubh and John had come to a stop on a hill where they talked together and scanned into the distance. Gertrude searched behind them for signs of Catriona and the rest of the group she'd left far behind, wishing they were on the way to rescue her. Unfortunately, there was no one in sight. She pulled her poncho on to keep the heat in her body, but the chill she felt penetrated through all her layers.

Brandubh glanced her way and then he and John took off again. Before she could settle herself, her mount took off after them and she was holding on with all her might.

By the time they stopped again, she was exhausted from trying to stay on the horse, her thighs weak and trembling. She slid off and crumpled to the ground, wondering if she might be sick.

When John led the horses away, Brandubh sat down on a flat rock, waiting for the rest of his men to arrive. He did not glance her way or make any acknowledgement of her at all. After some time, the Wildmen arrived, out of breath and tired from running. The beasts lolled around them panting with their tongues out. Before they had a chance to catch their breath Brandubh yelled, "Make yourselves useful! Go hunt for something for our evening meal." They took off again, sprinting into the trees without a word of complaint.

Gertrude summoned her courage and walked over to Brandubh, but just before she opened her mouth to speak, he turned. His eyes were all black, with no white showing—it was like looking into the face of the devil. She backed away, her hand at her throat.

"What's the matter? Don't like what you see? Who did you think I was, some man who would sweep you off your feet

and make love to you? The only reason you're not dead now is because you may be of use to me." He stood up and strode away, heading into the forest.

A large flock of noisy crows arrived suddenly, landing in the tree branches just above her head. When Brandubh saw them, he came over and waved her away. "Get out of here, Gertrude; I have work to do."

She walked down the hill and then turned to watch him. The birds were silent now, regarding him with their heads cocked, dark eyes gleaming. After a few minutes of silent communication, Brandubh walked away. The loud cawing began again as they lifted into the sky, dispersing in several different directions.

"We'll be leaving in a few minutes," Brandubh called out. "Eat now while you have the chance." He laughed. "That is, if you have any food."

He dug in his saddlebags for cheese and bread and then he and John sat on a log together talking and eating. Gertrude had a tiny bit of bread left from her time with MacCuill and the others. It wasn't much, but it helped calm her churning stomach.

It was only a few minutes later that Brandubh and John mounted the horses and rode out. This time, Gertrude found a rock to stand on and managed to pull herself into the saddle. By then, the Wildmen had returned empty-handed, hanging back from John and Brandubh. She heard yipping as the beasts appeared from under the trees, scaring her horse as they ran in excited circles.

Gertrude kept a safe distance between herself and Brandubh, afraid of what might happen if his mood darkened further, but her horse had other ideas. Before she could stop him, he had closed the distance despite her yanks on the reins to keep him away. When the two men stopped again, she was close enough to hear their conversation. When she heard the word, "spring," a fleeting image of the savage destruction of one of the sacred springs went through her mind—she had seen Brandubh and his men hurling rocks, using iron mallets to smash a hollowed out pool, stopping up the flow of the water by digging with shovels,

and using mud and rocks to pollute the natural flow. It was a violent act and spoke of what lay beneath this man's exterior.

The day dragged wearily on. Gertrude kept as far away from Brandubh and John as her horse would allow. By the time they stopped again, it was late afternoon, and she was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. A cold wind had begun to blow, sucking the heat from her body. Wrapping her poncho close, she slid to the ground, letting her horse go.

"We'll camp here," Brandubh announced as he dismounted, handing the reins to John. He turned to the Wildmen. "I want meat tonight and I expect to have it."

His tone was harsh and Gertrude watched the men scurry into the woods. For all their wildness they did not seem able to stand up to him. She hoped, for their sakes, that they were successful this time.

John came back from settling the horses for the night and set about making the fire. The crackling wood and warm flames drew Gertrude close, but she kept a wary eye out for Brandubh. A short time later, a shout of greeting went up as six or seven men appeared from the forest. They were dressed in priests' robes and headed straight for Brandubh and John, greeting them with handshakes and smiles.

"Where have you been?" Brandubh asked them after they were all seated around the fire.

One of the men threw off his hood revealing a baldpate and pockmarked, wrinkled skin. His fleshy lips and nose were red from the cold. As he loosened the tie around his middle, Gertrude noticed his enormous belly. "We've just come from the settlement. One of my favorite assignments, I have to say." He chuckled.

"And what else have you done to help the cause, Dan?" Brandubh asked. "I hope that pleasure has not been your only focus in this war. I didn't bring you here for fornication."

Dan looked abashed and then turned to the man next to him. "Gary and I were just having a little fun. You told us this was acceptable," he added defensively.

Brandubh stared at him silently. "I asked you a question."

"We've been rounding up the rebels and putting them into holding pens like you asked, at least the ones who survived." He laughed again. "Some of them are just too weak to make the trek, if you know what I mean."

"No, Gary, I don't know what you mean. If you're telling me that you've killed these men or tortured them, you will know my wrath. We need all the manpower we can get. I can't afford to leave a trail of dead across this land. More mines are being built every day, and we have to have workers."

"The lack of water gets them, your lordship," Dan said. "We haven't enough water to share and there are only two springs that still run."

"I've told you where to get water, you fools! Don't you ever listen? I have stores of water hidden in the southerines. Food is stored there as well. I think I was wrong to bring you men here. You don't take what we're doing seriously, think it's a lark to fuck the women and kill people."

Gertrude moved further away from the fire, watching Brandubh retrieve a worn map from his saddlebags.

"Come with me, John," Brandubh ordered, heading into the shadows.

Gertrude crept forward, hiding behind a tree to hear them. It sounded as though they were planning another attack on a village to the west. She backed away and returned to the fire, listening to the newcomers whisper. It seemed they were not happy with Brandubh's attitude, but from the looks on their faces, she could tell they were terrified of him.

"Are you men really priests?" she asked.

Gary looked at her in surprise and then glanced at the others. "We've been recruited to the cause. We call ourselves the deacons."

"So the answer is no?"

"We consider ourselves men of the cloth because of our connection to Brandubh. Our lives outside this world were not in the priesthood if that's what you're asking."

Gertrude nodded and then turned back to the fire. It was as she suspected. These men, with their American accents, were nothing but weak-willed scavengers taking advantage of the situation. It was disgusting. She added a few twigs to the flames and listened to them crackling, watching the sparks fly up and disappear. A short while later, she noticed that a shadow had come across the already dark sky. Brandubh and John were also watching the gigantic raven approaching from the north. Gertrude froze in fear as the bird shape-shifted into a larger-than-life woman as she landed. She focused her gaze on Brandubh, her words booming into the silence.

"Mortal, I am here to exact the payment that you promised twenty-six years ago when my powers helped you with your destruction of the settlement. From this moment, the crows and ravens are no longer under your power. Their part in your schemes is finished. I share them with Nantosuelta, the Goddess of the valleys and streams, and she is very angry. We are all angry at what you've done here. You have loosed a power that does not belong in this world. You have disrupted everything we hold dear."

"I gladly give them back, Morrighan," Brandubh said. "I thought you and I had an understanding between us."

The goddess glared at him. *"You were not filled with this evil when I first knew you. Now you have used your power to destroy my home. The second payment I require from you will not be so easy for you to accept."*



Brandubh seemed to blanch for a moment. "We were in agreement about the riches, were we not?"

"Taking what this land has to offer and selling it for your own profits?" Morrighan shook her head, her mane of black hair blowing about her face in a wild curtain. *"From this day forward, you will feel all the pain that you inflict on others. I have given you free reign for too many years."* She pointed one long, slender

finger toward the bleak landscape, the bare, eroded hills across the valley where abandoned mines lay like open wounds. *"I should have taken your powers long ago. If you cease and desist, I will show mercy because of our past, but if you continue with your destruction, there will be a third payment, and it will be worse than anything you could ever imagine."*

Brandubh paled but he did not speak.

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes," he said, but the tone was less than respectful.

An expression of fury came over Morrighan's features as she bellowed, *"Bow down to me this minute, or I will kill you on the spot!"*

Morrighan lifted the heavy spear she carried and pointed it at Brandubh. He quickly knelt down and bowed his head. A moment later, Morrighan began to transform and then she rose into the air on black wings and took off across the valley.

When one of the Wildmen approached from the woods, proudly carrying a dead rabbit, Brandubh backhanded him, sending him sprawling. As the man hit the hard ground with a shriek of surprise and pain, the rabbit flew out of his hands and a moment later the beasts were snarling over the carcass. A second later, Brandubh doubled over and cried out.

"What is it?" John asked, kneeling next to him.

"Pain—my hip..." he answered in a strangled voice.

"You mean it's real? The curse that scary witch just put on you?" John placed his hand on Brandubh's shoulder.

"Get off me!" Brandubh screamed, waving his hand in the air. John was sent flying and landed twenty feet away and lay still.

A moment later, Brandubh was on his back in the dirt with his eyes closed. Gertrude came close, checking for a pulse. He was alive, just stunned for a moment. When he opened his eyes, the look of fury there had her scuttling backward.

Gertrude retreated to a place out of sight watching Brandubh rise to his knees and then stand. His eyes were black as night with no light within them. John rose and disappeared into the woods. The deacons looked down as Brandubh sat on a log next to them in front of the flames.

A short time later, another man appeared out of the darkness, walking with elegant movements toward the fire. He would have been handsome, with masses of golden curls that hung to his shoulders, but the expression in his eyes marred his good looks. Brandubh stood and bowed his head and the others followed suit. Gertrude stayed where she was, watching the men in conference, noticing the way this newcomer seemed to be the one in control. She wondered who he was.



It was late when Gertrude headed away to find a place to sleep. Brandubh was still in conference with the new man and the others, who all seemed very interested in what was being said. Gertrude was glad of it. She was terrified of this man and had no desire to spend any more time with him. She leaned against the trunk of a tree, wrapped her poncho close, pulled her knees up, and closed her eyes. But all she could see was the terrible anger on Morrighan's features. This man was a devil.

Just as she was falling asleep, she felt a tug on her arm. She opened her eyes to see Brandubh towering her. "Get up," he said, pulling her roughly to her feet. He dragged her with him down the hill and shoved her onto the sheepskin he'd laid out. "Take off your clothes," he ordered.

Gertrude did as she was told, knowing that if she didn't things could get a lot worse. He'd already beaten her several times and given her a black eye when she'd attempted to stop his advances. She shivered as the chill wind hit her bare skin.

He looked down at her and then pushed his cassock aside, driving into her with such force that she let out a shriek of pain. He placed his hand over her mouth. "Don't tell me you don't like this—you were quite the lustful little whore back in Milltown."

"You weren't the same man," she managed to whisper once he removed his hand.

“Things change, Gertrude. The only reason I keep you alive is for this. I need it, and you will provide it until the day I decide to do away with you.”

“And if you do away with me what happens to you? From what Morrighan said—”

“Shut up and enjoy it. What other man would even want you?”

Gertrude’s scream was muffled as he held one hand over her mouth and plunged into her again and again. It was as though Morrighan’s curse had unleashed a new and horrible part of him that wanted to hurt her as much as possible. She thought back to his earlier lovemaking, the way he’d made sure she got what she needed. Now all he cared about was satisfying a physical need and the enjoyment of hurting her in the process. When he was finished, he rolled off, turned his back, and began to snore.

She rose to her knees and pulled on her clothes, examining the dark bruises on her arms and the raw skin and lacerations he’d left from his brutal assault. She ached from what he’d done to her. This must be what hell was like—being raped every night by a psychopath and knowing that she couldn’t get away from him. If it didn’t stop, she would either force him to kill her or find a way to kill herself.



Chapter Twenty-two

hAROLD CAMPED IN a hollow surrounded by rocks and tangled briar bushes. He made a small fire and huddled close for warmth, eating a hunk of cheese and bread. When he checked Argyll, the big horse was standing in the open with his back to the wind. There was no food for him and Harold wished he had asked Mikdal more questions. Where would he find hay for this beast? He closed his eyes, trying to shut out his worries about not finding Maeve. How far away could she be? But Mikdal had explained in detail how complicated this world was and the tricks to finding one's way across it. Mikdal told him to head north and that's what he was doing, he thought, pulling at his compass and looking at it for the millionth time. He was too tired to think anymore tonight. He'd figure it all out tomorrow.

Harold rode through a forest on a silver gray horse. It was before dawn and he had left Rhiannon at the castle after a night full of robust lovemaking—the sweet memory of her body was still fresh in his mind as he followed the trail through the trees. Armed

with a crossbow as well as a broadsword, he was alert for noises and anxiously watching the underbrush for danger. Engaged in a scouting trip for his father, his job was to determine the whereabouts of the Norse invaders. The sound of shouts brought him out of the forest. From the top of the hill, he scanned the valley where a huge battle waged. Screams of rage and pain and the heavy metal sound of swords clanking rose on the wind.

He hesitated for only a second before he left the hill and galloped down toward the battle. It was hard to tell what was happening in the confusion, but once in the midst of it, he pulled out his sword and did as much damage as possible. His sharp blade was brutal in its ability to inflict pain, cutting off limbs, gouging and tearing flesh. Blood flowed copiously from wounds, and the agonized shrieks of agony were all around him. An arrow struck him in the arm and he reached down and pulled it out. His tunic turned red but he ignored it as he worked his way through the mass of riders. Fire had started somewhere and his eyes began to tear from the acrid smoke. As he fought, he felt sick and disheartened at the bloodshed and mayhem around him. He was finally knocked from his horse and fell to his knees in the mud, tears flowing down his face.

Harold woke from the dream, horrified at what he had been involved in. He knew this was something from his past life as Kenneth, and it was all he could do not to scream aloud. He didn't want this, not the memories, nor his violent nature as that other man, not even the confusing realization of his past love for Rhiannon. He could never be involved in that kind of battle again, and he hoped and prayed that he wouldn't need to be. But he also knew that if it came to it, he would do anything to protect Maeve. He struggled with his impatience—he had to find her soon.



Harold peered into the gloom. He knew it was morning but it may as well have been night considering the amount of light

there was. There was a feeling of despair here that had crept into him, curling around his heart. His fire had long since burned out and it was bitter cold. He nibbled cheese and tried to make a plan. The day before, he had ridden by places where the land had been torn up, where trees had been felled and left to rot, and barren hillsides with stumps and not a blade of grass. Dried up and frozen stream beds were everywhere, and sometimes he came upon dead animals that looked as though they had starved to death. Argyll snorted and shied in fear, aware of the stench long before Harold picked up the rank aroma. From a distance, he'd watched men working in mines with pick axes and shovels. They were chained together to keep them from running away and strange creatures kept guard over them. Oillteil, from what he'd learned from Mikdal. The feeling in the air was of pain and suffering, and Harold felt despondent as he watched them going in and out of the mines to drag out the heavy carts of ore.

Sounds in the distance brought his attention back. He heard talking and the squeak of wheels. He slid off and grabbed Argyll by the mane, pulling him under the low-hanging branches as a raggle-taggle group of people appeared from around the side of the hill. Thin horses were hitched to carts filled with all manner of household goods. Their progress was not quiet, as pans banged and rattled against each other, the people conversing loudly. Harold watched until they were very close and then he stepped out.

"Hello."

The two men leading the group stopped. "Who are you?" one of them asked, pulling out his knife.

The sword Harold carried was out of the scabbard before he could register what he had done. "I have come to help the Willow."

The man's face relaxed and he held out his hand. "I am Iain Cormac and this is Caleb Dougall. We're on our way to Caer Sidi. Brandubh's men have destroyed our village. Will ye come with us for protection? I see that ye are well armed." Iain stared in admiration at the special sword in Harold's hand.

"Harold Fitzhugh," he said grasping the man's elbow.

Harold returned the sword to its scabbard and looked over the small group. There were five men and four women and three small children. They looked tired and hungry. "I will. I would like to enlist your help, though, if I may."



Harold, Iain, and Caleb ran through the dark night. The three men looked very much alike since Harold had borrowed some of their clothes and changed out of his jeans and bright plaid shirt. Now he wore homespun trousers and a deerskin tunic. His belt held the sword, and he carried a small knife he had borrowed from Iain. Once they reached the mine, they set to work to destroy the shaft. It was difficult and dangerous work and took close to two hours before they had pulled out enough supports to cause the roof to collapse. Once that was completed, Harold convinced the two men to help him search for the prisoners who worked the mines—they must be held close by.

They found the place by the pale smoke that lifted into the night sky. It was small, a pen more than anything else, and in a remote area that made the situation easier. The prisoners were under a lean-to surrounded by a high fence. At least there was a fire going to keep them warm. The prisoners slept as close to it as they could get. Two men with filthy matted hair stood watch at the wide gates. Harold found that he knew exactly how to manage his rescue. He sent Iain to one side, Caleb to the other, and then sauntered up to the gate. "Hey, let me in!"

One of the men opened the gate and peered at him. "Who are ye?"

"Do ye nae recognize me?" he asked in a scathing tone. "Get out of the way and let me by."

The other guard came to look at him as they opened up the gate. About that time, Iain and Caleb ran around the corner throwing rocks. One guard fell, and then Harold hit the other

one, bruising his knuckles and surprising himself with his own ferocity.

"The chains are locked."

"One of the guards must have a key—I'll get it," Caleb said, running back to rifle through their pockets.

The released men were weak but managed to follow them back to camp. There had been other creatures held in that pen—ape-like beasts who disappeared into the night as soon as the chains were unlocked. Harold was told that they were a tribe called the Amuigh. It was horrible to see them in this condition, Caleb added. They were part of the spirit keepers and their kind was nearly extinct.

The others were given a warm meal before they settled down around the fire for what was left of the night. Caleb's wife, Maggie, served them all from soup she had put together from their dwindling stores. After eating, Harold was hot to go out on another foray, but Iain and Caleb were not eager to accompany him. He finally decided to keep watch while the others slept for a couple of hours; he was too keyed up to rest.



Chapter Twenty-three

MAEVE WOKE AT first light and went into the forest to meditate. Where they had made camp the night before was in an unfamiliar wood, a place where they had decided on only because she and her group had become too exhausted to continue. Wind whistled through the higher branches, and she had the sense it knew they were there and was not happy about it. She'd heard about this wind that scoured one's mind and took away reason. She'd encountered it before. Every day, she discovered more strange elements of Otherworld. This morning ritual helped clear her mind of worry, allowing her inner knowing to take over. The morning sickness was under control now, due to the ginger root Rea had produced. After what Cerridwen had told her in her dream of the Underworld, she'd given up in her search for an abortive. The baby she carried seemed to be as much a part of this journey as her mission as the Willow.

Rea had become her friend, as well as a maternal influence, during the time they'd been together. She smiled, thinking about

the many times Rea had counseled her, rubbing her back and feet. The woman insisted on taking care of Maeve because of her condition, plying her with foods she dug up and searching every area they traveled through for the missing sheep. The other Crion women and men did everything in their power to help heal those who were ill and maintain a cheerful attitude. Their reputation as the “keepers of the wisdom” was becoming clearer with each day that passed.



Once she sat beneath a tree, she realized how far from camp she'd traveled. For some reason, she'd felt the pull of the forest, some inner voice telling her to keep going. She sat cross-legged and tucked her legs under her velvet skirt as she scanned around, listening for noises that might indicate danger. As soon as she closed her eyes, she saw Harold, his worried gaze regarding her from under scrunched brows. She let that go and allowed her thoughts to float away, going deeper into the void. Soon, she was in a blank place, her mind drifting like clouds.

When Maeve opened her eyes again, she wasn't sure how much time had gone by. Usually, her meditation lasted a half hour or so, but this one had seemed much longer. She had traveled somewhere, but she couldn't remember where. A flash of Gertrude went through her mind, the psychic's eyes pleading. Maeve let out a gasp as she remembered. During her meditation, she'd been in contact with the older woman and knew the predicament she was in. Gertrude was a prisoner, a kept woman whom Brandubh used for sex. And she was in mortal danger from Adair who drained her every day in order to keep herself young. Gertrude would not survive the sorceress for long.

Maeve waited for more but the vision was gone. She sat there for a moment wondering what to do. Should she try to find Gertrude to rescue her? But how was that possible with all the people who were now in her care? She felt torn for a second, and

confused, but when Finiche gave a yip, she made her decision. She had to keep following her path. If she came upon Brandubh's camp, she would do what she could for Gertrude, but for now, her main responsibility was to the people who had chosen to follow her. She rose and trailed Finiche back to camp.

As she and wolf drew closer, her uneasiness grew. They'd been gone for longer than she'd intended, and something did not feel right. When Finiche suddenly stopped, she drew

in a ragged breath and peered through the trees. A moment later, the wolf let out a bark and ran toward the spot she'd left her people. No one was there, and the place had been ransacked, the cooking pots, clothing, and blankets were strewn across the clearing.

"Hello!" she called frantically. Finiche moved through the chaos, his nose to the ground. When he took off, Maeve ran after him. Maeve could see no sign of them but she followed the wolf, winding around trees and heading under brush. When he stopped to sniff a snag of material that had caught on a limb, Maeve took a look. It was a piece of woven wool from one of the Crion tunics. She gasped when an image of Rea and the other women chained together in a pen went through her mind. Was Brandubh near? All of a sudden, she was running as fast as she could go.

She found her people huddling around a fire next to a deep cave. Many were hurt and bleeding, and according to Rea, others had never shown up. When Duncan appeared from within the cave, Maeve hurried over. "My god, I can't believe this!" she cried, grabbing hold of the older man's arm. "What happened?"

"It was a few hours after ye left. I worried somethin' might have happened to ye, so I took a couple of scouts with me and went to search. They must have been lurkin' in the forest, because once we got back to camp, they attacked—'twas like the hounds of hell, those beasts of theirs. The Wildmen here tried to subdue 'em, but those horrible animals paid no attention. And then the men arrived, Wildmen from Brandubh's camp and some of the biggest Oillteil I've seen so far. They were carryin'

these clubs that looked like tree trunks. Of course, by that time, half the camp was runnin' around like chickens without heads. I had to take control. I told 'em all to follow me and I took off.

Everyone was beatin' the way through the woods, screamin' like all get out, and so Brandubh's men didna ken which way to go. Should they follow this group or that? Controlled chaos is what I call it. In any case, some of our lot were taken and others are just plain gone. What ye have here are the ones who made it, but as ye can plainly see, many have been hurt."

Maeve made the rounds, checking everyone over. It took most of Rea's herbal supplies to treat the wounded, and many were missing. By the end of it, she was exhausted and felt like she'd let them down. She sank next to the fire, her head in her hands.

"So what in hell happened to ye? Why were ye gone so long?" Duncan asked, sitting beside her.

Maeve looked up. "I was only meditating, Duncan. If I had known, I never would have left camp."

Duncan put his hand over hers. "Dinna blame yourself, lass. If ye had been here, ye could have been hurt or worse. 'Tis a blessing ye were away."

Maeve tried to smile. "I'm responsible for these people. How many did we lose?" "Maybe ten by my count. But—"

"You led them to a safe place, Duncan. Without you, I don't know what would have happened."

But underneath the words, Maeve knew that the closer they got to Caer Sidi, the more danger they would encounter. Time was ticking by like a bomb about to blow.



Chapter Twenty-four

MAEVE HEARD SOMETHING calling to her, a path clear in her mind. She pulled on her boots and headed to the place where Duncan slept. Best to let him know what she was doing since he'd assumed the role of caretaker.

"If ye say so, lass," he said after she explained about the spring she'd seen in her vision. "But I'd feel better if ye took someone along with ye."

"Finiche will be with me, and if something happens, he'll come back and get you," she whispered.

She left everyone asleep and made her way into the forest, heading down one twisting trail after another, as she followed the route in her dream. A deep gloom hung below the branches, and a feeling of hopelessness emanated from the dank air.

When she reached the spring, it was the same as in her vision with the exception of the majestic willow tree that sprang up from the far side of the rocky bank, its branches falling gracefully over the water. *The tree that bends but will not break*, she thought, recalling her title. *I hope that's true*. The atmosphere felt

charged, making her aware that the tree and the spring repelled the darker forces that had invaded the rest of the forest.

While she gazed at the rough bark of the tree, examining the many branches that curved over the little pool, a voice, like the tinkle of bells, entered her mind. "We are the Ghillie Dhu, the spirits who guard the trees. We have come back because of your dedication." A sigh went through the branches and when Maeve looked up, she saw a tiny flash of silver and the movement of translucent wings. It was gone before she could get a proper look. Scanning back to her early days in the Otherworld, she thought of the web that had kept her dry on her night under the birch trees, the light beings that led her to the Rowan Village. Why had they called her here?

Maeve breathed deeply of the moist air, thanking the tiny beings for keeping the spring safe. The water was sweet and clean and cooled her parched throat. When she bent over to gaze into the water, the ribbon around her neck came untied and the moonstone sank to the bottom. In alarm, she reached for it, but the surface began to bubble and turn white. Pulling her hand out, she sat back on her heels, watching it foam and froth. Long moments went by before the roiling began to subside. When the water cleared, she could see the necklace on the bottom, the stone glowing and sending shafts of cool light in all directions.

A scene came into view, projected clearly on the bottom of the pool: one-hundred red-haired men side-by-side in the brilliant light, their arms linked. She and Harold stood together in front of them. The light from the moonstone was refracted by the movement of the water and encircled the tiny figures. Before she could make sense of it all, the scene faded and was gone. She mulled over what she'd seen, thinking about Harold being there with her. What was his role here? She thought about her plan to lure Brandubh's men to her side. But the vision in the water seemed to indicate a fight about to begin.

She reached in to retrieve her moonstone, but couldn't find it, and a lengthy search brought up nothing. The stone was simply not there.

While she was contemplating this, MacCuill appeared with another man the size of a giant. Maeve stifled the surprised scream that had risen in her throat, her gaze going to what had to be a god. Curly brown hair hung to his shoulders, vines twining around the antlers protruding from his head. His chest was as wide as one of the old growth tree trunks, his skin the warm golden-brown of bark.

"This is Cernunnos, god of the forest."

Maeve rose quickly to her feet and bowed. He seemed to be part goat or ram or maybe bull, his light eyes the color of the fall leaves of the birch tree.

"I pledge to stand with you against the dark forces," he intoned in a voice deeply resonant. "I will not allow any more of my forest to be destroyed or my animals killed."

Maeve felt his power on a visceral level. He had not lost his strength as the other goddesses had. "Thank you, Cernunnos," she uttered respectfully, finding her voice. She turned toward MacCuill, willing her gaze to leave the wide face, the eyes that still focused on her. She took a deep breath. "The spring has brought me a vision, but I'm not sure I like what it was."

MacCuill's indigo eyes met hers, calming her as they always did. "And what was this vision?"

"Harold and I stood in front of an army, but I'm determined to accomplish my mission without fighting." She moved her fingers to her neck. "My moonstone disappeared in there," she finished, pointing.

MacCuill's expression was neutral, his gaze never wavering from hers. "If you and Harold were together, you can be sure he's part of your destiny. As far as the moonstone, it has completed its job. You've outgrown it, Maeve."

"Outgrown it? It's just beginning to show me everything it can do!" And then she thought of Harold and what MacCuill had just said. Was he really part of her destiny? Tears stung her eyes when she thought of the baby that grew within her. She mentally shook herself, directing her attention back to the problem at hand. "What about the fighting? I refuse to be a part of it."

"What you described is not necessarily fighting. From what you said, it sounded as though the Sidhe were standing behind you in solidarity, not necessarily as soldiers ready to fight."

"You could be right." She sighed, looking down. "But I have bigger problems to solve than what will happen in the future. My people are starving and dehydrated. I can bring them here to drink and we can fill our skins, but we'll run out of water again within a day or two."

"More water is stored in the souterraines, as well as food. I can tell you how to find them, but you must be extremely careful. It is Brandubh who has placed the extra barrels there, and he has guards to watch over the supplies."

"Do you know if Harold is here in Otherworld? I keep seeing him when I meditate, and now this vision—"

"If he's here, you will find each other soon enough."

Maeve stared into the distance. Without the moonstone she couldn't just say, 'take me to Harold', and be whisked away. Every day, she discovered how big Otherworld was, how extensive the forests and the now-dry waterways, the high mountains that loomed in the distance.

"You may use this to summon me," Cernunnos announced, holding out an enormous horn.

Maeve turned in surprise. The enormous god had seemed to disappear into the shadows beneath the trees while she and MacCuill spoke. She took the horn he held out, admiring its delicate curve, the gleam of almost translucent bone. As she put it to her lips, his enormous hand came onto her arm.

"Only when you need me," Cernunnos ordered. "I will leave you now. I must tend to my animals."

Maeve watched him melt into the forest like smoke.

"What can I do to help you?"

Maeve brought her attention back to the druid. "I've heard that Brandubh's armies head north. I've seen fighting in the valleys and many have been killed. Use your magic to confuse and delay as much as you can. Maybe that way we can keep more troops from joining him."

"I can do that." He bowed once and was gone.

After a few minutes of staring into space, she stripped off her filthy clothes and climbed into the warm water to soak and take in what had just happened. She'd met a god who pledged himself to her, and MacCuill, an ancient druid with powers unknown, had promised to do her bidding. Maeve was overwhelmed for a moment, her eyes filling with tears of gratitude.

The way was clear. To bring balance without fighting had to be accomplished by attracting more followers. This meant convincing them that the riches they'd been promised were not worth the sacrifices they were making. So far, she had managed to free a few prisoners, but she had to do a lot more than that. She needed to win the hearts and minds of those who had been brainwashed into working and fighting for Brandubh. Her followers could certainly help with that and bring their friends to her side.

Her thoughts reached out to Harold, hoping they would find each other. All her anger and irritation seemed so petty now, as though she'd been a child when it happened. He'd been right about the map. She hoped he'd found it and used it to find his way to Otherworld. She put her hands on her still flat belly, imagining giving him her news. This was possibly the worst time for this to have happened. She was filled with worry for her people and the baby she carried. She closed her eyes and sank beneath the water.

When she rose to the surface, her confidence had returned. Her group had become integrated, the disparate beings united in service to her and to saving Otherworld. Even the injured Oillteil worked with the others to support the camp. The language barrier had been dismantled as everyone made an attempt to communicate. They would help to sway others of their kind if they came upon them. Her plan was attainable.

She climbed out of the pool and pulled on the tights the Crion women had woven for her, tugging the dress over her head. It hung loosely now and she registered how thin she'd become. After retying her boots, she pushed her fingers through her wet curls and headed back to camp.

Once she reached her group, she summoned everyone and told them of her meeting with MacCuill and Cernunnos, the course that had been laid out for her in the pool. "If the vision is about fighting, we will find another way," she announced strongly, looking around. Their eyes were on her, skeptical expressions mixed in with ones of confusion. But they all nodded and raised their fists to let her know they were with her no matter what.

When she meditated later, she felt sure that Harold was close by. It was time they connected. Could her instincts lead her to him without the moonstone? She had to trust herself—without that she had nothing.

She found Duncan drinking tea by the fire. "I'm leaving first thing in the morning," she told him in a hushed whisper. "I want you to take care of everyone while I'm gone. Take them to the spring to bathe and fill their skins and then wait for me here. I should be back in a day and a half or so."

Duncan stared at her, his mouth agape. "Lass, are ye daft? At least take Dirg or Soru with ye. Brandubh's men are all around us. Ye made it back safely this time, but I wouldna push your luck."

Maeve smiled. Duncan had become her guardian and a worrywart, nervous every time she left camp for even a few minutes. "I can't be bogged down by two men trying to protect me. I'll be fine. Just know that I'm counting on you, Duncan."

Duncan shook his head. "I dinna like this plan. Please reconsider taking Soru."

"I'll be careful and I'll take the wolf along." She took hold of his arm, giving it a squeeze.

He turned and gave an unexpected hug. "Stay safe, lass. I'll take them to the spring to fill our water skins. Goddess knows we all could use a drop to quench our thirsts."



Chapter Twenty-five

hAROLD AND THE villagers traveled a well-worn path at the edge of the valley. Behind them were the fifteen men they had rescued. A few were on horseback, riding next to Harold, but many walked, guarding the carts that carried the women and children. Oillteil and Wildmen had been spotted in the distance and so they were careful to stay out of sight and go quietly.

“Are there mines or bridges close by?” Harold asked Iain. Ideas were surfacing from his past life as Kenneth—clever ways to use his skills to undermine Brandubh’s plans. Apparently it was the type of warfare he had enjoyed immensely in his previous life.

“There are bridges and dams all along the river. Mines are being worked everywhere. If we stop and listen, I’m sure we will hear the sounds of the pick axes. What did ye have in mind?” Iain’s eyes were bright, his eyebrows raised in interest. The recent rescue they had conducted had given all of them a sense of accomplishment.

The group found shelter under the cover of trees on a low rocky ridge. From this vantage point, they could see where the wide river had brought water for the farms. Now it had been dammed and lay like a bruise along the valley floor, the dried out crops blackened from the cold.

"Why do so many follow Brandubh?" Harold asked, gazing across what used to be fertile land planted with corn, potatoes, beans, and squash. Earlier in the day, they had spent time out there gathering the few vegetables they could find.

"He promises wealth, especially to the ones who are intelligent and would otherwise rise up against him and his cohorts. He manipulates the others with only the promise that the god he's always talking about will reward them for their service. He speaks of heaven where they will be once they have given their lives for him. And he is powerful, more powerful than any mortal man. People are afraid of him and so they do what he wants."

"So he's brainwashed them."

Iain looked at him quizzically. "I do not know this word."

"It just means he's taken over their minds."

"Aye, that is correct."

When it grew dark, they roasted sweet potatoes over the fire and discussed plans for the night. They were surprised when a man appeared out of the darkness. Harold jumped up and pulled out his sword. "And who might you be?"

"I'm Eron, a friend of the one known as the Willow."

"You are welcome here. Come by the fire and share our meal," Caleb invited, moving over on the log to make room.

As he sat down, Eron looked around, his eyes coming to rest on Harold, who was standing with folded arms. "Your face is familiar. Have we met?"

"No. I'm Harold—or possibly you know me as Kenneth?" Harold looked curiously at the man. There was something familiar about him as well.

"Harold, of course! I am Maeve's grandfather." He held out his hand. "She's mentioned you."

"It's good to meet you," Harold said, grasping his arm.

"I'm searching for Maeve. Have you seen her?" Eron asked.

"No. I was hoping you had. I've been traveling with these people who have been kind enough to feed me."

A voice piped up from the back. "And launching daring rescues." It was a red-haired boy named Addis, around twelve years of age. The children had already made up an exciting tale about the men's exploits.

Eron glanced at Harold, his eyebrows raised in question.

"I seem to have some skills as a saboteur, or at least Kenneth does."

"Kenneth?"

Harold sighed. "Apparently I am not only Harold Fitzhugh from Halston, Massachusetts, but also Kenneth MacAlpin, the first King of Scotland." As Harold told his tale, the men clustered close around the fire. This was fast becoming part of their oral history.

An hour later Eron, Harold, Iain, Caleb, and two other men were running down the hill toward the valley. It was a very dark night with heavy clouds. Icy fingers of wind blew on them as Iain led the way upriver toward the dam. It took most of the night to dislodge the heavy rocks and dirt ramparts that kept the water back, but finally, a trickle broke through and after that, the heavy weight of the water scattered the rest of the boulders like pebbles.



It was two days later that Iain and Caleb informed Harold that their group was moving on. As much as they had enjoyed their adventures, the women wanted to get to *Caer Sidi* where they would be safe. They were tired of worrying every night as their men disappeared into the dark. Iain gave Eron his horse, *Taranis*, named after the god of thunder, with the condition that Eron would bring the beast to the *Caer Sidi* at some time in the not-too-distant future. Eron thanked him profusely and waited

until the caravan was safely on its way before he and Harold headed on horseback toward the valley.

Harold led the way across one of two bridges spanning the river. They dismounted and set to work on the east side, removing several critical supports from beneath, taking turns checking for Wildmen, Oillteil, or other men in Brandubh's employ who had been spotted marching toward the north. After they were finished, Harold left Eron with the horses and scouted up the valley. He found the enemy camp under the trees, recognizing Brandubh's distinctive dark cassock where he stood talking with a group of Wildmen. The second bridge they had planned to dismantle was dangerously close.

When Harold joined Eron an hour or so later, they discussed a plan, deciding to begin their work on the west side of the bridge. That way, if Brandubh and his men discovered them, they would have to cross it in order to attack. The bridge was heavily built, made to carry horses and carts, but with Argyll's talents as a workhorse, they were able to remove enough of the supports to be confident of its imminent collapse. This river now flowed because of their earlier efforts at the dam, but the water was already beginning to freeze over. Hopefully, the water beneath the ice would soon be available to the people and animals that lived along its banks.

Both bridges looked perfectly normal as they rode away, but with any luck, the next group to cross would be Brandubh or some of his men. Not only were they the only ones arrogant enough to travel out in the open during the day, but Harold had also done some reconnaissance and planned to draw the men with a series of diversionary tactics starting with an echoing call with one of Eron's small flutes. They rode the horses into the forest, left them to forage, and then crept back toward the river. Both men began to yell as loud as they could, Harold also clanking his heavy sword against tree trunks to simulate a fight. After a short time at this, Eron cried out in a falsetto, "Maeve, Maeve!" as the two men moved off into the forest. From their hiding place, Eron and Harold heard excited yipping as the

beasts and scouts came to investigate. As soon as the Wildmen were in sight, Eron and Harold sprinted away, making as much noise as they could. They wanted the Wildmen to believe there were enough people here to pursue. Reaching the horses, they mounted and galloped off, feeling assured that their plan would succeed.

Early the next day, the two men headed to the shallow mountain range that lay close to the western valley. They crossed the low-lying hills making good time, finding their way to the large loch glistening with ice at the deepest part of the valley. From the hills, they could see the two villages that flanked each end of the loch.

"I hope Brandubh has not been here," Eron muttered, scanning into the smokeless distance.



Harold noticed the grim set of his mouth as they came down off the hills.

Eron held up his hand to signal Harold and then brought his horse to a halt. The older man dismounted, kneeling to examine the animal and human tracks in the nearly frozen ground around the loch. "A day or two old, I would say," he said, turning to glance at Harold. They left the horses in what once was a fertile valley and made the rest of the trip on foot, walking through freezing fog that left a gray film on their jackets. When the first village loomed into view, they stayed low, skirting the houses at a crouch. An eerie quiet surrounded the deserted place.

"He's been here all right," came Eron's angry mutter. A trip through town brought them to an old man who had been injured. He cowered from them until Eron told him who he was.

"Eron! 'Tis been too many years. I am Dougal, do ye nae recognize me? How is Grita, that lovely wife of yours—and the child?"

Eron's face darkened. "Brandubh killed them—burned them up years ago."

"By the spirits, man. I am sorry to hear that. My wife, my grown daughter, and my grandchild were all taken during the slaughter that went on here." Dougal's bloodshot eyes filled and he turned away.

The wound on Dougal's leg still bled and the two men helped him back to his house, helping him onto the bed. Eron pulled herbs out of his pouch, placing them directly on the wound. To Harold's surprise, he then placed his hands over the wound and began to chant. Harold moved away, trying not to form an opinion about his healing methods, instead going to the hearth to make a fire. After a few moments, Eron joined him, whispering that the old man was sleeping.

"I'm going to scout around and see if I can find us something to eat," Eron said, heading for the door.

Harold nodded, and then turned back to the fire, placing several logs on top of the kindling. He pulled out a box of matches and lit it, sitting back on his heels. As the wood began to burn, his thoughts went to Eron—had Maeve mentioned that he was some kind of a shaman? He shook his head. He knew that Eron was Finna's real father and hadn't met his daughter until she was grown, but other than that, the man's past was a complete mystery. He obviously knew his way around here and could fight with the best of them. So far, the two of them had managed quite well together.

A half hour later, Eron burst through the door, his arms filled with bread, cheese, and a couple of apples he'd discovered in someone's root cellar.

"I found these and something even better." He grinned, holding up a handmade crockery jug. "Beer," he announced.

Eron's arrival had awakened the old man. Harold followed Eron over to the bed, watching as he checked the wound. It had completely healed.

"How did you do that?"

"What?" Eron asked, puzzled. "Oh, you mean that," he answered, pointing. "I have a knack, I suppose."

"That's more than a knack—I'd say it's bordering on the supernatural."

Eron laughed. "Hardly. Have you not met a healer before this? There are many here and I'm sure in your world too. It is not so unusual. It's all about energy and moving it where it needs to go."

"Hmm. I guess the Chinese work that way, don't they?" Harold looked up.

"I have no experience with the Chinese, but I do know that Druids and many others are adept in the healing arts. Maeve is one of them."

"Maeve?"

"Yes, Maeve." Eron turned toward Dougal. "How 'bout some beer, old man?"

As the three men took turns drinking from the jug, Dougal recounted the events of the day before. Brandubh's men had arrived before dawn and laid waste to the place, taking all the livestock and able-bodied men. The women and children had been slaughtered like cattle. Somehow, he had been spared. He figured it was his age that caused them to ride off without him.

Once the jug was empty, Eron and Harold set out to find the mass graveyard. Maybe someone might still be alive. In the back of the village, behind a stone wall, they found the bodies. Harold was violently ill, retching until there was nothing left in his stomach. The slaughter was complete, bodies hacked apart, bloody clothing strewn across the frozen ground. From the looks of it, they had been driven from their homes to the place of their death, with no way of defending themselves. There was zero chance of any life still existing here.

It took hours to dig graves to bury the dead. After the bodies had been covered, the two men gathered stones and placed them on the graves. Once the burial was complete, they went to the house for Dougal, bringing him back for a short service. Dougal sobbed quietly as Eron said a few words about speeding them into their next life. After a moment of silence, Eron took his flute

from his pack and put it to his lips, playing an eerie and mournful song.

By this time, the day was almost over. "We'll stay tonight and leave early in the morning," Harold announced, feeling the Kenneth personality rise to the surface. He wanted to find Brandubh and avenge these deaths, his hands itching to be around the man's neck. He went in search of another jug of some kind of alcohol, feeling the need to get beyond the gruesome images lingering in his mind.

Harold entered each house warily, worried about some other sign of destruction, but the ones that hadn't been burned had been left mostly intact, with dishes laid out on the table as though the people would be coming back shortly for a meal. At one point, he had to sit down, feeling the horror again, imagining the terror of these poor people. This kind of cruelty could not be allowed to continue.

With another jug in hand, he headed back to Dougal's house. He'd been drinking steadily since he found the hard cider in someone's root cellar, and his journey back was none too straight. When he came through the door, Eron looked up, waving him over by the fire.

"I see you've had a bit already," he said, smiling.

Harold grimaced, putting the jug down on the floor in front of the fire. "What's it to you?"

Eron looked surprised. "I'll not begrudge you your alcohol, Harold, just making a comment is all."

"Well, don't." Harold grabbed the jug, tipping it up to take a good swallow.

"Hey, man, leave some for us," Dougal called from the bed.

"Take it all!" Harold yelled. He turned and ran for the door, tears filling his eyes. He stumbled down the road, his hollow cries echoing into the distance. At some point, he collapsed, letting tears course down his cheeks. My god, what if they had Maeve? What if they killed her? Now he knew the true horror of this place, the pure evil that had infected Brandubh and everyone who worked for him.

When Harold finally got back to the house, he felt completely done in. Dougal was already asleep, stretched out on the bed. He came over to the fire and sat down next to Eron. A long silence went by as both men stared into the fire.

"This is a very hard thing, Harold," Eron said quietly. "For someone who hasn't seen it before, death like this can change a man forever."

Harold looked over, meeting the older man's sympathetic stare. He shook his head. "I wouldn't have believed this of any human being. Of course, I know all about the Nazis and all that, but this—it rivals it. From what I've heard, this used to be a wonderful place." Harold stared into the fire, his thoughts on Maeve. "What if they've killed her?"

"They have not killed her, Harold. She's very resourceful, and if she were dead, I would know it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Think about it. If they killed Maeve, the war would be over, no need for this kind of destruction and killing. No, this was done in a blind rage, and I have my suspicions that Maeve has thwarted them once again."

"I have to find her."

"You will. Now try to get some sleep. We have a long way to go tomorrow." Eron stretched out on the floor and closed his eyes.

Harold watched him for a while, thinking about what he'd said. Jesus, he hoped the man was right. After a point, his head began to nod and he lay down, curling himself into a ball next to the fire.

They both slept badly, waking in the morning with a sense of urgency, certain that Brandubh had gotten to the next village ahead of them. Harold was frantic, terrified of coming upon another grizzly scene. His head ached and there was a searing pain behind his eyes. He hadn't drunk this much alcohol in one sitting since his college days. Before leaving, they checked on the old man, begging him to come along, but he said, no, he wouldn't want to slow them down. He waved them off with

good luck wishes, assuring them he had what he needed right here.

"We'll come by on our way back," Eron assured him.

They found the horses nibbling on sparse grass close to where they left them, and saddled up, heading toward the far end of the loch where another village lay hidden under a blanket of fog. It wasn't long before they noticed dark smoke billowing into the sky. Harold turned to Eron. "We're too late."

The village was burned to the ground and still smoldering. They spent a long time searching through the rubble for survivors but found no one. As far as animals and food, there were none. It was with a feeling of bitterness and despair that they left, heading northwest toward another village. Eron had friends there, and the look in his eyes told Harold he was very worried.

An empty souteraine sheltered them for the night, but there was no protection for the horses as they stood shivering with their backs to the wind. In the morning, a breakfast of barley collected from the depths of the souteraine gave them back a little of the energy lost to the cold night. With no way to make a fire, the men huddled close together drinking cold tea brewed the day before. Wind continued to whine through the hills, chilling them and bringing an even darker mood.

After breakfast, they saddled up, pushing the horses more than on any other day. By nightfall, they reached the western forest that stretched to the sea. It was filled with ancient yews, firs and larch interspersed with elder, low-growing hawthorn, and brambles. The smaller bushes made riding difficult and they dismounted, leading the horses through the thick undergrowth. According to Eron, foxes, rabbits, wild boar, and the small wild horses known as Tarpan, lived in this forest, using the underbrush for cover, but on this day, there was no sign of them. There was a desolate feeling under the trees, ice dripping off the needles of the trailing branches as though they were weeping.

"I don't like the feel of this place," Harold muttered, looking around uneasily.

"The energy has changed here. I'm afraid of what we might find in the village."

Harold's mind immediately filled with a gruesome scene of destruction, but with it came a feeling of resolve. He was Kenneth again, his hand going to the scabbard hanging by his side. They would get through this and, if necessary, they would fight.

"This is the village of Bannee," Eron told him as they walked. "It means 'blessed' because of the sacred yew that grows here. This is one of only two places in Otherworld where you can find it. The bows from Bannee are well known all over Otherworld for their grace and beauty."

They walked single file, trying to follow the narrow trails made by the Tarpan. It was dark under the trees and fog clung to the bushes and swirled around them in strange eddies. By the time they reached the end of the forest, all of them were on edge, including Argyll, who snorted and jumped at every noise.

"We're nearly there. It's just over the next hill." Eron pointed into the distance.

They mounted the horses and rode on toward the top of the hill. From there the little village came into view. Thin smoke rose from the chimneys.

Eron let out a long sigh of relief. "I don't think Brandubh's men have been here."

The tension eased and they pushed the horses into a trot, covering the distance quickly.

That night they stayed with Tannith, a handsome woman in her fifties, dark-haired and buxom, who raised goats for the village. She was an old friend of Eron's and was very happy to see them. They dined on fresh goat cheese and freshly baked bread. It was as though this little village had been forgotten in the battle for Otherworld.

Eron and Harold stayed up long into the night talking to Tannith, impressing upon her the importance of going north to Caer Sidi. They told her that her village might be safe now but would certainly be found by Brandubh's army in the upcoming days. It was the gruesome account of Dougal's village that finally

convinced her. "I'll speak to the others. After hearing this, it's time we moved northward."

In the morning, Harold took charge, helping Tannith organize the other villagers for travel, getting the carts and horses hooked up and the food supplies loaded, including bales of hay to feed the horses. He told them to destroy what they left behind. There was no point in letting the enemy get anything of value. Each man carried a longbow of exquisite design and their quivers, which held as many arrows as they could fit in them.

Harold noticed the disgruntled expressions on many of the faces, finally deciding to take matters into his own hands. He whistled sharply to get their attention and then stood on a stump to address them. "I know you don't want to leave this village, and I can understand why, but after the destruction we've seen, it is only a matter of days before Brandubh and his men reach Bannee. Your women and children will be slaughtered like cattle if you choose to remain here. We will see you safely north."

They grumbled among themselves when Harold was finished, but he could see the determination that had replaced the earlier reluctance. They'd seen the decimation of the surrounding countryside, had heard other horrific tales from travelers coming through.

"And if you wish to help us disrupt Brandubh's troops, you will be very welcome," Harold continued after he'd gotten their agreement. He explained what they had already accomplished at the river, bringing some levity to the somber group as everyone imagined Oillteil and Wildmen falling into the icy water as they tried to cross the bridges. The raucous laughter that ensued was a welcome relief, releasing a lot of the tension of the past days.

By mid-afternoon, Eron and Harold were ready to travel, accompanied by ten men on horseback. They made sure the rest of the villagers were on their way, with instructions to get them safely to Caer Sidi, and then headed out, trotting along the western edge of the forest. The conversation was light and lively, and despite the dismal weather, the spirits of the men were high as they rode along companionably. Harold had taken charge in

his assumed role as leader, riding the big horse at the front of the line and discussing strategies to employ in case of possible attack. Eron filled them in on what had been happening for the past few weeks. They felt united in their sense of purpose as they headed north.

They camped in the forest that night, making a fire and eating heartily from the fresh food the men had brought with them. Harold was pleased to be able to give Argyll a substantial meal of sweet-smelling hay, the first he'd had for many days. The western sea was farther away now, but they could still smell the salt tang and feel the heavy fog that rolled inland off the water. They spread out around the fire, and then Harold took the first watch, standing guard at the edge of the camp.

As he sat with his back against a tree and his sword by his side, Harold thought about the strangeness of the situation. The Kenneth persona seemed to have taken over and he was grateful for it as his senses came alive. He felt no fear sitting alone in the dark, only the knowledge that he was a strong and able warrior, capable of defending himself and those whom he was guarding.



Harold woke in the morning with an anxious feeling in the pit of his stomach. He didn't say much to Eron about it until they had eaten breakfast, hoping the feeling would dissipate, but if anything it grew stronger.

"You've been very quiet, Harold, is everything all right?" Eron asked when he and Harold were away from the other men.

"I have to find Maeve. I think she's close."

"We're headed north, and I'm sure we'll run into her in the next day or so," Eron replied with his usual calm.

Harold left him and went to saddle his horse. "Let's get a move on!" he called out. Men jumped up at his command, rushing to ready their horses.

When Harold turned to speak with Eron, he had his arms around a bone-thin woman with short tufts of red hair sticking up all over her well-shaped head. She was wearing a tattered velvet dress, her feet encased in hiking boots. He watched until they pulled apart, surprised when her gaze turned to him. The wide green eyes looked too big for her face.

"Maeve?" He rushed forward and scooped her up in his arms. He could feel every bone in her back as he pulled her close. "Jesus, Maeve, you're so thin. And what happened to your hair?" He pushed her back, holding onto her forearms as he searched her face.

"I guess I've lost some weight," she said. "Saving Otherworld can do that to you." She grinned. "It's not for the faint-hearted."

"But are you all right? You look like—"

"Something the cat dragged in? I'm fine. Just a little tired. Now tell me, mystical man, how did you come to be involved in this?"

Before Harold could answer, a couple of men appeared and began asking questions: what formation to ride in, and whether they should have weapons at the ready. Should they cover the horses' feet with rags to keep them quieter? What was their mission today?

Maeve listened to the exchanges with a puzzled expression on her face. "What's going on?" she asked after Harold finished giving the men instructions.

"Long story. We can fill you in as we travel," Harold answered, glancing over at Eron.

"I need to get back to my camp. It's a few miles that way." Maeve pointed north.

"We'll take you, but I expect you'll want to travel with me now."

Maeve frowned. "Why would I do that? I thought you'd travel with me."

Harold stared at her and then glanced at Eron.

"Don't look at me. You'll have to settle this between the two of you."

He turned back to Maeve. "Tell us how to get to your camp and then we can discuss this further," Harold said, mounting

Argyll. He reached down for her hand. Once she was settled behind him, he heard her ask Eron if he'd seen her mother.

"Catriona and your mother are heading back to Bailemuir. Finna is ill."

Maeve gasped. "What's happened?"

"She has pneumonia, a virus that never existed in Otherworld until recently. I'm sure the so-called converts of Brandubh's brought it in. Finna will be fine once she's out of the cold. I did what I could for her, but the stress of the trip overwhelmed her immune system."

"What about Gertrude?"

Eron mounted his horse and shook his head. "I don't know what's happened to her. Catriona said she deserted them to be with Brandubh, and that was the last she'd heard." Eron shook his head. "We tried to tell her, to warn her."

"He tricked her and now she's in big trouble," Maeve said.

"What do you mean?" Harold asked, turning in the saddle to look at her.

"Gertrude sent me a vision a few days ago. She desperately needs our help, but right now I've got too many other responsibilities." Maeve stopped speaking and stared at Harold. "I need to get back to my camp," she said urgently.

"Maeve, I've been really worried about you and searching since I got here."

"I've been searching for you too." They stared at each other for several long moments.

Finally, Harold broke the silence. "We'll take you to your camp, but now that we've found each other, we need to travel together."

Maeve frowned. "I have a large contingent of people with me, Harold. If you want to join us, fine, but I'm not leaving them."

Harold turned to face front and urged Argyll into a trot. "Tell me where to go." He wanted to be happy he'd found her, but it was like having a stranger sitting behind him. He shoved the thoughts away, concentrating on the route in front of him.



Chapter Twenty-six

MAEVE HUNG ON to Harold, her mind going in several different directions. This man was nothing like the Harold she knew. This Harold had authority over the men who rode behind them. He seemed like he belonged here, with his long unkempt hair and scraggly beard. And since when did he know how to ride? And the sword that hung off his saddle was another thing—where had that come from? He seemed bigger to her, stronger, as though he'd been weight lifting or something. But she knew he hated gyms and never went.

"The camp's that way," she said into his ear, motioning with her left arm. He turned Argyll and rode into the forest, Eron and the others right behind him. "We're close now. Maybe we should leave the horses here," she called out.

Once Harold had pulled Argyll to a stop Maeve dropped to the ground, waiting for Harold to dismount. "Are you coming?" she finally asked him, looking up.

"I owe these men, Maeve. I can't leave them to go on without me."

"So after finding each other and not even having a moment to catch up, you're heading off again?"

Harold nodded, his lips pulling together. "I want you to come with us."

Maeve shook her head, looking over her shoulder toward where she'd left Duncan and the others. "I'm the leader here, Harold. It's my job to save this place. I'm not sure what your mission is, or why you're even here."

Harold shook his head and smiled. "I'm the one of noble birth, the reincarnated first king of Scotland."

Maeve stared at him. "What? Who told you that?"

"The boatman, for one, Rhiannon for another. And I can feel it in here." His fist hit his chest twice.

Maeve looked back at where her grandfather sat on his horse. "Do you believe this?" she asked.

Eron nodded. "From what I've seen so far, there's no question."

Maeve looked up at Harold again. "If it's true, we need to put our heads together. We may be working at cross purposes."

Harold frowned. "Cross purposes? I have an entire regiment here, Maeve. And they're all fighting for you."

"Fighting—that's the problem. We need to save Otherworld without violence."

Harold scoffed. "You think you can get Brandubh to lay down his arms without a fight? Good luck."

"I'm not kidding, Harold. I'm the one named in the prophecy, and it's my job to bring back the light. More fighting will not accomplish this." They stared at each other until Harold turned away.

"I have to go," he said. "There's a battle going on to the north of us."

Maeve put her hand on his thigh. "Harold, you have to listen to me! This decision is not up to you."

Harold's face seemed to change right in front of her, his dark eyes flashing angrily. "I'm a warrior and I'll do as I please." He spurred his horse into a gallop, the others following behind. Eron shrugged as he went by, his eyebrows lifting.



“What the hell?” Maeve listened to the galloping hooves until she couldn’t hear them anymore.

“What has happened, lass?” Duncan asked, appearing from under the trees.

“My boyfriend seems to think he’s some reincarnated king, and he won’t listen to me at all.” Maeve turned to Duncan. “It’s the first time we’ve seen each other since I came to Scotland and he just rides off?”

Duncan put a hand on her arm. “When we catch up, ye can hae a blether.”

Maeve met his gaze. “I can’t believe this. He had the audacity to go against what I’ve planned.”

“What is his idea?”

“He had a huge broadsword hanging off his saddle, so I would imagine it’s hacking people to death.”

Duncan looked at her. “This is what most think, your people here included. I heard ‘em grumblin’ while ye were gone. They’re soldiers, Maeve. Fighting is all they know.”

“I’ve already made it clear that we will not fight, Duncan. As I’ve explained, my idea is to lure more and more to our cause. Without the manpower, Brandubh will have to give up.”

“Brandubh is powerful beyond measure. I’ve seen what he can do and it is nothing to scoff at. He has sorcery at his fingertips. Have ye thought of that?”

Maeve didn’t answer, her fingers going to her temples. “Let’s get back to camp. I feel a headache coming on.”



Rhea brought her ginger and chamomile tea and listened as Maeve recounted what had happened. “I don’t understand,”

Maeve said, gazing at the diminutive woman. "I never thought our reunion would happen like this."

"It will be fine," Rhea told her. "The two of you need to talk."

"But he's gone now. I don't even know where they're headed. And I didn't tell him about the baby." Maeve's eyes filled with tears.

Rhea smiled and patted her arm. "Plenty of time for that."

"I don't want him fighting and ruining everything! Damn him!" Maeve wiped her tears away angrily. "We're leaving tomorrow for the north. I hope we can catch up with him before he does too much damage."

Rhea nodded, but the look on her face indicated something she wasn't saying. "I'll let everyone know," she said, rising.

Maeve sat by the fire sipping her tea. Why was this happening? If her way was right, which she was sure it was, why was Harold going against her? It made no sense, especially with the wording of the prophecy, "the one of noble birth who shall ride by her side." He certainly wasn't riding by her side. Her anger flared again. This was her destiny, not his. It was her job to save Otherworld. He should respect her and what she'd done here already. And the idea of him being a reincarnated king just made her even more angry. So what if he was? It didn't mean he had the right to take over. She had to catch up with him soon.



Chapter Twenty-seven

GERTRUDE SLID OFF her horse and removed the saddle and bridle. Maybe now the poor thing could forage for food. When the mare trotted after the other horses, Gertrude was suddenly aware that they would be continuing this trip on foot. Every day she saw more troops heading down the valley. How could she escape without her horse? Because that was exactly what she planned to do. Not only was Brandubh forcing himself on her every night, but also she was weak and sick from Adair's sorcery. The woman was using Gertrude's essence to keep herself young, not that she had much essence left at this point.

It had taken seeing Adair go from a wizened old hag to a voluptuous beauty that had finally clued her in. She'd learned that the handsome man with the long blonde curls who traveled with them now was Pryderi, Rhiannon's son, and Adair had designs on him. Lust and power were what drove the sorceress. And Pryderi seemed to have succumbed to her charms, she thought, watching the two of them disappear into the shadows beyond the fire.

Meanwhile, Gertrude was growing older by the minute. She could feel it in her bones that constantly ached. Her body was emaciated now, her hips jutting, her mind unable to focus. She hadn't looked in a mirror for a very long time, but she was aware of the dreadlocks her beautiful mane of hair had turned into. Her skin was raw, her lips so chapped they bled.

When she went to bed down Brandubh was waiting for her. He stared at her body, his expression revealing his revulsion. "You look like a skeleton. And your skin looks worse."

"Tell your mother to leave me alone."

"What are you talking about?"

"She's sucking me dry, Brandubh. Don't tell me you haven't noticed. How do you think she keeps Pryderi's attention? A man that handsome wouldn't be interested in taking an old woman to his bed."

"I thought she was going elsewhere for her sorcery."

Gertrude climbed under the sheepskin, watching Brandubh's face darken even further. "Goddammit," he muttered, climbing in beside her. When he tugged at her clothing, she was too tired to put up a fight, letting him pull away what was necessary. She turned her head and gritted her teeth, waiting for it to be over. Tears tracked silently down her chapped cheeks, burning her skin. When he finished, she curled into a ball trying to ignore the pain. She wished she were dead.



Gertrude was huddled by the fire the next morning when Pryderi approached Brandubh and whispered something in his ear. Brandubh rose from where he was seated and the two of them headed off. "Come on, John!" Brandubh shouted. "You too, Mother."

Adair was dressed in a low-cut black gown with lace at the neckline. Her thick brown hair was glossy, her unlined face pink with youth, and her eyes bright. She glanced at Gertrude before

following the men. "Don't die just yet," the sorceress whispered, smiling. "I need you."

Gertrude watched the four of them head for the bridge. Oillteil and Wildmen cowered behind them, glancing furtively at John. Lately, John had been taking his anger out on them for no reason she could see. It was a wonder they hadn't all deserted by now.

Morrighan's curse had barely slowed Brandubh down. The only thing that had changed was that now John carried out Brandubh's orders, slitting throats and stabbing farmers to death with his blade and raping the women they left behind. Gertrude had witnessed these encounters and couldn't get them out of her mind.

A minute or so later, she heard yelling and stood to see what was going on. The bridge was collapsing under their feet. At the same time, an earth tremor shook the ground so hard she lost her balance. She landed on the ground just in time to see Brandubh and the others splash into the river. Pryderi was not in sight. The rest of the bridge gave way, sending splintering wood flying in all directions. A horrible shrieking filled the air as Brandubh and John and the others struggled with the ice and freezing water. Only their heads were visible as broken chunks of ice hit them, carried by the released water that pushed wildly downstream.

"Use your magic, Pryderi!" Brandubh shouted.

Gertrude moved closer, crawling on her hands and knees. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Adair standing on the other side of the bridge. The sorceress was watching her son and the others being carried away. When Adair turned her head, Gertrude followed her gaze toward Pryderi up the hill away from the river. Their eyes met and a second later, they both disappeared.

The rest of Brandubh's men tried vainly to help those in the river but it was impossible. Brandubh's dark garments rose like sodden bird wings before he rounded a bend and disappeared from view. Gertrude began to laugh, all her pent up emotions

rushing to the surface. A few of Brandubh's recruits stared at her with dark expressions, but no one bothered her as tears rolled down her face.

She finally got up and made her way under the shelter of the trees. As she watched the bone-thin horses searching for something to eat, she felt a wave of sadness. They had been ridden too hard and not fed or watered, and now they could barely lift their heads. She thought about the killing she'd witnessed; the abuse she'd suffered. She'd ignored her psychic visions given her by the universe, and the cards that pointed out the darkness inside this man. All the evil acts she'd condoned came rushing back in a wave. Her insides heaved, scenes rushing by with dizzying speed—images of their coupling, Brandubh leering as John massacred women and children, Oillteil bowing down to him, Morrighan's pronouncement. All of it came up and out as she retched and retched. Afterward, she lay dizzy and weak on the ground, unable to move.

It was as though she'd just awakened from a dark and horrible nightmare. But worst of all, despite the lack of food and Adair's sorcery, she was certain she was pregnant. And what kind of baby would it be with Brandubh for a father? The image that arrived in her mind was so terrible that she nearly retched again. Hopefully, it was only a thought and not a premonition. Maybe her psychic abilities had disappeared along with all her muscle and fat and her ability to think. There was nothing she could do here in this desolate wilderness, nor did she have knowledge of the proper herbs to bring about a natural abortion. All she could do now was hope for a miscarriage; otherwise, this baby would be born.



Chapter Twenty-eight

ANGRY ECHOING VOICES rose up from the valley, reaching Maeve and her group on the ridge. There was a battle going on down there between the Tuatha De Danann and the Oillteil and Wildmen. Although well armed, the red-haired men were no match for the stronger forces carrying iron axes and swords. From here, Maeve had a clear view of Brandubh, John, and Pryderi standing on a low hill to the north. She could tell they were calling out orders, but their voices were lost in the din from below. Looking down, she recoiled from the dark patches on the frozen ground—spilled blood and a lot of it. Bodies lay in various positions of death, made up mostly of men with russet hair. Maeve's hand went to the horn she now kept on her belt. Was it time to summon Cernunnos? When she spied Harold and his men engaged in the fray, a sharp pain moved through her chest. How could she stop him?

But he was coming toward her now, his men straggling behind him.

"Maeve, you need to get dry," he said once he reached her.

She realized she was shivering, soaked through from the cold fog. She got up and followed him under the trees to where her grandfather had made a fire. Duncan and her people had taken over one section of the clearing, Harold's men huddled on the other side. The Wildmen and Oillteil she'd recruited hung back under the trees, using their blankets to keep them warm.

"We need to be smart about our next moves," Harold said, as he brought her some dry clothes from his pack. She tugged the heavy wool sweater over her head. Her tights were dry enough for now.

"What moves, Harold? I don't want to do this. Why won't you listen to me?"

But he wasn't speaking to her, his gaze focused on the men who rode with him. They nodded as one, pulling blades from their pockets and slinging bows and arrows over their shoulders.

Harold was still in war mode, and this was why she couldn't reveal her news about the baby or even have a conversation with him. She and her people had made the trip here without mishap, but when they met up with Harold and Eron and their men, Harold had already taken them into battle without even discussing it with her.

The night before, she'd listened to Eron and Harold discussing strategy and subterfuge with the other men, something she approved of, but when she interjected her own thoughts, he'd ignored her. But she had to admit she was impressed by what the men had managed to accomplish. Since dismantling the bridges, they had sent a group of Brandubh's Oillteil and Wildmen on several wild goose chases using flutes and other devices. She chuckled, thinking back on the big oafs crashing through the underbrush in pursuit of nothing. It definitely obstructed their plans, leading Brandubh's men wildly off course and wasting a lot of time.

But here they were now with Brandubh's men stretched from one side of the valley to the other. There was so much death and pain, a situation she'd been trying to avoid. It wasn't just the Sidhe who were dying, it was also Oillteil, Wildmen,

villagers, and Crion. This was not what the vision in the spring had shown, and it had to be stopped.

When Maeve came back to the fire, Harold was holding forth again in his new voice. She sat down, listening to the conversation.

“Eron, I think we need to break up what’s going on down there. Duncan, how about it? With the three of us, I’m sure we can create some kind of diversion.” Harold pushed the hair out of his eyes in a gesture Maeve didn’t recognize, and then pulled out his sword, checking it for sharpness.

“What about us?” one of the other men chimed in. “We’re set to help ye, just tell us what to do.”

Maeve was dismayed to see it was one of her own.

Harold nodded and began explaining strategies for diverting the attention of the enemy troops, ways in which they could confuse them and lead them astray by pretending to be their allies. He talked about grabbing the Oillteil and then releasing them, making them see the error of their ways in following Brannubh. As he spoke, he gestured with his hands, making squares and other shapes to illustrate his points. At one point he drew in the dirt with a stick.

He looked different, older and more rugged. His voice was deeper. Maeve had a flash of uneasiness as if she didn’t know him at all. Where was Harold in all this, and what if he never returned?

“What do *you* think?” Harold asked her abruptly in his new voice. His eyes looked fierce, his brows pulled together in concentration.

“I like your idea of confusion and distraction, but I don’t want any more killing.” Maeve stood and whistled for everyone’s attention. “If any of you know anyone down on that battlefield, I want you to try to bring them over to our side. I don’t care what you have to say—you can promise them the stars if you need to. Just get them up here with us. Without that, there is no chance of success. I refuse to have you all end up dead because of me. We will not fight!”

Her people lifted their fists in a salute, but the men with Harold glanced away or looked down. They didn't trust her. It was a moment later when shouts rang out. Everyone rose to see what had happened. Fire had begun in the trees on the other side of the valley and smoke was billowing over the valley floor.

"Come on, now is our opportunity—the smoke will obscure the battlefield. They'll think there's an attack coming from the rear." Harold turned to address the men. "You and you," he said, pointing to two of the villagers who were part of Maeve's group. "Take a couple of horses and skirt around the back to the other side and make as much noise as you can." His gaze met Maeve's. "No killing, Maeve, just a way of confusing the enemy."

"I'll go with them," Maeve said, whistling to the black horse. She pulled herself onto his back, waiting for the others.

"Try to make it sound like a large attack is coming from the other side," Harold continued. "The rest of you come with me. We'll hide on either side of that ravine." He pointed to the steep hillside about one hundred yards away, leading to the valley floor. "And you Crion, get down to the stragglers at the end of the Oillteil's lines, let them see you through the smoke and then lead them toward where we're hiding. They should be happy to get away from what they perceive as an attack. As soon as they get close enough, Eron and I and the Wildmen will grab 'em."

"Grab them, Harold? What does that mean?" Maeve asked sharply.

"It means we'll recruit them, Maeve. I'm attempting to go along with your plan." He stared at her, his dark eyebrows pulled together.

"Fine. I hope it works," she said, heading down the hill on her horse.

Maeve and the men on horseback took off, heading south to get around the rear of the battlefield. The Crion headed down the hill at a crouch. Harold and Eron and a few men distributed themselves along the hillside, lying flat to avoid detection. A minute later, Maeve and the men began shouting and galloping toward the rear guard.

Out of the corner of her eye, Maeve saw the Crion sneaking through the smoke and caught the moment when Brandubh's troops saw them. The ploy worked and a second later, the Crion men sprinted away and headed toward the hill. As soon as the Oillteil and Wildmen came abreast of the hiding men, Harold jumped up and yelled, "Now!" and the hillside erupted in shouting and the clash of weapons. The shouting brought others from the valley floor to help and soon there was screaming and the harsh clash of metal against metal.

Maeve watched with rising alarm as Pryderi looked straight at her and raised his hand, directing the wind in swirling light patterns. A few seconds later, the wind hit her square in the back and knocked her off her horse. She gasped to get her breath. Rising to her knees, she caught a glimpse of Eron and Harold running. Duncan was twenty feet or so behind them. They were in clear sight of Brandubh and the others.

Harold sprinted toward her. "You're going to get yourself killed!" he cried, helping her to her feet.

Wind roared and whirled around her, making it almost impossible to move. Harold was knocked off his feet and inched his way closer, trying to shield her from the Oillteil, who were moving up the hill. A moment later, an arrow whizzed by Maeve's ear and then Harold was standing next to her with his sword out. He tried to drag Maeve up the hill, but as he turned to face the Oillteil, an arrow hit him squarely in the chest.

Maeve screamed and grabbed hold of him, holding him upright. His glazed eyes met hers and then closed. He slumped against her, sliding down to lie at her feet.

A roar started from the valley as the rest of Brandubh's men saw what had happened. Oillteil and Wildmen ran toward them. Some held swords, some shot bolts from crossbows as Maeve attempted to drag Harold up the hill. The Oillteil were closing the gap and the arrows were too close.

Just as she turned to face them, the black horse appeared. It took every bit of her strength to lift Harold onto his back, laying

him across like a sack of meal. She climbed on behind him and the horse took off.

Once they reached the camp, Maeve screamed for someone—anyone—to come help her. A few men were there, their eyes wild as they took in the situation. “Where’s MacCuill?” Maeve shouted, looking around.

“I’m here, Maeve,” the druid said, appearing next to her. He took hold of Harold and dragged him off the horse, laying him gently on the ground. Maeve watched impatiently as MacCuill examined him.

“He’s alive but needs treatment immediately. Take him to my cottage. There are herbs and ointments there to treat his wound. Leave the arrow in until you have him stabilized, and then pull it out and staunch the blood with yarrow, comfrey, and horsetail. You must be familiar with these herbs from your time in Rowen. Do not let who he is distract you!” the druid said strongly.

MacCuill whistled once to bring Argyll close. He lifted Harold onto the piebald’s back and tied him on with ropes. “Take him to Caer Sidi and ask at the border for directions. Everyone knows where my cottage is.”

Maeve mounted the black and took hold of Argyll’s lead rope. “Thanks, MacCuill. I hope he lives.”

MacCuill patted her leg. “You’ll save him, Maeve. Love is a powerful healer. Now go.”

Maeve skirted around the fighting and headed north. As soon as they were away from the war zone, she pushed her horse into a canter, Argyll pounding after her. When she accidentally let go of the lead rope, the big horse kept following, as though he knew what was going on. When she reached the border, she called down to the first guard she saw. “How do I find MacCuill’s cottage?”

The guard widened his eyes when he saw Harold and then pointed into the distance to a narrow path up the hill. “Follow that trail and stay straight. At a gallop, you will reach it before nightfall.”

Maeve thanked him and urged her horse forward. Once they crested the hill, the black was at a full gallop. When she glanced over her shoulder, Harold's body was flailing about, bumping against Argyll's back as the horse galloped behind her. She thought about slowing down, but when she saw the pallor of his skin she kept going.

In the distance, Maeve saw the whitewashed cottage with the stone wall surrounding a field filled with sheep. She brought the horses to a stop and led Argyll toward the front door to make it easier to drag Harold inside. He moaned when she pulled him off, and she crumpled under his weight. At least he was still alive. "Harold, can you walk?" she asked, but it seemed he was unconscious.

She dragged him to the door, opened it, and pulled his body inside, marveling at her own strength. The inside of the cottage was cold and smelled musty, as though no one had been there for a while. Once she had the fire going, she dragged Harold to the rug in front of the warming flames. She removed his sword and laid it carefully on the floor by the door. When she looked at the arrow, the idea of pulling it out was something she didn't want to contemplate. But how was she to stabilize him without pulling it out? His breathing had become labored, and if she didn't do something soon, he would die.

Her gaze went upward to the rafters and the many hanging herbs; among them, she spied the ones MacCuill had mentioned. She pulled down several bundles and then hastily poured water from a jug into a kettle hanging on an iron rod over the fire. While it heated, she ground up the herbs in a mortar and pestle she found next to the fireplace. The comfrey leaves she left as they were, planning to apply them first.

As it grew dark, she lit a few candles and calmed her mind, thinking about what MacCuill had said. This was just another man to be treated, just like any of the others. But every time she glanced at him, her heart raced. She pulled his tunic off and removed as much of his undershirt as she could, tearing the cloth away from the wound. After staring down at his chest for

several long moments, she took a deep breath, put both hands around the arrow, and pulled upward as hard as she could. The sound it made coming out was horrible in the extreme, and she knew muscle and sinew were being ripped apart at the same time. Blood gushed from the wound, running down his sides and pooling on the rug. She did not look at him as she poured whiskey on the wound and pressed comfrey leaves there, adding the paste she'd made on top. She ripped off a long piece of her hem and strained to lift him so that she could tie it tightly around his chest. Hopefully, the hemostatic properties would take effect before he lost more blood.

Once that was done, she rubbed her hands together and placed them over the wound, imagining golden light entering his body and knitting together the torn flesh. She began to hum as Rea had taught her, but without the other Crion women, it sounded thin. "Please, Harold," she whispered. "Please, don't die. I need you, and the baby needs you. I love you." She closed her eyes and concentrated on drawing out the pain, imagining the wound closing up. It was hours of this before she heard him stir.

His eyes opened. "Maeve. What happened?"

"You were shot, Harold." She took his hand and twined her fingers through his. "I thought you might die."

Harold let out a moan as he tried to sit up."

She pushed him gently back. "You need to rest. I'm going to make soup if I can find anything to put in it."

"But what of the fighting—where are we?"

"This is MacCuill's cottage. You will not be fighting until you regain your strength."

"Maeve—" He tried to sit up again and fell back. "Jesus, it hurts," he gasped. "Where is my sword?"

Of course he'd ask for his sword first thing. Maeve shook her head in exasperation. "Your sword is right over there," she said, pointing.

Once she'd found a dried out onion, a potato, a couple of very old carrots, and some barley, she set about making soup.

Harold had fallen asleep again, but now his cheeks had some color. She left him by the warm fire and went outside to take care of the horses. They'd been ridden hard and she hadn't yet untacked the black.

She found them munching on thick grass. "Thank you," she whispered, pulling off the black's saddle and bridle. Argyll nosed her, his head coming under her arm. She turned to pat him and then threw her arms around his neck, the pent-up tears giving way at last.

It was deep in the night before Harold woke again. She spooned soup into his mouth and when he'd had enough, she helped him lie down, curling up next to him and pulling a sheepskin over them.



It was three days before Harold's wound was closed enough for him to walk around. He was ready to ride back immediately, his gaze focused on his sword lying by the door. By then Maeve had used up every bit of barley, oats, and vegetables she could find, the soup long gone. Luckily, she found a few pieces of pemmican in Harold's pack.

She put her hand on his arm when he picked up his sword and got ready to strap it on. "We are not going until you are fully recovered," she told him sternly. "And I need to share my news before we go."



Chapter Twenty-nine

AFTER MAEVE HAD told Harold about the coming baby, they lay wrapped in each other's arms. Before they went to sleep for the night, Harold filled her in on his former life as King Kenneth and what he thought this meant in terms of the prophecy. The "one of noble birth" finally made sense, their strong connection with each other surpassing all the petty misunderstandings.

Very early in the morning, Maeve woke to his lips on hers and felt her heart contract with love. He pulled her up and kneeled in front of her, laughing as he ran his fingers through her short hair. "I'm beginning to like this sprite look you have. It fits your Otherworld persona."

Maeve laughed. "Sprite? I see myself more as a goddess."

"That too," Harold answered, wincing as he drew her close.

"Harold, you aren't completely healed yet," she said, trying to pull out of his arms. But he held her tight against him and wouldn't let go.

They reconnected slowly and more carefully than usual, searching out the places that gave the most pleasure, and savoring one another like never before. As his hands moved across her bare back, Maeve pressed against him, feeling his heartbeat strong and regular. His hands went to her hips, pulling the hollow of her belly against his. She sucked in her breath as heat coursed through her. And then she was lost, gone into their combined breath, the rhythmic sound like waves moving into shore. It felt like a prayer as their kneeling bodies joined.

"I should get shot more often," Harold gasped when they lay spent and breathless.



Maeve gave him a sharp look. "Don't even joke about that. We still have a lot to get through."

Harold reached for her, his hands moving across her belly. "I can feel it," he said, his eyes growing wide. He put his ear on her stomach. "The baby is talking to me—"

Maeve laughed. "All you feel is my stomach grumbling with hunger; it's too soon for anything else."

Harold bent to kiss her belly, murmuring sweet nothings. "I can't wait to see him—or her," he added. "A month ago, I was worrying about my piddling job, what to do with my life, and how I was going to make a living, and now—" he spread his hands out in an expansive gesture. "I'm going to be a father and I've discovered a most incredible part of myself, not to mention a prophecy and a strange and wondrous world." He smiled, his eyes liquid and soft.

"And an upcoming conflict that could mean the end of both of us."

Harold's smile faded. "I suppose it's time," he said, standing and pulling her to her feet. He touched her cheek with his fingers before turning to find his clothes. "What did you do to my deerskin tunic?" he asked, looking down at the gaping hole.

"I didn't do it—the arrow did. But I do take credit for your shredded long underwear. Do you think you can ride? I'm sure that wound is still painful."

"I've had worse," he said, reaching for his sword. "Or, at least, Kenneth has."

She watched him strap on his sword, his expression changing into Kenneth.

The black horse and Argyll came as soon as Harold whistled, appearing from the other side of the cottage. Their feet were muddy up to their fetlocks. They'd obviously found some water. Harold laid his hand on Argyll's neck, affection in his eyes. "This is a great horse," he said, turning toward Maeve. "What do you call yours?" he asked, pointing to the black.

"I don't know his name, so I just call him horse."

"He's Pooka."

"What does that mean?"

Harold grinned. "Pooka is a Celtic creature, a shape changer who took the form of a black horse. He could be evil or he could help people. Yours is the helping kind."

Maeve laid her hand on the black's neck. "Pooka." He turned and looked at her when she said the name. "He seems to understand."

"I'm telling you, he's Pooka. I read all about him when I was studying Celtic mythology."

"There's a lot about you I don't know," Maeve said, lifting the saddle onto Pooka's back. "And even more with this new side of you."

"That's the way it should be. As long as we remain mysterious to each other, we'll never be bored."

"Am I mysterious?"

"Are you kidding? You aren't the woman I knew back in Milltown, that's for sure. I have to get to know you all over again."

Maeve laughed. "You're right about that. And now that we're on the subject, should I address you as King Kenneth?"

Harold roared with laughter, his eyes closing for a moment. "Do what feels right, milady," he said, sweeping his hand across his upper body in a gesture of obeisance.

Maeve put her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself into the saddle. "Looks like you're going to have to ride bareback."

"I've done it before—not the most comfortable thing in the world, but after nearly dying, I think I can handle it."



It was cold once they left the warm cottage, dark clouds massing as they rode east. Even though they were still in Caer Sidi, there was a palpable desolation that clung to everything. They kept the pace to a slow jog since the horses had not eaten properly for several days. Maeve didn't want to overtax them, especially since there might be a time when it would become necessary. She didn't relish what lay ahead. "You do understand that we cannot engage in the fighting," she said, glancing over at Harold riding next to her.

"It isn't easy for me to follow your orders, but I'm willing to try."

"Harold, I'm the one destined to save Otherworld. You simply ride by my side."

Harold frowned. "Simply? King Kenneth doesn't *simply* ride by anyone's side, Maeve. If I feel you're in danger, I will kill to save you. Let's leave this conversation for another time."

Maeve stared at him, noticing the expression of determination that had arrived on his face. "What other time? We're about to enter the war zone and I want to know that we're a united force."

Harold's eyes narrowed. "I already told you how I feel. I'll follow your lead, but I will not hesitate to kill if it comes to that."

Maeve noticed the Scottish brogue that accompanied this statement. "As long as we're clear on the main gist of things."

"I'm glad I have my sword," he muttered, pushing Argyll into a faster trot.



Once they reached the ridge that signaled the border of the *Caer Sidi*, a line of druid guards came into view. Maeve scanned carefully for MacCuill, but didn't see him among them. She wondered what had happened in her absence. The second full moon was almost upon them, and they had to have their plan in place before that. If it all worked the way she hoped, it would mark the end of the fighting and the beginning of balance here in Otherworld.

"Look." Harold pointed to the druid guards who seemed agitated, rushing around to form a tight line.

When a bolt of lightning struck the ground, followed by a boom of thunder, the two horses shied and jumped sideways. Maeve grabbed the pommel to keep herself from falling off. When she glanced over at Harold, his body was ramrod straight, his focus on the *Oillteil* who had appeared in the distance.

"We are not going to tangle with them!" she shouted.

Harold turned, his expression implacable. "We need to be on the other side of this valley before those *Oillteil* arrive."



"We also need to avoid being attacked." She pointed toward the masses of troops in the distance. "Those *Oillteil* are only half our problem."

"What do you suggest?" Harold asked, meeting her gaze. "We can't outrun them. If the druids can hold the line, we can sneak behind them and make it across."

"I definitely don't want to be down there," she said, pointing toward the valley where troops, like ants, were engaged in battle. "Especially after what happened to you."

"You cannot protect me. And I've already nearly died—what else could happen?"

Maeve laughed nervously. "You could be dead, Harold, and I don't want to lose you."

"How do you think I feel now that I know we're having a baby?"

Maeve stared into his eyes, unable to respond.

Harold grabbed Pooka's reins. "Maeve, we need to focus on what we're doing here, not on what might or might not happen. I have Kenneth inside me, and you're the Willow. This is our destiny. Now is not the time to worry."

"I know all of this, but—"

"You haven't yet shared what you intend to do—don't you think it's time? Or don't you believe what the prophecy says?"

Maeve looked over at him. His voice had changed, and his features had rearranged themselves again. "You don't look like yourself."

"I'm here, and Kenneth is here too. Dinna worry, lass, we both love ye." He laughed, a deep, rich chortle that did not sound at all like his usual laugh. "Well, lass? Are ye going to tell me your idea, or do I need to beat it out of ye?"

"Stop it, Harold, you're scaring me now."

"Just trying to impress upon you who I am in this scenario."

She met his gaze. "I do not want to have this conversation again. I know who you are, and I know what you want, but I have a plan that doesn't involve the use of your sword, or any swords, for that matter. Are you willing to listen?"

"Yes, milady. I'm here to do your bidding."

Maeve shook her head in irritation. "I'm serious, Harold. I've been thinking about this for a while. My idea is to win without fighting."

"And what does that mean, exactly?"

But she didn't get a chance to answer as wind roared around them, a lightning strike hitting the ground not ten yards away. It was all they could do to control the horses and move forward.



When they reached the border, the fight between the druid guards and the Oillteil was in full swing.

Harold slid off Argyll. "We need to be careful, there may be Oillteil who've managed to get through the line." Harold headed away from her, finding a trail up a slight rise where they could watch the proceedings. "The druids have managed to hold them back, at least for the time being," he called a moment later.

Maeve stared into the distance, her ears picking up the shouts and clanking of swords. Blue flames burst from the druids' fingers, keeping the underground dwellers from getting the upper hand.

"The druids control the elements," Harold muttered when Maeve mentioned what she'd seen.

"Come on, lass, we need to get across the valley before dark." Harold hurried toward Argyll and did a vaulting leap, landing squarely on his back. "Don't look at me like that," he said, noticing her astonished expression. "It just comes with Kenneth."

Maeve mounted her horse and followed Harold down the hill. She felt she was losing control of the situation, giving over to the Harold/Kenneth duo, and she didn't like it. She pushed Pooka into a trot, trying to keep up with Argyll, who was now in a canter, Harold riding him as though he'd lived his entire life on the back of a horse.

Harold shifted his weight back and Argyll came to a stop in front of a flat boggy area. "This does not look good."

Maeve rode up beside him, impressed by his riding prowess and wondering how he could control the enormous horse without a saddle and bridle. Her gaze followed his into the dark muddy water. "I wouldn't want my horse to break a leg in there."

"Breaking a leg is the least of our worries. Look." Harold pointed to a section of murky bubbles.

In the center of one, Maeve saw two yellow eyes. "Okay—this isn't what I expected to find in this place that's supposed to be so safe."

A second later a giant scaled head and then an enormous serpentine body rose, shedding rivulets of mud from its enormous body. The eyes were narrowed and yellow, the jaws wide as it focused on Maeve and Harold.

"What is that thing?" Maeve shrieked. At the same time, Pooka shied, sending her flying. She managed to get to her feet quickly but when she backed up to find her horse he wasn't there.

The creature pushed upward until it towered over her, blocking out all light. It moved closer and closer until she could smell the decayed matter that clung to its scales. Its head swung from side to side as it examined her with one eye, pinning her like a bug. Maeve screamed and fell backward, trying to scramble away. But just as she thought it would kill her, the eye softened. A second later it was gone, back under the muck.

Harold helped her up, his arm around her waist. She was shaking all over and clung to him, trying to control her hammering heart.

"'Tis the beastie," Harold said with a Scottish accent, holding her close, "the serpent that resides here. They are a transformative force, symbols of rebirth, representing immortality and the creative life force, but they are verra dangerous to those who didna belong in *Caer Sidi*."

Maeve pulled back to look into his eyes. "How do you know this?"

Harold smiled. "'Tis Kenneth who knows. And the beastie did nae harm ye."

Maeve took in a deep breath, searching the bog for eyes, but they had disappeared. "I guess it recognized me."

Harold let out a laugh. "It did, indeed."

When they returned to the horses a hooded man was heading toward them.

“Ciamar a tha sibh?” he said in Gaelic.

“S fhada bho nach fhaca mi thu,” Harold replied.

The man stared at him for a moment and then reached up to clasp his hand. “Kenneth!”

Maeve watched this interchange with surprise. She knew what the Gaelic words meant, but she couldn’t speak it herself. The druid had said hello and Harold had just said, “It’s been a long time.” How much time—thousands of years? How old was he?

The men turned toward her and Harold said, “Maeve, this is Tadg, he’s a Danann druid from long ago. I knew him then, as you probably surmised.”

Maeve turned to take a closer look at the bearded man. Yes, he did look fairly ancient with his weathered skin and heavy beard, but held himself proudly, his back straight. She took his hand when he proffered it, surprised by his strong grip.

“I’ll escort you past the sinkholes,” he said in English. “The serpents are very active during this time.”

“We’ve already met them,” Maeve said, mounting her horse. Harold led Argyll and walked next to Tadg, the two of them keeping up a running dialogue in Gaelic. She heard the names Muirenn, Bodhmall, and then MacCuill.

“Does he know MacCuill?” she asked, kicking her horse forward.

“They’re related—Demna is his daughter’s son.”

“Demna?”

“Another name for MacCuill.”

“That means Tadg is way older than MacCuill.”

Harold nodded, turning back to continue his conversation with Tadg.



It was deep night by the time they reached the other side of the marsh. Instead of stopping, they traveled on, figuring they would sleep only if they were too tired to continue. Both of them

were anxious to get back to the camp, especially since the full moon was fast approaching.

As they moved toward the forest on the eastern side of the valley, Maeve told Harold the rest of the scheme that had come to her while he was talking with the druid.

"I saw a vision in the spring before we met up. It indicated that I use my connection to the moon."

"What connection?"

"Have you read the full prophecy? It talks about the blood-red moon, the full moon that will rise twice. There's an eclipse coming, a powerful one. I can use it to bring Brandubh's soldiers to our side."

Harold looked puzzled. "Not sure what an eclipse will do for you."

"The moon has been invisible for years, Harold. Tomorrow night, the clouds will part and it will show itself just before the eclipse begins. The Oillteil are a very superstitious bunch. If I can time it right, this event will make them think I'm in control of the elements. I'm hoping they'll run away."

Harold shook his head, a frown appearing on his face. "This is your idea? How do you know the clouds will part? You can't count on that! You've got a sorcerer to contend with, not to mention thousands of his men. You think he'll let them defect?"

Maeve turned in the saddle to face him. "This came to me by way of a vision, Harold. I know what I'm doing."

"What I need right now is some scotch," Harold said, reaching into his pack. He pulled out an ancient flask and opened the top, taking a hefty swig. He held it out. "Do you want some?"

"I don't think drinking is the answer, Harold. Besides, it's bad for the baby."

"God's teeth. Sorry about that," he said, reaching around to stuff the flask back into his pack. "Tell me about the vision in the spring," he finally asked.

"You and I were standing in front of a large group of men—the Sidhe. Their arms were linked and they stood like a solid wall."

"Were they wearing armor?"

"I don't think so."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know exactly, but this how I'm supposed to manage it. I'm sorry you don't trust me."

"I trust you, but this sounds foolhardy. I've had firsthand knowledge of who Brandubh is. Did I tell you I remembered him from my previous life? He wasn't evil back then, nor was he a priest."

"Are you serious? What was he doing?"

"He was fighting the invaders along with my troops and me. He was connected with the goddess of war in those days, Morrighan. They were lovers, just as I was with Rhiannon."

"What? You never told me that!"

Harold stared into the distance. "I wasn't planning to mention it. It's all over and done with now."

Maeve had to think about that for a few minutes. It was one thing to know he'd lived centuries before, but to find out he was involved with a goddess who was still here...

"Maeve. You are my woman now. We're going to have a baby. Do you think I'd jeopardize that? Kenneth is only a small part of me. I'm Harold Fitzhugh."

Maeve didn't say anything, her thoughts going from images of Harold and a goddess in the throes of passion to Brandubh fighting next to Kenneth. That meant the priest was nearly as old as MacCuill. He was immortal. Why had no one shared this? She wondered what had turned him into the evil bastard he was now. This revelation made her intention even more important. She reached to touch Harold's arm. "We have to win this without violence, Harold. Will you go along with my idea?"

Harold looked down for a moment before his eyes met hers. "If this is how you want to handle it, I can help with troop placement and timing. I'm good at that, at least Kenneth is. And when I think about it, I have to admit your plan seems straight from *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. It's all about creating an illusion. For instance, causing disorder in the enemy troops when the moon

does its thing—‘If they are angry, perturb them, if they’re united, cause them to be separated, go forth where they will not expect it,’” Harold quoted. “The book speaks of starving them out by procuring their provisions, something you’ve done by raiding the souteraines. In *The Art of War*, killing is the last resort. Have you read it?”

“No. But I take it you have.”

“It was required reading when I was getting my MBA. Amazing, since it was written in the fifth century B.C. If you let me, I can talk to the Sidhe, maybe quote some of it. ‘*Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence*,’ he said, staring at her. “You have an intuitive understanding of this, Maeve.”

Maeve smiled and nodded slowly. “Coming from Kenneth, this quote could carry some weight.”

His eyes glittered. “Kenneth knows a lot about battle formation, sabotage, and all sorts of devious shit. We need to come up with a clearer idea of what happens when.”

“We have an entire day to work out details.”

“One day.” Harold laughed mirthlessly but then he brightened. “Listen to this. ‘*In general, whoever occupies the battleground first and awaits the enemy will be at ease; whoever occupies the battleground afterward and must race to the conflict will be fatigued.*’”

“So you think we should get there first, and be set up the way I saw us in the vision.”

“That’s exactly right.”

They pushed their horses into a trot and rode fast through the dark night, following one winding trail after another. When the trail became too steep and they were forced to walk again, Maeve turned to Harold. “Are you truly with me on this?”

His voice sounded disembodied in the fog that swirled around them. “I am, but if things go awry, I have to be armed. If you got killed because of me, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Fine. Keep your damned sword, but if you use it for anything other than saving my life or your own, I will kill you.”

Harold doubled over laughing. "Oh, that sounds really non-violent, Maeve. Hope it doesn't come to that." He continued laughing until they reached the eastern perimeter of *Caer Sidi*.



It was dawn when they reached the border and the druid guards pointed them in the direction of the *Tuatha De Danann* camp. Once they left the guards behind, Maeve glanced at Harold, glad to see the familiar expression that she knew so well. He turned and gave her a crooked smile. A second later, a jagged streak of lightning hit the ground and both horses shied.

"Come on!" Harold called, urging Argyll into a canter. "That's got to be the camp!" he yelled over his shoulder, pointing toward a dark line of smoke snaking into the sky. Wind whipped against their faces, making their eyes tear as they galloped on. As the storm moved toward the west, an earthquake struck, opening up a wide fissure next to them. Maeve let out a terrified scream as Pooka slid sideways toward the gaping hole.

Harold grabbed the reins, pulling the horse back. "Jesus! Be careful! Just hang on to his mane!"

Maeve righted herself and pushed her freezing hands into the thick, coarse hair, holding tight. She bent low on his neck, shielding her eyes from the wind. "Harold, look!"

They'd ridden to the top of a high mound that overlooked the valley. As the wind shifted, the clash of swords and the sounds of screaming came to their ears. People ran in all directions, slashing and killing one another in a frenzy of war. Too many to count lay unmoving on the ground, while around them arrows whizzed and swords found purchase in soft flesh. Maeve buried her face in her arms and began to cry. "I can't stand it!" she shrieked. "I hope my people are safe."

Harold rode up next to her and grabbed her by the shoulder. "This is why you're here, isn't it? I don't like this any more than you do, but we've got to keep our wits about us. We need to

get to the Tuatha De Danann camp. The sooner we do that, the faster your plan can be implemented.”

Maeve gazed into his determined eyes. His strength of mind revived her and she turned away from the terrible scene. They had to continue. They rode on, passing by villagers with carts pulled by exhausted horses, Crion with looms on their backs, all heading for the *Caer Sidi*. Nerves shot through her stomach—people were dying down there and she was doing nothing about it. Her tears started again, blowing off her cheeks as the wind hit her face.

Closer to the forest, hanging back nervously from the villagers and Crion, Maeve spied a group of injured Oillteil. When she stopped, they told her they were defectors and asked if they could stay with her. They were terrified they would not be allowed into *Caer Sidi*. She glanced at Harold, but he only shook his head in resignation and rode on.

Maeve dismounted and pulled out the herbs she'd taken from MacCuill's cottage. She treated their wounds as best she could and then remounted her horse and headed east, the Oillteil following behind. It wasn't far now.

It was an hour or so later that Eron and Finiche suddenly appeared at the top of a small rise. Behind them came Duncan and a long line of villagers, Crion, Wildmen, and Oillteil. Maeve jumped off her horse and hurried toward them. A minute later, she was in Eron's arms. After hugging her for a long moment, he turned to Harold, who had slid off Argyll's back to greet him.

“I am glad to see you alive, my friend!” Eron grasped Harold's arm, pulling him close.

Rea ran up to Maeve and grabbed her by the hand. She examined Maeve from head to toe and then smiled. “Look how many more have joined us,” she cried, pointing to the disparate groups still continuing to appear from under the trees. “It happened right after you left. The Oillteil and Wildmen who got separated in the mayhem decided it was safer to remain with us.”

Maeve watched in amazement. There were at least fifty more than when she left. They formed a large circle, all eyes trained

on her, as though waiting for some kind of declaration. Maeve acknowledged them with a nod and then began to speak. "If some cannot understand my words, ask this man," she said, gesturing to Oak. She put her hand up in greeting, acknowledging the enormous creature.

Oak watched her with a crooked expression that she thought might be a smile, and then raised one hand, pulling his meaty fingers into a fist. "Aa-aag!" he yelled. All the other Oillteil repeated the guttural phrase, a roar going through the crowd.

Maeve waited until they had quieted and then held up her hand "We have a plan for how we will win without fighting. Is everyone in?" another roar went up, this time with everyone participating.

"I will be speaking with the red-hairs as soon as I can. I hope they will agree to be part of it." Maeve looked around, noticing that Dirg was not part of the crowd. Too bad, she could have used the Sidhe warrior as liaison. He had probably headed home and would be her ally once she approached them. "Now let's make camp. We need to eat and rest in preparation for the full moon."

Maeve stepped out of the circle, Harold on her heels. "That was very good," he whispered.

Maeve and Harold led the way into the forest where they searched out a level area big enough to accommodate them all. An old fire pit remained from some previous occupant, and a few pieces of wood had been left behind. Before she had a chance to ask, Oillteil and Wildmen were heading into the forest to search for game and wood.

Eron kneeled to make the fire, talking in low tones with Harold while Maeve made the rounds, checking in with everyone. Rea helped her, chatting about who had been sick and who had injuries and what had been done about it. Several Crion had been killed after Maeve left camp, as well as ten villagers. Maeve was saddened by this news. When she questioned Rea about how it happened, the Crion woman turned away, her eyes filling with tears.

The other Crion women milled about, crooning their happiness at seeing Maeve again and showing her the baskets of tubers and greens they had collected. They all pointed to her stomach, pantomiming eating. "They think you are too thin," Rea translated. "And I do too. If you want a strong and healthy little one you must eat more."

"I didn't have much food, Rea."

"You do now," Rea retorted in a tone that could only be described as annoyed.

Maeve smiled to herself, touched by the small woman's mothering.



When Maeve came back to the fire, Eron, Duncan, and Harold were settled around the flames. Wildmen, Oillteil, and villagers stood behind, taking part in the conversation. According to Eron, after Maeve's departure, Brandubh's scouts had found them, and without the careful maneuvering of Duncan and the Wildmen, they would all have been captured. "And your efforts as well, Eron," Duncan added, his bright hazel eyes filled with admiration.

Eron smiled at Duncan and then his expression turned serious. "We have lost ten men, most of whom were from Bannee." He named them, mentioning how heroic each one had been. "And the Crion deaths are particularly upsetting. They hold this place in their hearts, their only purpose to keep the spirits alive." He shook his head, staring into the fire.

It was a few minutes before conversation resumed, each person lost in their own thoughts about recent events. It was Eron who broke the silence, gazing at everyone with an expression of pride. "We make a good team. The Wildmen have an innate ability to keep hidden, as well as being able to travel without making a sound. And these Oillteil are the strongest people I've ever had the pleasure to work with." There was a repetitive grunting from

the Oillteil that threw Maeve back to her first encounter with them. It seemed a miracle they were on her side.

"We now have food and water due to several heroic raids made on the souteraines. It seems that Brandubh intended to starve us out." Eron laughed. "Now we've turned the tables on him!"

Rea made tea in a large cauldron that had been confiscated from somewhere and then managed to produce several cups. She poured tea for the immediate group, assuring the others standing around that they would have the next batch. When she brought over a cup of sheep's milk, Maeve grinned. "Is this part of my new diet?"

Rea laughed. "It is. And I expect you to drink every bit of it," she added, holding up a finger with a mock frown.

After the tea was gone, one of the Wildmen known as Claif spoke up, asking about the strategy. His friends clustered close, waiting for him to translate as Maeve and Harold discussed their ideas.

About an hour later, Wildmen appeared with several ruffed grouse, handing them to the Crion women to pluck and prepare for cooking. Oillteil emerged shortly after that, their arms full of heavy branches and twigs. The fire would burn all day.

While meat cooked, conversations continued. Sticks were used to draw pictures in the dirt to illustrate upcoming actions, and there were long discussions about what had happened during Maeve and Harold's absence. It seemed that the fighting in the valley had been nearly continuous, with many casualties, described by all as a bloodbath. And many of the dead belonged to the eastern clan of the Tuatha de Danann. Maeve recoiled, trying to hold back tears and hoping that Dirg was not one of the lost. When she glanced at Harold sitting beside her, he took her hand in his.

"We've been up for hours, Maeve, we need a short nap before we talk with the Sidhe. Maybe between a nap and talking with the Sidhe we can go over the details?"

Maeve let him pull her to her feet, the two of them heading into the trees away from everyone. Lying next to Harold, his arm

protectively around her, Maeve described her time in Other-world before she met up with him, giving him a detailed account of everything that had happened. Tears were shining in his eyes by the time she finished.

He pulled her close. "You are the bravest person I know. If you want to do this without violence, I know you can make it happen. Just give me my instructions and I'll follow you to the ends of the earth."

"This is the ends of the earth," she whispered. "And we're going to save it." And then she kissed him. They curled into one another and fell asleep to the murmur of voices in the distance.



By late afternoon, Maeve was on her way, hoping that by this late hour the Sidhe warriors would have traveled back to their camp. Harold had protested vehemently when she told him she would go alone.

"What if they decide to kill you, Maeve? They don't know you."

"I have to take that chance. Please trust me."

The cries of battle had continued in her ears during the day, even coming into her dreams during her short nap; she hoped there would be men left to help her after what she'd witnessed. She knew now that the clan had lost many of their men and been pushed back to this remote area.

Finiche had not left her side since their arrival and followed at her heels as she moved toward the line of smoke, making her way on foot down a steep and rocky hill to cross a narrow valley. On the other side was another hill to climb before she would reach the camp.

Her approach revealed the community fire, with a large iron pot hanging from a wooden tripod over the flames. They had placed their tents beneath a grove of oak trees that, despite their leafless limbs, seemed to be affording some reasonable amount

of protection. They were tall men, well built with wavy gold-red hair and smooth faces. Swords hung in tooled leather scabbards at their sides and they were dressed in battle gear: heavy leather armor over long-sleeved homespun shirts, the image of the auroch, black against green, painted on the leather.

Strong voices rang out as they recited poetry, verses that were designed to invigorate, full of courageous exploits of former members of their race. In the shadows away from the fire Maeve could discern hundreds of people. The words in Gaelic made no sense to her, but the strength came through. Maeve told Finiche to wait and then announced herself in a clear voice, walking into the circle of firelight.

"And who might ye be?" a man asked, deftly pinning her arms behind her back.

"I am the Willow."

There was silence as everyone turned to stare at her. "Find Dagda," another man stated. "He will ken what to do." Her captor let go and disappeared into the shadows.

"Come warm yourself, 'tis a cold and nasty evening." The first man motioned to a log set in front of the blazing fire. "I am known as Aedh," he added, leading the way. Steam was rising from the cook pot, sending out the mouth-watering aroma of stew.

A moment later a tall, broad-shouldered man appeared. He looked about forty years old, with curly shoulder length hair the color of honey. His eyes were the pale green of sea foam, his long straight nose set a little off center, deep lines running from nose to mouth. "I'm Dagda, son of Danu—how may I be of service?"

"I've watched your men fighting in the valley. You have lost many."

"Aye, 'tis true. Our numbers dwindle as we defend our territory. The Oillteil burn our trees, harm the animals and the plants, and kill our women and children. There will be nothing left of our forest if we do not defeat them."

Maeve straightened her back and looked directly into his eyes. He was the one in charge and she knew she must convince

him of the rightness of her plan. Before she could open her mouth, Brigid appeared in her mind and she found herself speaking in the goddess's voice, saying things she had not planned. "I am born of Brigid, and my strength comes from that eternal source. I daresay you know this woman?"

Dagda raised his eyebrows. "You are born of this woman? I have lain with Brigid and she has born my children. We are mated." He stared at her, his eyes registering surprise. "What does she bring me here on this cold night?" he asked, cocking his head to one side.

"She brings you her wisdom through me, and assures me that you will remain her lover forever."

Dagda looked away. "'Tis many lifetimes since we have been together. I would be deeply in your debt if ye could—if ye would." He gave her a bleak look, one hand on his heart.

Maeve stared into his pain-filled eyes. This had not been part of her plan, and how—? Before she could finish her thought, her mouth opened and words flowed out. "I will find a way to bring you together again, my lord," she said, and then clamped a hand over her mouth. She was making promises she couldn't keep. But then she registered that it was Brigid's voice and Brigid's thoughts she had just spoken. Of course there was a way, and Brigid would show her.

Dagda focused into the distance for several long moments, seeming to struggle with his emotions. When he turned to her again, his expression had closed, his face that of a warrior. "We are all tired. Just this day we have lost many. We mourn for them."

"I know how heavy your hearts must be. I have met one of your warriors. His name is Dirg—he spent some days with us after he was wounded. I hoped to see him here."

Dagda's gaze met hers. "Dirg was one of our best, but sadly he is lost, killed down there with the others." He pointed toward the valley, his eyes opaque. "We wish to avenge all these deaths—they should not be made in vain." A murmur of agreement went through the crowd.

Maeve thought of the bright-haired soldier who had talked of the Tuatha De Danann. She tried to think of some words to express her sadness, but nothing came. "We have also lost people to the troops in the valley. But the moment is upon us, and we must act—the time of the second full moon is tonight," Maeve continued. "My strength and power come from this wolf moon's intensity. It is imperative that we use this potent time to defeat our enemies. Will you stand with me and my men?" She watched him, thinking about her words and how they didn't express her true intent. *Wait until I have agreement*, she said to herself.

"Who fights with you?"

"We are five-hundred strong. With us is King Kenneth MacAlpin, as well as the many Crion, Oillteil, Wildmen, and villagers who have joined our cause."

His eyebrows lifted. "King Kenneth? He lived long ago."

"His name in this life is Harold, but he remembers his life as Kenneth and carries the wisdom of that time."

Dagda didn't speak for a moment as he seemed to ponder this news. "Please bring these men to our fire where they can share our stew. The Cauldron of Plenty is never empty. And when your bellies are full, you can tell us more of this plan of which you speak."

Maeve nodded, and then turned away, heading back toward her camp. With their minds intent on revenge, it would be difficult to convince these men to follow her system. At the edge of camp, freezing wind swirled around her bare head. She wrapped the scarf Rea had given her around her neck and over her hair, tying it securely, and then went to find Finiche, whistling softly for him in the dark. As she climbed the hill toward camp, Harold appeared out of the shadows. She jumped when she saw him, making him chuckle.

"Did you really think I'd let you go alone?"



By the time Maeve and her group returned, many stumps had been placed around the fire. Flames crackled and spit from the new logs that had been added in her absence. Dagda's men looked wary, giving the Wildmen and Oillteil a wide berth as they arrived. Maeve waited while her people helped themselves to the stew, amazed by the cauldron's capacity. How could this one pot contain that much?

"It's the magical cauldron of plenty, Harold whispered, when she asked him. "It is mentioned in Celtic myth. It will never be empty."

As the long line moved slowly past, Maeve scanned the faces of Dagda's troops. There were many women, long hair cascading down their backs, their features resolute. They talked amongst themselves, whispering and pointing toward the Oillteil and Wildmen with expressions of doubt. Maeve had a moment of uncertainty, hoping she could pull this off. Her idea would have to be carefully explained, put in such a way that they would all accept it.

Once everyone had eaten their fill, Dagda and his men crowded close to hear what Maeve had to say. She put her bowl down, motioning for a few Wildmen hanging around the edges to come and eat, and then stood on a stump so that everyone could see her. "What I'm about to ask may be hard for you and your men," she said, addressing Dagda. "I know how courageous and what fine warriors you all are, but this does not involve fighting. It is about strength through the power of trust and the full moon, which will shine above us tonight."

"The moon has not been visible for many seasons," a voice called from the shadows.

"Yes, this is true, but it is there, only covered with thick storm clouds. I intend to lead all of us to the battlefield and draw out Brandubh's men. I believe that with our combined energy and clarity of purpose that the clouds will melt away and expose the bright moonlight on this special night."

There was a ripple of laughter and then one of Dagda's men said, "You are quite certain of this, my lady?" Behind him the group broke up, laughter overtaking all of them.

A second later Harold had moved next to her, Kenneth shining from his eyes. "This plan is a good one," he began, looking around. "We will be on the battlefield when Brandubh's men arrive. They will not know why we do not attack. And when the moon appears, they will all look up and feel that somehow we are responsible for it."

Maeve waited until he finished and began again. "Many of Brandubh's troops have never seen the moon. The sudden appearance of this enormous bright sphere in the sky will be frightening indeed. We will raise our voices in a cheer as the moon appears."

One of the women in the back stood up. "But how can you guarantee that the moon will show itself? It has been obscured by cloud since I can remember. The moon goddess has become just as weak as the others, and will not come to our aid."

Maeve waited until the woman sat down, allowing a moment to go by. When she spoke again, her voice rang out with authority. "I have seen this in a vision. *I* am the one named to bring this world back from the brink of darkness, not the moon goddess." She reached out, clasping Harold's hand. "King Kenneth will be by my side at the front of the line. Shall I recite the prophecy to prove my point? You must open your hearts and minds and trust that what I say will come to pass."

There was utter silence for several minutes and then Dagda spoke. "If we do what you ask, we will be slaughtered like animals." He stared at her, his eyes like green opals in the flickering light of the fire.

Maeve took a deep breath and summoned her strength. "We will only prevail if we are willing to stand for what we believe. Have you defeated this enemy with your swords? Brandubh has more than a thousand troops now. The magic that he and Adair and Pryderi wield far outweighs your swords or your bravery. You will die tonight if you go against them with weapons. What I propose is a new way—a way to fight without fighting. There will be no use of swords unless to save yourself. We will use the power of love and acceptance to bring these forces to their knees. This is written and will come to pass."

No one spoke, including Dagda. When he finally looked her way, his face was an unreadable mask. "I need to think about this, talk it over with my troops. And King Finvarra must be consulted."

"Where is this King Finvarra?" Harold asked, facing the Sidhe warrior.

"He is with his wife in our camp to the east. Shall I summon him?"

Harold turned to look at Maeve, who nodded her agreement. "Yes," he answered.

While a messenger was dispatched, they all remained around the fire talking with Dagda and his army, explaining what they had seen the past months. Harold got into a lively discussion with one of the men about long ago battles, their laughter pleasant after the seriousness of the evening. Maeve moved through the group, stopping to talk with men and women alike. These people were big-boned and handsome, with straight noses, and eyes of green or blue. It seemed that the women were warriors too, their long hair pulled back, their bodies covered with the same leather armor the men wore. Maeve spoke with one called Allis, asking if she had children.

"Aye, I have bairns at home. I do nae worry about defeat or death. War has always been part of our lives."

When the king stepped abruptly into the light, there was a hush, and then they all bowed their heads. He wore a long blue velvet robe studded with jewels over his leather pants and jerkin, his bare head covered with thick strawberry-blonde curls. Heavy boots rose up to his knees. He had a thick beard and strong masculine features, his bright eyes peering around.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked gruffly. His piercing blue eyes lit on Maeve coming toward him. When their eyes met, she stopped and bowed, waiting a full minute before meeting his gaze again. "And who is this?" he asked, his eyes traveling from her face down to her feet.

"I am Maeve, born of Brigid, and known here as the Willow."

He frowned, turning to Dagda standing next to him. "Is this one of your brats, Dagda?"

Dagda shook his head. "No, sire, she is from this time, come to fulfill the prophecy."

"The ancient prophecy that speaks of the return of balance?" He turned to Maeve again, his eyes flickering with interest. "And are you to be wed soon?" he asked, with what seemed to be a flirtatious smile.

"We have not planned—I mean—" Maeve stammered, surprised by the odd question. She turned to find Harold in the crowd, but he was facing the other way. "No. I am not planning a wedding."

"I am sorely disappointed," the king said, turning away.

"And what are ye scheming about this time?" a female voice asked from the shadows. A woman stepped into the light, her wide almond-shaped eyes trained on Finvarra. Ringed fingers smoothed the hair back from her forehead. When she shook her head, the russet mane rippled down her back. Her black brocade dress, studded with what looked like diamonds, shimmered as each jewel caught the candle light. "I should have known what you might be up to," she said, frowning. "You cannot be trusted for more than a minute with another beautiful woman around, especially one about to be wed. Are you to be wed?" she asked, her eyes boring into Maeve's.

"I have no plans to marry," Maeve answered in the strongest voice she could muster.

"Well, then, what is all the fuss? Will no one introduce us?" she asked, looking around angrily.

Dagda walked over, bowing before he spoke. "Donagh, my queen, this is Maeve, known as the Willow, who has come to fulfill the prophecy."

"Ah! Now that is good news!" Donagh went to an empty stump and pulled out her long skirts, settling herself. "Continue," she said, with an expansive gesture of her hand.

"As I was saying," Maeve said, gazing around at all the men and women who now focused on her, "we will stand together as one. We will not use violence unless we are in danger of losing our lives. We will use every bit of our will to keep our anger and

thoughts of revenge at bay. We must concentrate to deflect the waves of darkness that will be hurled at us from Brandubh and the others. We will prevail."

A younger man appeared out of the shadows. "Pryderi stands with Brandubh, and he has all the power of a god. How can we stop him if he moves against us?"

Dagda turned to him. "This is my son, Aengus Mac Oc. What he says is true. How do you respond?"

"And what of Adair? She has all the powers of a sorceress. I have witnessed firsthand what she is capable of." The speaker, a woman dressed in leather, stepped forward. "She and her son control what little is left of our homeland and they will stop at nothing to bring all of us to our knees. I have lost two children to this evil and I do not relish losing more."

Dagda glanced toward King Finvarra and then turned toward Maeve. "What say you to my son and Eithne?"

"I say again that trust and love are the strongest weapons in the world. And the god of this forest, Cernunnos, has pledged to stand with us."

"You dare to speak of *our* deity, the mighty Cernunnos?" Finvarra demanded. He frowned and ran his fingers through his beard, his gaze going from Dagda to his men. When he laughed derisively, a nervous chuckle moved through the group.

Donagh stood, her voice strident as she addressed Maeve. "You have no right to send these men and women to their deaths. Cernunnos is our god. With his help, Finvarra and I will decide our future." She came to stand by the king, looping her arm through his.

"Let the woman speak," Finvarra said, turning to Donagh. "Let this 'child of the prophecy' verify that what she says is true." He turned to face Maeve. "What proof do you bring?"

Maeve reached down and untied the horn from her belt. "I am to call him," she answered, raising the auroch horn so that everyone could see.

"Demonstrate the truth of what you say, Willow. Call him now," Donagh challenged.

When Maeve glanced at Harold, his face held the warrior expression of Kenneth. His eyes met hers and he nodded. She took a deep breath and raised the horn to her lips, forcefully pushing air into the opening. The note seemed to magnify in tone and loudness as it ricocheted off the hills and reverberated across the valley, hanging in the air for many long moments.

When it finally died away, Cernunnos appeared as though by magic and stood before Maeve. "It is time!" he roared.

There was a ripple of sound through the assembled crowd and some stood, bowing low to the deity. Even Finvarra bowed, his thick curls falling across his face. When he raised his head, he glanced around at the assembled crowd and then nodded to Dagda.

"We will stand with you tonight," Dagda announced, his admiring eyes trained on Maeve.

"We'll be back before moonrise," Maeve replied. "And then we will discuss the particulars." When she looked for Cernunnos, he had melted into the shadows.



On the way back to their camp, Maeve asked if anyone knew what was going on with King Finvarra and his wife. The discussion of weddings had mystified her.

Several men laughed, including Harold/Kenneth, before Eron answered her, his eyes twinkling. "You should be careful, Maeve. It seems that Finvarra has his eye on beautiful red-haired women who are soon to be wed. Why, is a mystery, but it angers Donagh greatly. The King has taken many soon-to-be brides to his bed."

Maeve turned to Harold. "Good thing we don't have marriage plans."

He gazed her way, his eyes unreadable in the dark. "Yeah, good thing."



Chapter Thirty

THE HOUR WAS growing late and the wind had come up, blowing stronger as each minute went by. Maeve and her entire group had arrived back at the Sidhe camp, the extra numbers spilling into the forest. Another fire had been made and Oillteil, Wildmen, and Crion huddled around it, trying to keep warm. Maeve, Harold, Eron, Duncan, Oak, plus Dagda and King Finvarra and several other Sidhe soldiers sat together under the trees discussing what was to come. When the first lightning struck, thunder less than a second later, Maeve realized that surviving this night would not be easy. Everything she'd done so far had come down to this point in time, and the storm developing above them was a sharp reminder of Brandubh's sorcery and what he was capable of.

When the rumble died away, MacCuill appeared, as if escorted by the electricity. Maeve was glad to see him but chose not to embrace him in front of the Sidhe. Her image as the strong warrior woman must remain intact.

As if responding to her unspoken thoughts, MacCuill took her hands, bending on one knee. After he had bowed his head, he rose to greet the others, bowing low to Cernunnos and then to King Finvarra. After that the druid turned to Dagda, acknowledging him by name with a special elbow-clutching handshake.

"It is good to see you, my old friend," Dagda declared, his serious expression disappearing for an instant.

MacCuill came to sit by Maeve. "What is the scheme you have concocted here?"



"It is all about the timing of the eclipse and standing together in solidarity. I hope to bring chaos to Brandubh's troops and scare them into defecting. With all the raiding of their supplies, it seems they must be on the edge of starvation by now."

MacCuill chuckled. "I've done my best, along with Eron and the others. What is my role here?"

Maeve met his gaze. "I want you to use your magic, not to cause injury, but to generate fear."

MacCuill nodded, a smile playing around his mouth. In the silence that followed, Maeve knew this was exactly how it was meant to go.



Near moonrise, Harold mounted Argyll and led the way toward the valley. Maeve was right beside him on Pooka, and Finiche followed at Pooka's heels. Cernunnos had gone ahead and was no longer in sight. The wind had turned into a gale, the force of it whipping around them making it hard for the animals to keep their balance.

MacCuill, Eron, and the Crion were right behind Maeve and Harold, and the Sidhe fanned out around and behind, at least

a hundred or more. The Oillteil and Wildmen were dispersed among them, part of their army now, but easily spotted because of their physical differences.

The trailing group made their way along a small side valley, heading to where it opened onto the wider plain. Lightning flashed every few minutes now, followed by the echoing boom of thunder rolling across a malevolent sky. The wind hit them sideways, and it was vicious, full of stinging ice crystals that clung to their hair and clothes; it pushed back every time they took a step forward. Something supernatural was certainly at work. Behind her, MacCuill had taken out his flute and seemed to be waiting for some sign.

Scanning ahead, Maeve was relieved that Brandubh's men were not yet on the battlefield. This was important to her plan. She stopped and addressed the crowd, her strong voice projecting. "Remember that our only purpose is to save Otherworld—and to manage this without doing harm. Do not let your fear or anger get in the way. But if your life is threatened, you must defend it. I want no casualties among you. If, during the course of our actions here, unfamiliar Oillteil, Wildmen, or villagers attempt to join your ranks, do not turn them away. I expect many defectors once the moon rises."

When Maeve finished her speech a shout went up—"Buaidh!" pronounced *bway*, the Gaelic word for victory. After the noise had died down, Maeve held up her hand. It was time to employ stealth.

Once they reached the valley floor, Dagda placed himself at the front of his men, a guard on either side. The rest of the men and women of the Sidhe got into place behind him with their arms linked. Eithne was there, a determined expression on her lovely features. Catching Maeve's eye, she smiled, her fist going up in a salute.

Maeve was impressed with how formidable they appeared—standing as one, their waxed leather armor glistening. At the back, she caught sight of King Finvarra and Queen Donagh, guards all around them. They were on horseback in case of

the need for a quick getaway. When the Crion went to join the Sidhe, disappearing among the larger race, Rea's small face drew Maeve's attention. The woman's smile was a tiny light in an otherwise dismal world. Maeve had a moment of misgiving, wishing she had not put the small ones into this dangerous situation, but she knew if she had tried to stop them, they would have insisted on coming along. At least they were warmly dressed. Rea and the other women had spent long hours working on skinning the deer found rotting in the valley, as well as every rabbit and squirrel they had trapped and eaten. Tanning the hides with their own urine, rinsing and drying them afterward, the Crion women had managed to fashion the pelts into vests, sewing them together with needles of bone and flax thread.

Cernunnos appeared out of the shadows, taking his place in front of Dagda, his impressive stature reassuring. Behind Cernunnos, MacCuill's gray robes billowed. Eron hurried forward to stand next to the druid, bending his head to whisper something.

A tremor rippled across the valley, followed by a jagged flash of lightning. The boom of thunder followed, echoing on and on. The earth heaved, throwing Pooka sideways and causing Finiche to let out an eerie howl that was answered by several other wolves. Maeve righted herself and glanced at Harold next to her. He and Argyll were perfectly suited, both calm and focused. One hand held the reins and the other was on the scabbard, ready to pull out the heavy sword if necessary. He was a warrior through and through, exuding strength and courage, but she also knew he would follow her orders to the letter.

To her left, Cernunnos had the horn in his big hand, waiting for her signal. She glanced back once more at the Sidhe and others of her group dispersed through their ranks, noticing the glow radiating from all of them. Her mind went back to the village of Rowan and Janus and Sara—the rose auras that seemed to expand with the emotion of love. She had a moment of pride before she raised her hand to let Cernunnos know it was time. He nodded once and then placed the horn against his mouth. The enormous sound filled the valley and reverberated, echoing

back and forth. Heavy gusts of wind materialized in response, sweeping down the valley to slam into the assembled group. She swayed for a moment and then felt Harold's hand grab hers. Her gaze went to the sky where dark and ominous clouds shoved and pushed against each other, embodying the fury of Brandubh and his men. Wind whirled in patterns, moving through the crowd behind her. She heard sharp cries and swearing but dared not look back.

A rhythmic thumping began, growing steadily louder. When Brandubh's men appeared out of the darkness, they were daunting, organized into groups of Oillteil, Wildmen, and villagers, marching in rows of eight. They continued to come into view, row after row—surely more than two thousand strong. In their hands, bright swords and crossbows gleamed out of the darkness, armor clanking rhythmically as they advanced. Maeve heard the whining of the beasts and then saw them spiraling through the lines, weaving in between the men. Their eyes glowed red, like burning coals.

When Brandubh was only a hundred yards away, he put up his hand, bringing his men to a halt. He faced Maeve and the others, his long hair blowing wildly, his features twisted into a mask of rage. "Prepare yourselves for the last battle!" he shouted, raising his fist. His ranks were silent, waiting for his command. He moved toward her, his steps measured as he assessed the situation.

A low rumbling growl came from Finiche as Brandubh drew closer.

"Don't worry, Maeve. He can't do anything to you," came Gertrude's voice behind Maeve. "Morrighan has stripped his powers because of his arrogance." The psychic's gaunt face was oddly serene as she shortened the distance between herself and Brandubh with long strides.

"No, Gertrude!" Maeve cried, moving forward to intervene. But the woman was already placed herself between Maeve and Brandubh, all her attention on the priest. There was a palpable intensity between them.

A few of Brandubh's men rushed up to help, but he waved them off, keeping his gaze focused on Gertrude. "You really believe you can defeat me?"

Gertrude smiled. "I do indeed, and you know exactly why."

Brandubh seemed taken aback for a moment. As he glanced over his shoulder, a whisper of uncertainty went through the men standing behind him.

Maeve glanced at Harold, but he seemed unaffected, his hands folded over the pommel of the saddle, as though watching a play. Another streak of lightning pierced the ground, turning the scene into garish green before dissipating. The resounding crack of thunder a second later was deafening.

Brandubh moved forward, his cat-like motions putting him in a position to knife Gertrude. It was like a choreographed dance as Gertrude moved in to block him, her back arched. He turned like a ballet dancer, going up on his toes to grab her and hold her against his body before twisting her away from him with a shove. When she came at him again, he seized her around the waist with one arm, his other hand circling her neck. When he squeezed her throat, she gave a garbled, strangled cry.

Maeve was just about to rush into the fray when Brandubh suddenly let go and fell to his knees, coughing uncontrollably. Gertrude took the opportunity to attack, pushing him backward where they grappled on the ground. Gertrude's high-pitched shrieks rent the air. "You evil bastard! I wish I had never met you!"

Brandubh stood, pushing into her with all his force. Gertrude was now on her hands and knees, Brandubh standing over her. "Do it!" she cried. "Kill me! I'd like to see you die with me, you son-of-a-bitch!" Brandubh backed away, and Gertrude staggered to her feet, bringing a shout from within his troops. "You are beaten by a mere woman?" someone called out. In the next second, chaos ensued, fights breaking out within the ranks as tempers flared.

Gertrude ran toward Maeve and the others, raising a cheer from within the Sidhe. Brandubh was now trying to regain

control of his men, his voice rising in anger. "You will not question my actions. I am in charge here. Have you not filled your coffers from my gold? Is it not my actions that keep you safe? Bow down to me now!" he shrieked. Most of his troops bowed their heads, a few going down on one knee.

Out of the shadows, Pryderi appeared, heading toward the priest. They conferred for a moment and then Pryderi raised his hand, creating a swirling blue-black cloud above his head. It grew and grew, going faster and faster until he straightened his arm, pointing his fingers toward Maeve. The angry cloud unfurled, heading her way at a terrifying speed. At the same moment a tremor shook the earth, knocking Maeve off her horse, and luckily putting her out of its trajectory. Behind her, chaos ensued as the winds whipped through her people, knocking them down. Frustrated cries from the Sidhe joined the sound of growling beasts and screams of rage coming from Brandubh's troops.

Buoyed by Pryderi's success, a large group of Brandubh's men left formation and headed toward her and the Sidhe. By this time, Maeve had found her balance, standing next to Pooka with her hand on the wolf's back. Finiche remained rooted to the spot and when she glanced to her right, she saw that Argyll and Harold were also planted. Maeve looked back to see the Sidhe standing like an impenetrable wall, their expressions resolute. What would happen when these Oillteil and Wildmen reached them? The sharp swords pointed toward them would surely penetrate their leather armor. All Maeve's visionary ideas came crashing down in her mind. How could she protect them?

As Brandubh's troops closed the distance between them, the glow faded, her people moving out of formation as panic set in. She saw hands going to swords, bows, and arrows at the ready. Her plan had failed completely. A moment later, a yell from Pryderi brought Brandubh's men to a screeching halt. The demi-god had his hand up, keeping them back as if to say, *This is my fight*. His handsome features distorted into an ugly grimace as his fingers circled above his head creating a spinning cloud full of dark

magic. It came at Maeve before she had a chance to move aside, digging into her flesh and pinning her to the ground. She tried to clear her mind, tried to summon her strength, but she couldn't move, her face pushed into the earth, making her gag when she tried to suck in air.

In the distance, a strange and eerie sound began. MacCuill was playing his flute. A second later, she was released from Pryderi's grip and rose to her knees. Pale mist spiraled toward Pryderi, knocking him violently off his feet. A cry of rage came from the demi-god and he moved toward MacCuill, both hands in the air. A battle began between them as they sent winds toward each other with increasing force. Maeve watched them, awe-struck by the power coming from both of them. MacCuill's expression was neutral, his gaze completely focused on Pryderi.

"Watch out, Maeve!" MacCuill suddenly shouted. Pryderi had turned from MacCuill, sending an ice-filled blast that hit her squarely in the chest. She went down, all the wind knocked out of her. Her chest ached from the cold, tiny knife-like crystals stuck in the tunic the Crion had made for her. Without the tunic, she'd be dead.

A bellow went up from Brandubh's men as they cheered Pryderi on. Maeve watched the wolf run toward Pryderi, his teeth bared, but when another tremor hit, the wolf lost his balance, falling onto his side. Maeve watched in horror as one of the Oillteil stuck a sword into him, the enormous creatures swarming over the wolf in their rush to get to Maeve. Maeve struggled to her feet, falling again as tremor after tremor rolled across the valley. Icy wind blinded her and when she checked for Finiche, he was completely lost from sight. Scanning behind her frantically, Maeve realized that MacCuill had disappeared, along with Harold and Argyll.

When the Oillteil were nearly upon her, she held up her hand. "No!" she screamed. They seemed shocked for a moment, their ugly features confused. Maeve turned toward the Sidhe, holding up her hand to signal them to stand strong. When the moon appeared, for an instant the Oillteil turned their gazes

upward, standing stock still as the brightness moved across the valley. The Sidhe cheered, as though they had produced the momentary sight. A second later, clouds had moved across, but that glimpse put the Oillteil into an uproar. Some dropped to the ground with their hands over their heads, others shouted garbled words, as though Brandubh might come to their rescue. In the meantime, the Sidhe stood strong, a Gaelic chant beginning within their ranks.

Just as she was thinking that her methods were working, Brandubh shouted. "Get up you lazy cowards! It's just the moon!"

The Wildmen and Oillteil behind Brandubh came alive, pulling their weapons out as they headed toward Maeve. Maeve noticed that Pryderi's attention had gone to something in the distance. On the northern hill above the battlefield, a gray horse had appeared, the dark-haired rider intent on her son. Behind Rhiannon, other goddesses showed themselves, Corra and Airmid and another, dressed all in black with a raven on her shoulder—Morrighan, the goddess of war.

A collective shout from the hill brought Brandubh's attacking troops to a standstill, everyone turning to watch the fight between Pryderi and his mother. From the hill, a battle cry came, a bolt of lightning hissing toward Pryderi. He deflected it, sending it back. After the strike, Maeve was blinded for a moment, unable to see what was going on. For a moment, Maeve thought Rhiannon had killed him, but when another bolt struck, mother and son were illuminated on the hill, circling each other like cats. A sharp crack hit the ground in front of Maeve, opening fissures and sending Brandubh's men cowering. But after the brightness disappeared, shadows deepened, the only evidence of the continuing battle on the hill, the shrieking curses and tremors that were becoming more and more extreme. The Oillteil backed away, trying to put distance between themselves and the gaping holes in the ground. Brandubh shouted threats, attempting to get his troops to obey him again.

The fight between Rhiannon and Pryderi grew more and more intense. Sparks showered over the valley, landing on

Oillteil and Wildmen alike and sending them screaming and running in circles as they tried to put out the fires. "Where is the one true god now?" someone shouted, bringing a rumble of assent. "Aye!" someone else screamed.

"Get back in line!" Brandubh roared. "These are but women on the hill; they are nothing!"

In response to that, there was a deafening shout from Morrighan. *"Is that what you think, mortal? Has nothing I have said or done had any effect on you?"* Morrighan's laugh echoed across the valley causing many of Brandubh's men to cover their ears.

"You will suffer greatly when the time comes for your last payment!" she cried out, sending a bolt of flame raining down on everyone.

Shrieks of pain and fear rang out as Brandubh's men caught fire. Brandubh was struck, his robe igniting. He rolled on the ground to extinguish the flames. His screams rent the air, bringing Adair running. The sorceress bent over her son, doing something with her hands, and a moment later Brandubh stood again, a smoldering dark cloud rising from his robes.

A flash caught Maeve's eye and she turned her gaze toward the Sidhe. Blinding light streamed from them, radiating into the darkness and meeting the luminescent rays coming from the goddesses. The light turned iridescent, tendrils pulsing and connecting, growing stronger each moment. Brandubh screamed at his men, ordering them to attack. Wind howled from up on the hill, obliterating the priest's words. His men refused to move.

This light shining from the goddesses was an unexpected gift, providing a clear view of Brandubh and his men. Giving up on his troops Brandubh ran toward Maeve, a knife held out in front of him. She rushed backward, but he quickly closed the gap. Before he could reach her, black fog spiraled into the valley, coming from everywhere at once. It circled around her, obliterating her view.

Maeve could hear screaming but couldn't figure out what was happening. Another earthquake struck and she slipped, falling heavily. The fog parted revealing Brandubh bearing down on

her. Her mind flew in circles wondering what was happening as shrieks and screams continued unabated. Her people were being massacred. Brandubh was nearly upon her when John rushed out of the fog, leaping ahead of the priest.

"I'll do her for you!" John shouted.

John looked deranged, his lips curled back in an eager smile. He held a sword, the tip of the blade set to sink straight into her heart. But just before he reached her, the light beings were there, buzzing around John. He swatted at them convulsively. When she hurried away, he was still at it, his hands above his head as he shouted for them to leave him alone. When he finally fell, it was to land on his sword, the blade slicing neatly through his body.

Maeve turned her head away, afraid she might be sick. Brandubh knelt by him but there was nothing he could do. "You killed him!" he shouted, staring at her with hatred. She left the two of them, running toward where she'd last seen Harold. Shouting, screams of fear and rage, snarling and swearing came out of the swirling mist. A second later, she was attacked and thrown backward by one of the beasts. The raging animal bit her arm, drawing blood, but she managed to curl into a ball to prevent it from grabbing her throat. She concentrated every bit of her will on having the beast leave her alone, surprised when it slinked away.

As the fog dispersed, a yell went up from the Oillteil. Maeve rose to her knees, staring up at the sky. The moon appeared for an instant and then disappeared as the clouds moved across its face. On the hill, the goddesses stood like statues. Maeve rose to her feet, a feeling of power coming into her. She was linked with these goddesses—she was one of them. Suddenly, she was singing along with the chant started by the Sidhe. *Sir-ee-ee-ee ha-all*. As their combined voices grew stronger, she knew what the words meant. *Sirheadh Thall* was an ancient prayer that meant "seek beyond."

The chant drifted away and Maeve felt bathed in the stillness it had created. Looking up she lifted her arms, waving away the rest of the heavy clouds and bringing a low guttural moan

from Brandubh's Oillteil. The remaining wisps scattered like so many frightened birds, bringing the bright orb into full focus. An audible sigh went through Brandubh's men, some falling to their knees, others rushing to join the Sidhe.

"It's only the moon, you idiots!" Brandubh bellowed. The priest made a motion to one of the Wildmen, ordering him to kill one of the defectors, but the man ignored him, heading away from the troop formation. Adair stood next to her son, her stare fixated on Maeve.

"Get back in line!" Brandubh yelled. "We've all seen it now!" As his words rang out, there was scuffling as some of his men returned, their focus again on him. They pulled out their swords, ready for his next command. Adair whispered something in her son's ear, pointing toward Maeve. Brandubh glanced at Maeve over his shoulder and then looked up at the sky. He addressed his men, his voice deep and carrying. "Do not be fooled!" he shouted. "This is all a trick conjured by a heathen witch! You must kill her to be free of the curse she brings down on us!"

In the sky, things were changing, the bright moon growing dark. There were terrified shrieks, fingers pointing upward as the eclipse began. Everyone watched the sphere slowly turn the color of blood, six hundred men rushing to join the Sidhe. Others were on their knees, their arms held up in supplication, and some simply covered their heads, trying to keep out the strange and eerie sight. Wildmen and Oillteil ran in circles, their voices adding to the general pandemonium. When the beasts began to howl, utter panic ensued. Screams rent the air as men and beasts took off into the night.

"Kill her!" Brandubh ordered. Beside him, Adair performed some intricate hand movements, as if to compel the men to do the priest's bidding.

A rush of men left the ranks. Like automatons, they pulled their swords out, charging toward Maeve. When Wildmen loosed arrows that hissed toward her, she stumbled backward, somehow avoiding being hit. Her gaze went to the hill above the battlefield where Cernunnos now stood, flanked by the goddesses. Others

had now seen him, causing more mayhem as defectors rushed toward where her men stood. People were being trampled; others were standing still, their mouths open in a perpetual scream.

Maeve ran toward her troops, finding a spot on their northern flank. Oillteil and Wildmen struggled with her people. More arrows whizzed by. Into this mayhem a sound began, building and building until it filled the valley, thundering and reverberating through the forest and across the valley. Cernunnos stood with arms spread, his mouth wide open. Stronger than the auroch horn, his cry of rage echoed on and on.

Once it died away, silence spread across the battlefield, bringing everything to a stop. Many of Brandubh's men kneeled, their foreheads pressed to the ground, hands over their ears. Others stood as though turned to stone, gazing toward the hill.

In the next moment, there was a deafening roar as a fifty-foot wall of water surged down the valley heading for the sea. Maeve stood transfixed, unable to believe her eyes as the water came toward her, a curling lip of white at the wave's top. Glancing around at the Sidhe, her heart contracted. They stood as before, their glow still strong. Cowering in their midst were newly arrived Wildmen and Oillteil, their arms raised to the sky. She couldn't see the Crion at all. Brandubh's men were in panic, fighting with each other to escape. Some hurtled toward the sea, others were knocked down, trampled in the mad rush. Brandubh and Adair had both disappeared. Tears brimmed in Maeve's eyes, spilling over to track down her cheeks. "Save yourselves!" she screamed at her people, trying to be heard. Would anyone survive?

The water was nearly there, sticks, rocks, and debris tumbling inside the gray-green mass. She turned, tripping in her haste to get away, seeing the expressions of terror and disbelief on the faces all around her. And then the water was upon them, slamming into them and engulfing everything in its wake.

Maeve was lifted roughly off her feet, the cold water snatching her breath, turning and twisting her body as it swept forward. She was struck with rocks and tree limbs, turned over and

over as she was carried violently downstream. She struggled to rise to the surface, seeing flailing bodies all around her. She wondered if this was it; that all this was for nothing. But just when she felt she couldn't hold her breath another second, she somehow found her way to the surface, drawing in air with a gasp.

Sucking in mouthfuls of air she struggled to stay afloat; her clothes were heavy and dragged her down, making her heart race. Kicking, she got her feet free from her boots and then pulled the leather tunic over her head, her panic subsiding as her body became more buoyant. The eclipse had now passed, the full moon luminous and huge, brilliant in the black star-filled dome of the sky.

Floating on her back to catch her breath, she glimpsed the quiet radiance of the moon reflected in the gently lapping wavelets. The wave had turned into a lake of molten silver. She swam in a circle, feeling the icy numbness creeping into her limbs as she tried to determine where Harold and her friends were. There were heads bobbing in the water but she couldn't see their faces. Cernunnos and the goddesses no longer stood on the hill. And where was Brandubh?

Just as that question went through her mind, a loud splash took her attention. Brandubh swam toward, his eyes black with anger. "You will die tonight!"

And then he was upon her, his fury and frustration overpowering her when she tried to escape his grip. He held her arms and pushed her under the water until she thought she'd drown, but somehow she wriggled and squirmed and got herself free, choking and sputtering as she struggled to get her breath. Brandubh let her go, his own coughing loud in her ears.

A moment later, he grabbed her again, turning her and pulling her against his body with one strong arm while he brought the knife out of his pocket with the other. He brought the blade to her neck, drawing blood before she freed herself and swam off. He followed her.

This time, when he grabbed her, she didn't struggle, suddenly aware that she would have to give her own life to free Otherworld from his curse. Her heart contracted with sadness as

she placed one hand on her womb where new life was growing. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she dog-paddled to keep herself in one place, waiting for the knife to plunge into her body. He came toward her and reached out, one arm going around her body, the other hand holding the glittering blade. It was a beautiful knife, hand-carved with an ivory handle.

"Do it," she said, her gaze meeting his. He had a startled expression before his eyes narrowed. For one second he seemed to hesitate, his head swiveling as though to find someone or something. But a moment later he raised his hand and plunged the knife deep into her chest. She screamed when the excruciating pain shot through her body. Blood poured from her chest as she tried to keep herself afloat. She was dying and would soon be under the water to ride the currents to the sea. Her mind seemed very clear, the pain gone as she watched Brandubh grab his chest with both hands, dark liquid oozing between his fingers. He let out a piercing shriek, surprise and horror appearing on his face.

As Maeve's life ebbed, she had a vision of Gertrude wearing a loose, woven caftan, her enormous belly straining against the fabric. Her long, dark hair was braided and pulled back, her eyes soft and full of love. She knew this was Brandubh's vision, not hers, and when she looked his way she could see the smile playing around his mouth, his hands held out as though to pull Gertrude close. But then Gertrude was gone, and in her place Maeve saw Morrighan, her furious gaze fixed on Brandubh. A second later, he let out the cry of a wounded animal, his body going slack as he sank beneath the surface.

Maeve was very close to death now, but she kept her eyes open as she drifted under, watching Brandubh twist and turn, his robes flying out from his body like seaweed. Just before death took her, she saw him carried swiftly away in the turbulent currents running to the sea. Her last thought was, *I'll miss my life, but I can rest knowing he's finally gone*, before her mind shut down and all went dark.



Chapter Thirty-one

hAROLD PULLED MAEVE'S body from the water, tears running down his face. "She's

dead," he told Eron, who had rushed over to help.

"She can't be," the older man said, staring at the limp form in his arms. "She's the Willow, the High Priestess. This is impossible."

Harold placed Maeve's body gently on the ground and bent to straighten her clothing. He ran his fingers through her wet hair, pushing it back off her wide brow. The bodice of her dress was ripped and torn, exposing the congealed blood from the deep cut from the knife. Harold's tears fell on her chest, dripping into the blood and turning it red again. A scream moved up his throat, but just before it erupted a shadow came over her. Harold looked up and into eyes the color of moss.

"This wound will take her from us forever if you do not reach my spring by sundown tonight."

"Sundown." Harold looked into the sky free of clouds, the bright orb that sent its warming rays to Otherworld. Green

shoots were already pushing up through earth that had become vibrant again. But lying next to this new life was Maeve, her lifeless body causing his stomach to contract. "What about the baby?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

The goddess regarded him from under dark brows, her long hair tangled around her face. "The baby is asleep, waiting for the moment Maeve can be brought back to life. But you must hurry. Look for the wall of dark rock."

Harold stood, his attention on where the horses might be. When he turned to ask Airmid another question she was gone.

Harold looked down at Maeve again, anxiety coiling in his belly. "Where are the horses!" he shouted.

"Last I saw, they were on the hill," Eron answered, his eyes filled with tears.

"Stay with her, I'm going to get him," Harold said, sprinting away.

Harold ran toward the hill, his boots slipping in the mud. He found Argyll and Pooka lying under the trees with their eyes closed. "Sorry to disturb your rest," he muttered, grabbing Argyll by the mane. "But we have one more battle to win."

He shook the image of Maeve's dead body from his mind, telling himself that Airmid would bring her back. But a frisson of fear made his hands shake as he led the horses down the hill.

At the shore, Eron helped him lift Maeve's body onto Argyll's back. Harold climbed on behind her, feeling the cold in her body that had replaced the warmth of life. Tears tracked silently down his face.

"Have faith, Harold. Airmid will bring her back."

"I don't even know how to get there."

"Follow the trail east and keep going until you reach the forest. After that, you're on your own."

"But I've never been there. I need a map."

"Do you still have the map of Otherworld?"

Harold dug into the pack on his back, extracting the worn map. He opened it and leaned down to let Eron see it.

Eron stared at it with his eyes narrowed for a few moments before pointing to a line of trees and a trail that Harold was sure had not been there before.

"When you reach the forest, take this trail. But try not to get lost in the enchanted forest. It will delay you and could keep you from reaching the spring in time."

"How do I know if I'm in it?"

"Oh, you'll know, Harold. If you keep your wits about you, you'll keep clear of it."

Harold stared at the sun rising above the tree line, urgency building inside him. "I've got to go. When you find MacCuill and all our people, tell them where I went."

Eron nodded and patted the big horse on the neck. "Be safe and hurry."

As Harold rode eastward, the sun rose higher, blinding him with its intensity. He shaded his eyes, realizing how much he'd missed the light. He thought of this place and the people, all the friendships he had forged in his short time here. His life in Halston seemed utterly remote, like a story he'd read in a book. But without Maeve here with him, he wouldn't want to stay. He held onto her as he pushed Argyll into a canter.

A faint mist hung over the surface of the water as he galloped by, scudding wisps of clouds reflected in the surface. Most of the area where the Tuatha De Danann camp had been was flooded, but a large group of men had gathered on the side of the hill. They looked exhausted, with sodden clothing and cuts and bruises all over their faces and arms. Many were barefoot. He recognized Dagda and his son Aengus and some of the other men who had stood with them. The Oillteil, Crion, and Wildmen were not there, and he wondered about them. Had they washed down to the sea? He hoped they were alive.

The Sidhe looked up as he rode by, worry appearing in their eyes when they saw the body lying in front of him. "It's Maeve," he called. "She sacrificed herself to free Otherworld from Brandedubh." When they rose to pay their respects, he shook his head.

"I'm taking her to the healing spring. You can talk to her when we get back." He tried to smile.

They fell back and raised their hands in salute and then Dagda yelled, "Good luck to ye!"

Harold galloped the big horse toward the forest, his only thought to find the spring before the sun went down. When he glanced over his shoulder, Pooka was following with no indication of stopping. The trip was a blur, a mad dash away from the valley, and then hours of hard riding. He held onto Maeve as though he could breathe life back into her, but when he looked down and saw the pallor of her skin and her blue lips, fear rose into his throat. He had to hurry.

A narrow canyon beckoned, hard to navigate and even harder to get out of. Was this the route? He pulled out the map again, but the lines that indicated the correct path were no longer there. Large craggy boulders lined the dry creek bottom that twisted and turned with no end in sight. His mind played tricks on him, dulcet voices telling him to keep going, others saying no, come this way.

When he reached a trail leading upward, he took it, urging Argyll into a canter at the top. The sun was already halfway down the western sky.

Argyll crashed through the forest as if he understood the urgency. Harold ducked under tree branches, steering around heavy brush. Tears flowed down his face, blinding him at times. The day seemed to lengthen and stretch, the light dimming and then brightening again as though magic was at work. Maybe this wood was also enchanted—where spirits played tricks on the people who dared enter.

A long stretch of time went by while he maneuvered through the murky dimness. He ignored the voices and the flashes of light in the distance. It was at least another hour before he came out of the forest, and when he searched the sky, he saw that the sun was at the horizon. Ahead of him was a flat wall of dark rock. It looked manmade, or maybe magic had erected the twenty-foot tall edifice. A few straggly trees grew along its base, their

misshapen branches covered with a thick layer of ice. It was a desolate place and it was hard to imagine a healing spring being anywhere around.

He dismounted, hoping he was in the right place. When he pulled Maeve's body into his arms, the sun was nearly gone. He left the horses and ran down the trail leading into a maze of rocks.

Finally, the unmistakable sound of bubbling water reached his ears. The spring was like an oasis in a dark world, with bright green plants vying for the warm moist air. Small trees grew in back of the spring, their branches laden with some kind of sweet-smelling red fruit. The water was singing as it ran into the deep pool. "Airmid!" he shouted, but there was no sign of the goddess.

He undressed Maeve and pushed her body into the water before taking his own clothes off. By the time he'd joined her, she was lying on the bottom of the pool. He held his breath and went down to get her, his arm coming around her back as he hauled her to the surface. When he rose above the water, Airmid was there. Her dress floated around her like flower petals, her body ghostlike and ethereal.

Her worried gaze went to the woman in his arms. "Give her to me," she ordered.

Harold gave Maeve's body a little push in Airmid's direction. The healing goddess held her for a moment before pushing Maeve beneath the water. She began to chant.

*Bone to bone
Vein to vein
Balm to balm
Sap to sap
Skin to skin
Tissue to tissue
Blood to blood
Flesh to flesh
Sinew to sinew
Marrow to marrow*

Pith to pith

Fat to fat

Membrane to membrane

Fibre to fibre

Moisture to moisture.

By the time the chant was finished, the sun was gone, without even a line of orange to indicate it had ever been there. Maeve looked as before, her eyes closed, lips even bluer than they had been.

"Why isn't she waking up?"

"Take her in your arms, Harold, and tell her how you feel about her. She may be lost in the underworld. You need to show her the way back."

Harold pulled Maeve's limp body against his chest. It was hard for him to say what he felt when Maeve looked so very dead, but he tried his best. "I love you, Maeve," he whispered, tears forming in his eyes. "I want to see our child born and spend the rest of my life with you. Please come back to me."

He looked up.

"Keep going," Airmid told him.

"Please, Maeve. You can't leave me." By now, tears were running down his face. "I love you. I've loved you since the moment we met, it just took me a while to figure it out. I was an idiot back then. We should never have broken up. If you come back, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Maeve asked, her eyes opening.

Harold bent to kiss her, his tears falling on her face. "Maeve, Maeve. Oh my god, Maeve."

When Harold looked up, Airmid was smiling. "Before you ask, the baby is fine. I expect to meet this child of yours once she is born."

"She?" Harold asked.

Maeve smiled. "I thought so. Her name is Airmid."

"You aren't planning to run this decision by the father?"

Maeve looked up. "Do you have another name you think would be better?"

Harold laughed and shook his head. "You could call her Goat, for all I care. I'm just overwhelmed to see you alive." He pulled Maeve close and felt her heart beat, strong and slow. "Don't ever do that again," he whispered into her neck.

"I'll try not to," she whispered back.

By now, Airmid had disappeared and the clear night sky had filled with stars. Harold waded across the pool and climbed out. He picked a fruit from the tree and held it out.

"I feel like Adam and Eve," Maeve said, taking it from him.

"But I'm the man and I handed it to you—does that mean it will be men who come from the rib of a woman?"

Maeve laughed, sinking her teeth into the succulent red fruit. "This place is so idyllic; I don't want to leave."

Harold nodded, his chin covered in juice. "We can stay and enjoy what it has to offer. The battle is over, and I think we deserve a moment to reconnect."



Later, after they'd made sure that their feelings for one another were quite clear, Harold said, "If Airmid hadn't brought you back, I would have found you."

"Found me where?"

"In the underworld. Airmid said that's where you were. Do you remember it?"

Maeve stared into the distance. "I did go somewhere. And I remember Cerridwen, the keeper of the cauldron of knowledge and inspiration. I had a dream about the underworld a few weeks ago, but that time I didn't take a drink. This time I did."

"Did you know you were dead?"

"I knew, and so did Cerridwen, but she told me it wasn't yet my time."

Harold reached for her hand. "Thank everything holy for that."

"Death isn't so bad once you get used to it," Maeve answered.

Harold shook his head. "Only if we were there together." He squeezed her hand. "I hate to say it, but we need to get back in time to say goodbye to the Sidhe. Are you up to it?"

"I'm alive and it's a miracle; I'm up for anything now."

They rode through the night, both surprised when dawn came. "Whoa," Harold said, staring at the streaks of gold and mauve, the pink clouds floating by. "Never thought I'd be so thrilled by a simple sunrise."



Chapter Thirty-two

ON THE SIDE of the hill below them, the Sidhe were preparing to leave. Maeve hurried ahead, Harold trailing behind. When Maeve reached Dagda, he went down on one knee, bowing his head.

“We thank the spirits of Otherworld for bringing you back.” He rose and took hold of her hands. “We are taking our leave now. We thank you for your guidance, your wisdom, and for what you have accomplished here.”

“Dagda, I thank you and your courageous men. Without your light, we would surely have failed. And please convey my deepest gratitude to King Finvarra and Queen Donagh. I am so sorry you lost so many.”

Dagda smiled sadly. “The prophecy did not say no lives would be lost. Look around you.” He pointed toward the rising sun and the streaks of mauve and gold. “The light is back because of your faith and strength of purpose. If it hadn’t been for that, we would have lost many more. The water has healed

the land, restored the waterways. The balance is returned, daughter of Brigid."

Maeve froze, her mind on her earlier promise, but Dagda was already turning away.

"I thank you, my lady," he called, leading his straggling group of soldiers to the east and home.

Maeve watched them, her mind far away. It had been Brigid who promised to bring them together, not her. She wondered for a moment if the Brigid who had appeared before her was her ancestor or the goddess. Or maybe they were one and the same. Maeve walked slowly down the hill. When she turned back for one last look at the Sidhe, she noticed a tall, bright-haired woman in a long gown walking next to Dagda. Her head was bent to his as she adjusted the dark shawl around her shoulders. Dagda must have felt her gaze because he turned, raising his right arm in a fisted salute. A second later, Brigid turned and waved. Maeve smiled and waved back, watching them until they rounded a bend and disappeared.

Gentle hands came down her shoulders. "MacCuill and Duncan are down there," Harold said, pointing toward where the water was receding. "Do you want to see them now or rest? You didn't get much sleep when we got back last night."

"And whose fault was that?" she laughed.

Harold grinned. "What did you expect, milady? I had to let ye know how I felt since I nearly lost ye."

"Are you kidding, or is Kenneth still very much alive?"

"He's here, but he's fading. I think I'll miss him."

"You told me you hated what he'd done and how he was."

"He lived in a time when fighting was necessary. At first, when his persona took over, I lost myself, but after I got used to it, it was like having two people inside me. We actually worked together pretty well."

"Did Kenneth ever make love to me?"

Harold smiled a crooked smile. "Yes, milady, and he enjoyed it very much."

"Tell me when it was Kenneth."

"If you think about it, you'll know."

Maeve thought back, remembering the night before Harold was shot with the arrow. The lovemaking had been different, rougher and more forceful. At the time, she'd attributed it to the thrill of being together again. But now, she remembered him whispering Gaelic words in her ear, his hands moving across her body in a very different way. The techniques were new to her, and if she admitted it, exciting. She might be sad to see Kenneth go.

"Don't tell me you're going to miss him too," Harold said, gazing at her.

"I might," Maeve said, cocking her head to one side. "He's pretty good with his hands for an old warrior."

Harold laughed. "Now that I've lived with him, I'm sure he'll leave me with some aspects of his personality." He wiggled his eyebrows and took her hand and kissed it before leading the way down the hill.

As soon as he saw her Duncan's tired eyes lit up. "I am very pleased to see ye both unharmed."

When Maeve hugged him, the older man stiffened, but she didn't care. She was just so glad he was alive. "I was worried about you, Duncan; I didn't see you during the battle at all."

"I was there, lost in the chaos. Somehow, I managed to keep out of harm's way. Somethin' was lookin' after me."



The water had receded, leaving a muddy and meandering path that led toward the *Caer Sidi*. There were no guards now, no people anywhere. The wall of water must have swept them all down to the sea. Hopefully, her people survived. As she and Harold and Duncan walked up the hill together, her gaze went into the distance where *Caer Sidi* lay like a shining jewel. The shoreline curved gracefully, a pale shell against blue-green water sparkling with millions of tiny lights from the sun. The azure sky looked domed, with streaks of pink clouds above where the sun

hung suspended over the eastern horizon. The fuzzy green of growing things was already visible where there had been nothing only a few hours before. A shallow silvery lake lay in the valley, stretching almost to the sea.

"Oh, look!" Maeve cried, pointing to the island where a castle of ice clung to the mountain.

A second later, she heard a deep voice behind her. "That is the castle of the moon goddess. Arianrhod wishes to meet you and is preparing a large banquet in your honor."

"MacCuill!" Maeve flung herself into his arms.

He chuckled and then laughed. "I was afraid we'd lost you, Maeve. I witnessed the fight between you and Brandubh."

"And you knew why I did what I did," Maeve countered, looking into his eyes.

MacCuill nodded. "It had to be you, I suppose. But it was a risky thing you did. I'm very glad of Airmid's spring right about now. Without it you would not be standing here."

Behind them, Maeve heard a shout. "You better not be leaving without me," came Eron's voice. He hurried up the hill and grabbed hold of Maeve, pulling her into a hug. "I haven't seen you since your death," he said, a grin spreading across his wide face.

"I thought you'd gone back to Bailemuir," Maeve said.

Eron looked away for a second. "I'll go soon, but I couldn't miss the bonfire." He turned to Harold. "I have to say I'll miss our exploits, Harold. You are good company."

Harold grinned. "Maybe now we can find some less dangerous way to enjoy each other's company."

The small group moved off again, MacCuill in the lead.

"MacCuill, where did the tidal wave come from?" Maeve asked, hurrying to walk beside him. "I thought there wasn't enough water here to produce a wave that high. Was that part of the prophecy or did Brandubh have something to do with it?"

"The strength of Cernunnos's call broke Pryderi's magic, releasing every dammed up stream and river in Otherworld all at once."

"Did Cernunnos know that would happen?"

MacCuill shook his head.

"I tapped into Brandubh's mind just before we both died," Maeve said, staring into the distance. "In his vision, Gertrude was pregnant and his last thoughts were of the life he could have had with her. I could feel all his emotional pain—the guilt and misgivings. It was so terribly sad."

"Do not feel sorry for the man, Maeve. Think back on what he did to this place, all the death and destruction he's responsible for. That vision was Morrighan's final curse."

"What do you mean?"

"At the moment of his death, Brandubh was shown the truth of what his life could have been. What worse way to die?"

Maeve thought about the horror of the man's death and shook her head. "I know he deserved it, but do you think Gertrude's really pregnant?"

MacCuill pressed his lips together and turned away. "If this is what he saw, then yes, I think she is."

"And what about Adair? I didn't see her at the end."

MacCuill didn't say anything for a moment, his gaze narrowing. "Adair lives," he finally answered. "But she is no longer in Otherworld."

There was silence for a moment as everyone took in this news.

At a rocky outcropping, the group stopped to rest, pulling out water skins and some cheese MacCuill had managed to salvage. MacCuill, Eron, and Duncan sat down together, talking about what had happened in the valley.

"Did you know we're having a baby?" Harold asked, twining his fingers through Maeve's.

MacCuill turned, chuckling. "I would love to tell you this was a surprise, but I have been aware of this since you were shot, Harold. Maeve screamed it to the heavens."



As they were preparing to continue, there was the sound of galloping and a moment later, Argyll and the wolf crested the hill. Maeve laid her hand on the wolf's wide head, gazing into his expressive and luminous eyes. "No, I would not have left you behind," she said aloud, as she received his message. Maeve glanced over to see Harold patting the big horse on the neck and crooning something into his ear. He loved that horse.

"Where's Pooka?" she asked.

Harold grinned. "I saw him earlier with a herd of mares."

"He's a stallion?"

"You didn't know that?"

"This renewal of the sun will bring many to Caer Sidi for the bonfire to honor Brigid's day. After all the years of infertility, there will be many bairns conceived on this special night." The druid's gaze went to Maeve. "And some horse bairns as well, from what Harold just told us."

Maeve's thoughts went to Rea and the other Crion women, the women at the settlement. Would they be able to conceive now? She thought about her life back in the States, the gallery, and her friends. Her father. None of it seemed real; it was this place that made her heart sing. Would she and Harold raise their baby here or go back? Did Otherworld have something else in store for them? She glanced at Harold, wondering whether he would want to stay or go. The thought of Milltown was as alien as this place had been when she first arrived.

Down in the valley, animals were coming out of their hiding places, drinking at the shallow lake and feeding on the tender shoots coming up. The sun was high, the warmth of it taking away any lingering doubts about what had happened here. The sky had turned a brighter blue, a few puffy clouds moving sedately above them. The Otherworld was again the place it was meant to be.

In the distance, Maeve could see a group of Crion, and Rea, shading her eyes to see who was coming down the hill. Next to them were Oillteil and Wildmen. She recognized Oak because he stood a half a head taller than all the rest. The last heaviness

lifted from her heart. Her mother and grandmother were safe in Bailemuir, and she was sure Gertrude was all right and would show up along the way. Any woman as fierce as that would manage to stay alive.

When Maeve turned to Harold, she saw her face reflected in his clear eyes. Love and gratitude washed over her as she picked up his hand. He grinned, twining his fingers through hers. A raven landed on a boulder next them, its raucous call a harsh reminder of the bird's role here. But this one merely watched her with bright eyes before lifting into the sky and soaring away.

"Ravens are magical birds," MacCuill said. "And this one was here to take a closer look at you." He smiled. "Now that they've been released from Brandubh, you can expect many visits in the upcoming days."

"Will we stay at the castle tonight?" Maeve asked, looking again at the ice-blue spires lifting into the sky and wondering what lay within the ice walls.

"Arianrhod, the moon goddess, is expecting you. You will like her, Maeve. The two of you have a lot in common."

Maeve smiled and leaned into Harold, feeling his solidness next to her. They'd nearly lost each other these past weeks. Now, they were together and heading into a new life free of Brandubh, where gods and goddesses and ancient druids were part of daily existence. They would have their baby here unless Harold wanted to go back to Milltown, but she had a feeling this would not be the case. When she glanced up at him, it was as though he read her mind, his arm looping around her shoulders. "I love you," he mouthed.

"I love you too," she whispered. Ahead of them MacCuill's long gray robe swung in the light breeze, his sandals already muddy from the wet trail. Duncan and Eron flanked the druid as they navigated the downward slope.

By now, they'd nearly reached Rea, and Maeve hurried ahead to hug her and thank all of the Crion for everything they'd done. Several Oillteil and Wildmen from her original group

stood with them and gave her fist salutes as she arrived. "We did it together!" she called, returning their smiles.

Maeve stood next to Rea, her gaze focused on the sea in the distance and the island that lay just beyond the shore. The castle of the moon goddess was a reminder of what they'd all been through. The goddesses were again in charge of Otherworld and she was one of them now, as powerful as they were. A flock of swallows flew by, dipping and swooping over the lake to catch the insects that had reappeared, the birds' deep blue wings iridescent in the sunlight. Harold caught up to Maeve and pulled her close before they followed the quickly expanding group along the edge of the lake, and across the border into Caer Sidi.

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