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Book of Days

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BOOK OF DAYS

by Sara Reinke

This book is dedicated with love in memory of my uncle,
James E. "Pete" Howard
(August 1, 1956-April 11, 2001), Chief Petty Officer, United States Navy,
who began it all with a simple gift that has yielded a lifetime of bounties for me ...
And in memory of my father-in-law, Rodney R. Reinke
(October 18, 1941-June 8, 2001),
in whose gentle smiles lay unspoken volumes.
Ta a fhios sin agam ta sibh in eineacht le me.
Go raimh maith agat, mo'cairde. Codladh samh duit.

Prologue

The year 1712 of the Third Age

"I have failed you," Dagarron Atreile whispered. He pressed the rim of a pewter cup to his lips and tossed his head back, feeling brimague run down his throat with dim heat.

It had taken three days for the news to reach the small haven of Mehnine. When it had, it had spread like wildfire in dried witchgrass, as grim tidings so often do in quiet hamlets and close-knit communities. Dagarron had heard tell of it by lunchtime; murmurs that King Herdranges had been butchered, his royal counsels and guard massacred, his throne stolen by the brother of his Elfin Queen. Herdranges's infant children, the twin heirs to his crown, had been slain and his wife, Queen Lythaniele, had thrown herself from one of the castle towers.

"I have failed you all," Dagarron said. He sat along the crowded bar of Mehnine's solitary, cramped pub, the Fortune's Folly. He had spent the grand majority of his day there with a cup in his hands and a grief so profound that it weighed like iron upon his heart. At the sound of a small voice crying out in startled fear behind him, he glanced over his shoulder, drawn from his sorrow.

"What are you doing here, Elf?" he heard a man say loudly, followed by a sharp, distinctive slapping sound and another frightened, tremulous cry.

Dagarron had observed a young Gaeilge boy stealing into the pub several moments earlier. No more

than eleven or twelve to judge by his diminutive stature, the wide-eyed lad had exhibited a level of curiosity uncharacteristic of Elves, and boldness at entering a tavern filled with drunken menfolk that demonstrated a higher degree of innocent naiveté than good sense. Dagarron had recognized him as a Donnag'crann, a sect of Gaeilge Elves who called the dense and sprawling forests of Tírnag'crann to the south of Mehnine their home. He could have warned the boy that the tavern on that night in particular was no place for Elves. The air within the Fortune's Folly was thick with heated and venomous conversations directed against the usurper king, at Lahnduren's new regime, and against Elves in general.

A burly man standing nearly twice as tall as the little Elf had spied him creeping among the crowd and had seized him roughly by the hair. A large group of men, all too filled with portar and brimague to reason with coherence or clarity, had gathered about, their lips twisted into menacing and wicked sneers. Dagarron pivoted in his seat, letting his hips slide toward the edge of the stool, his boot soles drop to the floor.

"Le ... le do thoil ... ní dteannan sibh!" the boy whimpered, his eyes enormous with fright, shining in the glow of lanterns with sudden tears. *Please do not!*

"Speak the popular speech, cub," the man snapped, and again, he slapped the boy's face. "This is Mehnine you trespass in—a village of menfolk!"

"We do not speak your bastard Elf tongue here!" cried another, stepping forward, his fingers closing into purposeful fists. "Hold him still. Let me teach him how to speak in the company of men."

"Leave him alone," Dagarron said, walking slowly toward them, fixing his gaze on the man holding the boy's hair. "Let the boy go."

There was not a man in Mehnine who did not know Dagarron by face and name, if not by reputation. As he passed, he heard the crowd of men whisper sharply together, scuttling away from him uncertainly.

"He is an Elf!" the man holding the boy shouted to Dagarron. "Elves murdered our king—your blood kin, Dagarron!"

"He is a child," Dagarron said, his brows drawing together, his voice measured but stern. "Lahnduren killed Herdranges. This boy did not. Let him go."

"Le do thoil!" the boy whimpered again. *Please!*

"Shut your mouth, whelp!" the man yelled, raising his hand again. The boy cowered, his hands dancing helplessly toward his face in frightened anticipation of the blow.

Dagarron moved swiftly, closing his fingers against the man's thick wrist. He rotated the man's thumb away from his shoulder, forcing his arm to hyperextend at an abrupt and agonizing angle. The man yowled in startled pain, his fingertips slipping free of the boy's hair as he struggled against Dagarron's immobilizing grip. The boy scuttled against the wall, crumpling to his knees, shrinking into the corner.

The man balled his hand to punch Dagarron, and Dagarron wrenched his wrist all the further. The man cried out sharply, stumbling, falling to his knees. "Let ... let go of me!" he bellowed. "Sweet Mother! Turn me loose!"

"If you touch the boy again, you will answer to me," Dagarron said. He swept the gathering of angry men with his gaze. "If any of you move to harm the Elf, you will need to pass me to do it."

He thrust the man's wrist away from him and stepped toward the boy, his gaze sharp and wary. "Go back to your portars," Dagarron told the men. "All of you now. Go back to your portars and let this boy pass."

He turned toward the boy, and genuflected before him. The boy shied further into the corner, his green eyes enormous, his tears spilling unabated.

"Le ... le do thoil," he whimpered. "Le do thoil ... ni ... ni gorteann tu agam!" *Please do not hurt me.*

"Ta se maith," Dagarron said to him gently. *It is alright.* "Ni eagliann tu, a'leaid. Ni gortoidh me agat. Ta tu slan anois." *Do not be frightened. I will not hurt you. You are safe now.*

The boy blinked at him, startled by his address in Gaeilgen, a language most menfolk in the realm did not speak with any fluency. Dagarron reached for the young Elf and he flinched, drawing his shoulder toward his cheek; his breath caught in his throat in a frightened gasp. Dagarron could see the dim shadow of bruises forming along the line of his cheek where the man had struck him, and his heart ached for the boy. The child had only been curious, meaning no harm when he had entered the pub. Dagarron wondered if menfolk would ever seem less than malicious and cruel again in his frightened and impressionable regard.

"Ta se maith," he said again. *It is alright.* "Ta ainm mo Dagarron. Cen t'ainm ata ort?" *My name is Dagarron. What is yours?*

"Kierken," the boy whispered. "Ta ... ta ainm mo Kierken."

"Ta tu diot a Donnag'crann, Kierken?" Dagarron asked him gently, drawing an uncertain nod from the boy. *You are of the Donnag'crann?* "Carb as daoine eile? Do teaghlach? Do cairde?" *Where are the others? Your family? Your friends?*

"Ni ... ni ta a fhios," Kierken whispered, stricken. *I do not know.*

"Ni eagliann tu," Dagarron said. *Do not be frightened.* "Ta me a'cara. Cuideoidh me feann iad." *I am a friend. I will help find them.*

He slipped his hand against the back of Kierken's head and when he drew the young Elf against his shoulder, Kierken did not resist. He trembled against Dagarron, his breath ragged and fluttering as he struggled to control his tears.

"Dtagann tu anois, a'leaid," Dagarron murmured, turning his face toward the top of the boy's head. *Come now, lad.* Dagarron rose to his feet, and the boy stood with him, shied closely against Dagarron's side, his fingers clutching at his doublet.

"Kierken?" Dagarron heard someone call out over the din of the tavern. At the voice, the beckon, the boy raised his head, his eyes flown wide. Dagarron followed the sound and saw four adult Donnag'crann Elves wading through the crowd, their expressions alarmed.

"Kierken!" one exclaimed, catching sight of the boy. Kierken ducked from beneath the protective shelter of Dagarron's arm and ran toward the older Elf.

"Athair!" he cried, rushing against the Donnag'crann, letting him enfold him in his arms. *Father!*

The group of Donnag'crann moved to leave, drawing the boy protectively among them. The men within the tavern still felt antagonistic and angry, and closed their ranks around the Elves, surrounding them slowly and blocking their avenue of exit from the pub.

"Stand aside and let us pass," one of the Elves said to the men. He was tall, with long, flaxen hair, nearly white in hue. His eyes were a translucent and icy shade of blue. His expression was less than amused, and the slight furrow between his brows deepened when none of the men made effort to step out of the way. "Stand aside and let us pass," he said again, coolly.

"Or what, Gaeilge?" one of the men said, smirking at him.

The Elf arched his eyebrow sharply. "Or I will move you," he replied.

"Hoah, now—" the man exclaimed, curling his fingers against his palms and stepping toward the Donnag'crann.

"Let them pass," Dagarron said, catching him by the shoulder with his hand, staying his advance. "The Donnag'crann are not our enemies. They have done their part to observe the peace. Let them take their leave."

"Alright, what in the bloody wide Bith is going on here?" yelled Ambrose, the barkeep and owner of the Fortune's Folly. He was an enormous man, built like a plow-ox: small head, broad shoulders, barrel-chested. He waded into the throng bearing a stout wooden club and the gathering of men immediately broadened in circumference around the Elves.

"I run a respectable establishment!" Ambrose bellowed. "If you seek a fracas, then seek it outside, the rotted lot of you!"

One by one, the men turned away from Dagarron and the Elves, muttering to one another and sparing scathing glowers as they slinked off to reclaim mugs of ale and cups of brimague. Within moments, conversation resumed, rising once more in volume and from somewhere, someone began to blare out a fresh tune on a fiddle.

Ambrose turned to regard the Donnag'crann, his brows narrowed. "This is neither the night nor the place to be for Elves," he told them. He nodded his chin toward the tavern entrance. "Get hence, all of you. I do not do business with Donnag'crann."

"That is fair, as we neither seek it nor want it," the flaxen-haired Elf replied.

Ambrose clapped a heavy hand against Dagarron's shoulder and steered him toward the bar as the Donnag'crann took their leave. "I am surprised to have found you in the middle of that ruckus, Dagarron," he remarked.

"I do not abide by those who would frighten and hurt children in the name of my cousin's honor," Dagarron said. He sighed wearily, his expression mournful. "I doubt that boy will ever trust menfolk again, Ambrose."

Ambrose shook his head. "Poor little lamb," he remarked of the boy, Kierken. "That was right decent of you, Dagarron." He kept his arm against Dagarron's shoulder, guiding him aside, past the bar and toward the rear exit of the pub.

"What are you doing?" Dagarron asked.

"I thought you should know there is a woman out back near the stables asking for you."

"I am in no need of a woman tonight," Dagarron said. "Only more brimague, Ambrose."

"She says it is an urgent matter," the barkeep said.

Dagarron frowned. "I do not keep urgent matters with women."

"I think you will keep this, my friend," Ambrose said in a low voice. "She says she has business with you. Says it has to do with the Queen."

Dagarron found her sitting on some hay piled just inside the doorway of the stables, a young woman in an olive-colored riding cloak that was at least two sizes too large for her diminutive frame. She held the reins of a stout pony laden with a large wicker creel strapped to its saddle.

The woman started at the rustle of Dagarron's bootheels in gravel and hay outside the stable and hopped quickly to her feet. She jerked a small ballock knife from beneath the folds of her cloak and thrust it toward him.

Dagarron chuckled at her fierceness, which apparently did not endear him to her in the slightest. "What do you want?" she snapped, shoving the tip of the dagger at him.

"I am Dagarron Atreile. You told the barkeep you wished to speak with me."

She lowered the hood of her cloak and narrowed her brows, peering closely at him. Her frown deepened as she took into account his scruffy appearance: his unkempt beard, the dark circles beneath his eyes, the gauntness in his cheeks born of too much grief and liquor and not enough food or sleep.

"You are Dagarron?" she exclaimed at length, in disbelief.

"I am," he replied with a nod. "You must pardon my appearance, my lady. I was not expecting any callers this evening."

She stared at him and he knew she doubted his word. But then her pony gave a snuffling noise, and he heard the soft mewling of kittens from somewhere, perhaps a new litter born in the straw of the barn loft, and the tip of her dagger lowered.

"I am Wyndetta Graegan," she said as she tucked the blade back into her belt sheath. "Queen Lythaniele sent me to find you."

"Then she's alive?" he whispered, his eyes wide, his heart seized with sudden, tremulous hope. "Tell me she lives. Tell me she escaped the palace somehow."

Wyndetta's stern expression grew soft and saddened. "Lahnduren locked us in her tower chamber together," she whispered. "After he had murdered the King. She helped me escape, but she did not follow. I do not think she could. She begged me to find you."

Dagarron lowered his face to the ground. He had been told Lythaniele had thrown herself from the window of one of the palace towers. "If Lythaniele is dead, I do not understand," he said. "Why she

send you to find me?"

The soft whimpering of kittens came again and Wyndetta moved around to the side of her pony. She unfastened the buckles of the creel and lifted the lid. He watched her reach inside and pull out a small, wrapped bundle. As she cradled it in her arms, the bundle began to wiggle and the mewling Dagarron had mistaken for the cries of newborn kittens came once more.

Wyndetta turned to him. With gentle fingers, she moved aside the folds of swaddling and he saw a baby, a small and delicate creature, with eyes as blue as a calm lake on a windless morning peeking out from the wrappings. He gasped audibly, and Wyndetta smiled. "Here," she said and before he could protest, she deposited the infant in his arms. She turned and produced a second swaddling-bound baby from inside the creel.

Dagarron stared down at the child he held stiffly against the crook of his elbow. The baby stared up at him in return, its little arms and legs wiggling beneath the swaddling clothes. A thin line of silvery drool slipped out of its mouth and trailed down its chin as the baby squealed suddenly, happily.

"That is Isgaan, Herdranges and Lythaniele's firstborn, their son," said Wyndetta, smiling as she nodded toward the infant in his arms. "And this one is Isgaara, their daughter."

"The twins," Dagarron whispered. He looked in breathless amazement at the squirming prince in his arms.

"The rightful heirs to the throne of Tiralainn," she said. "This is why my Lady sent me to find you, Dagarron."

Chapter One

The year 1728 of the Third Age

The first time Qynhelein Reoder remembered seeing the little boy was when she was just six years old. He appeared shortly after her mother died, and Qynh often wondered if her mind had somehow produced the apparition in response to the horror and shock of that terrible afternoon.

Qynh remembered lying on her back on a quilt beneath a towering cottonwood tree, with a trunk so large she could stand on one side and stretch her arms about it and her brother, Mahres, could stand likewise on the other side and they could not clasp hands with each other. They were on the banks of the Thiar River on a midsummer's afternoon: her father, Deog; mother, Evonne; Mahres and Qynh.

Evonne brought along a picnic lunch of red pears, butter cheese, bitter bread, and honey. Deog had closed his blacksmith shop in the bustling seaside township of Lyhndale for the day and Qynh remembered him laying on his side on the quilt, smiling at her, a long, green whip of witchgrass tucked between his teeth.

Evonne strolled down to the river's edge, lifting up her skirts above her knees and dipping her toe into the brown water. She was a Gaeilge Elf; her arms and legs were lean and preternaturally long, her bare toes elongated and prehensile. Both attributes were holdovers from the days eons before when her Gaeilge ancestors had dwelled exclusively among the tree tops of the arboreal southrealm, relying on long, strong limbs and their feet as much as fingers for grasping and climbing.

Evonne wriggled out of her skirt and underslips and tiptoed out into the river, giggling, clad in nothing but her undergarments. Deog whistled wolfishly after her, and she frowned at him without really being sore as she splashed water in his direction with the flat of her hand.

She danced out from the shore until the water met her mid-thigh and then she hooked her arms above her head, pressed her hands together and dove beneath the surface. Her head popped up some lengths from the riverbank and she bobbed there, laughing, the sunlight flashing off the water as it rippled in concentric circles around her throat.

Qynh remembered lying on the quilt, turning her eyes from her mother and looking directly overhead. She spied a large, black crow in an upper tree bough that seemed to be staring directly back at her with tiny pinpoints of scarlet light instead of eyes.

She stared up at the raven, mesmerized by the glow of its eyes, and then her father's voice, sharp with alarm startled her from her reverie. Qynh remembered Deog springing to his feet and staring out across the surface of the water; her mother had dived down, her feet splashing against the top of the water playfully in her wake but had not yet come up for air.

"Evonne!" Deog called, with a sharpness and alarm to his tone that had immediately drawn Qynh's attention to the river. He plodded out into the water, holding his arms out at crooked angles as if he did not want to get them wet.

Still, her mother did not resurface.

Deog screamed her name, swimming out to the point where she had vanished, his powerful arms pulling him through the water. Qynh watched him open his mouth and suck in a whooping mouthful of air and then he dove after Evonne, searching for her.

She had plunged too deeply into the brown depths and her arms had become entangled in a snare of submerged driftwood, the rotted remains of a mighty oak's root system. Her arms had been trapped and she had been unable to wriggle free. It took Deog seven tries, each time his head breaking the river's surface, his mouth wide and gasping and then ducking down once more, before he finally wrenched her poor, lifeless body from the drowned tree.

Two days later, when they lay her mother upon her bier and men from the village gathered to carry her to her pyre, Qynh stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom and tried to braid her hair by herself for the first time in her life. Evonne had always twisted the plaits for her, binding each in place with colorful scraps of ribbon.

Qynh could not complete the task alone; her fingers were yet too small and not yet nimble enough, and it was at this precise moment that it struck her that her mother was gone, her soul had traversed beyond the physical world and made its way into the golden realm of Tirmaithe. She burst into sobs that wracked her tiny body and drove her to her knees.

"Why are you crying?"

Qynh looked up, startled by the soft, tentative voice. The room was empty; no one stood before her. She crept to her feet and looked into the mirror, dragging the cuff of her sleeve across her cheeks to dry her tears.

She saw a little boy in the mirror, like a phantom standing behind her, with enormous blue eyes the same hue as her own, and a tangle of dark hair, just like hers. He looked to be her age and he regarded her with such pity that her breath caught in her throat.

"Please do not cry," the little boy said.

"My ... my momma has gone away," Qynh whispered. "She will never be back and now I am all alone."

"No," the boy said. He pressed his hand against the mirror; it was as though they stood in two rooms separated only by a wall made of glass. "I am here. You are not alone."

Qynh brought her hand up slowly, hesitantly, and pressed it against the mirror, lining her fingers up against his. They matched perfectly in width and length, as though each bore the same hand.

"My name is Qynh," she told the little boy.

"My name is Trejaeran," he replied, and he smiled at her.

He was not real; Qynh knew this in her mind, but it never stopped the phantom boy Trejaeran from appearing during times in her life when she most needed someone to turn to. Each time, their greeting had been the same, palm to palm, although it was always as though she touched mist or smoke; her hand brushed against nothing tangible when she reached for him.

These visions persisted as she grew older, as did the recurring dreams of her mother drowning and the ominous raven overhead with gleaming red eyes. Qynh wondered if somehow some portion of her mind had snapped with grief over the loss of her mother.

While her father's mind had not necessarily snapped, it was apparent that some part of his heart had. In the years after Evonne's death, Deog had receded like a shadow chased into a far corner by the light from a lantern. He was up every morning before the sun cast even the faintest glow against the horizon. He worked every day through in his smithy, not retiring from his labor until well after sundown. He wore the years of harsh labor like a heavy cowl. Deep furrows weathered his brows and cleaved grim paths between his nostrils and his chin. His mouth turned down at the corners in a perpetual grimace of intense concentration.

There was an endless supply of work to occupy his time. The Belgaeran army, the Damantas, had established a military outpost along the banks of the Thiar at the site of the Caladh Ferry nearly five years earlier. Here, they had erected an enormous watch tower; a striking black fortress looming ominously over the surrounding countryside. With their frightening array of armaments and armor and their battalions of horses, the Damantas provided a skilled blacksmith like Deog Reoder with steady work, and steady income. Day in and day out, he hammered away in the smithy, pounding out horseshoes, helms, sabers and ax blades. His fingertips, the crescents of padded skin beneath the prosceniums of his nails and the thick edges of his cuticles all stayed blackened and smutched with grease and soot, no matter how long or how fervently he scrubbed.

On the morning of March fifteenth, the day of Qynh's sixteenth birthday, she awoke in her darkened bedroom to the sound of her father weeping in the next room. She had never seen Deog cry, but she had heard him many times; he often wept alone in his room, when he thought no one would hear.

Qynh would lie awake, moonlight spilling through her window across her quilts and downy blankets, listen to her father's shuddering cries and weep silently herself, her tears trickling down from the corners

of her eyes, dampening her pillow. She wept that morning, a girl who wanted desperately to assuage her father's sorrow, yet remained helpless to offer him any sort of comfort. She pressed the side of her fist against her mouth, pulling blankets up to her face to stifle the sounds of her own tears. "Oh, Poppa," she whispered softly into a handful of quilt.

A little bit later, she heard his bedroom door open, and then listened to his soft, shuffling footsteps as he padded down the hallway. She heard hushed patters as he went down the stairs, the faint, metallic squall of the kitchen door swinging on its rusted hinges, and the faint click as it fell shut behind him.

Qynh sat up and pushed aside her drapes. It was not yet dawn, and Deog was off to work already, tromping across the shadow-draped yard toward the smithy to ignite his coals and furnaces. She turned her head, meaning to lie back against her pillow, and caught sight of a young Gaeilge in the tree outside, looking through the window at her. She blinked, startled, her breath catching in her throat.

He was the most beautiful being she had ever seen.

He regarded her with eyes as green and vibrant as new vernal foliage. His nose was long and tapered; his cheeks high and elegant arches etched above the angle of his jaw; his brows narrowed along the bridge of his nose and arched near his temples to lend his fair countenance an overall austere yet distinctly noble air. His hair fell in a long sheaf to his hips, pulled away from his face in slender, bead-adorned plaits that draped over his shoulders. His eyes met hers, holding her in place as surely as if he grasped her by the shoulders, and then only leafy limbs in the old oak swayed and shivered in the space where she had seen him. He was gone.

"Hoah—" Qynh whispered. She leaned out to peer more closely into the tree. "Hullo?" she called in a soft, tremulous voice. The oak leaves whispered in reply. She rubbed her eyes with her hands and peeped one last time. There was no one there.

"I must be going daft," she muttered, lying down again, curling on her side beneath folds of quilts. She was soundly asleep almost as soon as her head met her pillow.

Several hours later, the stomping of footfalls on the stairs jerked her from sleep and she sat up immediately, dazed and alarmed. The door to her room flew open and Qynh yelped, startled and frightened.

"Good morrow, birthday hen!" her older brother Mahres cried and Qynh laughed.

"Mahres, you goose! You nearly scared me witless!"

"Happy birthday, Qynh," Deog said, leaning over to kiss her forehead. He pressed a small box wrapped in blue paper against her palms and she blinked at him, surprised.

"What have you two done?" she asked. She peeled back the paper and lifted the lid, her eyes flying wide.

"Poppa, Mahres, oh..." she murmured. She pinched a silver chain between her fingertips and pulled the necklace out of the box. A pendant dangled at the end of the long, twined chain, a silver figure of a Gaeilge woman standing in an exuberant pose, her arms outstretched above her head.

"It belonged to your mother, Qynh," Deog told her in a soft voice. "I thought you might like to have it."

"Oh, yes, it is beautiful," Qynh said. She blinked against tears and smiled at Deog. "You would make me cry, Poppa."

That evening, Deog brought Qynh and Mahres to the Thierabout Inn for supper, fiddle music, and dancing. By the time they were ready to leave, Qynh stumbled on weary feet. She could not remember the last time she had heard Deog laugh so freely or so often; she knew the birthday celebration had been as good for him as for her.

"You lambs take care of that father of yours," Maire Figgett told Qynh and Mahres as they left the pub. She and her husband, Marceus owned the Thierabout, and both were old, dear friends of Deog's.

Maire smiled fondly as she watched Marceus and Deog engaged in quiet conversation ahead of them. "He is a dear man and he works too hard for those Damantas at Caladh. He should be careful of them. They are naught but trouble."

"When was this?" Deog cried suddenly, alarming them.

Marceus said something to him quietly, cutting his eyes toward Maire, Mahres and Qynh. Deog shook his head, turned to face the outer wall of the pub and uttered a loud, hoarse cry. He smashed the side of his fist against the wall, making Qynh jump.

"What is it? What is wrong?" she asked, frightened.

"That friendly little Gaeilge that worked down at the cobbler's, Maeruni Smolach," Maire said. "His wife, Lupharen, was murdered late last night. He was taken away by Belgaeran riders. No one knows what has become of him."

"The Damantas killed Lupharen?" Mahres said, his eyes round with shock. "She and Maeruni, they were Father's friends."

"Come along, children," Deog said, striding briskly toward them. His eyes were narrowed, his mouth drawn into a stern line. "It is time to go home."

"What is it, Poppa?" Qynh asked, frightened, as they walked home. Deog led them at a hurried pace, keeping his arm tightly across her shoulders, practically dragging her in step along with him.

"Maire told us what happened to Lupharen and Maeruni," Mahres said. "Surely you do not think that—"

"Hush, Mahres," Deog said. "Speak no further of it until we are home."

Qynh stumbled alongside Deog, struggling to keep up with him. That her father seemed so distraught, as close to afraid as she had ever seen him made her fright all the more terrible. When at last they reached the mouth of their own little alleyway, his behavior became even more peculiar. His eyes darted this way and that, and he moved very slowly, creeping toward the kitchen door as though he was afraid someone or something lurked in the shadows and watched their approach.

He unlocked the back door and herded Mahres and Qynh into the kitchen. Once inside, he shut the door and threw the bolt.

"Mahres, stay here with your sister," Deog said. He struck some flints and lit a lantern, brandishing it aloft. "If I call to you and tell you to leave, I want you to take Qynh and run back to the pub."

"Father, what is going—" Mahres began, but Deog turned and his gaze was so frightening in its intensity that the boy fell silent.

"Do as I tell you," Deog said. He strode for the corridor and disappeared. His footsteps resounded along the stairway as he climbed up to the second floor.

"What in the Bith is going on?" Mahres whispered. "I have never seen him in such a state. Do you think he is drunk, Qynh?"

Qynh shook her head. "I do not know, Mahres," she said. "He was fine until he heard about what happened to Maeruni and Lumpharen. I think it frightened him."

"What? Why? They have naught to do with us. They are friends with Father, true, but he has not seen them in ages that I can recall."

They heard Deog's rapid boot heels along the stairs once more. He came into the kitchen, carrying two swords in heavy sheaths together in his hand. "Take this, Mahres," he said. He tossed one of the scabbards to his son. Mahres caught it, but his hand trembled anxiously as he brought it to his side.

"Father, what is going on?" he asked. "You are frightening Qynh. You are frightening me, sir."

Deog unsheathed his sword and tossed the scabbard aside. He met Mahres' eyes, and there was more than fear upon his face; there was terror, plain and stark. "Listen to me, Mahres. There is no time to explain. I am going out to the barn. Wait for me here, with the door standing open until I call to you. Do you understand, Mahres?"

"Yes, Father," Mahres whispered.

They watched him as he took up the lantern and crossed the courtyard outside, approaching the darkened barn. Mahres and Qynh huddled together in the doorway, shivering in the cool night breeze.

"Mahres, I am frightened," Qynh whimpered.

"It will be alright, hen," Mahres told her softly, wrapping his arm about her.

Deog disappeared into the barn, and the glow of his lantern expanded along its vaulted walls and tall ceilings. After a few moments, he left and crossed the courtyard. He motioned to Mahres and Qynh. They scurried out of the house, and Mahres kept his arm close about his sister as they reached their father.

"Ready two horses and bring them out here," Deog whispered. "The two of you ride astride one. Go ahead and mount up, and I will take the other. Should something happen, and I call to you, I want you to ride west to the shores of the Uisce Mor. From there, turn south and go as fast as you can."

"But what about you, Father?" Mahres asked. Deog had turned on his heel and started for the smithy. "Where are you going?"

"I have to turn the kestrel loose," Deog replied.

He kept a small, downy kestrel perched in a comfortable mew behind the smithy. The falcon had turned

up nearly a month ago, and he had dismissed any inquiries regarding it, saying it had brought a couriered message from a distant cousin and now he tended after it.

"It know the path to Tirnag'crann," Deog said quietly, as if muttering nervously to himself. He turned and tromped toward the smithy. "I have to get word to Dagarron."

"What?" Mahres asked, utterly baffled. "Have you gone mad, Father? The kestrel?"

Deog whirled, his eyes flashing in fear and anger. "There is no time for arguments or explanations, boy," he snapped. "I said take your sister and wait for me!"

"Yes, sir," Mahres whispered, wide-eyed and startled by Deog's sharp reproach. He pulled at Qynh's wrist, tugging her into the barn.

They each set about saddling the horses as quickly as they could. "Did you hear him?" Qynh whispered as they worked. "He said something about warning someone, getting word to Dagarron. He has been here before, a man named Dagarron, years ago after Mother died. Do you remember?"

"No," Mahres shook his head. "But the name is somewhat familiar. Mayhap I have heard Father mention it before. Do you think it has something to do with what happened? Lumpharen murdered and Maeruni taken?"

"I do not know," Qynh said. They led the horses by the bridles out into the courtyard. Mahres looked anxiously in the direction of the smithy as Qynh swung herself up onto one of the saddles. "I do not see Poppa's light, do you?" Qynh whispered.

Mahres shook his head. "No, but the mew is behind the workshop. The lamp is blocked by the back walls, that is all."

Suddenly, from ahead of them in the darkness, they heard the rapid patter of fleeing footsteps. They saw a shadowy figure running toward them—Deog, without his lantern.

"Mahres!" Deog screamed, his voice ripping up octaves in his terror. "Mahres, go now! Run! Sweet Mother! Run!"

Qynh shrieked in terror as, in a thunder of sudden hoofbeats, five riders bore down upon Deog, racing out from behind the smithy. She did not need a light to see what they were: Belgaeran soldiers from Caladh. "Poppa!" she screamed.

"Mother Creator have mercy," Mahres hissed. He leaped onto the mare's back, grabbed Qynh around the waist with one hand and snatched the reins in the other. He kicked the horse mightily and she leapt forward, bolting down the alleyway, racing past the house and toward the street.

"No!" Qynh wailed. "No, no, Mahres! Go back! We cannot leave Poppa!"

"Sweet Tirmaithe!" Mahres cried, yanking back against the reins, forcing the mare's head up, her lips twisting in a sneer against the bit. Five more riders loomed at the mouth of the alleyway ahead, blocking their escape.

The mare slid to a halt, her hindquarters skittering in the loose gravel and soft soil. Qynh and Mahres stared at the riders in horror.

"Hand over the heir, boy," one of them said. Blazing scarlet points of fire flared against his helm where his eyes should have been.

Qynh screamed again. "Oh, Sweet Mother, Mahres, what are they?" she wailed.

"I do not know, hen," Mahres said, and he snapped the reins once more, kicking the mare hard. It galloped wildly for the corral fence. "Hold tight now, Qynh, here we go," Mahres told her and the mare leaped the height of the fence, knocking against the top rail with its back hooves, shearing it into splintered halves. The horse landed hard, and Qynh spilled forward across the mare's withers. Mahres tightened his arm about her and yanked her back into the saddle.

Deog saw them try to run, saw the Damantas block the alley. He dashed through the barn and out across the corral as his pursuers raced behind him.

"Poppa!" Qynh cried, holding her arms out desperately as he ran for them.

"It ... it is Qynh they are after, Mahres," Deog gasped, reaching them. He buckled slightly at the waist, panting, nearly out of breath. "They must not have her. Take her out of here, however you can."

"Me?" Qynh mewled, confused. "Poppa, what do you mean?"

One by one, the Damantas dismounted. They entered the corral, walking through the fencing, smashing the timbers against their armored chests as though kindling. One of them wore a black, crested helm, with twin spirals of thick, dark metal that twisted out from either side of the helmet and folded inward, like a ram's horns. A blood-colored cloak draped down from his shoulders. The emblem of King Lahnduren was embossed against his cuirass, as with each of the riders' breastplates: a black, winged wolf. Qynh recognized him; it was Daelle, the commander of the watchtower fortress nearby in Caladh.

Daelle had frequently commissioned work from Deog for his troops. Qynh had seen him before during visits with her father, albeit always from an upstairs window in the house. Daelle never removed his helm or dismounted during these encounters. He struck as fearsome a countenance on those occasions as now, as he strode across the corral toward them.

"She bears her mother's fair visage, blacksmith," Daelle called, as if offering idle greeting to Deog.

"What?" Qynh whimpered, stricken. She blinked at Deog. "Poppa, what ... what is he...?"

"Leave her be," Deog cried at them. "You cannot have her! Go and tell your bitch Queen in Belgaeran that you have failed!"

He turned to his son. "Head back toward the smithy," he said. "Cut through the woods, down to the beach." He sprang at Daelle, swinging his sword in a broad arc. "Go now, Mahres!"

Mahres speared his heels into the mare's stomach and the horse bolted, racing across the corral. She leaped the far fence and Mahres reined her hard, loping around the barn and tearing up the alley toward the smithy. He screamed, jerking against the reins as seven more riders appeared ahead of him, coming out from the forest. The black steeds plowed down the sloping hillside toward them. The riders brandished enormous swords that flashed with reflected moonlight.

"No!" Mahres cried, spurring the mare to the left. He kicked her hard in the belly, meaning to race

behind the house, into the neighboring alley, but reined her to a sliding halt once more as four more riders appeared, their huge stallions galloping around the far side of the house directly toward them.

Qynh screamed, covering her face with her hands as Mahres kicked the mare again, turning toward the mouth of the alley. The eleven riders raced behind them in a thundering pack and bore down upon them. Their steeds were too fast for the poor mare and Mahres' lead on them dwindled with every stride.

They raced past the corral and Qynh watched her father fight with Daelle. Deog glanced at them, his eyes round as he saw the eleven stallions closing in. Daelle noticed his momentary distraction and thrust his sword forward, ramming the blade through the blacksmith's chest in a single, abrupt thrust. Deog uttered a startled, strangled cry and slumped against the Damanta commander's forearm. Daelle planted his sabaton against Deog's limp figure and kicked him to the ground, freeing his blade in the same crude motion.

"Poppa!" Qynh screeched. "Sweet Mother, no, no, please no, Poppa!"

Mahres whirled in time to see his father crumple to the ground. "Father!" he screamed.

The Damantas were upon them, flanking them. One struck at Mahres with its sword, grazing the blade against his arm, and he yowled in pain and fear, pulling back on the reins. This time the mare, frightened by the proximity of the black stallions, reared back and pawed the air with her front hooves, sending Mahres tumbling off the left side of the saddle, and Qynh off the right. She hit the ground hard, her scream cutting abruptly short as the side of her head struck the dirt. The impact did not knock her out cold, but it dazed her, and she sat up slowly, bewildered.

The Damantas brought their horses to a halt in a wide ring around Qynh and Mahres and dismounted.

"Mahres!" Qynh whimpered, limping to her feet.

"Get behind me, hen, stay there," Mahres said. She cowered behind him and he turned in swift circles, eyeing the approaching Damantas. "Bastards!" he shrieked, swinging his sword. "You rotted, festering bastards!"

A Damanta lunged at him; Mahres tried to parry, but the sword sank deeply into the meat of his gut. He gasped in shock and pain, stumbling against the blade, dragging it from the soldier's fingers as he collapsed to the ground.

"Mahres!" Qynh screamed, falling to her knees. Her brother's entrails spilled out of the deep wound in his belly and across the ground, steaming in the cool night air. She hitched in a breath to scream, but her throat was worn raw; her voice, it seemed had abandoned her. "Mahres, no!" she whimpered helplessly. "Oh, Mahres, please no!"

Black steel sabatons settled against the ground before her and she blinked up at the Damanta as it leveled its sword. Tears pooled in her eyes and fell down her cheeks.

"Why are you doing this?" she whimpered, closing her eyes as the edge of the blade pushed against her throat. "What do you want?"

The wind hissed above her head and the tip of the blade wavered, slipping away from her. Qynh opened her eyes and saw an arrow buried deeply in the Damantas' helmet, sunken in the brief space of his eye slit, thrust at least halfway along the length of its shaft in the Damanta's head. The soldier tumbled

backward and she cowered, crying out miserably and throwing up her hands to shield herself as hooves thundered close to her head. She caught a quick glimpse of grey, the mottled flank of a horse reined closely beside her, and then she felt a strong arm hook about her waist, snatching her from the ground.

She was swung up onto the horse's back and fell across the rider's lap, turned side-saddle with her head against his shoulder. Qynh blinked dazedly in shock, and the rider glanced down at her as the grey stallion galloped away.

She was dimly aware that she recognized his face: his elegant, striking features; the remarkable green eyes; the lengths of dark blond plaits adorned with beads. It was the Gaeilge Elf she had imagined in the tree outside her window.

In her mind, she heard his voice. *I am Kierken*, he said. *Do not be frightened.*

"Ta tu slan fe lathair," he whispered to her aloud, and she fainted.

Chapter Two

On the morning of his sixteenth birthday, as nearly two hundred miles away Qynh Reoder awoke to the sound of her father weeping, Trejaeran Muirel awoke in the small, pastoral community of Edenvale to a loud racket beyond his bedroom door, and a low, dismayed cry from his mother.

Trejaeran sat up, blinking sleepily. His dog, an enormous, grey mastiff named Gorm, stirred alongside of him beneath the covers, stretching her long legs and yawning noisily. When another clatter came from the direction of the kitchen, Trejaeran jerked at the sound, startled.

"Mam?" he called, swinging his legs out of bed.

The dog followed him as he shuffled down the hallway beyond his bedroom, heading for the kitchen. "Mam, ta tu maith?" he called in Gaeilgen, running his fingers through his dark hair, pushing it back from his brow. *Are you alright?* He stepped through the kitchen doorway. "Mam?"

Naera Muirel blinked at him in surprise. She froze in mid-stoop near the back door, with one hand clutching the corner of the kitchen table for support and the other pressed against the considerable swell of her belly. Firewood lay scattered around her feet. She smiled at him sheepishly.

"Trejaeran, a'mac, gabh mo leithséal, I did not mean to wake you," she said. *Son, forgive me.* He hurried to her side, draping his arm across her shoulders. She straightened slowly, wincing. "I thought I might start a kettle of tea; mayhap some wehnroot might ease my back some."

"Are you in pain, Mam?" Trejaeran asked, worried. Naera was well into her ninth month of pregnancy; at any moment, her labor could come.

She smiled at him and brushed a loose curl back from his cheek. "No, a'mac, merely sore some in my back, my ankles. No more than usual."

"Here, why do you not sit?" He guided her toward a chair by the table; several well-padded cushions had been positioned in the seat to help keep Naera more comfortable. She grasped the arms of the chair and lowered herself carefully. Trejaeran kept his arm about her until she was fully seated.

"You should have called for me," Trejaeran said. He dropped to his knees and began to gather the fallen wood. "Treines said you should not lift much."

"What much?" Naera waved her hand, dismissively. "It was only a few small pieces of firewood."

Trejaeran carried the wood to the fireplace and began to arrange it against the hearth, tucking scraps of kindling in and among the shorn limbs. "Where is Poppa?"

"He is helping Eisos harrow his barley field today. He should be back by dusk, I think."

A ceramic pitcher sat on a cupboard, and Trejaeran took it in hand. "You should have called for me," he said again. "Let me draw from the well for your kettle."

Gorm bounded outside into the yard ahead of him. The dog skittered to a clumsy halt directly in his path, her thick, massive tail pummeling the air. Her back haunches folded and she sat, pressing herself against him, her shoulders meeting his thighs, her head nuzzled against his stomach.

"Gorm," Trejaeran said. He flexed his knee, gently nudging the dog. "Gorm, you are in the way."

The puppy had been presented to him nearly three years earlier by his parents' friend Dagarron Atreile. Dagarron had visited numerous times throughout Trejaeran's childhood, and had spent that entire summer with the Muirels at the insistence of Trejaeran's father, Petrich, who had wanted the man to teach Trejaeran how to read and write.

Trejaeran had enjoyed Dagarron's tutelage because he adored and admired Dagarron. The tall man with his grand wanderings throughout the whole of Tiralainn fascinated and amazed Trejaeran. He had often daydreamed of what life would be like in Dagarron's boots; no doubt filled with adventure and travel, exotic destinations and excitement.

Gorm was Trejaeran's reward for successfully completing his lessons. "She will be a big one, a'mac," Dagarron had told him. "So teach her manners now while she is still small. She will be a faithful, loyal friend to you for many years to come."

"And get in my path as often as she can," Trejaeran said fondly to Gorm, who stared up at him with large, adulating eyes, her tongue lolling happily out of her mouth.

He filled the pitcher at the well and hefted it in his arms, lugging it back to the house. As the kettle heated over the fire, he took a small cup down from a cabinet and found the line of small copper canisters his mother used to hold her numerous varieties of tea.

"Are you hungry, Mam?" he asked. "I could make you some breakfast...?"

"No, love," she said, rubbing her hands slowly against her swollen belly.

He watched her for an uncertain moment, and then said quietly, "Mam, was it this hard for you when you were heavy with me?"

She blinked at him, as if his question surprised her. "Trejaeran, you have always been a precious gift and a joy to me," she told him. "You have never caused me hardship, a'mac."

"Your tea is steeping," he told her. "And I will only be outside, in the barn or yard. You will call for me if you need anything?"

"Yes, Trejaeran. Do not worry so. Look, the sun is nearly risen. Treines will be here at any moment. Would you have me send Rhyden out to the barn?"

"I am sure Rhyden will make it there first on his own," Trejaeran told her, chuckling. He kissed her once more and walked out the back door.

Treines and Eisos Fabhcun were the Muirels' neighbors, friends to Trejaeran's family for years. The Fabhcuns were Gaeilge Elves, a race not normally found in the midrealm of Tiralainn, a historic home to mostly Mianach Elves and men. Eisos and Petrich tended their lands and barley fields together, while Treines had been helping Naera with household chores during her pregnancy. Rhyden was Trejaeran's age, only a month older, and had been his best friend practically since birth.

The Fabhcuns were not originally from Edenvale. They were of an ancient and traditional sect of Gaeilge called the Donnag'crann and had migrated to the northwestern village many years ago from much further south, a forest region below the royal city of Belgaeran called Tirnag'crann. Trejaeran had never fully understood why they had left their ancestral home to become peasant farmers in one of the realm's most forgotten corners, but he knew among the Donnag'crann in Tirnag'crann, Treines had been trained as a healer.

"She is a Banaltra," Dagarron had once explained to Trejaeran. "One of a very ancient *aicmeach*. Their secrets and rituals have been passed down from generation to generation since the *a'Tosach*—the beginning."

"A Banaltra," Trejaeran had repeated, and Dagarron nodded his head.

"Treines could tell you of the healing properties of every leaf, berry, root and bud within the whole of Tiralainn," Dagarron had told him. "I once saw her beseech the very trees to heal a poor lad, a Donnag'crann boy about your age who had fallen from the high boughs of a pine tree. She used the Banaltra healing ritual *adhmad le'draiocht* to help restore him."

"*Adhmad le'draiocht*?" Trejaeran said. The Gaeilgen term, meaning *magic of the wood*, was unfamiliar to him.

Dagarron nodded. "When a Banaltra beseeches the spirit of the wood, and if the trees deem the injured or failing Elf to be worthy of heart, they can grant benefit of their own energy, their own life force. The Banaltra can channel this energy and through it restore a fellow's strength and vigor. It is a gracious gift extended to only a rare few, even among the Donnag'crann."

At the time, this ancient ritual of *adhmad le'draiocht* through which Treines could exchange pain and suffering for a tree's blessings of life and vitality had sounded like magic to Trejaeran. However, within the last few months, things that had once struck him as magic no longer seemed so impossible.

Several weeks earlier, before spring leaves had filled out winter's barren branches, Trejaeran had been helping his father and Eisos mend fences throughout the farm. He remembered that cold February morning well. Petrich had discovered a length of top rail that had rotted and splintered out in the western field; he and Eisos struggled to lay a new beam in its place and Petrich had been calling to Trejaeran for assistance.

He had heard his father, but it had seemed to him that Petrich called from a great distance, his voice soft and faint. He had found himself staring, transfixed by a fragile, twisted widdenberry tree growing along the fenceline. It seemed he could hear this little, forlorn tree in his mind; it was weeping.

Trejaeran

He had walked toward the tree, stood beneath its slender, crooked limbs and turned his face up.

Trejaeran, fuilim fulaint ... I am suffering

He had reached for the tree, sudden, unexpected tears welling in his eyes.

le do thoil, ta me scanradh ... please, I am frightened

"Bocht crann," Trejaeran had murmured. *Poor tree*. When his fingers had brushed against the tiny, scarlet leaf buds beaded along the limbs, he had seen clearly in his mind: the tree was blighted somehow.

the duchar

Its roots ran deep, but grew shriveled and blackened beneath the soil. Trejaeran had felt its sickness

the duchar

within him like a faint, slithering sensation, something moving

creeping

behind his eyes.

"Ta me libh," he had whispered to the tree. *I am with you*. "Ta bron orm chuig do'pian." *I am sorry for your pain*.

"Trejaeran!" his father had said, his hand falling sternly against Trejaeran's shoulder, snapping him from his stupor, startling him.

"I have been calling to you! Have you been struck deaf, a'mac?" Petrich had cried, his brows narrowed sternly. His face had softened with concern when he realized Trejaeran was near to tears. "What is it, lad? What is wrong?"

"It is dying," Trejaeran had whispered, regarding the tree with mournful eyes. "It is dying, Poppa, I ... I can feel it suffering, here, inside." Trejaeran had placed his fingertips lightly against his chest.

"It is a tree, Trejaeran," Petrich had said, aggravated with him. "Trees die all the time."

Trejaeran had made mention of this incident to Rhyden. He thought his friend might tease him, but Rhyden had seemed untroubled.

"Mum says it is perfectly normal," he said. "In Tirnag'crann, my Donnag'crann ancestors listened to the trees all the time, and talked to them, too. They could even talk to one another in their minds, and some of them could even move things just by thinking about it long and hard. It is called the sight. It is a gift among the Elves, Mum says."

Trejaeran did not know if he would consider it a gift or not. He had found the best way to deal with this fledgling—and admittedly peculiar—ability was simply to picture a trap door inside of his mind. Anytime he felt the sight stirring within him; anytime he heard whispering voices or unfamiliar thoughts fluttering through his head, Trejaeran would simply picture a trapdoor standing open, and he would imagine closing it, planting his hands against the wood to hold it firmly in place. That usually seemed to do the trick; it would make the sight subside, his mind his own again, for which Trejaeran was grateful. He did not say anything more about it to his parents; he feared that Petrich and Naera would be angry with him if they suspected. They were practical sorts who did not waste time on things like magic or superstition. There was always too much work to be done in their fields or homes, as Petrich would have pointed out.

"I swear by my boot heels, Trejaeran, if your head is not poked in a book somewhere, then it is floating up among the clouds, lost in a dream," Rhyden laughed from behind him.

Trejaeran had ducked into the barn to feed and water the cow, Blath before milking her for the morning. He had been standing by the cow's stall, lost in thought, watching her bury her broad nose in the feed trough. At Rhyden's voice, he turned, startled and blushing sheepishly. "Good morrow, Rhyden. I ... I am sorry. I did not hear you. I was..."

"I know, you were daydreaming," Rhyden interjected kindly. Over the winter months, Rhyden had gone through a dramatic growth spurt, gaining four inches on his lean, lanky frame. He now stood nearly a full head taller than Trejaeran. He had hair the color of ripened wheat, a thick and heavy mane that spilled down his back, falling to just below the apex of his shoulders in the traditional Gaeilge fashion. His dark brown eyes, narrow brows and sharp, angular features lent him a stern countenance that stood in stark contrast to his untroubled, affable nature.

Rhyden leaned over the side of the stall as Trejaeran squatted against a milking stool and reached for Blath's plump udder. "And I bet I know what you were daydreaming about, too," he said, grinning broadly.

Trejaeran glanced at him, color stoking in his cheeks. "Stop it, Rhyden."

"Emylein Braedy," Rhyden said, leaning precariously over the stall. He reached out, tousling Trejaeran's hair, making his friend frown as he hunkered his shoulders, ducking away. "Am I right?"

"No, you are not. Stop it, le do thoil." Trejaeran said.

"It is your birthday," Rhyden said. "She asked you to meet her midday at the bridge. She has a present to give you. Will she kiss you, do you think, bidein?"

Bidein was Rhyden's affectionate nickname for Trejaeran, and one that Trejaeran loathed. It was Gaeilgen for *little nip*, and served as pointed and unnecessary reminder of Trejaeran's rather stunted height in comparison to other boys their age.

"She is not going to kiss me, Rhyden," Trejaeran said, shrugging as again, Rhyden's fingers tousled his hair. "Stop it now. She only asked me to be nice. Friendly-like."

"Friendly, my ass," Rhyden said with a wink. "You have pined over Emy for ... How long now? Three years? Four? She knows it, too—you mark me at that. She has known it all the while. Girls are like that. She means to kiss you."

"How would you know?" Trejaeran asked, frowning.

Rhyden laughed. "Because unlike you, bidein, I have kissed and been kissed before. I know how girls are, trust me."

He had been rooting around in his belt pouch; now, he produced a small sack and held it against his palm. "Here, bidein," he said, offering the pouch to Trejaeran. "La de'breith sona duit." *Happy birthday to you.*

Surprised, Trejaeran blinked at Rhyden. "What is this?"

"It is a gift, what else?" Rhyden asked, seeming somewhat embarrassed.

"You did not have to get me a gift, Rhyden," Trejaeran said. He opened the pouch and blinked as he slipped his fingertips inside. "Rhyden!" he exclaimed, pleased. He drew out a silver penannular brooch and admired it in the faint, grey daylight. The cloak pin terminals had been wrought in the likenesses of owls.

"It is not as good as a kiss from Emy, I know..." Rhyden began, and Trejaeran laughed.

"It is splendid, Rhyden," he said, looking at his friend, touched. "It must have cost you a dear pence."

Rhyden shrugged. "It was not much," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "Happy birthday, bidein."

Rhyden helped Trejaeran tend to his morning chores, and then he and Treines returned to the Fabhcuns' farm. Petrich and Eisos would be in from the fields soon for lunch, and Treines wanted to have something hot and ready when they arrived. After they had left, Trejaeran fixed Naera a cold lunch of apples and butter cheese.

"You are not eating, a'mac?" she asked, curious as he only set one place at the table.

"I ... I told someone I would meet them for lunch at the bridge at midday, if that is alright," he said. He felt shy color bloom in his cheeks and he looked down at his toes. "I would not be gone long, Mam, I promise. A friend has a birthday present for me, that is all."

Naera smiled at him. "Could this friend be Emylein Braedy, mayhap?"

He glanced at her, blushed furiously and looked down again. "Yes," he said.

"Well, that is fine, then, a'mac," Naera said. "Tend to the rest of your chores before you leave."

"Yes, Mam," he said, and he beamed.

"Rhyden gave you this?" Emy asked. She had surprised him with a picnic overlooking the river, shaded and secluded beneath the low-hanging boughs of a weeping willow tree. She scooted closer to him to admire his brooch. "It was very nice of him."

"Yes," Trejaeran said, nodding. He met her gaze and could not turn away from her. "Yes, it was."

Emy blushed, drawing something out of her dress pocket. "I have something for you, too," she said.

Trejaeran blinked in surprise. "What? But this ... The picnic is plenty, Emy. You did not have to go to any more trouble."

"It was no trouble," she said, pressing the gift against his palm. It was a coin purse, fashioned from soft hide and stitched tightly together along a thin seam. "It is not much. Just something I made," she said. "Nowhere near as nice as Rhyden's. You do not have to keep it if you do not like it."

He looked up into her expectant eyes and smiled. "It is wonderful," he told her. "You made this?"

She nodded, blushing at his praise. "You like it, then?" she asked hopefully. "Truly, Trejaeran?"

"I like it truly, Emy. It is splendid," he assured her. "Thank you."

She smiled and leaned toward him, canting her head slightly. "You are welcome," she said. She touched his face and he could not move; he could not breathe. He sat there, helpless and immobilized, thinking to himself that he would surely never doubt Rhyden again as Emy drew near, her eyes fluttering closed, her lips pursing slightly to meet his. He felt the soft intake of her breath against his mouth and he closed his eyes, absolutely paralyzed with anticipation.

Contuirt, the willow tree whispered to Trejaeran. *Ta tu i'gcontuirt*. You are in danger.

Trejaeran jerked back from Emy, his eyes flown wide in start. "Hoah!"

"What is it?" Emy asked. "Is something wrong, Trejaeran?"

Ta a scath de do'namhaid ta se ar tu, the tree said. *The shadow of your enemy is upon you*.

"Trejaeran?" Emy said.

In his mind, Trejaeran saw

Damantas

his mother spitting against the blackened steel sabatons of an enormous, hulking, terrifying soldier

Phyndaegon

Trejaeran knew Naera was in terrible pain. He could feel the knotting, writhing ache in her gut and understood that the baby was coming; she had fallen into labor.

"Long live Lythaniele's prophecy," Naera seethed at Phyndaegon as she spat. "By my very breath, you will never have my son."

And in his mind, Trejaeran heard a terrifying, whispering voice, not the voice of the willow tree, but something evil and insidious; something that fully meant to butcher his mother.

As you wish, foolish Mianach bitch

"Phyndaegon!" Trejaeran gasped, scrambling to his feet, stumbling clumsily. Emy reached for him, frightened.

"Trejaeran?" she said, rising. Her eyes were round, bright with fear and bewilderment. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"I ... I have to go now," he said, drawing away from her. "I am sorry. I have to go."

"What?" She blinked at him, startled. "Why? What is it? What has happened?"

"It is my mother," he said. "Please, Emy, I ... I am sorry. I think she is labor and she is home by herself. I must go to her."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "How do you know that?" she asked softly.

"I do not know," he said. "I ... I just do." He turned and began to run, ducking among the willow branches as he headed for the road.

As he approached the farm, he heard a strange and unfamiliar sound, a strangled, anguished sort of cry. *That sounded like Poppa*, he thought, bewildered because it was not possible for Petrich to be home yet; he would still be with Eisos out in the fields.

The cry came again and Trejaeran ran, frightened anew, because it was Petrich's voice; his father wailing in despair.

"Poppa!" he cried, and as he bolted around the side of the house, his feet came to a skittering, startled halt. The very air in his lungs seized tightly in his chest, and he gasped loudly, stunned.

Naera lay on the ground, her head turned toward Trejaeran. Her face had been savagely torn; there were brutal, gaping wounds in her forehead and cheeks. Her eyes were gone, ripped from her skull and her jaw had been wrenched open so far, it had broken upon its hinges.

"Mam!" Trejaeran whimpered. The dog, Gorm lay sprawled beside her in a bloody puddle, her liver and lights torn loose of her gut and spilled against the grass. Trejaeran's stomach knotted and he staggered, whirling around and vomiting his lunch.

"Trejaeran! Mathair Maith, no!" he heard Petrich scream, and he blinked in fear and confusion toward the sound of his voice.

He had been so horrified by the sight of his mother's corpse, he had taken no notice of the Damantas standing between him and Petrich. Trejaeran stared at them, as the largest of them all stepped toward him with brutal purpose; the one Naera had spat her last words at.

Phyndaegon

"Trejaeran, run!" Petrich screamed. "For the love of the Good Mother, a'mac, run away! Bastards! Leave him be! You cannot have him!"

Petrich roared like some sort of desperate, deranged animal and he charged at the line of Damantas between him and his son. He barreled into their ranks, his large fists swinging furiously, his thick elbows plowing into breastplates, his broad shoulders shoving past armored forearms and backs. Several of the Damantas grappled with him, pummeling his face, head and neck with their gauntlets, driving their spiked sabatons into his stomach, his groin. Petrich crumpled beneath them, crying out to Trejaeran. "Run, a'mac!" he shrieked. "Le do thoil, run!"

"Poppa!" Trejaeran wailed. He staggered backward, but terror had slapped all of the sense from him. He could not bring himself to flee; he trembled where he stood as the huge Damanta, Phyndaegon strode toward him.

"Beannacht, a'leaid," Phyndaegon said to him in a gentle voice.

"Le ... le do thoil," Trejaeran whimpered. He stumbled away from the Damanta, his eyes enormous upon the crested black helm. "Please ... please do not hurt my father!"

"I would not harm your father, Trejaeran," Phyndaegon said, his voice still quiet, nearly kind. "He is a strong Mianach. He will make my Queen a mighty warrior."

Behind Phyndaegon, two of the Damantas who bore bows instead of broadswords nocked arrows to their bowstrings, drawing their marks upon Trejaeran.

"Why are you doing this?" Trejaeran cried. "What do you want?"

You are the heir, Phyndaegon whispered inside of his mind. I want you, little one.

The first archer fired. Trejaeran heard the hiss of the arrow's approach and then his left shoulder exploded in bright, searing pain. The force of the arrow's hit knocked the boy off of his feet. He slammed against the grass and arched his back, screaming.

He stared in dazed shock at the thick arrow shaft protruding from his chest; this was no mere hunting arrow, best suited for drawing upon rabbits or squirrels. This was a full-fledged war arrow, with a shaft at least the circumference of his index finger.

Trejaeran heard his father shrieking his name, saw the hulking shadow of Phyndaegon as he stepped near to him, reaching for him and the world began to fade as he swooned.

A blinding flash of sunlight against silver darted above Trejaeran's head and Phyndaegon staggered backwards, reeling, his arms pinwheeling in the air as he howled. The hilt of a sword, thrown with lethal accuracy, protruded from the middle of his forehead.

"By my cleadh mor, you will not have the boy, Phyndaegon!" Trejaeran heard a loud voice cry out and then there was a thunder of hooves as a cream-colored horse, an enormous palomino, rushed upon him.

The horse was ridden by an Elf, a Gaeilge with long white hair and pale, nearly crystalline blue eyes.

The Elf leaned treacherously far in his saddle as he approached, holding himself on his horse's back with only the strength of his legs as he reached for Trejaeran, meaning to grab him, to lift him from the ground and rescue him.

I am here, a'leaid, he heard the Elf say within his mind. *Take my hands, Trejaeran, reach for me—*

Enraged, Phyndaegon lunged with impossible speed into the charging horse's path, seizing the Elf by the throat. He uttered a startled, strangled yelp of surprise and for a split second Trejaeran was looking directly up at the Elf's face, into his wide, alarmed eyes as he yet reached for the boy, and then Phyndaegon jerked him from his steed.

"Beannacht, Iasal," Phyndaegon purred, pulling the Elf Iasal close to his helm, his grip tightening about

his throat. Phyndaegon held him aloft so that his boots dangled helplessly above the ground. "How delightful to see you once more, a'cara. And now without your precious cleadh mor. I thought you of the Buion were not allowed to part with your pretty little sabers."

Phyndaegon wrapped his fist around the sword hilt at his forehead and slowly pulled the long, silver blade free from his skull. Iasal struggled vainly as the Damanta's grip crushed his throat.

"Do not fret, beag alainn Buion," Phyndaegon hissed. *Pretty little Buion*. "I will not slay you. Like our Mianach friend here, you will make a lovely gift for my Queen. How I will enjoy watching you writhe as your will is broken by the duchar, Iasal. Your tormented shrieks will be as music to my ears."

"Never, Phyndaegon!" a voice cried out.

More hooves pounded against the earth near Trejaeran's head, and a woman with short, blonde curls rode past him, her hands busied as she drew her mark with a short-limbed bow, her black mare spurred to a frenzied gallop. Trejaeran tried to cower from the heavy fall of swift hooves, but the moment he moved, his shoulder shrieked in agonizing protest. As he drew in breath to scream, more blood rushed up his throat in a sudden, terrifying flood, filling his nose, spurting from his mouth. He could gasp no air past it and he choked, panicking and clawing helplessly at his throat as he drowned.

Something enormous and white moved in a blur past him and he felt a strong hand grasp him firmly by the collar of his cloak and shirt, yanking against him. Trejaeran was jerked into the air; he nearly fainted from the swell of pain in his shoulder that accompanied the movement and then there was wind rushing against his face. He choked up blood and his throat cleared enough to drag in a whooping, desperate mouthful of air.

The pain was too much; he could not bear it. He swooned, his dazed and anguished gaze finding Eisos' face; somehow he had come to be in Eisos' arms, astride Eisos' white stallion, Dherga.

"Trejaeran, le do thoil, do not leave me," Eisos pleaded softly, and there were tears in his eyes. "Le do thoil ... please, do not!"

Trejaeran opened his mouth to speak, and blood gurgled feebly from his throat. His eyelids fluttered and he fainted, his head drooping against Eisos' chest.

Chapter Three

Qynh had ridden the night through with the young Elf who had rescued her from the Damantas. He had spurred his horse to a furious pace, and had not slowed until the sun began to rise on the new morrow. With daylight upon them at last, the Elf drew his exhausted stallion to a halt.

He dismounted, swinging his leg around the animal's flank, his boots landing almost soundlessly against the ground. He turned to Qynh, reaching for her. He held out his hands and spoke to her in Gaeilgen, words she did not understand. She sat motionless on the saddle, her shoulders hunched as she shivered with shock.

They had entered a dense and sprawling forest. The Elf managed to coax her from the saddle, but Qynh darted away from him, wrenching loose of his grasp. She fell onto her knees, trembling beneath a stand of pine trees, her eyes enormous and haunted, glassy with tears that had not waned through the night. Her

fingers twined anxiously against the tattered folds of her dress; it was soiled and torn, soaked with Mahres' blood and she stared down at the lap of her skirt, whimpering softly as her tears fell unabated.

The Elf reached into a saddle bag, finding a bundle of clothing, a leine and breeches rolled together. He brought them to her, along with a filled waterskin. Qynh recoiled in bright, new fear at his approach, cowering as he genuflected in the fallen leaves and soft pine needles before her, offering her the clothes and water.

"Do ... do not touch me," she whimpered, her voice hoarse and quavering.

"Ta me Kierken," he said to her in a quiet, gentle voice. "Ta me do'cara, mo'ribhinn. Ta tu slan anois."

She blinked at him in bewilderment. "Do you not know Gaeilgen, my lady?" he asked in the popular tongue. He reached out, setting the bundle of clothing and the waterskin between them. "I will not hurt you. I am Kierken Mailp, nineteenth son of Sheain, third son of Taemas, of the Buion aicmeach among the Donnag'crann Gaeilge, in my sixteenth year of Ag'iarraidh. I am here to serve you, my lady, as your protector."

She blinked at him, confused. "I ... I saw you," she whispered. "In the tree outside my window, I ... I saw you."

He nodded. "I have kept vigil over you since last week, my lady."

"What?" Qynh blinked, startled. "I ... I do not ... Why?"

"I have sworn an oath to see you protected," he said, his green eyes round and earnest. "I would abide by my word, my lady."

She stared at him in astonished disbelief. "Please," she whispered. "Please, is my father dead?"

Kierken raised his brows sorrowfully, sympathetically. "Yes, my lady," he said.

Tears fell from her eyes and she moaned, a mournful, wrenching sound. "And Mahres?" she said. "He is, too?"

"Yes, my lady," he said. "I am sorry."

Qynh gasped, shuddering, her face twisting in despair. "Oh, no, please, no!"

She brought her hands toward her mouth and began to weep, her shoulders trembling, her breath fluttering in her throat. Kierken reached for her and she flinched, whimpering. "No!" she gasped.

"Do not be frightened," he said softly, resting his palm against her forehead, letting his fingers spread through the crown of her hair. "I will not hurt you."

At his touch, Qynh found herself falling still and quiet, her alarm and uncertainty suddenly lifting from her, as though his fingertips bid it pass. He began to whisper, turning his face toward the ground and speaking in soothing, rhythmic Gaeilgen. As he spoke, it was as though he reached within Qynh's mind, indeed, within her very heart, unfettering a massive, terrible stone yoke from her. She felt the tension within her loosen beneath his hand, the release spreading through her like dim heat.

"What did you do to me?" Qynh breathed as he drew his hand away.

Kierken pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose, his brows lifted in pain, as though he had assumed whatever suffering had inexplicably waned within her heart and now he struggled to reconcile this torment within him.

"Your grief is too great for you to bear at this moment," he said. "I have the gift of sight, my lady, and I have used it to draw the pain from your heart deep within my own, that you might find some solace, some relief from it awhile."

"What?" Qynh stared at him, stunned. She shook her head. "No, you cannot ... No, that ... that is not possible. There is no such thing as the sight."

He seemed genuinely puzzled by her disbelief. *Of course there is, my lady*, he told her, his voice heard within her mind and not her ears, making her gasp aloud.

She stared at him, trembling and stricken. "Please," she whimpered. "Please take me back to Lyhndale. I want to go home."

"I cannot bring you back to Lyhndale, my lady," Kierken said. "It is no longer safe for you there. I am bringing you north to Ciarrai County, the manor house of Orinein. It is a Comhar stronghold."

She blinked at him, bewildered. "Comhar?"

He nodded. "You will be safe there among your allies. I am taking you to meet your brother."

Qynh's throat constricted, her breath tangling. "But you told me my brother is dead," she whispered.

"No, my lady," Kierken said. "I said Mahres Reoder is dead. Your brother yet lives."

When Trejaeran opened his eyes, he found himself in a sun-filled room, with his head against soft pillows, warm blankets tucked about him. "Where ... where am I?" he murmured, disoriented and confused. He sat up, his head swimming dizzily. He moaned, bringing his hands toward his face.

"Easy, Trejaeran. You are still very weak," said a gentle and familiar voice from his right. Trejaeran turned and saw a man seated next to the bed, a book of poems opened against his lap. His handsome yet weary face, sharp angular features and kind, dark eyes were well and fondly known to the boy.

"Dagarron?" Trejaeran blinked, bewildered.

Dagarron Atreile smiled at him, setting his book aside. "Yes, a'mac," he said. "Welcome back to us."

"You are really here, Dagarron?" Trejaeran asked. "I am not dreaming?"

"No, a'mac, you are not dreaming. I am here."

Trejaeran cried out happily and hugged his friend. "Hoah, I have missed you!" he exclaimed against Dagarron's sleeve. "I thought you might never come to visit again!"

Trejaeran sat back from him and the smile faltered on his face. "But ... but this ... this is not right; this is not home. Where am I, Dagarron? What has happened? I do not remember..."

He blinked, his expression growing troubled. "I remember now. I remember running home. I saw Mam..."

His eyes widened as he remembered Naera lying murdered in the yard and Petrich screaming at him

Trejaeran, run! For the love of the Good Mother, a'mac, run away! Bastards! Leave him be! You cannot have him!

Trejaeran looked plaintively at Dagarron. "Mam is dead? And ... and Poppa..." he whispered. His eyes swam with tears as he remembered the Damantas beating Petrich with their fists, driving their spurred sabatons into his gut. "Le do thoil, tell me it is not true, Dagarron. Please, tell me I have been dreaming!"

"Oh, a'mac," Dagarron whispered. "I wish that were so."

"But it ... it cannot be. It cannot," Trejaeran said, and he burst into bewildered, frightened tears. Dagarron drew him against his shoulder in a fierce hug.

"I am sorry, Trejaeran," Dagarron said as the boy shuddered with the force of his sobs. "I am so sorry, a'mac." He held Trejaeran until his anguished cries subsided and he sat back once more, trembling in the bed.

"Why, Dagarron?" Trejaeran asked in a quiet, anguished voice. "Why has this happened? I do not understand ... I..."

"I know," Dagarron said. "I know you are confused and frightened, a'mac. I wish I could spare you this pain. I have tried, Trejaeran. I have tried to keep it from you, but I could not, and I am sorry."

He reached out and curled his fingers against the boy's palm. "There is no gentle manner of explaining this to you, no words that will not bring you pain and grief, a'mac, though I wish so desperately that there were." Dagarron's eyes shimmered with his own sudden tears. "I would give anything, a'mac, to keep you from this."

"What?" Trejaeran whimpered. The sight of Dagarron's tears, the hurting and mournful quaver in his friend's voice frightened him anew. "Keep me from what, Dagarron?"

"The truth, a'mac," Dagarron told him softly, his brows raised as though the utterance pained him beyond measure. "The Damantas came to Edenvale for you, Trejaeran. They came in search of you."

Trejaeran blinked at him in disbelief. "Me?" he whimpered. He shook his head. "No ... no, that cannot be true, that is not true, Dagarron!"

"Trejaeran," Dagarron said and his voice was quiet and kind. "Listen to me. Petrich and Naera loved you. You were precious to them; nothing in all of Tiralainn meant more to them than you, a'mac. But you were not born to them."

"What?" Trejaeran flinched as if Dagarron had just slapped the cuff of his hand against his face.

"I brought you to them when you were a baby," Dagarron said. "Petrich and Naera raised you as their own, but your birth parents, Trejaeran, were my cousin, Herdranges—a man, the King—and his Gaeilge Queen, Lythaniele. You are a prince, a'mac, one of the rightful heirs to the throne of Tiralainn."

Trejaeran jerked away from him, his eyes round with horror as he recoiled. "What are you saying?" he cried. "That is untrue!"

"It is true," Dagarron said. He reached for Trejaeran, but the boy cowered, drawing back against the headboard. "Trejaeran, your birth father, the King, was murdered sixteen years ago by your uncle, Lahnduren. Your mother Lythaniele took great risk to have you smuggled from Belgaeran and brought to me. She bid me to keep you hidden, keep you safe, and by my soul, Trejaeran, I meant only that when I brought you to Petrich and Naera. They were my friends, dear and beloved to me, and I knew they would love you, a'mac, as their son, and that they would protect you. I did not think the Damantas would ever find you in Edenvale. I thought you would be safe there, all of your days.

"But I was wrong, a'mac, and you have suffered for it—and yet suffer now—and I am sorry."

"It is not true," Trejaeran said, fresh tears in his eyes. "Ta tu i mo loighe!" *You are lying!* He scrambled from the bed. The moment he was upright, his feet upon the floor, his equilibrium abandoned him and he stumbled dazedly, nearly swooning.

Dagarron hurried around the bed. "You should not be on your feet, a'mac. You are weak, lad. You need to recover your strength."

"Do not touch me!" Trejaeran cried, staggering away from Dagarron, holding his hand out to keep the man at bay. His head swam again and he dropped to his knees, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes. He shivered, numb inside, cold with shock and dismay. "It cannot be true," he whispered. "It cannot."

Dagarron stroked the boy's tangled hair, choked with his own tears. "Le do thoil, Trejaeran," he whispered. *Please.* "Ta bron orm." *I am sorry.*

Trejaeran wept again, and Dagarron clutched the boy against him, sharing in his tears.

"Bidein, you are awake!" Rhyden exclaimed, rushing into the room some time later, his brown eyes swimming with tears.

"Hullo, Rhyden," Trejaeran said. "Ni caoineann tu, a'cara, ta se maith." *Do not cry, it is alright.*

"I am not crying. The sun has cast a glare in my eyes," Rhyden told him with a feigned and fleeting frown. The corners of his mouth lifted in a smile and he uttered a happy cry as he threw his arms about Trejaeran's shoulders. "Mathair Maith, bidein, I thought I would never hear you speak again!" he gasped against Trejaeran's ear.

As he leaned back from Trejaeran, Rhyden touched his face. "Do you remember what happened, Trejaeran? The Damantas at your farm, the arrow through your shoulder, the—"

"Rhyden, ciunas," Treines said, following her son into the room. *Hush.*

"Ta se maith, Treines," Trejaeran said to her. "I remember, it is alright. I woke a bit earlier today and Dagarron told me."

He'd been sitting up in bed for some time, drowsy but unable to doze, his mind restless and dismayed by the things Dagarron had told him. The man had left him awhile earlier, during a quiet moment when

Trejaeran had let his eyelids droop closed. He had feigned sleep as he'd listened to Dagarron softly take his leave; Trejaeran hadn't had the heart for anymore company, fond or otherwise, and had simply wanted to be alone in his shock and grief.

Seeing Rhyden had changed that immediately and in full, however; Trejaeran had been helpless but to smile, closing his eyes against the sting of tears as Rhyden had clutched at him, hugging him fiercely.

"How do you feel, a'leaid?" Eisos asked, joining his wife and son at Trejaeran's bedside.

Trejaeran winced at the stiffness in his limbs; the muscles in his neck and shoulders felt tense and sore. "As though I have lain prone in bed for a week," he admitted.

"Only a week?" Rhyden arched his brow. "Try three!"

"Three weeks?" Trejaeran blinked, startled. "I have slept for three weeks?"

"You lost a great deal of blood, Trejaeran," Treines said. She sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked his hair.

"There were times when we did not know if you would survive," Rhyden said grimly. His expression softened and he looked toward Treines, smiling. "But Mum did her best to keep you with us, bidein, and it looks like she may yet succeed."

Trejaeran looked around the enormous room, seeing it fully and with a clear mind for the first time. He was amazed by the towering windows, the ornate furniture and elaborate tapestry wallhangings. The bed chamber alone was nearly the size of the Muirel farmhouse. "Mathair Maith," he said breathlessly. "Rhyden, Treines, what is this place?"

"Hoah, bidein, this is Orinein, the home of Dagarron's cousin—and yours, Trejaeran—the good Lady Airrenigh Atreile an'Clare," Rhyden told him. "She is the widow of a Baronmaster; she rules over Ciarrai County. We are guests in her manor house. When you feel well enough, I can give you a tour, if you would like. It is as large as a village proper, truly!"

"My cousin," Trejaeran murmured. He looked at Eisos and Treines, troubled. "You knew?" he asked. "You knew that I did not belong to Mam and Poppa, that I was Herdranges's heir."

"Trejaeran, no," Treines said. She reached out and touched his face. "We knew you were the heir. We have always known. But you belonged to Naera and Petrich, Trejaeran. Do not ever think you did not, because they loved you more than anything."

"Did you know, Rhyden?" Trejaeran asked, turning to his friend.

Rhyden blinked, hurt. "No, bidein, of course not." He shook his head. "I never would have kept it from you if I had."

The chamber door opened and Dagarron walked in, followed by a petite woman with short blond hair. Dagarron smiled when he saw Trejaeran sitting up in bed. "Beannacht, Trejaeran," he said.

"Beannacht, Dagarron," Trejaeran said, peering curiously and somewhat shyly at the woman. Her face was familiar to him, and he struggled to place her in his mind.

"How was your rest?" Dagarron asked. He sat beside Rhyden on the edge of the bed.

"It was well," Trejaeran said. He slipped his hand against Dagarron's, folding his fingers against the man's palm. When Dagarron drew him toward his shoulder, Trejaeran did not resist, and when Dagarron wrapped his arms about his shoulders, holding him, Trejaeran returned the embrace.

"I am so sorry, Trejaeran," Dagarron whispered.

"I know, Dagarron," Trejaeran said, closing his eyes. "It is not your fault."

"Trejaeran, a'mac, this is Wyndetta Graegan," Dagarron said, turning toward the blond woman. "She helped to care for you when you were a baby. She is the one who rescued you from Belgaeran and brought you to me when—"

"Dagarron, le do thoil," Wyndetta said. "He was only an infant. You are not likely to jar his memory of me." She smiled at Trejaeran. "It is good to see you well again."

"I remember you," Trejaeran told her and she blinked at him, surprised. "I saw you in Edenvale. You came to rescue me."

Wyndetta glanced toward Dagarron and then smiled at Trejaeran. "I did, yes," she said, nodding.

Another figure, a tall, flaxen-haired Elf stepped into the doorway, and as Trejaeran caught sight of him over Dagarron's shoulder, he realized that like Wyndetta's, the Elf's countenance was familiar. "And this is Iasal Gabhlan, of the Donnag'crann Buion aicmeach," Dagarron said.

"I remember you from Edenvale, too," Trejaeran said. "You spoke to me inside of my mind. You told me to reach for you."

Iasal nodded once. "I have the sight, a'leaid, just as you," he said.

Trejaeran could see the dim shadows of fading bruises above the high neckline of Iasal's tunic, and his brows lifted. "Phyndaegon hurt you," he whispered, aghast.

Iasal smiled slightly and lowered his head in polite deference. "He did his best to, yes," he said.

"Are you well enough for yet one other visitor, a'mac?" Dagarron asked. "There is someone else who would like very much to see you."

"Someone else?" Trejaeran said, puzzled.

Another Elf stepped across the threshold, handsome and tall, with dark blond hair and bright green eyes.

He led a young woman into the room, smiling at her in patient encouragement, as though she needed coaxing to come forth. The girl lingered shyly behind her Elfin escort, but when she saw Trejaeran in the bed, her eyes grew wide and she stepped tentatively out from behind his shoulder.

She had long, dark hair, nearly black in hue. Her eyes were large, a startling shade of blue Trejaeran knew well from sixteen years spent examining his own reflection. "Mathair Maith!" he gasped.

"Trejaeran, this is Qynh Reoder," Dagarron said. "She is your sister, a'mac. Your twin."

Trejaeran pushed the blankets aside and swung his legs out of the bed. He stood on unsteady feet; Rhyden placed a helpful hand against the small of his back until Trejaeran rediscovered his balance.

Qynh walked slowly toward him, her eyes flooded with tears. "I have seen you in my mind," she whispered. "Ever since I was a little girl, I have seen you."

He nodded, staring at her in abject wonder. "I have dreamed about you," he said, breathlessly. "I have seen you, too."

Qynh raised her palm toward him. Her lips trembled and she drew in a soft, ragged breath as he brought hand up to touch hers in familiar greeting.

"You are real," he said softly, incredulous.

"So are you," she replied, and she burst into tears as Trejaeran hugged her.

The others took their leave, and Qynh and Trejaeran sat on the bed; Trejaeran with his shoulders resting against the headboard, his knees drawn up to his chest, and Qynh by the footboard, with one leg tucked beneath her, the other dangling over the edge of the mattress.

"Do you know?" she asked. "Have they told you?"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "But I do not know if I believe it yet or not. Is this place your home? Have you been here all of this time?"

"No," Qynh said. "I lived in Lyhndale. Kierken brought me here after my birthday, after..." She blinked against the sting of sudden tears.

"Did the Damantas murder your family, too, Qynh?" Trejaeran whispered.

"Yes," she said, her voice hoarse and tremulous. "My Poppa and my brother, Mahres."

They looked at one another for a long, silent moment.

"What is going to happen to us, Qynh?" Trejaeran whispered at length.

"I do not know. Dagarron says we will be safe here at Orinein, that the Damantas cannot reach us here."

Trejaeran drew back against the headboard. "I want to go home," he whispered, his shoulders trembling. "I am all alone now, and I cannot bear it."

"No," Qynh said, touching his face, drawing his gaze. "No, you are not alone. You told me that once, and I have held fast to it, believed in it ever since, Trejaeran. I have believed in you. You are not alone. I am here. I am with you."

He turned his face against her palm. "Do you promise, Qynh?" he asked softly.

"By my breath, I do," Qynh whispered, and she leaned toward him, catching him in her arms, holding him.

Chapter Four

As he sat at Trejaeran's bedside at Orinein, the manor house of his cousin Lady Airrenigh Atreile an'Clare and watched the boy sleep restlessly, Dagarron had blinked against tears. Elves were exceptional healers, their physiology so accelerated and advanced beyond the race of men that past their childhood years Elves never became ill, suffering neither blight nor fever. Injuries that would be grievous and devastating to a man would seldom prove so to an Elf, as their bodies were capable of rapidly knitting broken bones, closing even the most gruesome of wounds and staving off the worst of infections.

Trejaeran was not fully Elfin, however. The blood of men—Herdranges's blood—flowed as much through his veins as did Lythaniele's, and by this birthright, the boy did not heal as one of pure Elfin descent. He had languished for many long weeks at Orinein, his poor, injured body lingering upon the threshold of frailty as Treines's Banaltra medicines and infusions worked to heal and restore him.

"Ta me libh, Trejaeran," Dagarron had breathed, brushing Trejaeran's disheveled hair from his brow. "Ni eagliann, a'mac. Ta me libh." *Do not fear, son. I am with you.*

The pain in Trejaeran's heart now surely surpassed any he had suffered from the arrow. Even if he had possessed in full the Elfin healing wiles, such blessings could not have prevented or assuaged such suffering and grief. Dagarron knew he was the cause of Trejaeran's sorrow, his suffering, and this realization nearly saw him broken.

He had never had children of his own. From the moment he had stepped outside of the pub in Mehnine sixteen years ago and met Wyndetta Graegan and the twins, Dagarron's life had been surrendered to them, and to the final promise Lythaniele had begged of him through Wyndetta, her nursemaid.

"Lythaniele told me you are a skilled traveler," Wyndetta had told him that night in the stables outside of the Fortune's Folly. "That you will be able to hide the babies where Lahnduren can never find them." Her eyes had filled with fear and sorrow. "Lythaniele told me that Lahnduren has given himself over to some sort of dark power, that it has corrupted him, made him mad. She told me she had foreseen that one of the twins would one day overthrow his rule and restore the alliance between menfolk and Elves.

"Lythaniele saw these events unfold, but could not see which twin would persevere. She told me Lahnduren had seen these things, too; that he meant to murder the babies. She begged me to take them to Mehnine, to you. She trusted you to hide them."

And so Dagarron had. He and Wyndetta had brought the princess, Isgaara, to his old and beloved friend Deog Reoder in Lyhndale and the prince, Isgaan, to another friend dear to him for many years, Petrich Muirel in Edenvale.

The Damantas' watch tower and fortifications along the Thiar River at Caladh had prevented Dagarron from traveling to Lyhndale over the years. He had never had the opportunity to know Qynh as she grew as a result; the risk was too great, the peril too close at hand. But Dagarron had frequently traveled the safer passage northward to Edenvale, as often as he had been able, and he had enjoyed spending a great deal of time with Trejaeran and the Muirels. The summer he had spent teaching Trejaeran to read and write had been one of the most blessed and joyous of his entire life, a season filled with memories Dagarron cherished. He loved Trejaeran no less than he would have any son of his own.

"I should not have told him," Dagarron said. He had left the room, granting Trejaeran and Qynh privacy, and walked alongside of Eisos in the corridor. "He was not ready. It was too soon. I should have

waited."

"Would he ever be ready?" Eisos asked, turning to him. "He needs to know, Dagarron, and he trusts you, trusts in what you tell him, no matter how painful it may be for him to listen." He placed his hand against Dagarron's shoulder. "You did what was best, what needed to be done."

Like Dagarron, Eisos had sacrificed greatly—indeed, the very life he had known among his people, the Donnag'crann—to keep Trejaeran safe. Eisos had been born to the aicmeach of the Flaitheas, the highest among his Elfin sect, and had been considered one of the Donnag'crann's most respected and venerated leaders. Eisos had willingly abandoned this position, relinquishing his own ambitions to move northward to Edenvale and assume the life of a peasant farmer to protect Trejaeran.

The Donnag'crann's ancient, arboreal home of Tirnag'crann had been the first place Dagarron had thought to bring Wyndetta and the infant twins sixteen years ago. The forest was only a brief journey from Mehnine; it had been Donnag'crann Elves Dagarron had defended in the Fortune's Folly, and the sight of these Elves that had stirred within his mind and heart the hope that they would harbor the twins and keep them safe from Lahnduren's forces in Belgaeran.

The Donnag'crann had not been so willing, however, and Dagarron and Wyndetta had been greeted with armed, readied archers and a less than fond reception as they had passed among the ancient pines and venerable oaks of Tirnag'crann. The forests were well-guarded, more so than Dagarron had anticipated, and the Elves had been uneasy and mistrusting of their approach. The Damantas had already been to Tirnag'crann; nearly a dozen of the Donnag'crann had been slain before the dark soldiers retreated, and the Damantas took with them seven members of the Banaltra healing aicmeach.

The Donnag'crann were frightened, their borders fortified, their warriors at the ready for further such attacks. Despite this trepidation, the sentries had been made curious by the sight of a man and woman of the race of men traveling with babies of obvious Elfin descent. When Dagarron had tried to explain their purpose to them, speaking articulately and fluently in their own language, Gaelgen, their interest was all the more aroused. He and Wyndetta had been escorted into the heart of Tirnag'crann and brought before a'Bardas, the Donnag'crann's delegatory council of leaders, comprised of representatives from their five highest aicmeachs.

Of the twenty-five members of a'Bardas, only Eisos had seemed to take Dagarron's implored requests into consideration. His fellows had proven rather vehement in their opposition.

"You cannot expect us to keep them here!" one of the Elves had cried. "Already, soldiers in blackened steel have dared to trespass into our woods! They butchered our sentries and stole our Banaltra sisters from us!"

"A dark presence has descended upon Belgaeran. An army of thousands of these creatures now stirs at Lahnduren's command," said another.

"If they seek these infants, we do not dare stand against them!" cried another.

"They came upon us in small numbers. If they turned in full upon Tirnag'crann, what hope would our forces stand? We could not surpass such sheer numbers!" declared a third.

"They would annihilate us! The infants cannot stay!"

"One of them will free us all," Eisos had said, and his voice, measured and thoughtful, had given the rest

of the council pause. He stood at his place beneath an immense cedar tree, his heavy sheath of blond hair spilling nearly to the hem of his belt. His eyes were framed by stern and drawn brows, his expression pensive and reflective as he gazed at Dagarron and Wyndetta. "We have each and all heard such from our seers among the Faidh. This prophecy of the Queen is one that our own Faidh have shared."

"Yes, we have heard the counsel of the Faidh, Eisos, but that does not mean that we should—" another Flaitheas argued, rising from his seat.

"A dark presence has indeed fallen upon the realm," said Eisos. "An age of darkness and shadow that our Faidh sisters have sensed for many long months now. What chance do our forces stand against such might, Erypaes?" He turned toward one of his fellows. "None at all, if we remain idle here among the trees, if we let this opportunity to offer sanctuary pass by. The Mathair Maith has brought these infants among us with great purpose. It is a greater destiny—one she has preordained for us—that we would embrace by helping this man, Dagarron Atreile. He comes before us in good faith and peace for our aid. How can we deny him?"

"Most easily, I assure you, Eisos!" cried one of the Elves, and then an agitated murmuring rose among them as they argued and debated the matter.

"Dagarron Atreile defended us bravely before fellows of his race last night in Mehnine," one said, standing. Dagarron recognized his countenance, his pale sheaf of hair and lucent blue eyes, and realized he had been among the group at Fortune's Folly. "I saw his efforts firsthand. Will we not now show him the same courtesy?"

"This is no matter of courtesy, Iasal," another snapped at him.

"No, it is a matter of courage and of honor," the Elf, Iasal shot back. "Which you seem to be lacking in abundance, Denaogh."

"If you will not consent to let the heirs remain here among us, at the least, let us extend our aid as best we are able," Eisos said. Again, he did not raise his voice or speak in anger, and yet again, his words brought the council to silence. "Let me call together a group to travel in Dagarron Atreile's company. Let us offer him our protection in his endeavors. We have all been told of the path that one of these children will follow. I will stay with one of the heirs, wherever Dagarron deems fit to find sanctuary for them, and there I will remain until such time as they are able to rise and meet this prophesized destiny."

Dagarron had blinked at Eisos, as stunned as any of his fellow Donnag'crann by his pledge.

"Eisos, you are of the Flaitheas! You cannot abandon your aicmeach!" someone cried.

"This destiny our Mathair Maith would offer to us now outweighs any predetermined by aicmeach or birthright," Eisos said.

"Eisos speaks wisely and truly," said another Elf. "I will go with you, mo'Flaitheas. I will remain with the other heir."

Eisos nodded his head in respect. "Go raimh maith agat, Maeruni," he said to the Elf. *Thank you.* "Your courage and wisdom are truly worthy of emulation."

"I will accompany you, as well, mo'Flaitheas," said the Elf Iasal. "As high ceannaire of the Buion aicmeach, I offer as many of my aicmeach brethren as you would call into your service."

And so it had come to pass that by Eisos' gracious intervention, Dagarron and Wyndetta had left the forests of Tirnag'crann west for the shores of the Uisce Mor and the village of Lyhndale in the company of more than fifty Donnag'crann Elves.

"Dagarron?" Eisos said in the corridor of the manor house, his quiet voice drawing Dagarron's thoughts from the past to the present. "Are you unwell?"

Dagarron blinked at him and managed a weary smile. "Gabh mo leithséal, a'cara," he said, pinching his forefingers to his thumb and brushing his forehead and chin in apology. "I am fine. My mind wanders. Nothing a shot of brimague will not tend to."

The corner of Eisos' mouth lifted wryly. "Lead the way. I will be glad of heart to pour some for us each."

Despite his vigil over her brother since his arrival at Orinein, Dagarron had tried diligently to make time for Qynh. He had been a stranger to her upon their introduction, and the weeks since had proven his first opportunity since Qynh's very early childhood to befriend her and earn her trust. Slowly but surely, she warmed to him, a realization that pleased Dagarron as much as he knew it would have pleased Qynh's father.

Deog's death was another that wore heavily on Dagarron's heart, and as he lay in bed in his chamber at Orinein, his thoughts turned to that terrible night when his friend had fallen, murdered by Daelle. He remembered the ides of March and his heart ached with sorrow and regret.

Kierken had arrived several days ahead of Dagarron and his Donnag'crann companions. When he had witnessed the arrival of the Damantas, he had raced astride his stallion to meet Dagarron and warn of the impending attack.

Dagarron had deliberately tried to distract Daelle, to draw his attack. The Commander of Caladh was nigh invulnerable, and Dagarron had wanted to keep him as far away from the princess as he could.

Kierken, ride now, he had thought, glancing toward the young Elf on the grey stallion. Kierken was blessed with a formidable gift of sight; outside of those born into the Faidh aicmeach, he was one of the strongest telepaths among all of the Donnag'crann and fully capable of reading Dagarron's mind. *Take the girl and get north to Orinein. We will follow if we are able.*

Kierken had nodded his head sharply, his green eyes narrowed. He pressed his spurs against his horse's flank and rode toward the battling Damantas, slipping an arrow from his quiver as he went.

Daelle's helm jerked toward Kierken and Dagarron slid from his mare, Ygellas' saddle. He slapped the horse's buckskin rump, sending her away. He wished to make himself appear more helpless in Daelle's regard, as inviting a target as he could.

"He is only a boy, Daelle," he called as he walked boldly toward the Damanta. The great blackened steel helm turned to face him once more. "Surely you would rather face a warrior more your equal," Dagarron said, holding out his arms, inviting Daelle's challenge.

Daelle had laughed. "You are hardly my equal, Dagarron Atreile," he said. "You have grown old since last we met. Old and slow and feeble, little man."

"I may be old, but I can still best you, Damanta," Dagarron said, his tone contemptuous, and Daelle took the bait, striding toward him, brandishing his sword.

Dagarron danced away from the Damanta commander, keeping him distracted from the battle behind them, from Qynh. He let Daelle's blows swing too close to the mark; he let the commander think he was too slow on his feet. More than once, the edge of Daelle's nimble sword cleaved the air within a hair's width of Dagarron's nose; the better to keep him occupied, the better to keep him from Kierken and Qynh.

He heard Qynh scream and Daelle turned toward the sound of her voice. Dagarron realized to his dismay that Deog's boy Mahres had fallen in the fracas. He could see Qynh, terrified and huddled over his fallen form, her hands stained with her brother's blood. He watched as one of the Damantas drew its sword upon her, aiming with deadly purpose for her throat even as Kierken reined his horse toward her, his bow nocked and at the ready.

"Qynh!" Dagarron cried. Daelle whirled toward him, swinging his sword. Dagarron brought his blade up to parry, and the Damanta's sword shattered his into shards upon impact. The force of the blow, Daelle's impossible, brutal strength, knocked Dagarron off his feet and he sprawled against the ground.

"We know of the second heir," Daelle said, towering above him. "Already Phyndaegon rides from Dorchadas to claim the boy in Edenvale. Did you truly believe you and the Donnag'crann could keep them safe from us, hidden from our sight? That your pathetic allies, the Comhar would not fall against our might if they dared to rise against us? You are a fool, Dagarron. And you keep secrets from us no longer."

He drew back his sword, leveling it at Dagarron's face.

An arrow pierced the armor of his hand and Daelle roared, whirling as he dropped his sword. A second arrow slammed through his eyeslit, plunging into the depths of his rotted brain with its slender shaft. Daelle staggered, throwing his head back, howling as a third arrow and a fourth lanced through his chain mail and throat, each punching in one side of his vertebral column and thrusting out through the other.

Dagarron saw Kierken, tall upon his saddle, with Qynh draped across his lap. He bore his bow in hand and gazed down the length of his arm toward Daelle, a fresh arrow nocked against the bowstring.

"Little Ag'iarraidh Buion, I will tear you asunder!" Daelle shrieked at him, seizing the arrow in his face with one hand and the two shafts through his neck with the other, wrenching them loose.

Kierken, flee now. Take the girl and run. Dagarron thought.

Kierken's eyes did not avert from his aim. I am unafraid of him. He would strike you down, an unarmed opponent. He has no honor.

Kierken, she is the heir, Dagarron told him sternly in his mind. *Remember your oath. She is most important.*

Kierken looked at Dagarron and nodded briskly, lowering his bow. He spurred the stallion and the horse leaped forward, darting for the road.

"No!" Daelle bellowed, enraged. Dagarron leaped at him, snatching the Damanta's fallen sword and brandishing the blade against him. He struck Daelle hard, sending him crashing backwards to the ground.

As they toppled together, Dagarron clasped the pommel against both hands and rammed the blade with all of his might, forcing it nearly to the hilt in Daelle's armored chest.

The moment Daelle's helm hit the ground, Dagarron flipped over his head and away from him. He whistled for Ygellas and the mare came to him immediately. He swung himself into his saddle and stared in astonished horror as Daelle rose to his feet once more.

The Commander grasped the hilt of his sword between his hands and slowly, deliberately pulled it free from his torso. His fiery gaze settled on Dagarron's face as his own black stallion trotted to his side without beckon.

"You will answer for that offense, Dagarron Atreile," Daelle told him. He shoved his blade into the sheath at his side and mounted his steed. "But alas, it must wait until next we meet; for now, I must ride. Before you rush off in my pursuit, I might point out that the blacksmith is not fully dead just yet." A soft, ominous chuckling sound emanated from his helm. "You might save him, have you a Banaltra in your numbers."

He yanked against his reins, digging his spurs into his horse's underbelly. The stallion tore off down the road, following Kierken. Seven other Damantas rode behind him as Dagarron hurried toward the ruined corral and the fallen figure of his friend.

Deog lay facedown on the bloodied earth. Dagarron turned him over and drew him into his arms, stunned to find Daelle had not lied; Deog drew in a ragged, hurting breath. His eyelids fluttered and he blinked dazedly at Dagarron.

"Qynh!" he gasped, trying to sit up. The effort cost him dearly; he spewed a sudden, violent, bloody stream across his lap. He cried out weakly, writhing in pain, and Dagarron held him tightly, pressing his forehead against Deog's.

"Le do thoil, do not speak, Deog," he whispered. "Please, please do not."

"Keep Qynh safe," Deog whispered. "And ... and Mahres, too ... Keep them both safe." He reached up and cupped the back of Dagarron's head in a clumsy embrace. "I can hear Evonne," he breathed, his voice soft and amazed. "She calls to me ... Dagarron ... Do you ... do you hear?"

His breath faded and Dagarron cried out. He kissed Deog's bloody pate and shuddered as he folded himself over his friend. One of the Donnag'crann came to him, kneeling by his side. "I will call for Linet," he said quietly to Dagarron. "She is a Banaltra. She—"

"It is too late," Dagarron whispered. "Just now, he has passed into Tirmaithe before my eyes. I did not even get to tell him good-bye."

He covered his face with his hands and wept.

Kierken had delivered Qynh safely to Orinein several days before Dagarron had arrived, and though Kierken had explained circumstances to Qynh as gently as he could, she had still been seized with confusion and rage upon her introduction to Dagarron.

"Mathair Maith," Dagarron had whispered to her in the foyer of the manor house. Qynh's resemblance to Lythaniele was staggering, drawing his breath to a tangle in his throat. He brought his hand up to caress her cheek, his mouth lifted in a soft smile. "Your countenance reminds me so of your mother."

Qynh had punched him in the face, closing her fingers into a tight fist and hooking her arm in a wicked arc from the fulcrum of her shoulder. She had stepped into the blow, putting all of her weight behind it, her knuckles plowing into Dagarron's bottom lip. She had drawn blood and he had recoiled, staggering away from her, stunned.

"You bastard!" she had screamed at him. "My father is dead for you! And my brother! All that has happened—it is all on your account, Dagarron Atreile! That is your name, is it not? You called yourself friend to my Poppa? He lies butchered in Lyhndale, dead because of you!"

Kierken had placed his hands against her shoulders, his eyes round with shock. "Qynh, what are you—" he said, as she wriggled and shrugged herself forcefully away from his grasp.

"Peace, Kierken, let it be. She is angry with me, and rightfully so," Dagarron had said, shaking his head at the young Elf. He had brought tentative fingertips up to his sheared lip; they had come away spotted with blood. "If I were only able, I would stay eternally in Tirmaithe in your father's stead," he had said. "I will never forgive myself for what has happened."

In his chamber at Orinein, Dagarron opened his eyes. He sat up in bed, letting his breath escape in a long, tired sigh.

"Dagarron, look at this," Wyndetta called from his balcony.

Dagarron blinked, startled. Wyndetta had been so quiet, he had not realized she was still in the room. She had come to him after Eisos had left, and they had enjoyed one of the impromptu lovemaking sessions that seemed to be a hallmark of their sixteen-year relationship. The other mark of note was their infallible friendship; he could turn to Wyndetta for anything, from the mundane to the profound, and she would be there for him. He probably took her for granted; being perfectly aware—not to mention somewhat ashamed—of this did not make him any less apt to do it.

At her beckon, he stood slowly, splaying his fingers wide and running his hands through his disheveled hair. He joined her on the balcony, naked.

"What is it?" he asked, following her gaze and seeing a group of nearly one hundred riders thundering toward the manor house of Orinein. Lady Airrenigh's soldiers, holding to their posts along the defensive walls, seemed undisturbed and unthreatened by the approaching cavaliers.

"Riders of Comhar," he said. "They are returning from the Dithreabh, north of the Aduaidh river. They said Damantas had been active there."

"Still?" Wyndetta asked, glancing over her shoulder at him in surprise.

"I doubt it," Dagarron said. "I think the Damantas had purposely engaged the Comhar in the northern portion of Thir County, luring the riders away from Edenvale so that Phyndaegon could claim Trejaeran."

"Others do not think so?" Wyndetta asked.

"Tressach does not think so," Dagarron said, nodding toward the approaching riders. "Tressach an'Clare, the Commander of the Comhar army. He is Aossach's son. His mother died when Tressach was an infant."

"Aossach was Airrenigh's husband, the Baron," Wyndetta said and Dagarron nodded. "He was murdered in Belgaeran the night Herdranges was killed, the night Lahnduren seized the throne."

"Yes," Dagarron said. "Aossach was Herdranges's guest at the palace. Tressach has never been fond of my cousin. I think he feels that Aossach's power, his Baronmastership came unjustly to her upon his murder. I think he would rather see it as his own."

Wyndetta raised a thoughtful brow. "It would seem to me that Tressach has found his own power, of a sort," she remarked, watching as the riders drew near the house.

"Yes," Dagarron murmured. "And I say he has only become more dangerous for it."

Chapter Five

Members of the Comhar Council began to arrive at Orinein by midafternoon. Introductions were made all around, and Trejaeran and Qynh stood in a receiving line, clasping hands and dropping curtsies and head nods. Trejaeran felt like a bauble set out on a shelf for all to admire and prod at; if someone caressed his cheek and remarked how much he favored Lythaniele once, they did so at least a hundred times. He stood beside Iasal and did his best to eavesdrop upon the Elf's formal, elegant words of greeting that he might say the same things and not seem ignorant.

A huge bear of a man approached and Trejaeran stared up at him in wide-eyed wonder. The man was tall, with strong, broad shoulders and a thick chest. His arms and legs were strapped with firm, heavy muscles. His hair was cropped closely about his head, blanched white-blond in places from the sun. He bore the appearance of one who had neither shaved nor bathed for many days. At his hip, he carried a large sword and a broad, curved dagger. A bow hung at the ready across his shoulders, hewn from wood that had been stained black with pine sap and smoke. He carried a stocked quiver strapped over his cloak as well, slung against the body of the bow. He towered above Iasal; in his shadow, Trejaeran felt all the more diminutive and childlike.

"If it is not Iasal Gabhlan, the little Donnag'crann Buion ceannaire," the man remarked in blunt, disdainful greeting. Iasal met his gaze, seeming unbothered by his snide tone of voice.

"Eoghan Drouin, go mbeannai Mathair Maith duit," he said politely, nodding his head. *May the Good Mother be with you.*

"How fares life in your woodland trees, Buion?" Eoghan asked.

"Better, I am certain, than yours beneath the dirt," Iasal replied evenly.

"And that fancy sword of yours? You have not lost it after all of these years, surely. Do you still bear it?"

"My cleadh mor, Eoghan? I do indeed. I would be glad of heart to show it to you, if you wish." Iasal's brows narrowed almost imperceptibly and Eoghan laughed, understanding the subtle challenge behind his words.

Eoghan looked down at Trejaeran. "Did you know, little one, that a Buion Elf works for more than twice a man's lifetime to claim his cleadh mor?" He glanced at Iasal, his brow raised. "Two hundred years wasted sometimes for a paltry trinket he could buy for a ten-mark at a pawn shop in Paldorahn."

"Nuh-n-no, sir," Trejaeran stammered. "No, I ... I did not..."

"Sir," Eoghan chuckled, finding the polite reference amusing. He stepped toward Trejaeran and the boy shied from him, his eyes enormous. "You are the boy twin, Herdranges's first born, then. Nod your head or shake it, boy, if you cannot speak without stuttering."

Trejaeran nodded, cowed, and Eoghan laughed. Iasal stepped in front of Trejaeran, his blue eyes flashing as he placed his hand against Eoghan's chest.

"You will leave the boy alone," he said in a low, menacing voice.

Eoghan looked down at Iasal's hand in something akin to surprise. "You will remove your hand from my shirt, Buion, lest I cleave it from your wrist," he said, glaring at Iasal.

"If you think you are able, you are welcome to try," Iasal invited, meeting Eoghan's gaze.

A woman had accompanied Eoghan into the house. She had been standing behind him quietly, but as his words with Iasal grew heated, she stepped forward, placing her hand firmly against his arm. Eoghan turned and she frowned at him. She did not say a word, but shook her head, her brows drawn in obvious disapproval.

"Gentlemen, this is a celebration of welcome," said a man and he stepped past the woman to clap Eoghan and Iasal each on the shoulders. The note of friendly cheer in his voice drained the tension between the two and Eoghan and Iasal stepped away from one another, their expressions softening.

"Lamiel, good to see you!" exclaimed Eoghan, shaking hands with the newcomer.

"And you, as well, Eoghan," Lamiel Reuel, the Baronmaster of Nichten County, told him warmly.

"You remember Keena Bairre, do you not?" Eoghan asked, motioning for the quiet young woman to come forward.

Lamiel smiled. "My Lady Keena, of course. It is a pleasure as always."

Keena smiled and then directed her gaze toward Eoghan. She moved her hands in front of her face in unfamiliar, peculiar gestures.

"She cannot speak," Eoghan said. "She was born without a tongue. But she hears just fine. Her hands have taken the place of her mouth, and you can see she manages to order me about fairly well." He laughed good-naturedly. "She says she is pleased to see you again."

Again, the woman, Keena said nothing, but she cut her eyes toward Eoghan and nodded her chin in sharp directive:*move along*.

Eoghan chuckled at her ire. "My lady beckons," he said to Lamiel. He spared a glance at Iasal as Keena led him away. "Another time, then, Buion," he said.

"I look forward to it," Iasal assured him.

Lamiel laughed when the pair was out of earshot. "Why am I not surprised to find you toe to toe with

Eoghan Drouin within only brief moments of seeing each other again?"

"The man has the social graces of an ox," Iasal replied, raising his brow. "I would only instill some sense into him."

He caught sight of a woman approaching them and something softened in his face, his severity waning to a smile. "Trejaeran, allow me to introduce our most gracious hostess, and your own blood cousin, a'leaid—the Lady Airrenigh Atreile an'Clare," he said, laying his hand against Trejaeran's shoulder. To the woman, he said, "My lady, may I present Trejaeran Muirel?"

The woman, Airrenigh smiled at Trejaeran. "Beannacht, Trejaeran," she said. "Welcome to Orinein, to my home."

Her fragrance, sweet like rose petals, her stunning beauty, and her sheer proximity left Trejaeran flabbergasted and nervous. He dropped to his knees, turning his face to the polished wood floor, surprising and disarming her.

"Saol fada chugat, mo'ribhinn," he said. *Long life to you, my lady.*

He heard the fabric of her skirts and crinolines rustling as she knelt before him. She placed her hands on either side of his face, making him look at her. Her smile was so tender, her eyes so soft and moved that Trejaeran was confused, suddenly anxious that he had offended her somehow with his social ineptitude.

"Le do thoil, you do not need to kneel before me, Trejaeran," Airrenigh said. "You are the son of my kin, lad, the true King of Tiralainn. You are my prince, my liege."

Trejaeran blinked at her, surprised and bewildered. "G-gabhaim pardun agat," he stammered. *I beg your pardon.*

As Trejaeran made his cousin's acquaintance, nearby, Dagarron exchanged affable hand clasps with Lord Ioruan, another delegate. "A'tiarna Ioruan, Mathair Maith duit," he said. *Lord Ioruan, the Good Mother to you.*

"Bail o'Mathair Maith ort, mo'cara," Ioruan said. *The blessings of the Good Mother to you, my friend.* "It has been far too long, Dagarron. Do you remember my son, Fiontan?"

Dagarron smiled. "Of course," he said. "Fiontan, beannacht. How do you fare?"

"I am fine, my lord, go raimh maith agat," Fiontan said. He looked toward Qynh, who stood somewhat beside and behind Dagarron, shy and uncertain in the midst of so many strangers. "My lady," Fiontan said, brushing his fingertips against his doublet and bowing in polite deference. "Go mbeannai Mathair Maith duit." *May the Good Mother be with you.*

Qynh still did not understand enough Gaeilgen to glean his meaning, and glanced at Dagarron, color blooming in her cheeks. "I ... I thank you, sir," she said, dropping a curtsy.

"I have heard, my lady, that you are skilled with a sword," Fiontan said.

Qynh's blush deepened. "Hoah, my lord," she said. "That is kind to say, but hardly so, I am sure—"

"On the contrary," said another voice, as a young man stepped toward them. "My men garrisoned here

have told me my lady makes morning habit of sparring with an Ag'iarraidh Buion and holds her own quite well. There is no small accomplishment, I dare say."

Qynh noticed that Fiontan frowned somewhat, his brows narrowed slightly and she glanced at Dagarron, puzzled. "Qynh, if I may," Dagarron said, his own expression settled dourly, as if he would have preferred not to. "Here is Tressach an'Clare, commander of the Comhar army. Tressach, Lady Qynhelein Reoder."

Tressach smiled broadly at Qynh before stooping in a low, courteous bow. "The blessings of the Good Mother to you, my lady," he said, taking her gently by the hand and bussing her knuckles.

"Thank you, sir," Qynh said.

"If it is not too bold of me, my lady, mayhap one of these mornings you might consider a new sparring partner?" Tressach asked. "I am impressed by what I have heard, and though I am hardly a Buion, I would enjoy the chance to try my hand with you."

"I ... thank you, my lord," Qynh said, surprised and flustered by his offer, his charming attention. "I ... Truly, I..."

"That is generous, Tressach," Dagarron said, stepping forward. He lay his hand against Qynh's shoulder and met the younger man's gaze. The slight crimp between his brows was all of the invitation Tressach needed to step back. "And my lady will give it due consideration."

Tressach lowered his head politely, glancing one last time at Qynh. "I hope that she will, cousin," he said. "Good day to you both, then."

The Comhar council would not meet until the next day; the evening was spent in affable camaraderie. After supper, the men and Elfin males made their way outside onto the evening-shrouded patio to indulge in their pipes, while the ladies retired to an adjacent parlor to share in tea and cordial discourse.

Trejaeran felt fatigued and weary, his heart heavy and his mind nearly exhausted from all of the day's grim revelations, but he still joined the men outside. As much as he longed for the respite of sleep, he yearned even more for the simple comfort of companionship. The prospect of the enormous bed chamber that awaited him, vacant of conversation and draped in the shadows of nightfall, and the realization that once within, he would be alone except for his own troubled and grieving thoughts, seemed very unappealing.

He sat beside Rhyden, and drew solace simply from his familiar presence and proximity. He watched Rhyden pack his clay pipe while the men began speaking among one another, and when Rhyden struck flints to the pipe bowl, he shared his smoke with Trejaeran.

"Go raimh maith agat," Trejaeran said as Rhyden passed him the pipe. *Thank you*. It nearly felt ordinary to Trejaeran; this simple act and the sorrowful ache that seized his heart must have reflected in his face.

"Oh, bidein," Rhyden said quietly, hooking his arm around Trejaeran's shoulders. "It will be alright. You will see tomorrow, when the Council of the Comhar meets."

Comhar. It was a word Trejaeran had heard over and over since rousing that morning; a reference he still did not fully understand. "Rhyden, what is the Comhar?" he asked.

"This is the Comhar, bidein," Rhyden said, nodding his chin toward the others. "An alliance of five counties in the midrealm—Nichten, Corgue, Thir, I'lar and Tamhnach—along with the Donnag'crann and Eoghan Drouin's menfolk forces in the Midland Mountains called the Fiainas. They have a council of delegates set to meet tomorrow afternoon to decide the course of action they will take now that you and Qynh are here at Orinein; now that you are stronger, well once more."

"Course of action?" Trejaeran blinked, puzzled.

"Against Lahnduren and the Damantas," Rhyden said. "And Ciardha."

Ciardha.

Here was another name Trejaeran had heard mentioned repeatedly that day; another that left him more puzzled than enlightened.

"She sits on the throne as Lahnduren's Queen," Rhyden said. "It is her draiocht that stirs within the duchan and the Damantas. Father says she is ancient, older than the Elves; one of a race that predates all the mortal species of the Bith. The first of Mathair Maith's peoples—the Na'Siogai."

"Na'Siogai?" Trejaeran repeated, confused.

Rhyden nodded. "Mum told me few except the Donnag'crann have record of such beings. They were supposed to have been immortal, and Father told me that when their time in the Bith was finished, when they had readied the world for the rest of us, the Good Mother took them all into Tirmaithe and from them, she made the Elves."

Trejaeran stared at him. "But you said one of them, Ciardha, is Lahnduren's Queen," he said. "How could she still be here if the Mathair Maith took them all? Why would she help Lahnduren?"

"They do not know how she is still here," Rhyden said, cutting his eyes towards Eisos and the others. "Nor for certain that is what she is. But they suspect it. Her draiocht is like none recorded in all of even the Donnag'crann's Elfin histories, bidein. They say she commands bird and beast with only her mind; that her duchan enslaves any who partakes of it—animals, Elves, menfolk, even trees, Trejaeran. Belgaeran is surrounded by a blackened forest now—the Dubholc'crainn—a place filled with trees and creatures that follow her command. She does not help Lahnduren. She controls him, and the realm."

"They believe Ciardha is somehow of the Na'Siogai, one Abhacan discovered millennia ago, buried beneath the Barren Mountains," Rhyden said. "The Abhacan tried to imprison her, to seal her underground, but Lahnduren set her free. He discovered her lair in the old mines beneath Dorchadas and they released her. She made him powerful for it, and strong, too; Lahnduren and his two most trusted commanders—Daelle in south and Phyndaegon in the north."

"Phyndaegon," Trejaeran said and he remembered

You are the heir

a terrible, icy presence; the cruel, whispering voice of Phyndaegon

I want you, little one

He closed his eyes and an image of Phyndaegon flashed through his mind; Phyndaegon's helm, his

faceplate of twisted, blackened steel, his scarlet eyes searing from within the shadowy depths of his eyeslit.

Beannacht, little one, he thought he heard Phyndaegon hiss in his head, and he gasped softly, jerking against Rhyden.

"Trejaeran?" Rhyden asked, laying his hand against Trejaeran's shoulder. "What is wrong, bidein?"

Trejaeran opened his eyes and found Kierken standing nearby, staring at him. Kierken's expression was as stricken as Trejaeran's felt, and he regarded Trejaeran with wide eyes, his hand fluttering toward his temple as though he felt pain there.

He heard it, too, Trejaeran realized, startled. *I did not imagine it, Phyndaegon's voice just now in my mind. Kierken has the sight and he heard it, too.*

"Kierken?" Iasal said, reaching for the younger Elf. "What is it, mac'leinn?"

"Trejaeran?" Rhyden said again, concerned.

Kierken blinked as though roused from a doze. "It ... it is naught, mo'altrum," he said, averting his eyes from Trejaeran.

"I am alright, Rhyden," Trejaeran said, turning to his friend and managing a smile.

"I think I will take leave for my chamber," Kierken said to Iasal. Iasal placed his hand against his sleeve, his brows lifted in worry and Trejaeran heard his voice in his mind; Iasal speaking to Kierken through their shared gift of sight.

What is it, Kierken? Something has happened, a'leaid. You are upset. Will you not tell me of it?

Kierken pressed his fingertips against his forehead. He glanced at Trejaeran out of the corner of his eye and Trejaeran realized that Kierken knew he could hear them. Kierken's sight was much stronger than Iasal's, and while Iasal did not notice Trejaeran's trespass, Kierken did.

Le do thoil, Trejaeran, please stop. You are hurting me, Kierken told him.

Trejaeran recoiled, frightened and abashed, forcing himself to imagine the trapdoor within his mind, to picture his hands against it, slamming it shut.

"I am sorry," he whispered to Kierken.

"For what, bidein?" Rhyden asked.

"I will see you in the morning, mo'altrum, for our meditation?" Kierken asked Iasal, lowering his head respectfully.

"Yes, lad," Iasal said, still disconcerted. "You are alright, Kierken?"

Kierken glanced again at Trejaeran. "I am fine," he said. "Oiche mhaith." *Good night.*

"I think I will go to bed as well," Trejaeran said, rising to his feet. He was bewildered and distraught

over what had just occurred, and he could not loosen from his mind the thought of Kierken's voice,
imploring him

Le do thoil, Trejaeran, please stop. You are hurting me

"I will walk with you, bidein," Rhyden said.

"That is alright, Rhyden. I will see Trejaeran to his door," Dagarron said. He had been sitting quietly, seeming absorbed in lighthearted conversation. As he stood and walked toward Trejaeran, as he rested his hand against Trejaeran's shoulder, Trejaeran could sense that this attentive manner had only been a ruse. Dagarron did not have the sight, but he had observed the peculiar exchange of glances between Kierken and Trejaeran, and was troubled by it.

"Come on, a'mac," Dagarron said, drawing Trejaeran against him. "It has been a long and difficult day for you."

"Dagarron, who is Phyndaegon?" Trejaeran asked.

The pair had not offered much in the way of discourse as they had made their way through the manor house to Trejaeran's room, and now, as Trejaeran lay in bed, his head and shoulders propped on a comfortable pile of pillows, he knew that Dagarron was quiet in the hopes that Trejaeran might broach the subject of the gardens, and confide in him what had happened with Kierken.

However, Trejaeran did not wish to speak of it. He wanted to clap his hands against his head and forget about Kierken's voice within his mind

Le do thoil, Trejaeran, please stop. You are hurting me

His question caught Dagarron by surprise and the man sat against the edge of the bed, meeting Trejaeran's gaze.

"I mean, I know who he is," Trejaeran said, his fingers twining restlessly along the hem of his blankets. "He was one of the Damantas at the farm. He killed Mam." He looked at Dagarron, his eyes troubled. "But who is he?"

Dagarron reached out and took his hand. "Surely you are tired, a'mac," he said. "Why do you not rest? We can speak of this tomorrow—"

"No, Dagarron, le do thoil," Trejaeran said, sitting up in bed. "Please, I want to know. I keep thinking of Phyndaegon, remembering him and I want to know. Please."

Dagarron sighed in reluctant concession. "Phyndaegon Tomaltach was a Baronmaster in the northern expanse," he told him. "He was considered a great hero in the Elfin army during the days of the Cogadh'Dearg. He served with Lahnduren, a'mac. They were close as fletchings and Phyndaegon's loyalty to his prince was very fierce. That is part of the reason Herdranges offered Lahnduren the appointment as Baronmaster of Dorchadas County following the war. Phyndaegon's county, Aill, bordered Dorchadas and Herdranges had hoped Lahnduren might find some appeasement in living so closely to his dear friend and comrade."

"But he did not?" Trejaeran asked.

Dagarron shook his head sadly. "No, a'mac," he said. "It seems Lahnduren drew great offense at this appointment, mistaking it for banishment. Herdranges did not intend such disregard. He always did his best to keep peace among the races, to please as many as he could as often as was within his power."

He looked at Trejaeran. "Phyndaegon is the one who piqued Lahnduren's interest in the ancient Mianach and Abhacan mines beneath the fortress of Dorchadas. The tower had been built ages ago during the Elfin civil war—the Mor'Cogadh—as a stronghold for the Mianach, and the mines beneath were said to be used as arsenals, hidden places where the Mianach stored weapons and armor, enough to outfit a sizeable army. An army Lahnduren and Phyndaegon hoped to rally against Herdranges."

Dagarron's expression grew sorrowful. "Phyndaegon was not a bad Mianach, a'mac," he said quietly. "None of them were at the first, not even Lahnduren. They were only disappointed, Trejaeran, and disheartened. It is hard to devote so many years of your life to a cause, a war, to see it all seemingly wasted. I did not know Lahnduren, but I honestly believe that he sought only what he thought to be right in his original purpose. Something happened to them. Something touched them, and took that purpose within them and twisted it. It took what was ambitious and misguided in their nature and made them evil."

"Ciardha," Trejaeran murmured. Dagarron raised his brow at him in surprise. "Rhyden spoke of her outside—Lahnduren's Queen. He tried to explain."

"He spoke truly," Dagarron said. "It was indeed Ciardha, a'mac. The mines beyond Dorchadas extended beneath lands owned by a Dorchadas county landowner and industrialist, a Mianach named Daelle Gildhalla. Daelle operated coal and iron mines, stone quarries, and steel forges throughout the northern expanse. Phyndaegon and Lahnduren approached him to help their excavations of the Dorchadas mines."

"Lahnduren had saved Daelle's life during the Cogadh'Dearg, and because of this, he was as fastly loyal as Phyndaegon to Lahnduren, and he gladly agreed. He sent hundreds of his workers deep beneath the Barren Mountains to find the lost troves of Mianach armor and weapons. Daelle promised his purse to finance Lahnduren's rebellion efforts."

"And then they found it," Dagarron said to Trejaeran. "A place sealed by twin doors of towering black granite set in place by ancient Abhacan settlers to the realm. A place meant never to be discovered again by mortal races and a seal meant to contain what slumbered behind those doors eternally. Ciardha, Trejaeran. The witch of Nocturn."

"Nocturn?" Trejaeran asked.

Dagarron nodded. "A subterranean stream. The Donnag'crann were able to find ancient and obscure reference to it in their recorded histories, remnants of legends passed down over the eons. The Abhacan had discovered the Nocturn spring millennia ago as they established mining systems with the Mianach in the Barren Mountains. According to lore, the Abhacan encountered a spirit within the waters of Nocturn, a presence they referred to only *asa'cailleach*—a witch. She promised them great vigor and power if they drank from the stream. The Abhacan drank from Nocturn at her bidding and at first, legend says, her promises came to pass. They were infused with strength and vitality as they had never felt before—but only at first. The waters were tainted, it is told; cursed, damned. It changed within the Abhacan, becoming some manner of foul, thick ichor that at first consumed them from within and then flowed outward upon them like tar, covering them, dissolving flesh and threw from bone, disfiguring them into horrendous abominations."

"The Abhacan called this ichor *theduchan*, Trejaeran. That is the fate that meets those who drink from

the spring. That is what has befallen those who released the Abhacan seals and crossed the threshold, setting Ciardha free."

Trejaeran stared at Dagarron, stricken.

"She must have made promises to them, similar to those she made to the Abhacan ages earlier—strength and power. But the Abhacan realized Ciardha's deception before it was too late, and they were able to contain her, to bury her beneath the mines. They sealed the cavern through which the spring flowed with granite doors marked with the most powerful totem they possessed, the Seal of the Seven Ancient Kings of Tirgeimhreadh. They built a massive and impenetrable dam beneath the mountains to stave the flow of Nocturn eternally. The stream, it is said, has since pooled beneath the ground into an immense underground lake.

"Lahnduren either did not realize her deception, or did not care in the end, because he drank the water, as did all within his command—the Damantas. And then this army, a'mac, rode against Belgaeran and Herdranges, under the sway of the waters of Nocturn, the control of the duchan and Ciardha."

"Rhyden said she is ancient, Dagarron, older even than the Elves?"

"There are records among the Donnag'crann histories that suggest such a race, yes, a'mac," Dagarron nodded. "The Na'Siogai."

"Do you believe that is what Ciardha is?" Trejaeran asked him quietly.

"I believe she is evil," he said. "Whatever she once might have been has long since passed, and now only darkness remains." He rose to his feet. "That is enough for tonight, a'mac. This has all come upon you so fast, and you have yet to reclaim your strength." He touched the boy's face. "Sleep now, a'mac. I am only down the corridor if you need me."

When Dagarron turned for the door, Trejaeran reached out from beneath the quilts, catching him by the hand.

"Dagarron?" he said, his voice soft and tremulous.

"Yes, Trejaeran?" Dagarron asked, smiling at him.

"I am glad you are here," Trejaeran told him, and he could feel the sting of tears in his eyes.

Touched, Dagarron gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. "Codladh samh duit," he said. *A pleasant sleep to you.*

"Oiche mhaith, Dagarron," Trejaeran whispered. *Good night.*

Chapter Six

Qynh lay awake in her bed long before the sun rose. She had dozed occasionally during the night, but her mind kept slipping into horrific dreamscapes where, again and again, she helplessly watched as hordes of Damantas—hundreds of the hulking, terrifying soldiers—converged upon her. They swarmed with blades poised and at the ready, their gauntlets outstretched and fingers splayed wide, grasping for

her.

She had at last abandoned the effort at sleep and settled for reading. The library at Orinein contained a large selection of poetry volumes, and Qynh had spent much of the night with one cradled against her lap as she sat in bed, framed by a small circumference of candlelight, letting her mind grow quiet and comforted by the measures of verse contained within the parchment pages.

Even now, almost a month since the horrifying, terrible night when Deog and Mahres had been murdered, something within her still stirred at the same time each morning. She had grown long accustomed to awakening at the sound of Deog's soft footfalls in the corridor beyond her bedroom door as he made his way down the stairs and off to the smithy. It seemed her heart still listened for him, yearning for those familiar sounds.

Airenigh had given Qynh a wardrobe filled with magnificent gowns; dresses in every hue of the rainbow, in every fine fabric known. That morning, Qynh settled for a pair of breeches, comfortable and more familiar to her than the fancy dresses and layers of crinolines and underslips.

She slipped a dun-colored leine over her head, catching her heavy fall of hair against her hands along the edge of the collar and tugging it loose as the shirt fell over her shoulders. It was Kierken's leine; the one he had given to her during the ride north from Lyhndale. She gathered the linen between her fingers and pulled it against her nose for a brief moment, smiling to breathe in the faint scent of the young Donnag'crann that lingered in the fabric; a soft incense of wood smoke and pine needles, autumn's last dried leaves and sunshine infused within his hair.

She fastened her belt across her waist, making sure the knots that held her scabbard well in place remained tight and intact. Kierken had been teaching her how to wield a sword, making time for instruction each morning after his meoraich, a ritual of meditation he practiced with every dawn and dusk as part of his Ag'iarraidh.

The air outside was crisp, but not uncomfortable, and a heavy dew had settled upon the velveteen cushion of grass. Qynh followed the garden's manicured paths toward a small, rounded clearing of relatively level and unadorned ground, where she found Kierken waiting to practice their swordplay.

"You are late," he said, the corner of his mouth hooked in a slight smile.

"I am not," she replied, slapping his belly with the back of her hand as she moved past him.

He watched her walk across the clearing from him, his left palm cupped against the hilt of his sword, the corners of his mouth lifted in a faint smile. When she turned to face him, she realized his attention and felt shy color stoke in her cheeks. "What?" she asked.

"You look troubled," he remarked.

"I did not sleep well, that is all," Qynh replied, dismissively, waving her hand. "Do you intend to spar, Kierken, or are you going to spend the morning standing there, looking at me?"

"I would find neither unpleasant," he told her with a shrug and a smile.

Qynh's face blazed and she pretended to frown. "Come now, have at you," she said, coiling her fingers around the hilt and drawing her blade from its scabbard.

He raised one brow and chuckled. "As you wish, my lady," he said, touching his fist against the breast of his leine. He drew his sword, turning the hilt against his hand and gripping it lightly against his palm. Sunlight flashed against the edge of the long, silver blade as he thrust it toward her.

Qynh stepped back, swinging her blade at hip-level, parrying the blow, knocking the tip of his sword aside.

"Maith thu," he told her, smiling. *Very good.* His reflexes were much quicker than hers, more finely honed, and his blade swung around, coming toward her once more. She deflected it again, the metal blades singing against one another.

"Good, move your feet," Kierken said. "Step back. Take your space. There you go."

He advanced, forcing her back. Her eyes were wide and round on the movement of his blade; she fended off each of his attacks successfully, rotating her wrist, her elbow, and her shoulder to keep her sword positioned between her body and his strikes.

"Do not let me come at you so," he said. "Drive me back, Qynh. Strike at me."

Qynh swung at him, faster than he expected, and he drew his blade sharply toward his face, narrowly blocking her blow. He arched his brow at her above the vertex of their crossed blades.

"Like that?" Qynh asked, innocently.

"Yes, that will do," he laughed.

She moved on the offense, bringing her sword around again and again at him. When they had first started practicing together, she had been anxious about attacking him; the edges of the blades they each wielded were kept purposely dulled, but the tips were still tapered, the points yet sharp, and she was afraid she might accidentally hurt Kierken.

This concern had amused him. "I have trained in swordplay for sixteen years, Qynh," he had told her pointedly. "I think I can defend myself against an inexperienced rival."

His words, innocent in the delivery, had singed Qynh's pride, and she made every effort in their sparring from that day forward not only to disarm Kierken, but to defeat him without dispute. So far, his assessment of his abilities as compared to hers held true, but Qynh still enjoyed her attempts to prove him wrong.

She drove him back across the clearing; his feet moved in quick, graceful strides before her. His gaze held steady upon her blade and he parried her advances with a practiced, comfortable ease that infuriated Qynh.

"Come closer," he said, nodding in encouragement. He deflected a strike she had delivered toward his abdomen and smiled. "Step forward, Qynh. Step with your lead foot between mine on your lunge. Yes, maith thu, ta sin maith!" *That is good.*

His right heel settled against a soft mound of earth that yielded beneath his weight, and he stumbled. Qynh seized the opportunity, lashing out with her foot and hooking his ankle. She kicked his foot out from beneath him and his already unstable balance gave way. Kierken fell onto his rump, his eyes wide, as Qynh planted her foot against the ground between his sprawled, outstretched legs. Before he could

recover enough from his surprise to lift his sword, she thrust the flat of her blade against his throat, stilling him.

"Do you yield?" she asked, breathless with exertion and excitement, pleased with her apparent victory.

He looked up at her, his brow arched, as she used the edge of her sword to tilt his head back, his face toward hers. "That was clever," he remarked.

"I have you in a pinch, Kierken," she told him, smiling proudly. "Yield, and mayhap I will not draw my blade across your throat!"

"I am not at your mercy just yet, my lady," Kierken said and his hand shot out, clamping across her wrist and twisting. Qynh yelped in startled pain and opened her hand, dropping her sword as he hyperextended her wrist. His leg swung behind her, clipping her across the heels, and Qynh fell to the ground, landing hard on her bottom.

"Ow!" Qynh cried miserably, rubbing at her wrist. She glowered at Kierken. "That hurt, you goose!"

"I am sorry, Qynh, le do thoil!" he said, wide-eyed and stricken. He drew himself onto his knees and took her wrist gently against his palm. "Please, Qynh, I did not mean it. Please, I—"

He looked so upset, so genuinely distraught, Qynh was touched, and she chuckled at him. "It is alright, Kierken," she said. "I do not think I am permanently maimed." She wiggled her fingers demonstratively for him.

He touched her face, his eyes soft and remorseful. "Le do thoil," he said quietly. *Please*. "I am sorry, Qynh. My sparring etiquette abandoned me. It will not happen again."

"You just could not bear to be defeated by a girl," she told him fondly, reaching out and tugging at one of his braids. "I am telling Iasal on you."

He laughed, lowering his face to the ground. "You are not hurt, then?" he asked.

"No," she assured him. "Truly, Kierken, I am fine."

He smiled and she leaned toward him, pressing her lips against his flushed cheek, drawing a startled breath from him.

"Truly," she told him again. She stood once more, dusting off the seat of her breeches and recovering her fallen weapon. "Come on, now. Do not sit there in a state. Let us go once more."

He looked up at her, smiling, pleased by her kiss. "As you wish," he said, nodding.

They sparred together for another hour or so, until the sun had risen fully above the horizon. When they were finished, they walked along the garden paths together as they headed back to the house. "I am starved!" Qynh declared, patting her stomach. "I am going to have at least three eggs this morrow for breakfast. How about you?"

"It is a'Cead, Qynh," he said. "The first of the week. I cannot have breakfast. I must observe a'troscach."

A'troscach was a Gaeligen term that meant *fasting*. It was a ritual practiced by the Buion aicmeach and, like his meoraich, was part of the training Kierken followed in his Ag'iarraidh. Buion observed two days of each week, a'Cead—the first—and a'Cuigiu—the fifth—as those of fast.

"Are you hungry?" Qynh asked.

"Somewhat, yes," he replied, because he was an Elf, and thus by his very nature could not lie.

"I could steal down to the kitchen," she offered. "Sneak some bread, an apple or two. No one would know."

He raised his brow at her, his mouth unfolding in a smile.

"I would not tell Iasal," she assured him, making him laugh.

"No, my lady, but thank you," he told her. "The purpose of a'troscach is to instill humility and discipline in me."

"No, the purpose is to make you go hungry," Qynh said, poking him playfully in the belly with her fingertip, making him laugh again. "Look, you wither before my very eyes!"

"Stop, Qynh," he said, catching her hand. She poked him again with the other.

"Hoah, I can feel clear through to your spine, Kierken!" she exclaimed, giggling.

He caught her other wrist and they tussled together. He drew her toward him, and she danced on her tiptoes, stumbling clumsily against his chest. They were both flushed and laughing, and when she looked up, she was close enough to feel his breath brush against her nose. Her laughter faded, but her smile, and her blush, remained; the latter deepened, in fact, as he slipped his hand loose of her wrist and touched her face, brushing her hair back from her brow.

"You are a goose," he said quietly, smiling. Qynh could not turn away from his gaze, and her heart raced suddenly, pleasantly beneath her bosom. Kierken canted his face slightly, leaning toward her, and she closed her eyes, her heart pounding all the more in eager anticipation. She felt his breath against her lips, and she stood poised for his kiss; her own breath hitched to a fluttering standstill.

"Qynh," Kierken said softly, and he sounded pained, something she had no accounting for. She opened her eyes, blinking at him, puzzled, and found him leaning back, drawing his hand away from her. "We ... we should..." he began. His voice faltered and he turned to look over his shoulder, his brows narrowed suddenly.

"What is it?" Qynh said.

Kierken did not seem to hear her. He pursed his lips together, as if in deep concentration. He stepped past her, moving swiftly, quietly along the path.

"Kierken?" She hurried after him, worried that she had upset him somehow; that she had just done something wrong and made him angry with her.

She nearly stumbled into the back of his shoulders; he had come to an abrupt halt and stood looking across one of the garden's wide, shallow reflecting pools. Qynh was surprised to find Trejaeran standing

across the water, his gaze toward them, meeting Kierken's.

"Trejaeran?" Qynh said, confused. Trejaeran's expression was hard and determined; he looked far more haggard than he had the night before, as though he, too, had enjoyed precious little rest. He and Kierken stared at one another, neither averting their eyes, neither taking notice of her.

A crow cawed loudly from tree boughs overhead, and Qynh jumped, startled by the shrill sound. She looked up in time to see the great raven flap its broad wings and fly away.

The caw distracted Kierken's attention and he, too, turned his face to the sky. His hand fell upon the pommel of his hilt and he hedged back a small step, positioning himself protectively in front of Qynh.

"Kierken, what is it?" she asked.

At the note of fear in her voice, Kierken's expression softened and he smiled at her. "It is a bird, Qynh," he told her. "Nothing to worry over. Look, here comes Trejaeran. Beannacht, a'cara!"

"Beannacht, Kierken," Trejaeran said as he followed the narrow footpath around the pool to join them. "Good morrow, Qynh."

"Good morrow, Trejaeran," she said, embracing him. She touched his face, her brows pinched with worry. "Are you unwell? Has something happened?"

He smiled. "No, Qynh. All is well. I am just tired. I slept poorly last night."

Her fingertips lingered against his cheek. He looked so fragile to her; so weakened with fatigue and grief that even the most tender of touches might shatter him like glass. She longed desperately to offer him some sort of comfort, but did not know what to say, what to do to ease his pain.

"I was just escorting Qynh to breakfast," Kierken said. "Why do you not join us?"

"No, go raimh maith agat. I am still full from supper last night," Trejaeran said, smiling wearily, patting his stomach. "I thought I might wander through the gardens and clear my head a bit." He started at the distant cry of a crow and looked apprehensively up at the sky. "I have tarried you, forgive me," he said, and he brushed past them, hurrying down the path toward the lower tiers.

Trejaeran had awoken that morning tucked beneath warm, silken quilts. He crawled out of bed and stumbled across the room to his washbasin and splashed cold water against his face, gasping aloud as some of the hazy clouds of sleepy disorientation lifted from his mind. The balcony door stood ajar and Trejaeran stepped outside, leaning heavily against the wrought iron railing as he tilted his face toward the sky and filled his lungs with sweet, morning air.

Trejaeran

Feathers fluttered loudly near his ear and he caught sudden, startling movement out of the corner of his eye. Frightened, he jerked sideways, stumbling over his own bare feet and falling onto the balcony floor.

A massive raven had come to perch on the railing and gazed down at him. Its spear-tipped, black beak parted open and it squawked at him.

Beannacht, Trejaeran

a soft voice whispered in his mind, like a cold breeze through winter-barren tree limbs—Phyndaegon's voice. The raven's eyes blazed with sudden fire, glowing like pinpoints of candlelight in a darkened room.

"No," Trejaeran whimpered, clutching his hands to his head.

You could still save Petrich, little one, Phyndaegon said. *Follow the raven.*

if you would save Petrich

spare your father

follow the raven

The crow shook its head, its black feathers splaying. Its wings hooked and it flew away, gliding gracefully along the still, cool air down toward the gardens below. It dropped into a blooming fruit tree and disappeared, but it called to Trejaeran, its shrill voice beckoning.

Trejaeran hurried from the room and down to the gardens. He stood in the dew-soaked grass in the dim shadows of dawn's first light, turning in full circles, straining to catch a glimpse of the crow. "I am here!" he cried desperately. "Le do thoil! I am here!"

He heard the faint, distant yawp of the crow and jerked his head toward the sound. He ducked between two tall hedges; their spindly branches poked painfully against him as he eased past. He entered a small clearing and stood before a long reflecting pool. A towering granite statue stood at the edge of the smooth, motionless water, a stern-faced man wearing regal, flowing robes and brandishing an immense broadsword between his fists. Trejaeran trembled beneath that unflinching stone stare and when the raven fluttered overhead, landing atop the statue's pate, its red eyes gleaming, Trejaeran recoiled, crying out in startled fright.

Let us come to an agreement, little one, Phyndaegon's voice purred inside of his mind.

Let us come to an arrangement

save your father

set him free

"Anything!" Trejaeran pleaded, staring at the raven. "Le do thoil, anything you want, I will do it! I will give you what you want. Please set him free!"

Phyndaegon breathed at him: *On your knees.*

Trejaeran knelt beside the pool, leaning over to gaze into the water. "Please," he whispered. "Please, I will do whatever you say, only spare him, I beg you. I beg you."

You will leave the sanctuary of the Comhar and ride north to Dorchadas.

"Yes." Trejaeran nodded, feeling tears well in his eyes, splashing down against the mirrored water. "Yes, I will, but please, please, my father..."

I will spare him a fortnight

no more than that

I will spare him a fortnight that you might bring yourself to me

Trejaeran shuddered, drawing his arms against his stomach. *Please do not hurt my father, he thought. I will be there. I will come. Please do not hurt him.*

Trejaeran sensed another presence within his mind

Kierken

and he looked up from the water, startled.

I will spare him a fortnight, Phyndaegon told him.

you must come northward to Dorchadas

"I will," Trejaeran whispered. He looked across the water and saw Kierken on the path, staring at him with wide, alarmed eyes. "I will come. I will be there in a fortnight."

Phyndaegon's voice fell silent within his mind, and Trejaeran stood slowly, hanging his head ashamedly beneath the weight of Kierken's heavy gaze. Kierken's gift of the sight was strong; he had been able to sense Phyndaegon's presence, if not hear every word Phyndaegon and Trejaeran had exchanged.

What are you doing, Trejaeran? Kierken thought.

Please do not tell, Kierken, Trejaeran cried, the shrill despair in his words punching into Kierken's mind, staggering the young Buion. They will try to stop me.

Who will try to stop you, Trejaeran? Kierken asked.

You know who, Trejaeran said. Dagarron and Eisos, even Iasal.

No, a'leaid, Kierken thought. They are your friends. We are all your friends here. They would try to help you, not hinder you.

In doing one, Trejaeran thought unhappily. I fear they would only succeed in the other. You cannot tell them, Kierken, le do thoil. I must do this alone. There is no other way.

Do what? Strike a deal with Phyndaegon? You cannot bargain with the Damantas, a'leaid. They are not Elves anymore, not like you and me. They will lie to you, Trejaeran. They will deceive you.

Phyndaegon has my father! Trejaeran cried.

Kierken stumbled back, his hands darting to his face as a blazing spear of pain lanced through his head at the cry. He blinked, startled at the younger man. "What?" he whispered.

My father is still alive! Trejaeran cried, stricken. *They will force the duchan upon him if I do not come! They have promised they will set him free if I come to them.*

They are lying, Trejaeran, Kierken said. Whatever they have told you, they would trick you to get you alone, away from the safety of the Comhar, and they would kill you.

I do not care! I would rather take my chances than remain here while my father suffers. I cannot abandon him, Kierken! I will not!

Qynh came up behind Kierken, her footsteps rustling in the grass. "Kierken?" she asked, her voice tremulous.

Kierken narrowed his brows at Trejaeran. *If they have asked you to betray Qynh in order to save your father, then know well, Trejaeran, that you must kill me to have her. I am willing—and unafraid—to die to protect her.*

Trejaeran blinked at him, startled and hurt. *I would never betray Qynh*, he whimpered, shaking his head. *No, Kierken, I could never do that. I love her. I would never—*

"Trejaeran?" Qynh asked, bewildered.

A crow screeched from overhead at that moment, and Trejaeran jerked, frightened, looking up in time to see the raven gliding away.

The Dubholc'crainn, he thought. *It flies south to the Dubholc'crainn to tell Ciardha I am coming.*

"Kierken, what is it?" Qynh sounded frightened now, and Kierken looked at her, trying to smile. He did not wish to upset or alarm her. "It is a bird, Qynh," he had said. "Nothing to worry over."

As Trejaeran hurried away from them, making up excuses he knew neither Kierken nor Qynh believed, he struggled not to weep. *I have no choice*, he thought, tangling his hands in his hair. *I will ask the Comhar to help me, but if they will not—if they refuse—I have no other choice. I will come for you, Poppa. I swear it. One way or the other, I am coming.*

Chapter Seven

"...the Damantas were testing us," Tressach said, his voice loud and resonant, rich with the polished timbre of one well accustomed to speaking before large groups. "They turned and fled rather than stand in engagement once they witnessed the combined might of the Allies of the Comhar! They had hoped to find a weakness in our borders, coming in from the north beyond the Thiar to try the boundaries of Nichten and Thir Counties. We surprised them well indeed with our sound rebuttal of their hostile advances."

Qynh and Trejaeran had sat among the council of the Comhar for several hours, listening as the members recounted as much as they could of Ciardha's history and discussed the actions the Comhar forces had pursued thus far in their campaigns.

"They did not come to test our borders," Dagarron said, loudly enough to draw attention away from Tressach. "The Damantas rode with only one purpose in mind—to draw our riders away from the Thiar, to allow Phyndaegon and a small band across the river to find Trejaeran Muirel, while Daele advanced in the south from Caladh toward Lyhndale."

Tressach raised his brow at Dagarron. "Why would Phyndaegon and Daelle, two of Ciardha's commanders, ride to claim children? Surely such a simple task must be beneath them."

"Hoah, Tressach, I, too, have long thought we overestimate the importance of the little ones," Eoghan said gruffly. He was seated close to Tressach and stood now, sparing a disdainful glance toward Qynh and Trejaeran. "These are not sovereign heroes to us. These are kittens, barely weaned from their mother's teats. I think the Elfin prophecies you have held so fast to, Dagarron, will prove false."

"Ciardha does not agree with you, Eoghan," Dagarron told him evenly. "Why would she send two of her most trusted to see them dead, Tressach? Mayhap it is because their deaths are a matter of great urgency to the Queen. Mayhap she sends those she trusts the most because she thought she could count on them to succeed."

Tressach blinked but offered no reply.

"We waste our time with the lambs," Eoghan insisted, his voice growing louder and sharper. "They know nothing of battle. You would have us pit all of our hopes and our futures on a timid pair of children who quake in their boots when spoken to in voices louder than a whisper! I say Herdranges's Elf Queen was wrong. This is not the path to victory over Belgaeran!"

"It is not Lythaniele's vision alone," said Aoife, one of the Donnag'crann Faidh, as she rose from her seat. "The prophecy of the twin heirs has been shared by countless Elfin seers, Gaeilge and Mianach alike. There seems to be no corner of Tiralainn now beyond Ciardha's reach. Her army of Damantas grows exponentially, as they raid more and more townships and steal more and more victims to feed to the duchar. This is our path, Eoghan Drouin—the true path destiny has laid out for us to follow."

"Ciardha grows too strong," Lamiel Reuel said. "While the full extent of the Na'Siogai's powers remains unknown to us, it is apparent that her sway will soon be too immense to stand against. Even before we realized that the Damantas rode from Caladh and Dorchadas to claim Trejaeran and Qynh, we knew that the time of the prophecy was at hand. We knew if we did not act now, strike against Ciardha and her forces, she would be beyond our capabilities to defeat, to destroy."

"Act now?" Eoghan scoffed. "Strike against Ciardha, Lamiel? I see no action. I see no strikes underway. I see us gathered together, wagging our collective tongues over ancient histories and prophetic Elfin riddles that would have us believe a pair of children is the key to our salvation."

"My riders stand ready to lay siege," Tressach declared. "Give me the word, and we will ride eagerly against Belgaeran."

"Your riders, Tressach?" Dagarron raised his eyebrow. "I was unaware we had coronated you King."

Tressach leaned over the table enough to meet Dagarron's gaze and glower. "One among us must lead the armies of the Comhar," he said. "I seek only to serve the interests of our allies."

"We cannot abandon the prophecy," Fiontan said. "It is only by the prophecy that we are here. Mayhap the heirs are not fighters now, but we can train them, teach them. We dare not stand against Ciardha without them. The Comhar is strong now; we have never had a better opportunity to succeed. But we will fail if we do not heed the words of Lythaniele's vision. No matter our strength, skill, or might, it is not the Comhar who shall defeat Ciardha and Lahnduren. It is the twins."

"One of the twins," Baronmaster Conaire of Tamhnach County reminded. He studied Qynh and Trejaeran with dubious, narrowed eyes. "Only one of the twins will persevere. The prophecy has never revealed which one."

"And we waste our time with the other," his son Cahan agreed. "Tressach and Eoghan speak truly. While we linger here idly, teaching children how to wage war, Ciardha in turn strengthens. The boundaries of the Dubholc'crainn swell; the duchan reaches throughout our lands, tainting them. We cannot wait. The time to act is now."

"The Donnag'crann will not act in haste," Iasal said. "I will not permit my Buion to ride to certain failure and death."

"Hoah, well then, it is settled!" Eoghan cried, raising his hands in exasperation. "If the Buion do not ride with us, then all is surely lost!" He glared at Iasal, thrusting one thick forefinger toward the Elf. "We do not need your paltry, arrogant Buion warriors. Your fancy cleadh mors and overrated discipline did not serve you in the Cogadh'Dearg and they will not serve us in this hour, either."

"But the rash and impetuous nature of men will?" Iasal returned, his eyes flashing at Eoghan's challenging tone. "Have you been struck deaf, Eoghan? Fiontan spoke truly. It is not the armies of the Comhar who will conquer Ciardha. It is one of the heirs. We must train them, teach them. There is no other way."

"I will strike you deaf, prattling Buion..." Eoghan growled, rising from his seat.

"I am here if you would advance, Eoghan," Iasal snapped, rising as well. His hand fell against the hilt of his cleadh mor.

Keena stood, her eyes wide as she grasped Eoghan by the sleeve. She waved her hand at him in imperative gestures.

"No, Keena, I will not have peace," he said angrily, pulling away from her. "I am tired of that pretentious Elf—"

"Have peace, all of you," Eisos said, imploring. "We serve nothing by arguing among ourselves!"

"Why do we dawdle here?" Eoghan cried. "My Fiainas stand at the ready. I say to those who would follow me, let us ride together and leave these others to play with the children!"

"You cannot break the Comhar. You would kill us all," Dagarron said, rising to his feet. "We stand no chance divided. We must keep the alliance between men and Elves strong."

"So which is it, cousin?" Tressach sneered. "Do we prevail through our allegiance or do we prevail by the heirs?" Airrenigh placed her hand against his arm to still him and he jerked away from her. "Do not touch me, woman! I am not some unruly child in need of silencing."

"Do not speak so to my lady," Iasal said. "You will keep a civil tongue when you address Airrenigh or you will answer to me, Tressach."

"Yes, I would expect you to rise to her aid, Buion," Tressach said with a contemptuous snort. "It is only proper, I think, since you make your bed with her whenever it is convenient for you."

Iasal whirled toward him. "You have no honor, Tressach, that you would shame my lady so," he

seethed. "You will answer for such grievous disrespect."

"Iasal, no!" Airrenigh said, standing, holding her hand out.

"We are allies here, not enemies!" Treines cried. "All of you, stand down!"

Trejaeran cringed in his seat at all of the fiery words. He had hoped he might beseech the Council for aid, beg them to send even a handful of riders north to Dorchadas for Petrich, but he realized now that he had been naïve in his hope. The Comhar could not agree on anything, it seemed.

Frustrated and upset, Trejaeran rose from his chair.

"Trejaeran?" Qynh blinked at him, confused. He knew the conflict among the Council upset her, as well; her distress was apparent in her face.

"Ta bron orm, Qynh," he whispered, tapping his fingertips against his forehead and chin in apology. *I am sorry.* "Excuse me, please. I cannot bear this."

He turned on his heel and walked hurriedly for the doors, wanting only to escape the harsh and combative words, to be rid of them all and on his way north. He had made up his mind that this is what he would do if they failed him, and it seemed he had no other recourse. The arguing behind him faltered and drew silent as the Council members realized his intentions to leave the room.

"Trejaeran—" Dagarron called after him.

"Leave the lamb, Dagarron, let him go," Eoghan said. "Do all of you see now what Dagarron and the Buion would have us pin our hopes on? A boy—the runt of the litter, no less—who would tuck his puppy tail between his legs and flee to weep. Imagine his reaction in battle, will you not? What would he do before Lahnduren and Ciardha—"

Trejaeran turned and stared at Eoghan, angry and hurt. He opened his mind to the man, his blue eyes blazing.

You are wrong.

Eoghan fell silent as though Trejaeran had just clapped a stifling hand over his mouth. Trejaeran walked slowly back toward the table, toward Eoghan.

Why do you hate me? I have done nothing to you.

Eoghan's brows narrowed and he glanced at Iasal, touching his temple with his fingertips as though his head pained him. "Call off your boy, Buion," he seethed quietly. "Get him out of my head with his damned Elfin draiocht."

"Trejaeran, ni ndeanann tu—" Dagarron said, walking around the far side of the table to approach the boy. *Do not—*

Trejaeran frowned and pushed himself into Eoghan's mind. The burly man cried out and staggered back from the table, shoving his hands against his head. In his memories, Trejaeran saw

Sorcha

a beautiful woman, Eoghan's wife in Tiepenas, the small, riverside village he had called home in the years following the Cogadh'Dearg. Trejaeran saw a little boy, four years old

Cainnes

his son ... Eoghan's son

and he could feel Eoghan's simple, overwhelming, intrinsic love for the woman and boy; it was as pure and unyielding as his own love for Petrich. He could see in Eoghan's memories what had become of Sorcha and Cainnes and at last, he understood the tremendous, bitter rage that brimmed within Eoghan.

Eoghan had left to spend one summer afternoon in the forests along the Domhain River, carrying his bow in hand and his quiver against his shoulders, hunting for squirrels. While he had been gone, the Damantas had raided Tiepenas. They set fire to the village, burning all of the thatch-roofed houses to the ground. By the time Eoghan made it back to the town proper, nothing remained standing and buildings smoldered around him, blackened, smoking piles of rubble and debris. Bodies lay everywhere among the ruins and Eoghan found Sorcha among the dead. He fell to his knees, gathering the limp, bloodied body of his wife in his arms. When he moved Sorcha, he realized

Sweet Mother, no no no please

that she had tried to use her body as a shield to protect Cainnes from the butchers. The boy lay in a crumpled, bloody heap beneath his mother.

In the solar, Trejaeran stumbled beneath the full realization of Eoghan's suffering. Eoghan had begun to reel about in wide, staggering circles, knocking aside chairs and floundering into the wall. He clutched at his head, bellowing loudly.

"Get him out of my head!" he shrieked. "Sweet Mother, the pain! I cannot bear it! Somebody, please! Mathair Maith, he would kill me!"

"Trejaeran, ni ndeanann tu!" Dagarron cried sharply, clapping his hand against Trejaeran's shoulder. *Do not!* The moment his palm touched Trejaeran's sleeve, it was as though he somehow severed the connection between Trejaeran and Eoghan. The boy's face softened and his eyelids fluttered. He blinked at Dagarron, disoriented and bewildered.

"Dagarron?" he whispered.

Eoghan fell to his knees, stunned and shocked, keeping the heels of his hands over his eyes. Keena rushed to his side, her eyes enormous with fear and panic. Her hands fluttered against his shoulders and then she drew back, startled as she realized Eoghan was weeping.

Iasal ran toward Trejaeran, and the entire Council began to murmur and stir in quiet, confused uproar.

"Dagarron, is he alright?" Iasal asked, his blue eyes wide with worry.

"I am alright," Trejaeran murmured dazedly. "Please, I am sorry. I ... I did not mean it."

The room seemed to swing as if the horizon had been suspended against the edge of a pendulum. He swooned, crumpling against Dagarron in a faint.

Trejaeran was dimly aware of a flurry of soft, urgent voices rising all around him as Dagarron gathered him in his arms, holding him against his chest.

"...it is not draiocht, Tressach, tu'amadan, it is the sight," he heard Iasal saying, his voice angry and quick as he called Tressacha *fool*. "It is strong within the boy, but he cannot control it yet. He meant no harm..."

"...his mind is closed to me," he heard a woman say, the Donnag'crann Faidh, Aoife. "I have never sensed the gift so strong in anyone before. This surely cannot be ... he is not even fully Elfin..."

"He is grief-stricken," Treines said. "Any natural inhibitions that would have kept the sight in check in Edenvale are gone now ... his mind is too exhausted with sorrow for such efforts ... let me see him, Dagarron, here, lift his head..."

They carried him to his room, tucked him beneath the coverlets of his bed, and Trejaeran slept. Whatever he had done, whatever power he had exercised to delve so deeply into the hidden recesses of Eoghan Drouin's mind, the effort left him drained and spent.

When he finally awoke, many hours later, the sun had set. He sat up in darkness, momentarily bewildered, but then the memories of what had happened, of how he had turned his mind, his power, loose upon Eoghan returned to him. He ran his hands through his hair, ashamed of himself. Eoghan was not a bad man, nor was he as cruel and callous as he outwardly appeared. Trejaeran knew what he had done was wrong; he had not happened upon Eoghan's thoughts and memories by accident, and Eoghan had not opened his mind for Trejaeran's review. Trejaeran had forced his way into Eoghan's private store of memories.

Trejaeran sat on his bed and gazed out toward the balcony, filled with remorse, and for the first time, he realized what time it was and how long he had been asleep. He blinked, startled and alarmed.

"Oh, no," he gasped, scrambling out of bed and hurrying out onto the balcony. The moon had risen fully and the constellations had begun their rotation across the sky; it was not yet midnight, then, but the hour drew all the more near, and Trejaeran had squandered nearly a full day that could have been spent en route north.

"Oh, no," he said again. He went back into his room, to his wardrobe, snatching his cloak in hand. He had meant to leave that afternoon, once he and Qynh had been excused from the Council meeting. The others would have all still been in attendance—Dagarron, Eisos, Treines, Iasal—and he had felt confident that he could slip past the gatehouse without arousing any suspicion. Now he could ill afford to waste any more time waiting for the dawn to break on the new morrow; already, he had only thirteen days to cross the Dithreabh and the Barren foothills.

Trejaeran clambered down the boughs of a large tree growing just beyond his window and carefully picked his way through branches and limbs to the ground below. Once his boot soles touched upon the soft grass of the garden, he drew his cloak more tightly about him. The deep, olive green fabric blended well into the dim shadows and Trejaeran stole quietly across the garden, hidden among the trees and hedges, his feet soundless in the moss and grass.

Trejaeran slipped into the darkened stables. The horses snuffled and whinnied softly, aware of his presence, but not alarmed. He crept toward the back of the barn. He had made several clandestine trips out to the barn the morning before so that he might have all of his supplies arranged and ready to go. He

planned to retrieve the supplies, saddle and bridle Dagarron's horse, Ygellas, and take his leave. With so many Comhar patrols coming and going through the manor house walls, the gate stood open even after dusk.

Ygellas poked her head from her stall and nuzzled him in the darkness, her lips lapping gently against his face. "Beannacht, Ygellas," he said, tickling her chin.

Eisos' white stallion, Dherga, was also stabled in the barn. His immense, ivory head peeped from over his stall gate and he whinnied softly in greeting, recognizing Trejaeran's familiar scent, his voice.

"Beannacht to you, as well, Dherga," Trejaeran whispered, smiling.

He walked toward the corner stall to fetch his supplies and drew to an abrupt, startled halt. Someone sat in the piled hay on the floor, waiting for him in the shadows.

"You have not packed nearly enough food for so long a journey, bidein," Rhyden told him, drawing his long legs beneath him and standing. "Fortunately, I have planned with such contingencies in mind and have brought enough for us both."

"Rhyden!" Trejaeran gasped, surprised and dismayed. "What ... what are you...?"

"Doing, bidein?" Rhyden stepped toward him and a faint and distant glow from the manor house fell across his face. "I am coming with you, that is what I am doing."

Trejaeran blinked, abashed at his discovery. "I am not going anywhere," he said.

Rhyden cocked his eyebrow. "Of course you are, Trejaeran. You think your father is alive, and you mean to go and rescue him. You have tried very hard to be clever about it, but I know you, bidein, remember?"

Trejaeran shook his head. "I ... I do not..." he began, and then his brows narrowed. "I do not think Poppa is alive, Rhyden—I know it. I have seen him in my mind, through my sight. Phyndaegon has shown him to me. He is alive, and still untouched by the duchar. They have brought him north to the Barren Mountains, a tower fortress called Dorchadas."

"And what was your plan, Trejaeran? Steal a horse and ride there?" Rhyden asked, arching his brow as he folded his arms across his chest. "You cannot steal anything, bidein. You may have the blood of menfolk in your veins, but you are as Elfin in your heart as I am."

"I have no time for explanations, Rhyden," Trejaeran said, as he knelt and began to gather his supplies. "Already, I have wasted a day, and I have only thirteen left to make it north in time."

"In time for what?"

Trejaeran glanced at him, finding his rolled blankets and tucking them against his arm. "Phyndaegon promised he would spare Poppa from the duchar for a fortnight if I come to Dorchadas. They will set him free, Rhyden."

"In exchange for what? For you, Trejaeran?" Rhyden knelt and placed his hand against his shoulder. His eyes were wide with worry. "They will kill you, bidein."

"I do not care," Trejaeran said, shrugging away from Rhyden's hand. "Do you hear? I do not care what they do to me, so long as they let Poppa go. And maybe, somehow, I can find some way to rescue Poppa, and escape myself. I do not know. I will figure it better as I go along."

"You would rescue Petrich and escape, bidein? Tell me how. You have not even thought to pack a weapon, have you?"

Trejaeran blinked at Rhyden in dismay.

"I did not think so," Rhyden said. "Again, it is most fortunate that I have planned well enough for both of us." He stood, slipping a bow from across his shoulders, and a well-packed quiver. He held both out to Trejaeran, who rose tentatively to his feet and accepted the weapons.

"It is Mum's bow," Rhyden said. "It is fine enough, although it is boxwood and I personally prefer to draw upon yew. I worried Father's bow would have too great a pull; Mum's is lighter, only thirty pounds, I think."

"You stole Treines' bow?" Trejaeran whispered in disbelief.

"I am Gaeilge. I cannot steal," Rhyden said. "It took me nearly an hour to come up with a viable enough reason to take the bow before my mind and heart would let me."

"What was the reason?" Trejaeran asked.

"You are my friend, Trejaeran," Rhyden said quietly, lowering his head. "You are my best friend and you need it more than Mum." He looked up and tried to smile. "I thought I would take this..." He patted his hip and Trejaeran was surprised and impressed to find a long, tapered sword sheathed against his leg.

"Mathair Maith!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get that?"

"With the riders home once more, there are enough soldiers milling about that sooner or later, surely one of them would misplace their blade," Rhyden told him, shrugging nonchalantly.

"Can you wield it?"

Rhyden looked hurt. "Of course I can wield it. Father taught me long ago. I am forever demonstrating my fencing moves, pantomiming and whatnot. Surely you have noticed!"

"I thought you were only pretending," Trejaeran said. "I never imagined you might actually know what you were doing."

Rhyden laughed at this and Trejaeran looked up at him for a long, quiet moment. "Rhyden, if you come..." he whispered, his voice tremulous, sudden tears gleaming in his eyes. "If you come with me, it is unlikely you would come back alive. I have thought a lot about this, and it is a worthwhile sacrifice to me. I cannot live if I know I have not at least tried to help Poppa. But as for you ... I cannot ask you to sacrifice yourself. Not on my account."

Rhyden smiled at him. "I would follow you to the moon, bidein, if you would only say the word. And besides..." He dropped Trejaeran a wink. "...no one has ever written songs and epic poems about Elfin boys who stayed at home and never struck out on adventures."

Trejaeran smiled and hugged his friend fiercely, shuddering against him. "I am frightened, Rhyden," he gasped. "I do not think I have ever been more frightened in all of my life."

"Me, too, bidein," Rhyden whispered.

They led Ygellas and Dherga from their stalls and set about positioning saddles on their backs. Trejaeran secured the long bow and his supplies to Ygellas' saddle; he strapped the heavy quiver across his back, pulling his hood loose from beneath the fletchings. Rhyden had brought extra food and water bags; enough that surely they could make it across the Dithreabh into the Barren Mountains.

"That is everything, then? We are ready?" Rhyden whispered.

"Yes, I think so," Trejaeran replied.

Rhyden slipped his foot in the stirrup and swung himself into Dherga's tall saddle. Trejaeran hopped, swinging himself astride Ygellas, and reined the buckskin mare alongside of Dherga at the stable doorway.

"How do you suppose we ought to do this?" Rhyden said quietly.

"I think the direct way is the best," Trejaeran said, peering cautiously about to make certain they were unobserved. "We simply walk the horses across the courtyard toward the gate, as though we have all of the business in the world doing so. In the dark, with our hoods pulled up, mayhap the guards will recognize our horses and think we are Eisos and Dagarron."

"This should be interesting," Rhyden remarked, smiling wryly. "Our first adventure: getting out of the manor. I wish I had thought to pack a journal. This has the makings of a splendid story."

Trejaeran pulled his hood over his head and Rhyden followed suit. They reined Dherga and Ygellas in step and the horses walked from the barn, following the western wall of the manor house, heading for the courtyard and the gatehouse beyond. They had nearly made it; Trejaeran could see the expanse of lawn beyond the corner of the house, and then two shadow-draped figures stepped briskly out in front of the horses.

"Hoah!" Rhyden yelped, as Dherga skittered beneath him in start. Startled, Ygellas uttered a whinny, her hooves scuttling as she drew to an uncertain halt, and Trejaeran felt his heart and breath tangle somewhere in his throat in bright alarm.

"Oiche mhaith, lads," one of the figures said, and Trejaeran felt his heart sink in sudden, leaden dismay.

"Iasal!" he gasped.

"You would leave us, then?" Iasal said. "Without saying so much as good-bye?"

Chapter Eight

"Ni creidaim ea!" Eisos roared at Rhyden. *I do not believe it!* "First you take your Mother's bow and now you steal my horse!"

Rhyden cringed inwardly but did not cower from his father. "I did not steal Dherga," he said. "The bow perhaps, but Dherga came with us of his own choosing."

Apparently, Trejaeran had not been nearly as stealthy in his tree-climbing as he had believed; Iasal had been standing out on a balcony and observed his descent. Curious, the Buion had followed him, coming across Wyndetta in the gardens along the way and persuading her to accompany him. She and Iasal had delivered the boys to Dagarron's room, where Eisos and Treines—roused from their beds and furious—had joined them.

"Have peace, Eisos," Iasal interjected on Rhyden's behalf. "The boy sought only to protect his friend. He meant—"

"I would thank you kindly, Iasal, to leave the rearing and disciplining of my son to me, le do thoil," Eisos seethed, his eyes dark and glowering, his jaw set at a stern angle.

"I cannot believe you would take Ygellas, a'mac," Dagarron told Trejaeran, his arms crossed at his chest. He had been roused from a fairly sound sleep and stood before the boy in his underbreeches and robe, his hair askew. "You would steal, Trejaeran? From me?"

Trejaeran shook his head, ashamed. "Le do thoil, Dagarron, no, I would not steal. I wanted to help Poppa. I told you—he is alive. I know he is! I have seen him in my head, and they have promised me a fortnight to come for him. That is all I meant, Dagarron! I cannot stay here, safe and warm, eating fine foods and wearing nice clothes while Poppa needs me!" His voice choked, and he blinked helplessly against tears.

"Trejaeran, you know I love Petrich," Dagarron said, his stern expression softening at the boy's visible despair. "Listen to me, a'mac. You know I would not abandon him to such a fate if I could prevent it."

"But I can prevent it," Trejaeran pleaded. "I can save him, Dagarron, please!" Dagarron shook his head, his brows crimping again. "They promised me, Dagarron. Please!"

"Trejaeran can leave if he wishes," Wyndetta said quietly, her tone calm. She came and stood next to the boy, placing her hand on his shoulder. "We cannot make him stay here."

"And what of the prophecy, Wyndetta?" Dagarron said. "Should we just toss Lythaniele's vision to the wind, as Tressach and Eoghan would like?"

"Petrich is his father, Dagarron—"

"I know that, Wyndetta! Petrich is also one of my oldest and dearest friends! Do you think I want to leave him to the duchar? Do you think it does not move me to see Trejaeran suffering this way?"

"Do not take that tone with me, Dagarron," Wyndetta said coolly, her brows drawing together. "If you know such things, you should not be angry with the boy. You would—"

"I am angry with him because he acts without thinking!" Dagarron cried. "For the past sixteen years—his whole life—all any of us in this room have tried to do was keep him safe from harm, keep him alive! And he would turn about and strike a bargain with the Damantas behind our very backs! He would simply give himself to them. He would ride north on my horse, no less and smile and say, 'Here I am, Phynndaegon, come and run me through!'"

Dagarron cupped Trejaeran's face between his hands and stared at him, desperately. "Trejaeran, a'mac, use your sight. Look inside of my heart. Do you not see how much I love you? Why would you do such a thing? You are as dear to me as my own son. Do you not know I would rather die than see any harm come to you?"

Trejaeran could see these things within Dagarron; he knew the man was not so much angry with him as he was terrified of what might have happened had Iasal and Wyndetta not intercepted him in his flight. Dagarron was frightened because he spoke truly; he had spent the length of Trejaeran's life struggling to keep him safe. He had sacrificed everything he had ever known or held dear from the moment Wyndetta had come to him sixteen years ago in Mehnine.

"Whatever your reasons, what you boys did was foolish," Eisos said. "You should have come to us about this. You have betrayed our trust and—"

"Why should we have come to you, Father?" Rhyden cried angrily, stepping toward him. "So you could tell us there was nothing you could do? That we should just sit back and let the Damantas have Petrich? He was your friend, too, Father, and if you were in his place, Petrich would never abandon you like a coward to the duchar!"

"You would speak to me with such disregard, boy?" Eisos said, his brow raised in furious disbelief. He stood nearly eye to eye with Rhyden; the boy was frightened but did not back away from his father. He lifted his chin defiantly at Eisos, his eyes flashing hotly.

"Eisos, no," Treines said, alarmed, grasping him by the sleeve. "Rhyden, you do not speak so to your father. Have shame, a'mac, you have greatly offended."

"Le do thoil," Trejaeran cried, helplessly, distressed by their heated exchange. "Rhyden, Eisos, please stop!"

"Give the boy a month, Dagarron," Iasal said. Dagarron opened his mouth to protest and Iasal held his hand up, staying his voice. "Hear me, mo'cara. I will take Trejaeran north myself and see if what he says is true. If the Damantas have truly spared Petrich the duchar for the time, mayhap Trejaeran is right, and we can rescue him."

Trejaeran blinked at the Buion ceannaire in stupefied surprise.

"No," Dagarron said, equally startled. "No, Iasal, absolutely—"

"The Council has agreed to three months until the Belgaeran campaign," Iasal said. "That is plenty of time to reach Dorchadas and return. The prophecy would still hold true; the twins would still ride together upon the royal city."

"Unless Trejaeran is killed at Dorchadas, certainly, Iasal, yes, by all means!" Dagarron cried.

"I would not let that happen," Iasal told him. "You know by my breath, Dagarron, I would not."

"An entire Damantas brigade is stationed at Dorchadas under Phyndaegon's command." Dagarron shook his head. "I am sorry, Iasal. I mean no disrespect, but even you cannot fend off five hundred Damantas and defeat one of Ciardha's commanders. Not all alone."

"He will not be alone," Wyndetta said. "I will be with him." She looked at Iasal and smiled. "What do

you think? Two hundred and fifty for you? Two hundred and fifty for me? I will let you have Phyndaegon, if you do not mind."

"Not at all, my lady," Iasal replied, the corner of his mouth lifting in a wry smile. He nodded respectfully at her, touching his fingertips to his chest.

"I will be there, too," Rhyden said. "I know how to fight."

"So do I," Trejaeran said, looking at Dagarron.

"And so do I," said a loud, deep voice from the open doorway.

Trejaeran jumped, startled, and was flabbergasted to see Eoghan Drouin standing at the threshold of Dagarron's chamber, staring at them intently, apparently having listened to the entirety of their debate.

"Eoghan?" Dagarron said, confused. "What are you...?"

"Doing here? Who could sleep with all of the clamor you people raise?" Eoghan said. The huge, brawny man strode across the room toward Trejaeran and frightened, Trejaeran drew back, his eyes enormous and alarmed.

Eoghan frowned as Iasal stepped into his path. "Stand aside, Buion. I mean no harm to the boy," he growled. Iasal did not move and as Eoghan tried to step around him, Iasal matched his stride, his hands curled lightly into fists in anticipation of an impending brawl. Eoghan shrugged and dropped down onto one knee, canting his head to peer around Iasal's hip at Trejaeran. "I will not hurt you, lad," he said in a soft, nearly tender voice and his gaze was gentle upon the boy. "You have learned my secrets, have you not? And now I know yours, too. Phyndaegon has your father? The man who raised you as his own?"

Trejaeran nodded timidly, still not convinced Eoghan would not simply knock Iasal aside and decide to throttle him.

"If I knew my boy lived, or my Sorcha," Eoghan said quietly, his eyes filled with sudden and profound sorrow, "I would move Tirmaithe itself and rend the Bith asunder to save them. That is how you feel, is it not, little one?"

"Yes," Trejaeran whispered, nodding his head.

"Then why do we stand here, arguing amongst ourselves?" Eoghan asked. He stood and gazed down at Trejaeran, the corners of his mouth lifting into a smile. He glanced toward Iasal and Wyndetta. "Five hundred Damantas, did you say? Plus that duchar-cursed bastard, Phyndaegon? Against one scrawny Buion, a crazy man, a woman, and two Elfin boys? I like those odds, I think."

Trejaeran looked at Rhyden, astounded, and could not help himself but to grin in his utter astonishment. Rhyden dropped him a wink. "Our chances of having epic poetry written about us, bidein, keep improving exponentially," he remarked with a smile.

"This is madness," Dagarron said. "Eoghan, you cannot be serious."

Eoghan turned to face him. "You love the boy, Dagarron. It is apparent that you do. You have given up sixteen years of your life, spent them devoted to his safety for that love. Would you deny the boy the same sacrifice? We all choose our own priorities, Dagarron. And no matter what your Elfin prophecies

tell you, we all decide our destinies for ourselves. You cannot keep the boy from choosing freely, Dagarron. If you love him as you say you do—as I know you do—you will let him go."

Dagarron looked from Eoghan to Iasal. His gaze locked with Wyndetta's and he sighed heavily, running his hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture. At last he said, "The Dithreabh is an unforgiving terrain. You will need maps to make your way across it."

He turned to Trejaeran. "Aossach kept some, and I have my own, with my journals from my travels through the wilderlands. You may take them, a'mac, if you would like."

Trejaeran stared at him, speechless, moved. "Yes," he whispered, nodding. "Go raimh maith agat, Dagarron." *Thank you.*

"We should not tarry," Iasal said. "We have less than a fortnight now. We lose time with every passing hour. Dagarron, you have been through the Dithreabh? Can you plot a course for us to follow?"

"I have never been as far north as the Barren foothills or Linn Dorcha, but I have been close enough that yes, Iasal, I believe I can mark the maps to show you the way," Dagarron said. "But it has been nearly twenty years since I last set foot in the Dithreabh, and I do not know how much of it has changed in those years."

"Point us in the right direction, Dagarron, and we will take care of the rest," Eoghan said. "As for you, Buion, how soon before you can be ready? Myself—give me ten minutes and I will be prepared and packed."

"How about an hour?" Wyndetta suggested gently. "I think we all have fare-thee-wells we should like to extend."

"An hour then, yes," Iasal said nodding. "We will gather in the foyer, the five of us."

He and Eoghan looked one another in the eye for a long, quiet moment. "This should make for an interesting journey, Buion," Eoghan remarked dryly.

Iasal arched his eyebrow. "Muisse," he agreed. *Indeed.*

As the moon began its descent, someone knocked softly on Qynh's chamber door, rousing her. "Hoah ... Just ... just a moment," she called, sleepily, shoving her hair back from her face. She frowned, trying to determine who in the Bith would be calling at such a wretched hour.

With a start, she realized it could be Trejaeran. He had fainted at the Comhar meeting, and had not roused for the rest of the day. He could be awake now and confused or frightened, turning to her for comfort. She shoved the covers aside and scrambled out of bed. She grabbed her dressing robe and pulled it on as she hurried across the room. "Trejaeran, are you—?" she began as she opened the door.

"Hello, lass," Daelle said, shoving his hand against the door and forcing it wide, slamming it open against the wall. The Damanta Commander towered in her doorway, his eyes blazing like twin points of molten steel.

Qynh shrieked, recoiling from the door. Daelle stormed toward her, his footfalls shuddering the floorboards beneath her. She could smell him; the nasty, putrid stink of his duchan, and she could hear it slithering across him, dripping and sliding along the contours of his body beneath his armor.

Qynh whirled and darted across the room, terrified. She felt Daelle's fingers close about a handful of her hair and she wailed as he yanked her backwards. She fell against his chest and he clasped her by the chin, forcing her head back.

"Did you think you would be safe here, child?" Daelle said, and his breath smelled like putrefied flesh as it pressed against her face. "That my Queen would not find you?"

"Get away from me!" Qynh shrieked. She drove her elbow back into his stomach with all of her might, sending spears of pain through her arm at the impact with his cuirass. Daelle wolfed for startled breath, his grip loosening as he staggered back.

Qynh remembered her sparring sword. It rested against the wall beside her bed and she bolted for it, frantic. Daelle bellowed behind her; the sound was inhuman, and it ripped through her mind as well as against her ears. She heard his booming, heavy, rushing footfalls behind her and she leaped over her bed, sliding across the mattress, her arms and torso tangling in the blankets as she thrust her hands out, grasping wildly for the hilt of her blade.

"I think not, lass," Daelle hissed and his fists closed against her ankles, jerking her back toward him. Her fingertips scrabbled for purchase against the hilt and then the sword slipped and toppled to the floor beyond her reach. Qynh struggled, crying out as Daelle grabbed her roughly by the hair, jerking her head back.

"Kierken!" Qynh screamed. "Kierken! Help me!"

"There is no one who can help you now," Daelle said. He forced her onto her back. Qynh fought with him as he crawled onto the bed with her. She kicked at him and swung blindly with her fists, but he was too heavy; she was helpless against him. He grabbed her wrists, forcing her hands above her head.

He reached for his helm, his fingers unfettering the chin strap. He lowered his face, drawing the helmet away from his head. As the moonlight fell upon him, Qynh began to shriek. She could see now that the duchan had swallowed his features whole, and his entire face was covered in a shimmering, quivering blanket of the ichor. His nose looked lopsided and nearly collapsed in the moonlight, dissolved beneath the duchan. His eyes bulged from their sodden sockets, unnaturally wide, his upper eyelids almost completely eaten away. His lips were blackened, split with deep fissures that revealed red, bloody meat, and when he brought his mouth toward Qynh's, she jerked her face away, shrieking, repulsed, terrified.

"No!" she cried. "No, no, Mathair Maith, no! Kierken! Help me! Kierken!"

Qynh sat up in bed, hitching in a breath to scream. Her heart was racing, her body drenched in frightened sweat, her hair disheveled and askew about her head. She looked around, terrified and disoriented. The blankets were tangled around her legs and hips, wrenched loose from their moorings around the mattress. Her pillows had been knocked and shoved to the floor as she had thrashed about frantically in bed.

"It was just a dream," she whimpered, but she felt tears burning in her eyes nonetheless as she remembered Daelle's putrescent stench, his face rotting beneath the duchan.

She crawled out of bed, standing on unsteady legs as she drew her robe about her. She crept slowly, trepidatiously across the room, her eyes darting about anxiously. She threw the door open wide. Everything outside was empty and quiet and Qynh rushed down the hall. She slapped lightly but

frantically against Kierken's door, hiccupping against her tears. "Oh, please," she whispered. "Oh, Kierken, please!"

Kierken opened his door and peered out at her, sleepy and bewildered. "Qynh?" He blinked, and then the daze left him and his brows narrowed in alarm. "Qynh, what is it? Are you alright?"

Qynh uttered a low, pitiful cry and burst into tears. She stumbled toward Kierken and he drew her into his arms, holding her fiercely. "Qynh, what is it?" he asked, frightened. "Qynh, a'ghra, mo'chroi, what has happened? What is it?"

He shut the door and led her over to the fireplace. He settled her in a chair before the hearth and knelt, cupping her face between his hands.

"Qynh," he whispered, stroking her hair. "Mo'chroi, are you hurt?"

"No," Qynh whimpered, shaking her head. "No, Kierken, I am sorry. I ... I had the most horrifying dream!" She clutched his hand between hers, closing her eyes. "It was so horrible ... It felt so real," she whispered, shuddering uncontrollably. "Daelle came to my room. He attacked me. I was screaming for you and he ... he was covered with the duchan. I could see it rotting away his face underneath it, and I could smell it..." Her voice dissolved into tears, and Kierken hugged her, running his hand through her long, tangled hair, pressing his lips against her ear.

"Oh, Qynh," he murmured. "It is alright now, a'ghra. Please do not cry."

"I was so afraid," she breathed. She pulled away from his shoulder and looked at him, trembling. "It seemed so real, Kierken. I ... I could feel his hands on me..."

"It was a dream," he said. "Just a dream, I promise, and you are safe now. I will never let anyone hurt you." He cradled her face between his hands and met her gaze, his brows lifted in implore. "Mathair Maith, Qynh, I love you. Do you not know that? I would die before I let harm come to you."

Qynh blinked at his words, moved. "Kierken," she whispered. She leaned forward, brushing her fingertips against his face. She said his name again, her voice little more than fluttered breath, and then she pressed her lips softly against his.

He drew in a startled breath against her mouth as if he meant to pull away, and then he whimpered and kissed her deeply, tangling his hands in her hair, leaning toward her, pressing her back against the chair. Her fingers slipped into his hair, and she tilted her face up to his, drawing another quiet murmur of pleasure from his throat.

He moved his hands against her shoulders and pushed himself away from her, his eyes wide, his breath caught in a gasp. "Qynh..."

"I love you, Kierken," she whispered, her lips finding his again.

"Qynh, le do thoil," he whimpered as she kissed him. "Oh, ni ndeanann tu, Qynh ... no." He pushed himself away from her again, blinking at her, breathless. "We cannot do this," he said. "Oh, Mathair Maith, we cannot, Qynh."

She was confused; she thought she had done something wrong. "I ... I am sorry," she said as he sat back from her, resting his weight against his heels. "Kierken, I am sorry. Please do not be angry with me,

I—"

"I am not angry with you, Qynh," he said. He reached out and caressed her cheek. "I have so longed for that. You cannot know."

"Then what is wrong? Why do you recoil from me? What have I done?" Qynh asked, bewildered.

He looked anguished. "Qynh, I am in my Ag'iarraidh," he said. "I have many, many long years left before it is completed."

"I know this, yes," she said.

"I have sworn many mionnan as part of my commitment to the Buion," he said. He took her gently by the hands. "A mionn is an oath upon my honor. I am bound to them, Qynh, until the completion of my Ag'iarraidh, until I have earned my clann's cleadh mor and am a full-fledged member of the Buion aicmeach." He squeezed her hands, his eyes pained. "One of those oaths was a'mionn de'geamnaidh. A vow of celibacy, Qynh."

"What?" Qynh blinked, surprised.

"I cannot be with you, Qynh. I cannot kiss you in wanton fashion. I cannot touch you with anything other than purity of heart. I cannot make love to you. I cannot do anything that could be misconstrued as violating my a'mionn de'geamnaidh. I must remain celibate. If I do not, I will lose my place among the Buion. I will be expelled from the Ag'iarraidh."

A heavy knocking fell against Kierken's door, and they both jerked at the sound, startled. "Kierken?" Iasal called, and Kierken gasped sharply, his eyes widening with dismay.

"Mo'altrum!" he whispered, stricken.

"I will not tell," Qynh said. "It was my fault besides—I am the one who kissed you. They cannot expel you for that."

The knocking came again. "Kierken? Kierken, are you awake, mac'leinn?"

"It will be fine," Qynh told Kierken, touching his hand. "We will never speak of it. We will—"

"Mayhap I do not want that, Qynh," Kierken whispered.

Qynh stared at Kierken, stricken. "Kierken, do not say that," she said. "They will expel you from the Ag'iarraidh—from the Buion. You have worked so hard for it."

"Kierken, are you awake?" Iasal called again, beating heavily against the door. "Le do thoil, open the door!"

Kierken stood and crossed the room. He opened the door just as Iasal had reared his hand back to knock again. Airrenigh stood with him, both of them looking anxious and somewhat alarmed.

"Mo'altrum, my lady," Kierken said, nodding in deference. "I ... Forgive me. I was ... I was only..."

"I had a nightmare," Qynh said, rising to her feet. She tucked her disheveled hair back behind her ears and went to the door. "We ... we were only talking."

"Hoah, Qynh, good. You are here," Airrenigh said.

"Both of you come with us to the foyer," Iasal said. "The others have already gathered."

For the first time, Qynh noticed Iasal and Airrenigh were fully dressed; not only this, they were clad for traveling, with hooded cloaks drawn about their shoulders, and laden knapsacks slung against their backs. "The others?" Qynh asked, bewildered.

Iasal nodded. "We are leaving," he said. "We are bringing Trejaeran north."

Wyndetta had helped Dagarron gather the old, yellowed parchment maps. They knelt together on the floor of his chamber and she watched as he had carefully marked a course on the pages. He had pulled two well-worn volumes of journals from his knapsack. Each sheet within the journal was filled with line upon line of his slanted, meticulous handwriting; vivid and detailed descriptions of his travels and wanderings and all of the places, people and things he had seen along the way. He referred to the journals frequently as he hunched over the map, quill poised in hand.

"I should go with you," he said at one point. "I have been through the Dithreabh many times. It is foolish for you to go without benefit of a guide."

She met his gaze, but offered no reply.

His brows pinched and he said wearily, "You are right, I know. I cannot leave Qynh, not now. She needs me, too, as much as Trejaeran, even more so, mayhap. And I cannot trust the Comhar to be left to its own devices. Or to Tressach's."

He finished marking a pair of Aossach's maps and left them spread upon the floor to let the ink dry fully.

They went and stood on the balcony together in the meantime. She had made time to pack her belongings and her knapsack, blanket roll, bow, and quiver all sat by the door, waiting for her. There were twenty minutes remaining before they were due to meet in the manor house foyer.

"I should have known it would come to this," Dagarron remarked at length, his voice quiet and pensive as he looked out over the courtyard.

"Yes, you should have," Wyndetta agreed, glancing at him and smiling. "Sometimes I think Trejaeran could be your son. He certainly can be as willful as you at times."

Dagarron laughed, hanging his head. He looked over at her, resting his elbows on the top rail. "This makes two adventures now you will have without me," he said. "First, you ride to Edenvale with Iasal, and now you ride together for the Barren Mountains. Is there something I should know?"

Wyndetta chuckled. "You are a goose," she said. "Iasal is in love with Airrenigh."

And I am in love with you, Dagarron wanted to say. "Bi slan, muirmin," he whispered to her instead. *Be safe.*

He kissed her and she tilted her mouth up to meet his, pressing her hands tenderly against his face. She pulled him toward her, stepping backwards, drawing him into his room and toward the bed.

"You cannot mean to go!" Tressach cried to Eoghan. An hour had passed, and it seemed the entire

manor house and all of the members of the Council of the Comhar were awake, aware and gathered in the main foyer. "It is suicide! And what of our armies here among the Comhar? Who will lead them against Belgaeran?"

"We are not quite dead yet, Tressach, have peace," Eoghan replied, irritably. "Let us at least make it out the door before you break out the dirges."

"Surely you do not believe you will survive such a trek," Mahon, Baronmaster of I'lar County said, his brow furrowed, his hair disheveled with sleep. He shoved his finger at Trejaeran, making the boy draw back, his eyes wide. "You will see them all murdered for your folly, you idiotic child. You are fools." He turned his gaze toward Eoghan. "All five of you, fools."

"All six of us," Airrenigh declared loudly, her voice resonating in the long, vaulted foyer as she and Iasal strode side by side down the stairs.

"Make mention of fools and who should appear?" Tressach muttered, turning his glowering gaze toward the pair.

"Hold fast to your tongue, Tressach, for tonight I come prepared to answer you myself," Airrenigh told him, her hand falling against the pommel of her sword.

"And who will look after the County's affairs while you traipse off on this reckless adventure, my lady?" Tressach demanded sharply of her, his tone mocking as he offered her formal address.

"Dagarron will," she replied, looking toward her cousin. "If he would be so willing. He is my kin, Tressach—my blood kin—and he is most capable of minding in my stead."

"I would do so gladly, cousin," Dagarron told her, lowering his head politely.

"Five of you or six, it will not matter against Dorchadas," Conaire of Tamhnach County scoffed. "Was it not just this morrow we were warned of breaking apart the Comhar in arbitrary cause? And here go six of our number, off on a fool's quest into the very heart of—"

"It is not a fool's quest, Conaire, but a mission of mercy," Fiontan said from the staircase. He walked abreast of his father, Lord Ioruan, down from the second floor. Fiontan wore his sword against his hip, a quiver on his back. He carried a knapsack in one hand and a bow in the other. "And I would be glad of heart to be a part of it."

Trejaeran blinked at Fiontan in surprise. Mistaking his silence for apprehension, Fiontan looked at him, his brown eyes eager and bright. "I have tasted of battle, my prince, having served in the Cogadh'Dearg. It would fare only well to bring me with you. I will serve you most loyally and capably."

"Of course you may join us, Fiontan," Trejaeran said, still nearly dumbfounded by the Mianach noble's generous volunteering. "We would be honored to have you. And you as well, Airrenigh." He stared, wide-eyed at his cousin as she approached.

"Do not let her fair exterior fool you, little master," Eoghan told him, placing his hand against Trejaeran's shoulder. "She is as capable as any man with a sword in her hand—more so, even, than most. It is good to see you out of those frills and crinolines and back in fighting stance, my lady," he told Airrenigh fondly.

Dagarron caught sight of Rhyden coming down the stairs with Eisos and Treines and smiled to see Eisos

lay his hand affectionately on his son's shoulder. They had apparently made their peace, then, and it did Dagarron's heart good to realize it. Rhyden carried Eisos' silver Flaitheas blade sheathed at his side and bore a traveling pack in one arm, a bundle of silver plate armor in the other.

"It would seem everyone has arrived then, a'mac," he said quietly, turning toward Trejaeran. "And you are ready to take your leave. Here, Trejaeran..." Dagarron held out some neatly folded maps and his journals, pressing them against Trejaeran's hands. "What I do not remember well within my mind, I remember most clearly within those pages. Mayhap you will find some use for them."

"Dagarron," Trejaeran said softly. "Dagarron, I ... I..."

"There are many places within the Dithreabh that are unrivaled in their glory," Dagarron said. "But there are many dangers, too, a'mac. Remember that and have care."

Trejaeran hugged him fiercely, closing his eyes. "I will," he whispered.

"Do you think you can make it across the Dithreabh and into the mountains in time?" Qynh asked Trejaeran, her eyes swimming with tears as he swung himself astride Ygellas.

"I do not know," he admitted. "But I must try. I waited because I had prayed for this, that the Comhar would help me. I did not hold out much hope of making it on my own, or even with Rhyden. But with Iasal and the others, and now Eoghan Drouin..."

Qynh laughed. "I would have dropped to the floor to see him on his knees, pledging his service to you," she said.

He smiled. "I saw him in the doorway and my heart nearly stopped. I thought it surely meant I was dreaming."

Qynh reached for Trejaeran, hooking her fingers against his. "I do not want you to leave," she whispered. "I feel as though all of this time you have been lost to me and I have only just now found you again."

"You are not going to lose me," Trejaeran said. "You have always been with me, Qynh, through the sight."

Qynh blinked at him in surprise. "But I do not have the sight, Trejaeran," she said. "That is your gift, while I..."

"You have as much Elfin blood in you as I do," Trejaeran said pointedly, the corner of his mouth lifting in a soft smile. "You have never been fully aware of it, perhaps, but it is there, still the same. And it has always been particularly strong between you and me, like how we always know when one or the other is hurting or sick. We have a special sort of sight between us—the ag'roinnt, the sharing of our hearts and minds."

"The ag'roinnt," Qynh whispered, pronouncing the Gaeilgen carefully. She felt her tears slip, trailing down her cheeks. "Do you think it is in me, Trejaeran? The sight? Do you truly?"

I know it is, Qynh, Trejaeran said inside of her mind, making her smile despite her tears. He raised his hand, his palm turned to face her. *And we will never be apart for it. Remember that.*

She raised her hand, pressing her palm against his. *Promise me you will return*, she thought to him, slipping her fingers through his. *Promise you will come back*.

He folded his fingers through hers. "I promise," he whispered.

"Trejaeran," Rhyden said, easing Dherga alongside Ygellas. He reached out, touching his friend's shoulder. "We should be off. The others are already across the courtyard."

"Little Eisos!" Eoghan called out to Rhyden, as if on cue. "Trejaeran! This journey is all for you! Do you not want to come along for it?"

"Fare thee well, lads," Dagarron told them, raising his hand in a wave as he came to stand beside Qynh. "Slan leat, the both of you."

"Slan agat," Rhyden said, pressing his heels into Dherga's abdomen. The white stallion whinnied, breaking into a wide, prancing stride, eager to set out on a new and promising adventure. Rhyden pivoted his hips in the saddle and waved to his parents. "Slan agat!" he called.

"Slan agat," Trejaeran said, reaching down and brushing his fingertips against Dagarron's as Ygellas followed Dherga toward the gatehouse.

He sat up straight in the saddle as the manor house fell behind him. He opened his mind to the moonlit sky, tilting his face so that he could see the countless shimmering stars overhead, like a spill of diamonds against black velvet. He closed his eyes.

Poppa, can you hear me?

I am coming, Poppa. I am coming and I will set you free.

I promise, Poppa. I promise.

Chapter Nine

"What is that?" Qynh asked Kierken.

It had been nine days since Trejaeran and the others had left Orinein for the Dithreabh. They had received no word from the wayward rescue party; not even the Faidh seer from the Donnag'craun, Aoife, had been able to track their progress within her mind. She had offered a disturbing statement that "a shadow had descended over them," obscuring them from her view, words that had left Qynh troubled and worried.

"What is what?" Kierken said, glancing up at her. After their morning sparring match, the pair had retired to the garden arbors. He sat beneath a broad, leafy maple tree, with a book propped against his knee, a narrow, goose-vane quill poised in his hand.

She rested in the grass in front of him, lying on her belly with her chin propped in the cup of her palms. "That little book you are always writing in," she said.

He raised his brow at her. "I am not always writing in it," he said. "As a matter of fact, I very seldom

find time to write in it these days, between my studies, my meoraich, and having you trounce me at fencing."

She laughed. "What is it?" He shook his head, color rising in his cheeks as he averted his eyes back to the book. Qynh reached out, slapping the toe of his boot. "Tell me, Kierken. I will not tease. What is it?"

"It was a gift from my Maime," he said. "She gave it to me upon my departure for Lyhndale so I could chronicle my journey. She told me, 'great things await beyond the horizon's edge. Mark well the passage of your days, for they will be as legends.'" Qynh looked perplexed and his blush deepened. "It is a leabhar de'laen, a book of days. You write in it, Qynh. That is all."

"What manner of things do you write in it?" Intrigued now, Qynh sat up, drawing her legs beneath her, regarding him with unfeigned fascination.

Kierken shrugged. He seemed nearly shy on the matter. "All manner, really. You can write down things that occur throughout your day, good and bad. You can write about places you visit, people you meet. You can write about your feelings, your thoughts and the sort."

"Most people simply keep their thoughts within their heads," she said, smiling at him.

"Some thoughts are worth writing down and remembering," he replied, smiling back at her, extending his leg and tucking the toe of his boot gently beneath her chin, nudging her.

"Do you write about me in your leabhar ... leabhar de..."

"Leabhar de'laen," he interjected kindly.

"Your book of days," Qynh said. "Do you, Kierken?"

He raised his brow. "I might," he said, blushing again.

"May I read it?" she asked and he blinked at her, surprised.

"Qynh, it is a sort of private thing," he said, visibly flustered. He drew the journal toward his chest as though she had reached for it. "I did not mean for anyone to read it when I..."

"I would not poke fun," she said, wounded.

He yet looked rather mortified at the prospect and Qynh relented. "Keep it to yourself, then," she said, her brows narrowing. "I do not care."

She stood, dusting off the knees of her breeches, and tromped back over to her own book. She lay back down on her belly, purposely turning her feet toward him. She tucked her hair behind her ears as she settled against the grass, tucking her palms beneath her chin once more and scanning the page beneath her to find her place among the lines and measures.

He moved so lightly, so softly behind her she did not hear him, and she jerked, startled when he lay down beside her. "You cannot laugh at me," he said, offering her the leabhar de'laen.

Moved, Qynh smiled at him. "I could never, Kierken," she whispered, as she took the journal from him. He stood once more and went back beneath the maple tree. He hefted another book, a thick volume

borrowed from Airrenigh's library, and dropped it heavily against his lap. He opened the cover and found where he had marked his place. He settled back against the tree trunk, making himself comfortable as he began to read.

Qynh flipped through the journal until she found the last entry recorded, the one he had been working on just moments before. She smiled, wondering if he had written anything of their sparring match that morning. *Disturbing dreams from last night weigh upon my mind*, he had written instead. Qynh's smile faded and her brows drew in concern. *In my mind, I saw a heavy cloud of shadows descend upon Tirnag'crann, a black and billowing fog that obscured the trees, the grass, the sky from view. I cried out for Maim and Athair, calling to them in warning, but the darkness closed about my throat and fell upon my eyes, rendering me mute and blind. Even in the full light of day, these images haunt me, for I do not know what they mean. I will seek counsel this afternoon with Aoife. Mayhap she can offer some insight into*

His words ended abruptly; Qynh had interrupted him in midthought and he had not had time yet to complete his entry. She returned to the front of the book, letting the pages flutter against her fingers and read once more from there.

Upon their arrival at Orinein, when they had learned of Trejaeran's injury, and his fragile, uncertain state, Kierken had noted, *There is something that stirs within his mind. Even now, in his weakened condition, I sense it within him. It is power unlike any I have ever felt. It is tempered now; his mind is distant and withdrawn, but when it awakens ... If he should survive...*

Of her kiss, he had written: *Mathair Maith, what words can I offer, save that I will surely never draw breath upon the Bith in the same manner as before. I will never know a more glorious moment in my life than that, when she pressed her lips to mine and whispered that she loved me. All of the significant points within my life—before and since—will now be measured by that one moment, and none will ever compare.*

Qynh lowered Kierken's book of days against the grass. She felt ashamed of herself for having been brazen enough to ask to read his journal. She realized he had only shared it with her because she had asked it of him, and he would not refuse her anything within his power. She stood, walking over to him. He glanced up at her, puzzled as she knelt in front of him, holding the book out.

"That was quick," he remarked, raising his brow.

"I changed my mind," she said. "It was wrong for me to ask to read your book, Kierken. I had no right to intrude and I am sorry."

"You did not intrude," he told her. He leaned forward and cupped his palm against her face. "I can keep no secrets from you, Qynh. You have my heart."

A sudden scuffle of hurried footsteps in nearby leaves startled them both, and they drew apart, wide-eyed and blushing. Dagarron ducked among the low-hanging boughs and caught sight of them. "Here you are," he said.

"We were only reading," Qynh said, her voice rushed and shrill. "Truly, Dagarron, it ... it is a nice day, and we—"

"I need you both. Come with me," Dagarron said, motioning with his hand. For the first time, Qynh realized he looked anxious, nearly ashen with worry, and she scrambled to her feet, alarmed.

"What is it?" she asked. "Have they heard from Trejaeran and the others? Is there some news?"

"There is news, muileach, sweetheart, but not from the north," Dagarron said. "I have called a meeting in my chamber. Come with me, and I will explain."

"A shadow descends upon the south," Aoife said gravely. She stood in Dagarron's room before the hearth of his fireplace.

"Kierken told me he has seen the same images within his mind," she said, turning her gaze toward the young Donnag'crann. "Such imagery is not unfamiliar among the Faidh. In the days before the Damantas rode upon Lyhndale to claim Qynhelein, we saw images such as these, and then again, as the Damantas rode from Dorchadas to try to take Trejaeran. I fear for our fellows in Tirmag'crann. These dreams and visions mean the Damantas prepare to ride and soon."

Dagarron wore a pained and troubled expression. "We have no way to warn them," he said. He closed his hand into a fist and struck the mantle. "Damn the duchar! We cannot trust the trees to send word to them, not that close to the Dubholc'crainn. We could send kestrels, but could they reach Tirmag'crann in time?"

"Mayhap the Donnag'crann need no warning. Could these visions, these premonitions have been shared among the Faidh at Tirmag'crann?" Lamiel asked. "Is it possible that the Donnag'crann know what is to come and prepare for it?"

"I cannot know with certainty," Aoife said. "The minds of the other Faidh are closed to me now, as though a shroud has been drawn to block my sight. I cannot call to them, or reach them with my mind."

Lamiel looked toward Eisos. "You have how many among your forces, mo'cara?"

"By Iasal's count, the Buion stand at four hundred thirty-seven now," Eisos said. "With the Ag'iarraidh, closer to five hundred, at best. With the other aicmeachs, maybe another two thousand warriors able to fight."

"It is not enough!" Treines exclaimed. "The Donnag'crann lay trapped between Caladh and Belgaeran. They cannot withstand such an assault all alone! Mathair Maith, they will be massacred!"

"They will not stand alone, Treines," Dagarron said firmly, his brows narrowed. "The Donnag'crann are members of the Comhar and we stand together. If Ciardha strikes at one of us, she strikes against us all."

"And she will answer to us all for her offense," Ioruan said.

"You cannot see with certainty when this attack will come to pass, Aoife?" Tressach asked. He had pulled a chair over into a far corner and sat by himself, his arms folded across his doublet. It was difficult to ascertain who was more surprised by Dagarron's invitation that he join their council—Tressach or Dagarron himself.

Aoife turned to Tressach, fully anticipating confrontation. "I see only darkness now, Tressach," she said. "It is Ciardha's draiocht, surely; dark magic that would keep her intentions secret from my sight."

"So we do not know if this assault is yet to happen, or if it is currently underway," Tressach said, raising his brow. "Or mayhap it happened days ago, and the Donnag'crann lay slain among the trees."

"Aoife has practiced her gift for more than five hundred years, Tressach," Eisos said. "It is most familiar to her. If she says it is yet to be, then it is yet to be."

"You misunderstand my meaning, Eisos," Tressach told him calmly. "I am not questioning the validity of my lady's prophesies, but rather the time in which we, your allies, have to rally a response."

"Whatever our time, it is not enough to squander," Dagarron said. "We cannot wait to send word to Tamhnach and I'lar counties and hope they issue favorable reply, if that is what you would suggest, Tressach. We have riders here, soldiers from four of the Comhar counties. We should ride southward at once to defend Tirnag'craun."

Keena stood from her chair, her eyes flashing, her hands moving in swift, fervent gestures.

"My lady asks what you would have of her forces, the Fiainas in the Midland foothills," Kierken said. "She says they are at the ready, that they await this chance to stand with their Comhar allies against the Damantas."

Keena looked at him, her brow arched, surprised and intrigued by his intervention. Without Eoghan to offer translation for her, she had come to rely on handwritten notes she would hastily scrawl. In her eager haste to make a point, however, she had forgotten herself and expressed her thoughts as was instinctive to her; with her hands.

Kierken smiled at her, pressing his fist against his shoulder and lowering his gaze politely. "I have the sight, my lady, just as Aoife, and would be glad of heart to interpret for you, if it pleases you," he offered.

"Keena, it would take nearly a week to send word to the Fiainas among the Midlands," Dagarron said. "And from there, another week—mayhap two—to reach Tirnag'craun. We do not have time."

"Unless we do not send the Fiainas to Tirnag'craun," Tressach said. "Dagarron, if we were to dispatch a small party of riders eastward while the rest of our army here turned south, we could rally Mahon's forces as we crossed I'lar County, and Conaire's as well as we struck across Tamhnach. Cross the Thoir River close to the Midland foothills and we can collect Eoghan's Fiainas in our passage and make south for Belgaeran."

"We do not ride upon Belgaeran, Tressach," Lamiel said. "Our focus is on Tirnag'craun and the Donnag'craun."

"They are far from helpless, Lamiel," Tressach said. "We have long counted on them to lead our southward wave should we lay siege against Belgaeran. They command a capable army. They are able to fend for themselves."

"Fend for themselves?" Eisos said, his brows furrowed deeply. "Against the Damantas, without our support? You are mad, Tressach. I will never allow my Donnag'craun to be your lambs of sacrifice so that Belgaeran might fall!"

"Nor will I, Eisos, by my breath," Dagarron said.

"Your Donnag'craun have an army of two thousand strong, Eisos," Tressach said. "They have hope—and a chance—until our Comhar forces can arrive. I would not see the Donnag'craun abandoned. Rather, I would count on their resistance. The more they fight—and the more we fight with them—the

more Damantas will be drawn away from Belgaeran and the Dubholc'crainn. The royal city will be vulnerable. Lahnduren and Ciardha will be vulnerable. We may never have better opportunity to make a strike against them."

"We cannot strike Belgaeran," Ioruan said. "It is too soon; all is not prepared and we do not have both of the heirs among us. The prophecy does not tell us which one will prevail. We do not dare move against Belgaeran while Trejaeran rides north to—"

"Who among us does not believe that it will be Qynh to fulfill the prophecy?" Tressach asked, rising. "Every morning this past week, I have seen the girl hold her own in swordplay against one of the Buion Ag'iarraidh—a task I doubt I could see to fruition, and I have twice as many years of battle and training beneath my belt. She has the heart of Herdranges within her, I tell you. She will lead us to victory."

"Tressach, you speak with fair purpose, but we cannot take such a risk with the—" Lamiel began.

"Mayhap we can, Lamiel," Dagarron said thoughtfully, and Lamiel turned to him, surprised. "Such a trek as you propose, Tressach, could be completed in nearly the same amount of time as the southward pass to Tirnag'crann."

Tressach nodded. "Muisse. I have spent the day in my father's library plotting such a course, cousin. I would only need a small ration of riders, no more than twenty-five. Mahon and Conaire would listen to me; they would not waver in their support if I bid it of them. My Lady Keena, you could join me and rally the Fiainas in Eoghan's stead. Qynh could ride with us; she would be safe among our numbers. This is our chance, Dagarron. We may never be so fortunate again."

"It is sound strategy," Dagarron said. "Eisos, if you led Ciarrai's cavalry in my stead, with Lamiel and Ioruan's forces, we could launch a formidable stand in defense of Tirnag'crann and have our chance against Belgaeran at the same time."

"In your stead?" Eisos blinked, perplexed.

"I will keep with Qynh," Dagarron said.

"And with Tressach. You would trust him, Dagarron?" Eisos asked.

"A sound strategy does not a sound character make, Eisos," Dagarron said. "No, I would not go so far as to say I trust Tressach and that is why I would ride with him, to ensure that his intentions remain as noble in the demonstration as they do in the utterance."

"They will, cousin," Tressach told him dourly. "Though the level of your confidence is less than flattering, I will endeavor not to draw offense."

"We cannot tarry," Dagarron said with grim resolve. "Tressach, you have a course plotted for the Midlands, did you say? Then meet with me—Eisos, you as well, and you, Lamiel, Keena, and Ioruan in the library. We will look over Aossach's maps and decide on the paths we each need to follow. It will be a long night for us, I think, mo'cairde. We have a lot of preparation and precious little time."

"Trejaeran thinks I have the sight," Qynh said to Kierken. "He told me that before he left for the north."

They had left Dagarron's room and gone to Kierken's chamber. She sat on his bed, trying to make light conversation. Her heart ached as she watched him pack a small traveling knapsack. He would leave her

in the morning, Qynh realized with sorrow. His family remained in Tirnag'crann; his parents, brothers and sisters, about all of whom he had spoken frequently and fondly. She had seen the stark fear in his eyes during the meeting, and in her mind, she could not blame him for choosing the path to Tirnag'crann.

Kierken glanced at her, rolling a pair of breeches into a tight bundle. "Of course you have the sight," he said. "I have known this since I first saw you."

She blinked at him in surprise. "You have? But why, then, have you never made mention, Kierken? I ... I did not..."

He tucked the breeches deep inside his pack and pinched his fingers together, tapping his forehead and chin in apology. "Gabh mo leithseal, Qynh. It is not my place to tell you of such things. I knew you would discover the truth in your own time, and that until then, you would be safe among us here at Orinein."

She watched in silence as he continued to fold and pack his clothes. "You will ride with Eisos, then," she said at last, and to admit this aloud brought a tremble to her voice and the sudden sting of tears to her eyes. "For Tirnag'crann tomorrow, I mean."

Kierken glanced at her, startled by her comment. "I will ride with you, Qynh," he said and she blinked at him in surprise.

"What?" she said.

He realized she was near to weeping. "Oh, mo'ghra," he said, coming to sit next to her on the mattress. He reached out and caressed her face, letting his fingers trail into her hair. "Qynh, did you think I would not?" he asked.

"But your family," she whispered. "Kierken, your family lives in Tirnag'crann. Surely you must want to go to them."

"My family lies in Tirnag'crann, yes," he said. "But I must trust in my Buion fellows, in Eisos and the Comhar and the wisdom of the Mathair Maith to keep my home, my family safe from harm. For my heart, Qynh, lies with you." He wiped at her tears with his fingertips, smiling at her.

"I am frightened, Kierken," she whispered.

"I know," he said. He drew her against his shoulder and she hugged him fiercely.

"I did not think it would ever come to this," Qynh said. "I never believed this moment would truly come. It is madness, Kierken, to think I can fulfill Lythaniele's prophecy. I cannot do this. It should be Trejaeran. He is the one with the power, not me. You know what he did to Eoghan Drouin with his mind. Surely, it is Trejaeran, Kierken. He is the one, not me."

"I do not know which of you is the one, Qynh," he told her softly. "But I have seen what you can do with a sword, a'ghra, and it is every bit as powerful as—"

"Kierken, you do not fight me as an equal when we spar," she said. "I defeat you only because you let me."

"Mayhap I have shown restraint in the past," he said. "You are inexperienced, and I do not want to see

you hurt. But these past few matches, Qynh, you have beaten me soundly and fairly. I did not let you."

He told the truth; Kierken could not lie to her. "Whatever destiny awaits us in the south, Qynh, I believe in you," he said. "And whatever comes, I am with you."

Qynh returned to her chamber and set about arranging items to bring along with her on the journey. In her bedside table drawer, she found the silver pendant Deog and Mahres had given for her sixteenth birthday. She pinched the length of chain between her fingertips and let the totem dangle before her face, watching the lamp light wink off of the figurine's diminutive features and outstretched arms. Deog's words from that morning came to mind

It belonged to your mother, Qynh ... I thought you might like to have it

and Qynh closed her hand around the pendant, pressing it against her heart as she remembered her father.

"Oh, Poppa," she whispered as she slipped the chain about her neck, letting the silver figure drop beneath the collar of her tunic.

A soft rapping fell against her door and Qynh turned. "Come in," she said.

The door opened, and Dagarron stepped inside. He carried a long, tapered sword sheathed in a black leather scabbard in one hand.

"Hullo, Dagarron," she said. "Your meeting is finished already?"

"Alas, no," he replied, sighing heavily. "I think we will hold counsel long into the night, but I wanted to speak with you in private before you went to bed. So much has come about so quickly. I can only imagine what it must seem like to you."

He embraced her. "Ta bron orm," he whispered. "I am sorry I cannot keep you from this. I would if I could."

"I know, Dagarron," she said, closing her eyes against tears she felt rising once more, unbidden. "No one is to blame."

He offered the sword to her, pressing the hilt between her hands. Qynh looked at him, astonished. "What is this?" she asked.

Dagarron smiled. "Take it, muileach. No warrior is complete without a reliable sword."

"You cannot mean to give this to me," she said. She drew the sword from the scabbard and admired the heft of the blade as she held it aloft. She gave it an experimental swing and looked at Dagarron with wide eyes. "Dagarron, this is too kind. I cannot accept."

"You have need for a good sword, Qynh," he told her. "That old sparring iron you have been toting about is quite fine for practice, but you need Elfin-tempered steel to face the Damantas. That is one of the finest blades you will ever find. It was made for you, Qynh, many years ago."

She blinked at him, visibly puzzled and he smiled again. "Deog made this sword for you, Qynh, for just this purpose," he said. "He crafted the blade out of love for you, and his faith that with it, you would fulfill

your destiny."

"Poppa made this?" Qynh breathed, stunned.

"What better steel to wield than that crafted by your father, the finest weaponsmith in all of the land?"
Dagarron said, laying his hand on her shoulder.

Qynh burst into tears, bringing her hand to her face and letting the sword dangle at her side as Dagarron enfolded her in his arms. She wept against his shoulder, clutching the sword as though she clung to Deog himself.

"Go raimh maith agat," she whispered to Dagarron. "I cannot tell you what this means to me. Go raimh maith agat." *Thank you.*

"Ta failte romhat, Qynh," Dagarron said, blinking against his own tears. *You are welcome.*

Qynh had never seen an army prepared to ride into battle, and as she and Kierken strode side by side at daybreak out the front doors of the manor house and into the courtyard beyond, she drew in a marveling gasp.

The Comhar cavalry, hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers, greeted them, all dressed in full battle armor. There were more than two thousand mounted soldiers and infantrymen at the ready, waiting both within the expansive manor courtyard and beyond the perimeter of the defensive walls. Everywhere Qynh turned she saw horses prancing and shuffling impatient hooves as early morning sunlight winked off of silver chanfrons and crinets, gleaming against polished cruppers.

Kierken smiled. "It is impressive, is it not?"

She nodded. "Hoah, is it ever," she agreed.

She fell in step behind him as they walked around the side of the manor house. Qynh caught sight of Dagarron by the stables. He smiled to meet Qynh's gaze, raising his palm in friendly greeting.

"Good morrow, Dagarron," she said as they approached.

"Good morrow, muileach," he said.

"My Lady Qynh, beannacht," Tressach called in greeting. He approached them from the direction of the courtyard, leading a strapping black stallion adorned with silver bard by the reins. He nodded amicably toward Kierken. "And to you as well, Kierken. Good, we are all accounted for, then."

Tressach approached Qynh, holding the stallion's reins out to her. "If it would please you, my lady, I offer my Maing for you to ride. He is a magnificent steed, sired from an exceptional bloodline, I assure you."

Qynh blinked at him in surprise. "Oh, Tressach," she said. "That is kind of you, but I—"

Tressach pressed the reins against her palm, cupping her hands lightly between his. "I insist, my lady," he said. "It would please me immeasurably to know you rode upon my most prized steed."

He felt her fingers close against the reins and he smiled.

"Thank you, Tressach," Qynh said, the corners of her mouth lifting into a pleased and flattered smile.
"That is very generous of you."

Kierken ducked into the stables to retrieve his mottled grey stallion, Toit, while Dagarron, Tressach and Qynh each took turns exchanging slan-agats and saddling their steeds.

"Farewell, Dagarron, mo'cara," Eisos said as Dagarron leaned over in his saddle to clasp his friend's proffered forearm. "Go mbeannai Mathair Maith duit." *May the Good Mother bless you.*

"Gurab amhlaidh duit, Eisos," Dagarron said. *The same to you.* "When next we meet, old friend, may it be over brimagues in the royal palace, with Ciardha overthrown and this terrible shadow behind us."

"I look forward to it," Eisos said.

"Keena, Kierken, le do thoil, mo'cairde, have care along your journey," Treines said as Dagarron extended his farewells to Lamiel and Ioruan each in turn. Keena smiled, offering Treines a friendly nod as she mounted her horse.

Kierken pressed his hand against his breast, lowering his face in polite deference as he spurred Toit forward. "We will, my Lady Treines," he said. "Saol fada chugat, mo'caraid." *Long life to you, my friend.*

Treines watched the young Donnag'crann ride away. Her eyes swam with sudden tears and she turned, pressing her hand against her mouth as her breath fluttered. "Gurab amhlaidh duit, Kierken," she said softly. *The same to you.*

Chapter Ten

"Look at all of the flowers," Wyndetta breathed.

The seven had made it across the Comhar territories of Nichten and Thir counties, crossing officially into the expansive forestlands and heaths of the Dithreabh. They traveled nearly without stop, despite constant drizzle or drenching downpours. The ground beneath their horses' hooves lay sodden and treacherous, but the steeds managed to set a steady, fleet-footed pace nonetheless, seeming relatively unencumbered by the muck and mire.

Dusk had crept across the landscape as the beleaguered, weary band came upon the ruins of a crumbled fortress in the midst of a seemingly endless meadow. A blanket of small golden flowers, thousands of them nodding in an evening breeze, spread out in a broad circumference, standing in stark contrast to the blanched witchgrass around them.

"They are og'sgothan," Airrenigh said. "Gold-blooms. I did not know they could grow this far north."

"It is getting dark," Eoghan said. He nodded toward the crumbled tower. "We should rest here tonight. We can find some shelter among those ruins."

"No," Iasal said, his eyes anxious. "Not here. Ta seo a ionad aisteach." *This is a peculiar place.*

Eoghan glanced at him, his brow raised. "Buion, you keep as nervous as a wetnurse in a roomful of hungry toddlers," he said, frowning. "It is a scrap of earth, some broken stones. We should camp here and wait for the sunrise."

"It is more than earth and stone," Iasal said. "There is great energy here. I can feel it."

"They died here," Trejaeran said quietly. He and Rhyden rode abreast of one another toward the rear of the group. His words, soft and somewhat distant, and his gaze, his blue eyes fixed dazed on the ruins, drew Rhyden's worried gaze. "The flowers are for them, I think. One for them each and all."

"What, bidein?" Rhyden asked.

Trejaeran looked like he was in a trance, his eyes glassy, his expression softened. He nodded toward the fallen walls without averting his gaze. "It is called Orbhui, the tower of Orlaith," he said, and at this, Iasal turned, his eyes flown wide. Rhyden had no accounting for the startled, stricken look on the Buion's face.

"The Ollabhar'Orga made their final stand here eons ago against the Feachd de'Sgathan, in the last days of the Cogadh an'Cead," Trejaeran murmured. "They—" His voice dissolved in a series of strained, moist hacks. While spring had courted early the rest of Tiralainn, the vernal season seemed slower in its arrival the more northward they went. The damp, persistent chill, unpleasantly reminiscent of winter, had left Trejaeran stoked with fever, strangled with hacking coughs for the better part of a week.

Trejaeran brought his hand against his mouth and coughed, feeling his chest tighten, his breath rattle beneath his sternum. Something thick rose in the back of his throat. He turned his face and spat with a small groan of disgust. He drew his damp cloak more closely about his shoulders and shivered.

"Are you alright, bidein?" Rhyden asked, reaching for him.

Trejaeran nodded, glancing at him, the dazed cast to his eyes gone. "I ... I think so," he wheezed, reaching for his waterskin to drink.

"It is this cursed weather, this wretched dampness that has had ill effects on us," Eoghan grumbled. He, too had been sniffing mightily against a congested nose for much of the last two days. He glanced toward Iasal and Fiontan darkly. "All of us save the fair little Elves, I should say."

"Elves cannot fall ill, Eoghan," Fiontan said. "We are stricken with an occasional childhood malaise, but once into adulthood, we live our days free of sickness."

"How fortuitous for you," Eoghan growled. "We camp here tonight, I say. Trejaeran needs to rest."

"We cannot stay here," Iasal said quietly. Wyndetta blinked at him, startled by the uncharacteristic fear in his voice.

"Hoah, then, Buion, you ride on ahead," Eoghan said. "Find us a nice little country inn with some rooms to let for the night." He snorted, shaking his head. "As for me, I am keeping here. Anyone else?"

Iasal said nothing more, but his eyes were troubled, his expression drawn as they dismounted from the horses and walked through the field towards the ruins. While the others spread out their blankets within the remnants of the fallen foundation, Trejaeran and Rhyden wandered about, investigating together.

"Why would someone build a fortress in the middle of the Dithreabh?" Rhyden asked, straining to peer through the fading light, studying the crumbled rocks.

Trejaeran had come to a stop before the remnants of a stone wall. Moss and lichens had crept up over the ages to lay claim to rock and mortar alike. He stared at the wall, his eyes wide as he reached for it, settling his hand against the stone.

"You said something about it being used in a war earlier. Did you mean the Elfin civil war, bidein?" Rhyden asked. "Maybe an old Mianach stronghold? They might—"

"Not the Mor'Cogadh," Trejaeran said. "The Cogadh an'Cead. The First War."

Rhyden turned, curious and troubled by the peculiar, monotone sound of Trejaeran's voice. "Bidein?" he whispered, walking toward him. "Trejaeran, what is wrong?"

"The Ollabhar'Orga fell beneath the shadow's might but Orlaith herself would not succumb," Trejaeran said. "She and Ciardha battled fiercely upon the threshold of Orbhui and when Ciardha fled from her own certain defeat into the foothills of the Barren Mountains, Orlaith pursued her with relentless fury."

"What are you talking about?" Rhyden asked. He leaned toward Trejaeran, flapping his hand in front of his face, trying vainly to draw his gaze. "Trejaeran, can you hear me?"

"In the northern mountains, Orlaith hunted Ciardha down and ran her through with the golden fire of the anam'cladh," Trejaeran said. "It might have ended there, the reign of the Na'Siogai concluded and the time of the Elves born, had Ciardha not held final victory in the end. She released her spirit deep into the Bith when the anam'cladh's flames pierced her body, and her soul found its way into the Nocturn."

Rhyden's eyes widened in start. "What?" he gasped.

"Here she slept for ages, regaining both strength and resolve, patiently awaiting the time of her return to claim Tiralainn once more as her own," Trejaeran said. He turned to meet Rhyden's gaze, and there was something foreign and unfamiliar to his face; his blue eyes were hard and cold as polished steel, and the sudden draw to his brows, the thin, downturned line of his mouth, lent a shadow of cruel capacity within his face that Rhyden would not have imagined possible.

"Bidein?" Rhyden whispered, drawing back from Trejaeran.

"The shadow descends," Trejaeran said. "The time of Ciardha has come. The age of darkness is upon us." He began to cough again, his slender frame racked so violently that he staggered back, his hands darting toward his mouth. As soon as his fingers drew away from the stone wall, he seemed to reclaim his wits again, and he whooped for desperate breath, his eyes smarting.

"Here, a'leaid," Iasal said from behind them, reaching out to offer Trejaeran a waterskin.

Rhyden yelped, whirling about, startled by the soft voice. "Hoah!"

"Thank you, Iasal," Trejaeran wheezed, accepting the waterskin and taking a long, fervent gulp.

"You should not wander by yourselves in the dark," Iasal told them. His gaze was not unkind, but there was something stern and cautious in his eyes; something Rhyden had no accounting for. "Come back to the pallets and keep among the rest of us."

Rhyden slept, but his dreams were troubled and disturbing. He saw a woman, beautiful and fierce astride a large stallion. The woman's hair fell nearly to her knees in thick, twining tendrils of amber and gold. She wore golden plate armor and her helmet was crafted to resemble an owl's head, with its mighty, hooked beak curved down over her forehead, its wings spreading out from the sides of the helm to frame her face. Her eyes were light, lucent ocher, like a cat's; her skin flawless and pale as new cream.

Rhyden could hear her voice crying out in his mind, proud and unafraid as she sat tall upon her saddle, her shoulders back, her chin lifted defiantly. She raised a sword in her hand as she called out to an army of thousands. "They will not seize Orbhui! We will never yield to the darkness!"

Her blade was unlike anything Rhyden had ever seen before; it blazed with golden fire, so bright it was painful to look at for too long. The blond woman raised the flaming sword above her head and swung it in a wide loop, her brows drawn together, radiant and glorious in her wrath. "We will never yield!" she shouted.

Rhyden woke with a gasp for breath and a start, sitting up on his pallet. He groaned quietly, pressing his palm against his temple and spreading his fingers through his disheveled hair.

"Are you unwell, Little Eisos?"

Eoghan's voice was soft and deep, emanating from the moon-draped shadows in a hushed rumble, but it startled Rhyden nonetheless, and his shoulders jerked reflexively, his eyes flying wide in surprise.

"Eoghan?"

"Yes, lad, only me. Do not fear." One of the nearby shadows moved and Rhyden realized the man had been seated close by, still and silent, keeping watch as the others dozed. Eoghan stood and came to Rhyden, genuflecting before him. His eyes were kind, his expression soft, and his mouth unfolded in a gentle smile.

"I had troublesome dreams," Rhyden said quietly. "About a woman." Eoghan raised a speculative brow. "That does not sound troublesome."

Rhyden laughed. "Not like that," he said. "She was a warrior, dressed in golden armor, with a helm like an owl. She brandished a sword in her hand, the likes of which I have never seen, Eoghan."

"A flaming sword," Eoghan said, quietly and Rhyden blinked at him in surprise.

"Yes," he whispered. "You know of it?"

"The golden lady and her sword? She came to my dreams as well. I think she pays us a visit each in turn tonight."

"Who is she, Eoghan? What does it mean?"

"I do not know. I think it has to do with this place. Mayhap the Buion was right to be frightened—though do not go telling him I said so. There is draiocht here, that much is for certain, and I for one do not trust it."

"Trejaeran feels something here through his sight," Rhyden said. "He keeps speaking in riddles. It is

getting stronger, harder for him to control, the further north we go. He keeps having spells; he goes into these trances and he says strange things."

I am worried for him, he wanted to say, as he thought of Trejaeran's dark and cold expression as he had touched the crumbled walls.

The shadow descends, he had told Rhyden. *The time of Ciardha has come. The age of darkness is upon us.*

Eoghan raised an interested brow, and Rhyden glanced over his shoulder toward Trejaeran, who slept soundly, curled beneath his blankets. "There is something here," he whispered. "And it is trying to reach him."

"Draiocht," Eoghan said again, with a snort. "Draiocht is taibhsan." *Magic and ghosts.* He stood, looking around with uneasy eyes, pulling his cloak more tightly against his shoulders. "It will be behind us in the morrow, Little Eisos, and I doubt there is one among us who will miss it."

"Eoghan, le do thoil," Rhyden said quietly, holding out his hand to stay the man. "I do not think I can rest again. Would you mind, mayhap, if I sat up with you for a time? I could help you. We could keep the watch together."

Eoghan gazed down upon the boy's earnest, upturned face and smiled. "I would not mind at all, Little Eisos," he said. "In fact, I would be most grateful for the company."

By the dawn's first light, Rhyden discovered that Eoghan had spoken truly; each member of the group had indeed been visited in the night by visions of the golden lady with the flaming sword.

"It was Orlaith," Iasal said, pacing restlessly among the ruins.

"Who?" Wyndetta asked, puzzled.

"Orlaith," Iasal repeated. "Queen of the Na'Siogai and Commander of the Ollabhar'Orga, the Golden Army in the a'Tosach, the beginning of time, before the Gaeilge, before the Mianach. They fell during a terrible siege at the tower of Orbhui during the Cogadh an'Cead, the First War against the fabled Feachd de'Sgathan, the Army of Shadows. The Feachd de'Sgathan tried to defy the Mathair Maith, to keep the Na'Siogai from surrendering the Bith to the mortal races."

His words rang eerily familiar to Rhyden, and he realized Trejaeran had uttered nearly the same things only the evening before. He turned to his friend, who sat nearby, his blankets drawn about him as he nibbled on a hank of salted pork. Trejaeran listened attentively to Iasal, his blue eyes wide and curious, as if he had never heard of such things before in all of his days.

Because he does not remember, Rhyden realized. *He does not remember saying them.*

"Despite the defeat of the Ollabhar'Orga, in the end, the will of the Mathair Maith held sway," Iasal said. "The Feachd de'Sgathan was conquered. It is said that the royal Noalan clan of the Elves descended from Orlaith's lineage, that the blood of the Golden Queen yet runs through their veins."

Rhyden blinked at Trejaeran again, and found his friend's eyes widening in surprise. Trejaeran was of the Elfin Noalan clan; his birth-mother, Queen Lythaniele, had been born to the royal house.

"Muisse, Buion?" Eoghan asked dryly, arching his brow. *Indeed?* "Thank you for that entertaining little tale. Surely we are all the better now for having heard your charming Elfin lore. We should be readying ourselves to leave this place, not lingering here discussing fanciful armies made of gold."

"It is not fancy, Eoghan," Iasal said. "It means something, I know it does. Surely it must."

He turned and walked away from them, his pale blue eyes fixed on the ground, his gaze distracted and distant. Airrenigh frowned at Eoghan. "Must you always antagonize him so?" she snapped. She turned on her boot heel and hurried after Iasal.

"If the blood of Orlaith yet runs among the royal Noalan clann, that would mean it runs within Trejaeran's veins," Wyndetta said.

"Mayhap that is where your power comes from," Fiontan said, turning toward Trejaeran. "If you bear even a touch of the Na'Siogai, it could account for the amazing strength of the sight within you, a'leaid, and why none among the Elves have ever known equal to it."

Trejaeran blinked at Fiontan, pale and visibly disconcerted by this notion. When a round of moist, hacking coughs shuddered through him, he seemed nearly grateful for the distraction.

They rode hard across the Machaires'fairsing, steering north toward a massive river gorge called Braon i'Tir. As the horses neared the edge of the endless miles of heath and quitch, and as the great chasm of the Braon i'Tir appeared ahead of them, Iasal held his fist aloft and brought them to a halt. The horses huddled together in a close group, nearly shoulder to shoulder.

"What is it?" Wyndetta asked Iasal, frowning as she scanned the horizon.

"I do not know," Iasal replied, his brows drawn. He glanced over his shoulder toward Trejaeran. "Do you sense that?"

Trejaeran nodded, wide-eyed as he looked about. "There is something here," he said in a small, anxious voice. "Something wrong."

Dagarron's maps and journals had described a solitary bridge—the Thar'tir—crossing the expanse of Braon i'Tir gorge. "Where is the bridge?" Fiontan asked, shielding his eyes against the glare of the sun with his hand.

"Have a care, mo'cairde," Iasal said to them. He pressed his heels against the belly of his horse, and the palomino strode forward once more, observing a cautious, creeping pace. "Trejaeran, Rhyden, stay close and do not wander. I do not believe we are alone here."

"I do not like this," Eoghan said, frowning as the horses walked together down a slope toward the Braon i'Tir. He looked all about, his eyes darting here and there. He unsheathed his sword and carried it in hand. "Wyndetta, you said there was a bridge here. I do not see it." He glanced at Iasal. "If they have taken out the bridge, Buion, and we are attacked, we will be trapped."

"Dagarron marked a bridge on his map, Eoghan, the Thar'tir," Wyndetta said.

"Mayhap Dagarron was wrong, then," Eoghan scowled.

"I doubt it," Wyndetta replied, raising her brow. "The bridge is here somewhere. We just have to find it."

"I believe we have found it," Fiontan said. She glanced over her shoulder at him, curious and he nodded toward the ravine. "There it is. Do you see those two posts thrust out from the cliff's edge?"

"I see them," Eoghan said. His frowned deepened. "There is no bridge there."

"Not the sort we were expecting, no," Fiontan said. He looked unhappy. "It is a droichead'rioghan, a swinging bridge. You walk along ropes strung between the edges of the ravine."

"What?" Rhyden gasped. He and Trejaeran blinked at one another in mutual dismay.

"You jest," Airrenigh said, crestfallen. "That is not the Thar'tir, Fiontan. Surely, it cannot be."

"It is," Fiontan said. "And we have to get across it." His bow was lashed against his saddle and the Mianach unfettered it now, sliding his fingers around the grip. He reached over his shoulder, pinching goose fletchings between his fingertips. He set the nock piece of the arrow against the string and let the bow rest, relaxed and undrawn at his side, his eyes scanning the tall, wagging fields of grass for any sign of a target.

"We cannot, Fiontan. The horses surely cannot pass," Rhyden said. He saw Fiontan carried the bow at the ready and his eyes flew wide and anxious. He took the hilt of his sword in hand, sliding the blade loose from its sheath. "Ceard e fein, mo'cara?" *What is it?*

Fiontan's brows furrowed as his eyes met Rhyden's and suddenly his arm swung up from his hip, his fingertips drawing the bowstring taut toward his jaw, the bodkin of his arrow seeming to thrust itself toward Rhyden's face.

It happened so quickly, Fiontan had no time to even shout in warning. He let the arrow fly and Rhyden yelped, ducking and hearing the wind whistle through the fletchings as the arrow sliced through the air above his head. He turned his shoulders, watching it pass, crying out again as it slammed between the eyes of a large wolf that had sprung from the tall grass.

A second wolf charged them, springing out of the quitch and bounding toward Wyndetta. She drew her sword as Fiontan nocked another arrow at his bow; he drew his bow arm up and loosed the arrow into the second wolf's skull. Thick, steaming black ichor splashed against Wyndetta as the animal fell and her eyes flew wide in horror. "It is the duchan!" she cried. "They are touched with the duchan!"

"Sweet Mother Above!" Eoghan bellowed as hundreds of wolves suddenly appeared from all directions, leaping out of secret places among the quitch, their eyes blazing with duchan-tainted fire.

"They are from Ciardha!" Trejaeran cried, his voice shrill with panic as Ygellas danced in frantic alarm beneath him.

"Make for the bridge!" Iasal cried, kicking his heels against the palomino's abdomen, spurring it to run. "They cannot outrun the horses! Go!"

They raced for the Braon i'Tir with a throng of wolves fast on their heels. The wolves hurled themselves at the galloping horses, ripping into their flanks and rending open their shoulders and haunches while their riders vigorously defended themselves with sword, dagger and bow. The horses proved swifter than the wolves and gained ground ahead of them as they thundered toward the bridge.

Fiontan had spoken truly; the Thar'tir was indeed a droichead'rioghan, a series of intertwined ropes suspended nearly a half of a mile in the air above a plummeting ravine. Iasal reached it first, reining his horse to an abrupt halt. "Mathair Maith," he gasped.

"Mathair Maith!" Eoghan cried, echoing his sentiments as his stallion plowed to a stop alongside of Iasal's palomino. "That is no bridge, Buion—that is fishing line!"

"We cannot pass!" Wyndetta shouted, drawing her mare beside Eoghan and staring in horror at the Thar'tir. "Iasal, Eoghan—surely you do not mean for us to pass! The horses cannot cross this!"

"They are coming!" Trejaeran cried as he rode toward them. "The wolves! They are coming!"

"We can follow the Braon i'Tir east," Wyndetta told Iasal. "Another half a day's ride and we can reach the end of it and cross north from there."

"There is not time," Iasal replied. "We have to cross here."

"No! We cannot leave the horses!" Trejaeran cried in desperate protest. "Iasal, le do thoil, we will never make it to the mountains in time by foot alone!"

Fiontan and Rhyden joined them, their horses skittering to a stop alongside one another. Fiontan rode with his spine twisted, his shoulders and torso turned to face the approaching wolves. He carried an arrow nocked against the bowstring, drew and fired, sending another tumbling dead to the ground. He was down to three arrows; he had made each and every one of the others count without fail.

"What are we doing?" Rhyden cried.

"We are crossing the bridge," Iasal replied.

"No!" Trejaeran whimpered, shaking his head.

"That half-rotted thing?" Rhyden exclaimed. "What about the horses? I doubt it will bear our weight fully or well, and the horses cannot—"

"We will have to leave them behind," Iasal said. He swung his leg around and dismounted from his palomino. He slung his bow across his shoulder and unslashed a water bag and small pouch of rations from his saddle. "Take a water bag and food. No more than you can carry easily."

"What?" Rhyden blinked, dismayed, his hand falling upon Dherga's withers. "Leave Dherga to the wolves? No, Iasal, no, I cannot—"

"There is not time, Rhyden! Do not argue with me!" Iasal shouted at him. "The horses will keep the wolves from us. They will give us time to make it across. Now get down from that saddle and move, boy! Now!"

For a few brief moments, the distraction worked. The wolves could not resist the vulnerable horses and converged upon them, surrounding and engulfing them, nearly forgetting about the riders who now stood on the precipice of the Braon i'Tir, huddled around the droichead'rioghan, Thar'tir.

"Mathair Maith," Wyndetta gasped, making the mistake of peeping over the edge of the cliff and staring down the sheer, brutal fall toward the Riastail River below.

"Go, now!" Eoghan cried. He waved his hand at Wyndetta. "Either we take our chances on the bridge or we stand here like new lambs waiting to be gored by the wolves. You decide, Wyndetta!"

Wyndetta pressed her lips together, turning to face the bridge. "Mathair Maith," she muttered, reaching out and grasping the hand ropes.

Eoghan followed her out onto the droichead'rioghan. "Trejaeran, Airrenigh, the three of us next, come on!" Iasal said, stepping onto the bridge behind Eoghan, motioning with his hand.

Trejaeran stood immobilized, terrified of the impressive height, of the tenuous sway of the bridge beneath their combined weights. "I ... I cannot," he said, shying back, shaking his head. He blinked at Iasal, stricken. "Iasal, I ... Le do thoil, I cannot."

Iasal reached for him, holding his hands out. "I am with you, a'leaid, I am right here," he said. "It is naught, do you see?" He walked backward onto the rope, letting his hips reflexively shift his weight as it moved and swayed beneath him.

"And I am behind you, cousin," Airrenigh said. "We will make it together." She heard Fiontan's and Rhyden's footsteps behind her. Some of the wolves had abandoned the horses for more interesting prey—the riders. Fiontan fired his bow once, twice and a then a third time, felling wolves with each arrow.

"My quiver is empty!" he cried out. "Airrenigh, Trejaeran, le do thoil! They are upon us! Move!"

Trejaeran moved forward, galvanized by the shrill alarm in Fiontan's cry. He stared at Iasal, trying not to let his eyes wander from the Buion's. Iasal walked along the wire with ease, holding Trejaeran's gaze, nodding at him in gentle encouragement with each hesitant step. "Ta me libh," he said. *I am with you.* "Come on. It is alright."

Fiontan followed Airrenigh out onto the Thar'tir, with Rhyden bringing up the rear. The young Donnag'crann moved with the same graceful ease as Iasal and he pivoted on his toes, walking backwards with absolute and unwavering balance, watching the wolves slink toward the edge of the cleft in their wake. He narrowed his brows. "Bastards," he hissed at them.

One of them, the largest Rhyden had ever seen, shrugged its way to the front of the pack. It was impossibly huge, the size of a well-tended ox, and Rhyden shied back as it hunkered along the side of the Braon i'Tir and watched him with blazing, fiery eyes. There was blood dripping from its muzzle, caked and smeared in the fur around its face. *Come back, little Elf,* its voice hissed inside of his mind, heard through his own limited gift of the sight. *I have tasted your horse's blood and bone. I would taste of yours now.*

Rhyden struggled to summon some mettle. He had sheathed his sword and now his hand left the rope and fell against his hilt. "Why do you not come out on the bridge and try?" he said.

Very well, the wolf replied, its lips wrinkling back from its muzzle in a snarl. It stepped forward. The bridge swayed precariously beneath its immense paw and Rhyden heard the strands in the foot line begin to snap. He drew back, his eyes widening. "Fiontan!" he gasped.

Iasal glanced up and watched in horror as the enormous beast took a tentative step out onto the bridge. He did not miss the ominous sound of the old ropes creaking and straining beneath the wolf's weight.

"What is it?" Trejaeran asked, seeing the shift in his expression. "Iasal?"

He met the boy's eyes. "It is naught," he said. "Look at me, a'leaid. You are nearly there. Do not stop now."

Wyndetta and Eoghan had both made it across the Thar'tir. They stood on either side of the bridge, both of them taking aim with their bows for the far side of the gorge. "We are running short of time, Buion," Eoghan called to Iasal in a grim tone, letting an arrow fly.

Iasal spared him a glance from the bridge. "I am aware of our situation, thank you, Eoghan," he said dryly.

"What is happening?" Airrenigh asked, pausing to look over her shoulder behind her. Her face jerked back toward Iasal, her eyes huge with fear. "Iasal, it will spill us!" she cried, breathless with fright.

Trejaeran turned and saw the wolf as well, and his voice escaped him in a terrified mewl. "Iasal!"

Iasal was no more than four steps from the land. He released the hand ropes and balanced on the line, using his hips to bear his weight as he reached for Trejaeran. "Pay no attention to the wolf," he said. Within the boy's mind, he said, *We will make it. We are nearly there now. Step with me, Trejaeran. I am not leaving this bridge without you.*

The enormous wolf now bore four of Eoghan's and Wyndetta's arrows deep within its neck and shoulders and it stumbled, lowering its head toward the ground, snarling. *If I am to die*, it hissed at Rhyden, its red eyes blazing. *I will take you with me, rotted Elves.*

It lay its paw against the line once more as Eoghan and Wyndetta fired in unison. Wyndetta's arrow slammed into the right side of the wolf's face, puncturing its skull and piercing its brain. Eoghan's stele punched through its left eye in a splattering mess of duchar, burying nearly to the fletchings.

I will take you with me, the wolf hissed again and it crumpled forward, tumbling over the edge of the ravine and crashing into the ropes at the far side of the droichead'rioghan.

"Mathair Maith!" Rhyden shrieked as he felt the ropes snap beneath the sudden, immense weight. The wolf fell, tangling in the lines, wrenching the twin supports from the ground, dragging them behind it.

Fiontan began to turn, his eyes flying wide as he realized what was happening. The ropes beneath their hands and feet went flaccid and then were simply gone.

Iasal stared into Airrenigh's eyes helplessly as he felt the rope beneath his feet shift and falter, as the moorings and lines that held it fast to the other edge of the Braon i'Tir crumpled and broke.

Airrenigh saw the terror in his face and understood.

"Airrenigh—!" he gasped.

"I love you—" she whispered, and then the ropes fell beneath her. Iasal reached out with both hands, his fingertips slipping against the front of Trejaeran's cloak, but missing Airrenigh completely. Trejaeran's eyes were enormous and pleading; even as he dropped away, falling beyond Iasal's grasp, he held the Buion's gaze. "Iasal!" he whimpered.

Eoghan dove onto the ground at the cliff's edge with his hands outstretched. His large fist closed against Iasal's quiver, but Trejaeran and Airrenigh plunged away from them.

Fiontan fell with them. His cloak blew up into his face, tangling about his arms and he struggled as he fell, his shrill, terrified cries reverberating against the chasm walls.

Rhyden also plunged toward the rapids below, wailing piteously for Eisos. "Father!" he shrieked. "Father! Father! Coigleann me! Coigleann me!" *Save me! Save me!*

"Airrenigh!" Iasal shrieked as Eoghan jerked him roughly backwards, hauling him onto solid ground. Eoghan wrapped his strong arms around Iasal's waist, pinning his arms to his sides as the Elf thrashed against him.

"Release me!" Iasal screamed, kicking his legs and throwing his head back against Eoghan's shoulder. "Oh, Mathair Maith, let me go, Eoghan! Let me go, I beg you! I beg you! Airrenigh! Airrenigh, no, no, le do thoil, no!"

They heard Trejaeran scream; his shrill cries ripped up octaves, drawing near to them somehow, and Wyndetta cried out, staggering back from the edge of the chasm as an enormous raven—a bird the size of a full-grown goat, with the wingspan of a man's full length—whipped out of the gorge, sailing skyward.

They could see the blazing fire of the duchan in its eyes; it clasped Trejaeran by the shoulders in its massive, crooked talons. The boy thrashed and struggled against its unyielding grasp, screaming as he flew over his friends.

"Help me!" he wailed. "Iasal! Eoghan! Le do thoil! Help me!"

"Trejaeran!" Eoghan bellowed, turning loose of Iasal. He ran after the raven, wrenching an arrow from his quiver and nocking it, drawing desperate aim. It was futile effort; Eoghan fired at the bird, but it was long gone, sailing over the tangled growth of heavy pine forest that dominated the northern side of the Braon i'Tir. Trejaeran's piteous screams faded slowly, echoing behind him, and Eoghan threw back his head. "Trejaeran!" he yelled. "Trejaeran!"

Wyndetta burst into tears. She knelt at the rim of the chasm and looked down, trying to see the others, trying to see what had happened to them, but they were gone. "Oh, Mathair Maith! Airrenigh, and Fiontan ... and poor Rhyden...!" she whispered, drawing her hands to her face, her shoulders shuddering with sobs.

"We have to go!" Eoghan cried, running back toward the ruined bridge. "Wyndetta, get on your feet, woman! Buion, gather your wits in your skull! That thing took Trejaeran! We have to move!"

He reached for Iasal, who had managed to stumble toward the edge of the cleft. When Eoghan closed his hand against Iasal's arm, the Elf shrugged him loose, whirling toward him, his lucent eyes flashing. "Get your rot damn hands from me!" he snapped. "Airrenigh could still live! I have to go to her!"

Eoghan blinked at him. "You gave your word," he said. "You swore yourself to protect the boy, Buion. You are bound by it. You—"

"Do not remind me of my oaths," Iasal said, baring his fists, squaring off against Eoghan. "I know them well. If one of Ciardha's birds took Trejaeran, they could have taken the others, as well. They could have taken Airrenigh. I have to—"

"Iasal," Eoghan said, stepping toward him, holding out his hand. "Iasal, she is gone."

Iasal shook his head, his eyes swimming with sudden tears. "No," he said. "No, that is not true. She she could still live. She ... she could..." The strength in his legs abandoned him and he crumpled to the ground. He hung his head, his long, disheveled hair spilling into his face. He clapped his hands over his eyes and began to weep, agonized. "I cannot live without her," he pleaded, shaking his head. "I cannot draw breath without her. I cannot bear it ... le do thoil..."

Eoghan genuflected beside Iasal, drawing his arm about the Buion's shoulders, holding him in a clumsy embrace. "I am sorry, Iasal," he whispered. "I am sorry, mo'cara."

Chapter Eleven

Qynh and her party crossed the Thoir River at the Torainn bridge, officially leaving Tamhnach County and the Comhar territories behind them as they entered the foothills of the Midland mountain range. True to his word, Tressach had proven both an effective and expeditious diplomat and they now boasted nearly four hundred Comhar riders among their ranks.

The landscape of the Midland foothills was breathtaking in its primordial, untainted beauty. Kierken tilted his face back as they rode beneath the lush and dense expanse of trees, smiling to feel dappled sunlight against his skin as it fell between young leaves and laden pine boughs. *I have missed this*, he said, his voice wistful and nearly forlorn with longing. *The trees here are still untainted by the Dubholc'crainn, the duchan. They are singing to me, melodies within my mind so sweet, they still my very breath to listen.*

Qynh looked up into the treetops, curious, opening her mind, trying to hear. Despite Trejaeran's assertion and Kierken's reassurances, she was still not convinced that she possessed the gift of the sight. If she did, it apparently paled in strength to her brother's, and to Kierken's as well; she could hear nothing but the soft whisper of wind through laden boughs and dense canopies of leaves.

As the late morrow waned into afternoon and from there into evening, the sun disappeared beneath a shroud of rain clouds. As night fell, the rain began, gentle at first, dropping through treetops and plopping against the ground, growing more insistent until the clouds opened and a downpour fell. Rivulets of rain water coursed down the sloping hillsides and run-off streams swelled into noisy, gushing torrents.

Qynh sat hunched in her saddle, with the hood of her cloak drawn. She was soaked, shivering with chill and sputtering raindrops away from her trembling lips. When lightning began to wink at them through the darkened treetops overhead and thunder began to growl among the clouds, she groaned, trying to pull her cloak as tightly about her as she could.

Lightning hissed overhead, pale light fluttering through leafy limbs and nettled boughs, and her stallion, Maig, snuffled unhappily, his lips wriggling against the plate of his bit. Thunder grumbled and then another bolt of lightning seared down from the sky, striking the trunk of a huge tree almost directly in front of Qynh with a blinding shower of sparks and sudden flames. Qynh shrieked in fright, throwing her hands toward her face to shield her eyes, and terrified, Maig whinnied loudly, rearing onto his hindquarters, pawing at the open air with his hooves.

"Qynh!" she heard Kierken cry out and then there was a loud, cracking sound as the tree collapsed on

its burning, damaged trunk. Its heavy, leafy limbs tumbled down toward her, an expanse of black shadow rustling loudly in the dark.

"No!" Qynh cried as Mairg floundered, still reared on his back hooves, his head thrown back as he screeched in terror. She felt the horse's hooves skitter uncertainly against the loose, flooded ground, sliding in the mud and soaked leaves, stumbling along the edge of the hillside and slipping down the slope.

"Kierken!" Qynh screamed, feeling Mairg lose his balance, feeling the stallion's spine arch beneath her as he began to topple. She had less than a second to realize if the horse fell, it would crush her beneath and she twisted, jerking her boots loose from the stirrups and throwing herself from the saddle.

Qynh hit the ground hard, landing on her side and taking the brunt of the impact with her shoulder. She saw lightning flash off of Mairg's armored saddle and she ducked her head, rolling, listening to the crash of snapping tree limbs and the heavy, shuddering thud as the horse hit the ground.

She tumbled wildly down the hillside as the tree slammed into the earth. She rolled, falling down the embankment, crying out sharply as she struck cragged points of protruding rocks along the way. The side of her face smacked into an upturned corner of bedrock, drawing blood and rattling the senses from her.

At last she came to a stop, spilling head over ankles into the swollen stream at the bottom of the hill. She landed face-first in the shockingly cold water and sat up, dizzy and sputtering, with blood streaming from her nose.

Qynh moaned, her fingertips fluttering toward her face. She tasted blood in her mouth and winced, spitting. Her head swam and her strength wavered. She slumped back into the swirling water, thrusting her hands into the torrent, to catch herself weakly. She heard voices calling out her name frantically, and the shrill, panicked cries of frightened horses.

She floundered in the stream, feeling the steady, pounding pressure of the raging current bearing forcefully against her. She tried to crawl toward the nearest bank and as she moved through the water another sound met her ears, this one close by and ominous, a low, steady growl.

She looked up and saw a large mountain cat hunkered alongside the stream, its yellow fur sodden and bristling. Its lips wrinkled back, pulling away from its teeth, as another yowling sound, warbling and menacing, emanated from deep within the animal's throat.

The cat glared at her, its eyes blazing with red fire, and Qynh drew back, her eyes flying wide in horrified realization.

duchan, it is infected with the duchar

A second cat crept out of the shadows of the forest underbrush, snarling at her, its eyes burning points of scarlet vermilion. A third followed, and then a fourth, and a fifth. They stole out of the woods behind her; Qynh heard a sudden snarl near her ear and jerked, crying out in fright as a broad, heavy paw swung at her, hooked claws whipping sharply in the open air where her shoulder had only just been. She whirled about, gasping to find four more mountain cats, their eyes all ablaze as they slinked toward her.

One of the cats crouched, its body poised, its hindquarters wriggling, as it prepared to spring at her. It bared its teeth, its eyes flashing with the fire of the duchar, as it pounced.

"No!" Qynh shrieked, throwing her arms up, her eyes shut in absolute terror. She heard an abrupt, shrill

yelp and a loud splash. She opened her eyes hesitantly, shuddering with fright and saw the cat lying dead on its side, its limp body slipping beneath the swirling water, an arrow lodged deeply in its skull.

Another cat yipped in startled pain, and then another, and Qynh recoiled to feel a brisk and sudden wind whip past her face; an arrow that left a mountain cat behind her, ready to leap, skewered and dead on the banks of the swollen stream.

She turned and saw Kierken on the slope of the embankment, his bow clasped in his right hand, his left hand drawing back the bowstring as he found his mark upon another cat. He let the arrow fly and the cat uttered a loud, piercing howl as it collapsed to the ground.

The remaining cats scattered, scrambling to escape. Kierken had not missed the gleam of scarlet fire in their eyes and he nocked one arrow after another against his bowstring, drawing upon them each in turn with amazing speed and accuracy. He shot each of the mountain cats, his bow arm not wavering until they all lay slain in the downpour.

"Qynh!" he cried to her, slinging the bow over his shoulder and rushing toward her. "Qynh—mo'ghra!"

"Kierken!" Qynh exclaimed as he splashed into the stream. He fell to his knees, cupping his hands against her cheeks.

"Qynh, you are bleeding!" he said, anguished. She crumpled against his shoulder, feeling his arms wrap around her.

"It is alright," she whimpered as she faded from consciousness. She tried to smile for him, her eyelids fluttering closed. "Please, I ... I am alright..."

Qynh moaned softly, turning her face toward a dim yellow glow of illumination as she came to. She was lying on her back and the air around her felt crisp with chill. She drew her hand to her face, bewildered, as she felt her fingers moving beneath the heavy folds of a woolen blanket.

A gentle hand touched her forehead and she heard Kierken's voice within her mind. *Do not be afraid, Qynh. All is well and I am with you.*

"Kierken?" Qynh murmured, opening her eyes. He moved into her view, stretching his legs out and lying on his side next to her, propped on his elbow. He caressed her hair and smiled at her.

"Yes, mo'ghra, it is Kierken," he said. "Welcome back to us."

They appeared to be in some sort of cave; Qynh saw candlelight against stone walls, fading into heavy shadows close to the ceiling. Confused and somewhat alarmed, she stirred beneath her blankets, scooting her hips back and sliding her elbows beneath her. "Where are we?" she whispered.

"These are na Uaimhas'salann de Abhacan," he replied in a quiet voice. "A system of ancient caves and mines once occupied by the Dwarves. They are occupied now by the Fiainas, Eoghan Drouin's army. You are among friends here, Qynh."

"What happened?" she asked. Her brows narrowed and she touched her head gingerly. Her temple felt sore; a fading bruise lingered beneath her fingertips.

"There was a storm, Qynh," he said. "A terrible storm. Lightning struck a tree; your horse frightened and

reared. You fell from your saddle, down the embankment. You struck your head." He reached out and brushed his fingertips against the faint, aching place at her temple. "We brought you here, among the Fiainas, to rest, to recover."

"There were cats!" Qynh exclaimed as she remembered all at once. Her eyes flew wide and she grasped at Kierken's leine. "In the woods, when I fell, there were mountain cats and they were infected with the duchar!"

He nodded, solemnly. "Yes, but they are gone now."

"You killed them," she said. "You saved me from them." Her memories returned, and she leaned toward him, slipping her arms about his shoulders, embracing him. She felt his hands slide against her back, his fingers tangling in her hair as he held her. "You saved me."

She drew her cheek against his, moving her head back until the tips of their noses brushed and she could look into his eyes. Her mouth was very close to his, and she could see the sudden longing that swelled within her own heart mirrored in his eyes. "Qynh," he whispered, cradling her face between his hands.

"I love you," she breathed, tilting her chin, bringing her lips toward his. She felt the gentle intake of his breath against her mouth as his lips parted to kiss her.

"My lady Qynh! You are awake!"

Kierken lowered his face reflexively, his nose brushing against her poised mouth as he blushed, the corners of his lips lifting in an abashed smile.

Tressach an'Clare had stepped into the chamber, ducking his head as he passed through the low, narrow entrance. He smiled brightly at Qynh. If he noticed anything awkward or amiss between the young couple, he was too polite to let it show. "Awake and well, I hope? You have given us all quite a fright, indeed!"

"Beannacht, Tressach. I am alright, I think," Qynh replied, leaning back from Kierken. "A little disoriented at first, but Kierken has helped."

"He has worried terribly for you, my lady. We all have, of course, but Kierken has scarcely left your side even for a moment." Tressach clapped Kierken affably on the shoulder. "I should go and fetch Dagarron. He is another we have barely been able to pry away."

"Le do thoil, Tressach, I will get him," Kierken offered. Tressach glanced at him and the young Donnag'crann smiled. "Why do you not stay a moment with Qynh? You have been concerned yourself, mo'cara." He rose to his feet and gazed down at Qynh.

You are leaving because you are afraid you will kiss me, Qynh thought.

He raised his brow at her and smiled wryly. *I am leaving because I am afraid I will be unable to stop kissing you.*

Her hand darted toward her mouth as she struggled not to laugh aloud. She felt color rising in her cheeks as Kierken took his leave. Tressach settled himself on the ground, folding his legs beneath him.

"How is your horse, Maig?" Qynh asked. "He was not injured in the fall, was he...?"

Tressach's brows lifted mournfully. "He broke his forelegs, my lady, I regret. And a point along his spine shattered as well. I drew my bow on him. I could not bear to see him suffering so."

Tears sprang to Qynh's eyes and she drew in a shocked, gasping breath as she reached for him, touching his hand. "Tressach, oh, I am sorry. It is my fault. I am sorry."

Tressach blinked at her. "You fault? No, my lady. I would gladly give over the lives of every stallion I own—or will ever own—to know that you are safe and unharmed. I would willingly run my own sword through my breast to think any steed of mine would cause you injury."

Touched, she smiled at him, and he drew her fingers toward his mouth that he might genteelly kiss her knuckles. "Your wounds have healed and you are alive, awake and strong once more," he said. "That is all that matters to me, Qynh." He smiled for her, some of the sorrow lifting from his face. "Do you know where we are, my lady? Has Kierken told you?"

"The mines of the Fiainas? Yes, he told me. He said the caves have a name, something in Gaeilgen, but I did not..."

"Muileach! Cen chaoi bhfuil tu?" Dagarron's voice attracted Qynh's attention and she smiled as he strode into the cave. *How are you?*

"Dagarron!" she cried as he genuflected before her, arms outstretched to greet her with a fond embrace. "I am alright, Dagarron, truly."

"Do you feel up to some company and a bit of supper?" he asked. "I had thought if you were feeling well enough, you might like to take sup with me and Keena, and some of the Fiainas? They are quite anxious to meet you."

"I feel well enough, I think, Dagarron," Qynh said. "That would be lovely, thank you." Dagarron helped her rise to her feet. Qynh closed her eyes against a sudden dizzy spell and she stumbled against Dagarron, moaning softly.

"She is still too weak, Dagarron," Tressach said. "Why do you not go ahead? I would be glad of heart to keep my lady company while—"

"Oh, no, Tressach, I am alright," Qynh said, opening her eyes. She steadied herself, pulling away from Dagarron to prove herself capable. "Truly, the both of you. Give me a moment, that is all."

She followed Dagarron along the confined passageways of the Uaimhas'salann. He held a torch aloft that cast a bright glow against the arching stone walls. Tressach walked behind her, close enough that should her strength wane again, he could catch her.

"Have these passages have always been here?" Qynh asked.

"No, my lady," Tressach said. "The caves, mayhap, but all of these corridors were hewn eons ago by Dwarf miners. A person could get easily lost beneath these mountains and never find his way out. Keena has warned us well of the dangers of exploring."

At last, the narrow passageway opened onto an expansive subterranean chamber, the main Uaimh'salann. The Fiainas used the spacious cavern for communal purposes; here, they all gathered to

eat, sleep and socialize: five hundred and sixty-eight men, women, and children beneath Eoghan's command.

"It is a marvel, is it not?" Tressach asked Qynh. He smiled to see the amazement in her face.

"Did the Dwarves dig this, too?" she asked.

He chuckled. "No, I think this cave was beyond even their engineering capabilities. It is called the Seomra'brea, the grand chamber. It was hewn solely by the hand of the Good Mother."

As they followed Dagarron toward a large bonfire in the center of the Seomra'brea, someone struck up a jolly melody on a fiddle. The fiddle song was joined by the tolling rhythm of a bodhran and the clapping of hands. The music drifted gaily toward the ceiling, resonant and amplified in the shadow-draped heights. Several people, silhouetted against the blaze began to dance.

"They live here?" Qynh asked. "All of these people—they are the Fiainas?"

"Yes, muileach, these are the Fiainas," Dagarron said. "The so-called wild men of the Midlands, though not quite so feral in the flesh as they are in the legends. They have proven gracious hosts."

Qynh caught sight of Kierken as they drew close to the fire. The young Donnag'crann knelt amid a group of a dozen or so small children, none older than eight or nine years. The children stared at him, wide-eyed and transfixed, as he spoke quietly to them, gesturing with his hands. She realized he was telling them a story, fairy lore of some sort to entertain them. One little girl, three years old if a day, toddled toward him, her brows pinched with curious intensity. Kierken paused in his tale as she trailed her fingertips through his hair, brushing long strands aside to reveal his tapered ears. She pinched the tips between her fingers, fascinated.

"Eoghan gathers with him only menfolk to this colony," Dagarron told her. "Most of the little ones were born among these caves; they have never seen an Elf before. The Gaeilge and Mianach among our soldiers have kept them spellbound indeed."

"Dagarron, hoah, what treasures have you brought us now?" a loud voice boomed as a young man walked toward them. He was tall and lean, with dark, curly hair shorn close to his scalp. His complexion was dusky, his face clean-shaven and handsome. He extended his hand to Dagarron in friendly greeting, and Dagarron clasped his forearm in reply. "Already your young Elf lad enchants our children with ... Hoah, now, speaking of enchantment..." The man regarded Qynh with a faint smile upon his lips, his brow arched.

"Aedhir, this is my lady, Qynhelein Reoder," Dagarron said. "Qynh, please allow me to introduce Aedhir Fainne, of the Fiainas."

"So you are the one," Aedhir remarked. He grinned broadly at Qynh and offered his hand to her. "Good to see you awake and alive, my lady. You have had the lot of your fellows all in tiff, that is for certain."

Qynh smiled at him, timidly. "Beannacht, Aedhir."

"Daddy! Daddy!" a high, delighted voice trilled and the little girl who had been so enraptured by Kierken's ears rushed toward Aedhir, arms thrown wide. She was the spitting image of her father, with dark eyes and skin and a headful of bouncing curls. Aedhir knelt, enfolding the child in his arms as she plowed into him, her arms clasped his neck, her legs about his waist as he stood.

"Beannacht, Aelwen," he told her fondly, puckering his lips so that she could present him with a loud, smacking kiss. "Where is your Mam?"

"With Keena by the fire. Daddy, there is an Elf over there."

"Yes, love, suddenly there are Elves everywhere," Aedhir remarked with a wry smile.

They gathered around the bonfire to share supper, members of the Comhar and Fiainas together in camaraderie and fellowship. Qynh sat cross-legged on the ground between Kierken and Dagarron. She cupped a wooden bowl laden with vegetable pottage against her palm and watched in wide-eyed delight as Keena and a man introduced as Eamon, along with Aedhir and his wife Iona and several other couples, danced lively, fleet-footed jigs about the fire.

She laughed aloud and set her supper aside, clapping her hands as Keena jigged toward Dagarron, holding out her hands and dragging him to his feet.

"Hoah, Dagarron!" Qynh cheered loudly as he relented and joined in the dancing, hooking his arm about Keena's waist and spinning her about, his boot heels falling in rhythmic step with hers.

As she looked about the cavern, Qynh realized that although their Elfin compatriots joined them in the Seomra'brea, they seemed to keep mostly to themselves, gathered in large groups of Gaeilge and Mianach in the far corners of the cave. In fact, a longer gaze upon those gathered about the bonfire revealed none but menfolk in their numbers, both Comhar and Fiainas. She and Kierken were the only two of Elfin descent among them.

"Why are the others keeping away?" she whispered, leaning toward Kierken. "Why do they not come and join us by the fire?"

"The Fiainas have been gracious to welcome us into their home," Kierken replied after a brief, thoughtful pause. "But they do not care much for Elves. It is only by Keena's word that we have all been received so."

Qynh blinked in surprise. "Do not care for Elves? But they are Comhar allies, on the side of the alliance between menfolk and Elves."

Earlier in the evening, two burly, strapping Fiainas men had rolled in an enormous wooden barrel of leann—a type of hearty, stout ale—into the Seomra'brea. Loud cries of delight and a round of jovial applause had fluttered about the room as the keg was tapped and the thick, rich foam flowed freely upon the ground. People had gathered almost immediately about the barrel, eager for a taste.

Aedhir walked toward Qynh and Kierken, bearing ale mugs. His daughter Aelwen rode on his back, her arms hooked around his neck. "Hoah, it is a celebration!" Aedhir exclaimed, passing them the drinks. "And yet here you both sit without mugs in your hands! Here we go, now, drink heartily. There is plenty more where these came from!"

"Go raimh maith agat, Aedhir," Kierken told him, lowering his head in a respectful nod as he accepted the ale.

"Yes, hoah, Aedhir, many thanks!" Qynh cried, beaming as she took her mug.

Aedhir left them, skipping his boots and making loud, whinnying sounds like a horse to entertain Aelwen, but the little girl paid her father no mind for the moment; she looked back over her shoulder toward Kierken, her dark eyes round and enthralled.

"I think you have found a new friend," Qynh said to Kierken, leaning her shoulder against his.

"She has never seen an Elf so closely before," he said. "I am strange and unfamiliar to her."

Kierken set his mug of ale next to hers. She glanced at him curiously and he said, "You can have mine, if you wish. I cannot partake of libations during my Ag'iarraidh. Such things cloud your mind, dim your focus."

Qynh took a long swig of her leann. "No ale, no kissing," she remarked, her brows drawn. "Your Ag'iarraidh does not sound like much fun."

Kierken laughed. "It has not always been, no. I think that is part of its purpose."

She tilted her head back and downed the ale. Kierken raised his brow at her, dutifully impressed. "I take it you like leann, my lady?"

Qynh brought her knuckles lightly against her lips and blew a soft belch against the back of her hand. "I have never tasted it before now," she said. A warm, pleasant sensation in her belly began to spread and she giggled. "It has a nice flavor, I think."

Dagarron walked toward them, accompanied by Keena and her comrade, Eamon. "Hoah, muileach, you should not be tasting the leann," Dagarron said. "It will make you dizzy, Qynh, and you are still weak from your fall..."

"I am perfectly fine, Dagarron," Qynh told him with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Your hands are empty, Elf. This will not do!" Eamon declared. He thrust a mug toward Kierken. "Here, I have only just now refilled this one. You take it. I will get myself another."

Kierken smiled at him. "Go raimh maith agat, mo'cara," he said, folding his fingertips toward his thumb and touching his forehead and chin in turn. "It is gracious, but I cannot. Gabh mo leithséal, le do thoil."

Eamon blinked at Kierken, caught off guard by the refusal. "I make the offer in good faith, in fellowship, Gaeilge," he said, his brows narrowing. "This cup is not tainted just because a man drank from it."

Kierken realized he had unintentionally offended and his eyes widened in dismay. "Ta bron orm, Eamon," he said. *I am sorry*. He rose to his feet, turning his face toward the ground, pressing his fist against the breast of his leine. "Le do thoil, you misunderstand. I—"

"I speak your rotted Elf tongue quite fine, go raimh maith agat," Eamon snapped at him. "I misunderstand nothing."

"Eamon," Dagarron said in a quiet voice, stepping forward to try and dissolve the sudden tension. Others around them had taken notice of Eamon's raised tone, his sharp words and had paused in their conversations to glance curiously in their direction. Dagarron lay his hand against Eamon's arm. "Kierken meant no offense, mo'cara. He is in his Ag'iarraidh, training to join the Buion. He is not permitted to—"

"Do not offer excuses for him, Dagarron," Eamon said, angrily, jerking his arm away from Dagarron's grip. "You fancy yourself too good to drink among menfolk as your fellows, boy?"

He pressed his thick fingers together and jabbed Kierken roughly in the shoulder, causing him to stumble backwards. Kierken blinked at him and then toward Dagarron, his eyes confused and alarmed.

"Eamon, do not," Dagarron warned, stepping between the man and Kierken. "Have peace. Leave him be."

Keena stomped forward, slapping her hand roughly against Eamon's elbow. He glowered at her as her fingers danced at him in furious rebuke. All around them, the Fiainas and Comhar alike had fallen into an awkward silence. The fiddle music had faded; the dancing had stopped.

"This dirty Gaeilge may be your ally, Keena, and yours as well, Dagarron, but that does not make him mine," Eamon said. His hands curled into large, menacing fists. "You have offended, boy, and by rights, you will answer for it."

Eamon shoved Dagarron aside, sending him staggering.

"Kierken, look sharp!" Qynh cried out as Eamon swung his fist toward Kierken.

Kierken did even flinch from the blow; he narrowed his brows and raised his hand, meeting Eamon's punch with his palm. He stepped aside out of the charging man's path and closed his fingers against Eamon's knuckles. In one graceful, fluid movement, he twisted his wrist and canted his arm, using Eamon's own forward momentum to sweep the man's strong arm behind him, hyperextending his shoulder. Kierken clasped Eamon's wrist securely at an unnatural and painful angle and Eamon yowled in pain, collapsing to his knees, immobilized by Kierken's deliberate grip.

"You rotted Elf!" Eamon shrieked. He tried to squirm but even feeble effort was agonizing as Kierken kept hold of his wrist. "You bastard rotted Gaeilge! Let go of me!"

"Le do thoil," Kierken said to him. "I do not wish to fight you."

"I will do more than fight you, Elf! I will crush your throat between my hands—oh, Sweet Mother, release me, you bastard!"

There was no sound in the cave whatsoever, save for the crackling of wood blazing in the bonfire, and the snuffling, labored sound of Eamon's breathing as he struggled not to weep in pain. Then one of the children began to mewl, frightened and bewildered, and a small rustle of whispers moved through the chamber, bouncing off of the high ceilings.

Kierken looked from Qynh to Dagarron, upset. He released Eamon's wrist and stepped back, wary of another attack. Despite his vehement threats, Eamon made no further move toward Kierken. He drew his injured arm against his chest and knelt against the ground, his face lowered, his hair disheveled about his face.

"Le do thoil, I meant no disrespect to him, Dagarron," Kierken said.

"I know, Kierken," Dagarron said gently.

"I did not wish to hurt him," Kierken said helplessly. "He came at me."

Dagarron stepped toward him. "I know, a'mac. I saw him. It is alright."

"I have shamed you among our allies," Kierken said, looking stricken. "I have surely dishonored you."

Dagarron reached out and cupped his hand against the back of Kierken's head. "No, a'mac," he said. "You defended yourself with great restraint. I am proud of you, not ashamed."

"I should go," Kierken said. "I should take my leave, go back to the smaller cave where we have set our camp, I..."

"Kierken, no," Qynh said. "You did nothing wrong. That boor attacked you. He meant to hurt you. You were only defending yourself."

The others do not see it as such, he told her, cutting his eyes toward the Fiainas gathered around them. He glanced at Dagarron, speaking to him as well. *They only see an Elf attacking one of their fellows. The circumstances make no difference. It would be better if I take my leave.*

"But that is not fair—" Qynh protested, and Dagarron lay his hand against her shoulder.

"We will be gone in the morrow and all of this will be forgotten," he said softly. She drew in a breath to object and he interjected. "Qynh, I do not like it any more than you, but Kierken is right."

"This is unconscionable, Keena!" Tressach declared loudly, striding forward. "Surely you cannot mean to let this man Eamon go unpunished for such disregard! We are all allies here, menfolk and Elves alike! If he offends our young Buion, why then, he offends us all!"

"Have peace, Tressach," Dagarron said, holding up his hand. "No one has drawn offense. It has all been a terrible misunderstanding, and it is behind us now, where it belongs."

Eamon rose slowly to his feet with the help of two of his friends. He turned toward Kierken, regarding the Donnag'crann with dark eyes. He rubbed his aching shoulder gingerly.

"It has all been a terrible misunderstanding, is that not so, Eamon?" Dagarron said again, more loudly this time, his voice drawing Eamon's gaze. "It is behind us now, right?"

Keena's fingers darted at Eamon reproachfully when he offered no reply, and the man's glower grew all the more petulant as he muttered, "Fine then. A misunderstanding left behind us."

One of his Fiain comrades pushed a mug of ale into his hands and clapped him on the back, leading him away from the bonfire. Keena nodded sharply to the fiddler and he struck up a new melody. On the surface, at least, the celebration resumed in full course.

"I will walk with you, a'mac, I think," Dagarron told Kierken, clapping him on the shoulder. Qynh could tell from his face that he was worried Eamon or some of his more rowdy fellows might creep along and lie in wait for Kierken, to pick up the fracas where it had so abruptly left off.

"I will, too," Qynh said.

"Qynh, no," Kierken said. "I need to attend to my meoraich anyway. I need to clear my head of this. Le do thoil, stay. You have not even finished your supper. Tressach, why do you not dance with her?"

"I would be glad of heart to, Kierken," Tressach said.

"But Kierken—!" Qynh protested.

He touched her face, leaning over and kissing the corner of her mouth gently. "All is well," he whispered. "Have a dance or two. I know it would please you."

Qynh hugged Kierken fiercely, pressing her lips against his cheek. "You could have taken him," she whispered in his ear, making him smile as he drew her tightly against him. "I know it. You would have made him weep like a girl."

"Such fire you have," Kierken remarked, chuckling. He stroked her hair. "I will see you in a bit, then." In her mind, his voice fell like a gentle caress: *I love you.*

Chapter Twelve

Trejaeran woke to the soft, shuddering sounds of someone weeping.

His eyelids fluttered and he blinked dazedly up at tangled tree boughs looming high overhead. He smelled wood smoke and sat up slowly, bewildered and disoriented. His head swam and he pressed his palm against his temple, breathing in deeply until the vertigo passed.

He rested on a pallet of blankets before a small, tended campfire. A second pallet lay spread across from him, with a laden knap sack, a filled waterskin and an enormous quiver nearby.

"I am the last," Trejaeran heard a low, mournful voice utter, followed by a faint, hitching sob, and startled, he jerked about, his eyes flying wide. A man knelt at the edge of the clearing with his back to Trejaeran. His long dark hair, streaked in places with thick strands of coarse grey, fell down his spine to just below his shoulders in a twisted plait. His long, black cloak draped the length of his torso. His shoulders shuddered as he wept.

Trejaeran sat motionless and uncertain. He did not know if he should be afraid of the man or not. He had no memory of how he had come to be in such unfamiliar company, or how long he had been asleep by the fire.

"It is too heavy a burden for me," the man moaned woefully. He drew his arms close to his chest. "I ... I cannot..."

"Beannacht?" Trejaeran said in quiet, hesitant greeting as he rose to his feet, stepping toward the man. "Sir?"

At his soft, tremulous voice, the man started. He whirled toward Trejaeran and the boy's faltering footsteps came to an abrupt halt. The man clutched the hilt of a dagger in his hand. He was bleeding; he had dragged the edge of the blade across the width of his wrist, opening his veins and spilling a flood of his own life against his lap and the ground. He stared at Trejaeran with enormous, surprised eyes, his face twisted with such desperation and sorrow that Trejaeran's breath caught in his chest and he froze, stricken.

"You are awake," said the man. He started to reach for Trejaeran with his injured arm and then blinked at his wound, watching as blood spurted in a grisly fountain as though he had forgotten he had slashed himself.

"Hoah!" Trejaeran exclaimed, snapping out of his shocked stupor. He rushed toward the man, falling onto his knees. "You are bleeding!"

Trejaeran jerked the hem of his cloak out from beneath him and used it to grasp the man by the wrist. The man's arm was thick and strong; it took both of Trejaeran's hands to cover the gushing wound with the folds of his cloak. Blood spattered against his face and seeped immediately through the wool. It had pooled in a wide puddle around the man's knees; Trejaeran had never seen so much blood before. He stared up at the man, wide-eyed with horror and confusion.

"Hold your arm up," he whimpered, clamping his fingers mightily against his cloak and easing the man's forearm up toward his shoulder. He raised his hips to keep his grip against his cloak; the man's torso was long and tall in proportion to his own and he did not want to loosen his hands against the gash.

The man said nothing as Trejaeran struggled to save him. He stared at the boy as Trejaeran's brows furrowed, his eyes closed, and his hands shoved mightily against the wound. He watched silently as Trejaeran gritted his teeth with his efforts; he uncurled his bloody fingers against Trejaeran's cheek and brushed his fingertips lightly through the boy's hair, a gesture unnoticed by Trejaeran.

Trejaeran kept applying relentless pressure until the strength in his arms began to wane and he trembled with exertion. He opened his eyes and found the man blinking at him in silent, passive regard.

"Why?" Trejaeran whispered hoarsely. "Why would you do such a thing?"

The man offered no reply, no explanation. He blinked at Trejaeran and then averted his gaze toward his wrist. Trejaeran loosened his grip against the man's arm and lifted the blood-soaked corner of his cloak from the wound to inspect his progress. The bleeding had stopped nearly in full and Trejaeran stared in aghast curiosity at the wound.

He glanced toward the man and found he regarded Trejaeran with round, melancholy eyes, and for the first time, Trejaeran took in the entirety of his countenance. His face was elongated, angular and drawn, cast with such profound sorrow that the very weight of his grief seemed to pull his features toward the ground. Trejaeran drew back, troubled by the sadness in the man's visage and unsettled by his steady, silent attention. The man moved his injured hand; Trejaeran flinched as he ran the cuff of his fingers lightly against his cheek.

"Your fever has lifted," the man said to him in a low voice.

Trejaeran pulled away from his touch, his eyes large and uncertain. "You should have a care," he whispered, rising to his feet. "That wound could easily bleed again. We should..."

He went back to the campfire and retrieved the man's waterskin. He saw the hem of a linen underleine poking out of the knapsack, and he took it in hand, shaking it loose from the pack. He carried both back over to the man's side, kneeling once more, keeping his attention averted nervously from the man's face.

The man remained quiet and still as Trejaeran poured water against his wrist. Bathing the wound surely must have hurt, but he did not so much as bat an eye or draw in a hissing breath of protest as Trejaeran tended to him. He watched with unflinching interest as Trejaeran ripped the leine into swaths and

wrapped each in turn gently about his wrist.

When the bandaging was finished and the man's arm lay meticulously swathed and bound, Trejaeran raised his eyes from the task to discover the man continued to observe him stoically. They looked at one another for a long moment and then Trejaeran lowered his eyes to the ground.

"Why did you do that?" he asked softly.

"Why did you stop me?" the man asked in reply.

Trejaeran blinked, lifting his chin, surprised. "You ... you were bleeding," he stammered, caught off guard by the question.

The man tilted his head at a slight angle and reached out, touching Trejaeran's face. His hand was enormous; his palm alone was as long and as wide as Trejaeran's entire head, and the boy cowered, his eyes flying wide.

"Do you think I would hurt you?" the man asked. "You have been in my company for five days. If I meant harm to you, it would have come to pass long before this moment."

Trejaeran looked at the man, puzzled, and the man smiled at him, the corners of his thin, wide mouth uncurling in a brief and measured curve.

"I am Suille Buichard," the man said.

"My name is Trejaeran Muirel," Trejaeran said quietly.

"Beannacht, Trejaeran Muirel," said the man, Suille Buichard. "You have saved my life, or at least, so it would seem. As I suppose I saved yours."

Trejaeran blinked, bewildered, but then he remembered the hanging bridge over the Braon i'Tir collapsing; Isal reaching for him, but unable to grab him in time to save him from a fall. He remembered a gigantic raven swooping down like a shadow and seizing him fast in its large, hooked talons. Trejaeran had no idea how long he had been carried by the bird, but it had dropped him eventually and rather unceremoniously in the middle of a dense and unfamiliar pine forest. It had been night, and Trejaeran had stumbled about in the dark, alone and frightened. He had been doubled over with coughing fits, nearly delirious with mounting fever, staggering through the trees. After hours spent wandering in the woods, he had crawled beneath the hollowed-out shelter of a rotten stump, desperate for sleep.

Suille had discovered him there, limp and barely conscious; Trejaeran had a dim recollection of being wrapped in warm blankets as he lay against the ground, shuddering and semi-lucid, convulsing with coughing spells.

As he remembered this, he realized for the first time that he could breathe freely again. He could draw in a full, deep breath through his nose without being smothered with congestion or wracked with painful, crushing coughs.

"You made me drink something," Trejaeran said to Suille, his brows furrowing, his nose wrinkling at the memory. Suille had roused him over and over from fitful slumber, lifting his head up and pressing a cup against his lips. He had poured some manner of foul liquid down his throat, pressing his fingers against Trejaeran's chin to hold his mouth closed and tilting his head back until he swallowed each vile and

repugnant mouthful. Trejaeran had struggled to spit the drink out, pawing vainly at Suille's hands and gagging each time the drink was forced on him.

He blinked at Suille, his eyes frightened and alarmed again by the memories.

"The bitter root infusion broke your fever, cleared your lungs," Suille said to him. "Its taste is revolting but its work is swift." He drew himself onto his knees and began to slowly stand. As his legs unfurled and he rose to his full height, Trejaeran's eyes grew wide, his mouth dropping open.

Suille was tall, very tall—the tallest man Trejaeran had ever seen. Suille towered over him at more than seven feet at the crest of his pate. Trejaeran's fear and alarm returned anew and he scrambled to his feet, stumbling backwards, his voice escaping from his throat in a soft, tremulous gasp. "You are a Giant!" he said.

Suille gazed down at him. "I am Fathacan, yes," he said to the frightened boy. "The last of the Fathacan."

He walked past Trejaeran toward the fire. He rifled about in his knapsack until he found a pair of breeches. "There is blood on my pants," he said. "I am going to walk behind those trees and change them, as it appears I will not rot in these as planned. You are welcome to scurry off if you wish. I will not try to stop you, or follow you. If I cannot die this morrow, then I suppose I must continue on my chosen course northward, and you would be more than wise to be without my company. I ride for Dorchadas, and the dark tower is no place for a wide-eyed Elf boy."

Startled, Trejaeran blinked at Suille. "Dorchadas?" he whispered. "But that is where I am..."

His voice faded abruptly as he realized what Suille had said to him.

You have been in my company for five days. If I meant harm to you, it would have come to pass long before this moment.

"Five days?" Trejaeran gasped, dismayed. "I have been asleep for five days?"

"You were very sick, lad," Suille said. "It was by good fortune that I came upon you. You might not have survived."

"Oh, but I ... oh, no," Trejaeran whimpered, distraught. "Mathair Maith, I cannot possibly make it to Dorchadas in time. I cannot!"

He collapsed, sitting on the ground, his eyes enormous with shock and disbelief, swimming with tears.

"You keep appointments at Dorchadas?" Suille asked. "That is a dangerous business for anyone, much less a boy."

"The Damantas have my father," Trejaeran said, his voice trembling. "They will force the duchan on him unless I come to them. They ... they gave me a fortnight, but I cannot make it now. Not in time."

"You have bartered with the black riders?" Suille asked, his brows raised in surprise. "Why would they strike a deal with you?"

Trejaeran gazed at the ground as his vision blurred with tears. "I have something they want," he said in a

hush.

"It must be something special," Suille said. "I have always heard that the Damantas simply take what they want."

He began to walk toward the treeline, carrying his breeches in hand. "Do not look not so stricken," he said as he disappeared among the pines. "You are not so far from your mark. You rode in my company these past days. We now stand within a half a day's ride from the shores of the dark lake. We should reach *Dorchadas* by dusk."

"Truly?" *Trejaeran* asked. His face, brightened for the moment fell once more as his brows drew warily together. "But why do you ride for *Dorchadas*, Suille?"

Suille reappeared through the trees, striding barefooted, dressed in fresh breeches. He glanced at *Trejaeran*, his expression impassive, his eyes grave. "Gather those blankets together, roll them into one bundle," he said. "Roll them tightly now. With two of us on my horse's saddle, there will not be much room left to spare."

He leaned over his pallet, grasping the straps of his quiver in one large fist. As he hefted the pouch, he glanced up, realizing *Trejaeran* still sat on the ground. "On your feet, lad," he said, his brows narrowing. "I do not make such haste for my own benefit. You are the one with a schedule to keep, a bargain with the *Damantas*, not me."

They rode northward through the forest for many long hours in nearly absolute silence. Suille apparently had little if any need for idle conversation, cordial or otherwise. *Trejaeran* leaned his head forward, pressing his brow against the swell of Suille's quiver, and closed his eyes. He did not mean to doze, but the unbroken silence and dappled sunbeams filtering through the trees lulled him. When a sudden chorus of cries echoed through the forest in haunting, startling refrain, he sat up, his eyes flown wide.

"Suille!" he exclaimed, alarmed. "Do you hear—?"

"I hear them, yes," Suille said. "I have heard them many times these past days as I have made my passage through these woods."

"What are they?" *Trejaeran* asked, wide-eyed and anxious.

"The ancient *Mianach* called this place *Coill'siuil*, the haunted forest," Suille said. "So I suppose they must be *taibhsan*—ghosts."

"*Taibhsan*?" *Trejaeran* said. "Do you really think so, Suille?"

Suille glanced over his shoulder toward the boy, the corner of his mouth lifted in a gentle smile that *Trejaeran*, absorbed in gawking at the forests, did not take notice of. "No, lad," he said. "I do not think they are ghosts. I think they are northern loons, mayhap, or coydogs."

Trejaeran

An image flashed within his mind, abrupt and vivid; a woman's face, staring at him, a woman with golden hair and eyes the translucent hue of sunlight seeping through spun honey.

Trejaeran gasped, flinching, his hands darting to his face. "No," he whimpered softly, because he could

feel it within his mind; he could feel the sight stirring. He tried to think of the trapdoor, of pressing his hands against it, holding it shut, but he could feel it resisting his will, forcing itself upon him. "No, le do thoil!"

Trejaeran

Dtagann tu agam ... Come to me

The woman's face, beautiful and stern, seared through his mind again, her golden eyes ablaze. He shoved the heels of his hands against his eyes, crying out softly as her name came to him, burning into his mind

Orlaith

"Are you unwell, lad?" Suille asked, turning his head, his brow lifted in concern. He pivoted in the saddle to look back at the boy and Trejaeran reached out, seizing him by the cloak, twisting his fingers in the dark wool.

"Help me!" he gasped. "I cannot keep it from me!"

Trejaeran, dtagann tu agam

Trejaeran's head snapped back like a rag doll given a swift, rough shake, and his eyes flew wide. Alarmed, Suille jerked upon the reins, bringing the horse to a sudden stop. He turned in the saddle, reaching for Trejaeran. "What is it, lad? Tell me what is wrong!"

"It creeps behind your eyes," Trejaeran whispered, his eyelids fluttering. "I can feel it inside of me like centipedes and spiders in soft loam, squirming with maggots..."

"Trejaeran!" Suille said sharply, grasping him by the shoulders.

Trejaeran turned his sleepy gaze toward Suille. "It creeps," he murmured and then he closed his eyes, his brows furrowing as he moaned aloud. His hands flew to his face, his fingers spreading in his hair, his palms pushed against his temples. "I am not daft," he whispered.

"I did not say that you were," Suille said.

"Sometimes I hear things in my mind," Trejaeran said. "And I see things, visions, hallucinations. I cannot control it. It comes upon me so strong now, and I cannot prevent it, I..."

"You have the Elfin sight," Suille said and Trejaeran looked up at him in surprise. "Yes, I know of such things."

"It is strong within me," Trejaeran said, his eyes round and frightened. "Too strong. I cannot keep it from me."

"What did you see?" Suille asked him. "Just now to upset you so. What did you see?"

"I ... I saw..." Trejaeran began, and then he heard her voice within his mind, calling out to him.

Trejaeran

Trejaeran turned his head, looking warily toward a thick growth of pine trees to his left.

"What is it?" Suille asked, following his gaze, his brows narrowed. He drew in a startled breath, his hand falling against the hilt of his sword.

The woods were filled with Elves. Dozens of them appeared, stepping out from behind tree trunks, all of them women, all dressed in immaculate, shimmering gowns with their hair long and unfettered.

"Hoah!" Trejaeran breathed. He slid his leg over the horse's rump and dismounted. "Trejaeran, no!" Suille cried out as the boy walked toward the Elfin women. When his cry brought Trejaeran no pause, Suille swore loudly and swung himself down from the saddle.

"Trejaeran, get away from them!" he shouted, striding boldly forward, his hand coiled against his hilt. The steel hissed as he started to draw his blade from the scabbard.

"It is alright, Suille," Trejaeran said, pausing to glance over his shoulder. He smiled, and Suille faltered in mid-step, the sword poised half within the sheath. "It is alright," Trejaeran said again. "I have to go with them for awhile. I will not be long."

They brought him to a place where a cragged edge of limestone thrust its way through the earth, stretching skyward. He was led down a wooded embankment. The flank of the mountainside had been hollowed out by time and the elements and an immense tunnel granted passage for a rain-swollen stream. When Trejaeran saw this natural bridge, this mighty, towering archway, he drew still, gasping in wonder.

"Ta se thar barr," he murmured in breathless awe. *It is magnificent.*

"This is a Naofa'Ionad," one of the Elves said. "The sacred place."

As they drew near, the crest of the tunnel soared above them until the lofty stones blocked even the bright light of the sun, spilling a broad swath of cool shadow upon the ground. Trejaeran's eyes adjusted to the sudden shift from bright to dim as he stepped beneath the looming eave of the tunnel, and he realized a figure stood poised at the water's edge waiting for them; a woman with long golden hair. He did not even need to ask her name; he recognized her from the first.

"You have come," Orlaith said. Trejaeran drew in a startled, wondering breath as the very air about him suddenly seemed to tremble with energy. She smiled at him, her thoughts, her presence within his mind like sunlight streaming through opened drapes and into a darkened room.

"Yes," he whispered.

"You do not have much time," she said. "The hour draws close at hand."

"Yes," he said again, nodding his head.

"You bear my mark," she said, the corners of her mouth lifting in a faint, pleased smile. She brushed her fingertips against the apex of his throat, caressing the silver brooch with wrought owl heads. "I used such owls as my symbol, my sign, and here, you wear them in silver near to your heart. Na ulchabhana'orga—golden owls. They often come to visit me here, and I am grateful for their company."

She moved away from him, walking toward the sunlit opening of the tunnel's edge. He walked with her,

stepping out from beneath the archway of stone overhead and onto the sun-draped ground beyond. He squinted at the sudden glare through the trees and brought the blade of his hand to his brow to shield his eyes. He walked several paces through the grass, following the undulating course of the stream, before he realized Orlaith did not follow. She stood at the threshold of the tunnel, beneath the shadows of the overhanging rocks, watching him.

"I cannot follow you into the light of the sun, Trejaeran," she said. "I cannot step beyond this mark of the stone's shadow upon the ground."

"Why?" he asked. "You cannot leave the tunnel? I do not understand."

For you, Trejaeran, and others, this place is naofa—sacred, someplace holy, she said softly within his mind. *For me, it is a place of aithri'siorai, of unending penance. The Good Mother has decreed that I remain here eternally. I can never leave the shelter of these stones.*

Trejaeran stepped back into the shroud of shadows beneath the lip of the arch. "Why?" he asked.

Orlaith smiled at Trejaeran. "It is a story long in the telling, and forgotten to most, save me, but I would share it with you, if you would listen. Mayhap you can take from it lessons that came far too late to me."

He followed her to the water's edge and they sat together by the stream. "You are Na'Siogai," Trejaeran said, staring at the swirling, rushing water. "Like Ciardha."

"Yes," she said. "Ciardha is my sister." He blinked at her, his eyes flying wide in surprise. "Each of us princesses, daughters to King Aonisteor during the Aois'Cead, the first age, what the Elves today consider the beginning of time, a'Tosach.

"The Na'Siogai are immortal. We cannot die, save by the hand of one of our fellows. My people lived for eons and then the Mathair Maith decreed that the time of Imeacht—the Great Exodus—had come and that the Na'Siogai would abandon the Bith for the land of Tirmaithe, surrendering this world to new mortal races."

"The Elves?" Trejaeran asked.

"The Elves, yes, and menfolk," Orlaith nodded. "Such things were well-known to us through prophecy and ancient promise, and the Imeacht did not come as a surprise. We looked forward to our journey to the Good Mother's golden realm of Tirmaithe—at least, most of us did.

"Ciardha did not. She did not wish to relinquish this physical world, and she rallied to her cause enough of the Na'Siogai to stage a revolt in defiance of the Good Mother's bidding. She formed an army beneath her command, the Feachd de'Sgathan, and murdered our father with the hope that she might usurp his throne and wield his forces against the Good Mother. She was sorely mistaken in that regard. I took upon myself my father's crown and his forces, the Ollabhar'Orga, leading them in defense of the Mathair Maith."

"The Cogadh a'Cead," Trejaeran whispered.

"Yes. The First War." Orlaith's face filled with poignant sorrow. "My father drew breath upon the Bith for more than seven hundred and fifty thousand years. He sowed the seed of the first tree in Tiralainn. It grows there yet, within the walls of Belgaeran, a mighty and magnificent maple, untouched by the foul darkness of the Dubholc'crainn—not even Ciardha's blackened, twisted heart, her evil, bitter duchar, can

taint its ancient, noble roots.

"My father bore us upon his shoulders when we were children; he cradled us to his breast and loved us truly when we were grown. For one hundred thousand years he loved us, and Ciardha butchered him as though it was all naught. She crept upon him as he slept and slew him with his own sword, the blade of the Na'Siogai Kings."

Trejaeran looked down and saw she cradled the silver hilt of a bladeless sword against her palms. "The anam'cladh," she said. "The sword of the soul. Its blade is as unique as the hand that would command its fire. Just as no two hearts or souls are the same, no two fires of the anam'cladh burn alike. For my father, it burned as white and pale as newly fallen snow. Against my palm, it blazed—"

"Golden," Trejaeran whispered. "Like the sun."

"Muise," she nodded. "And in Ciardha's hand, it burned black and terrible, a sliver of darkness so absolute and horrible that no light could penetrate it. She plunged the blade of the anam'cladh deep into our father's heart and in the aftermath, as she realized in horror what she had done, she dropped the sword. That was a blessing, I suppose. A blessing in that she might have prevailed in her efforts had she kept the anam'cladh. I shudder to think what the world would be like in the wake of such aberration. But it was also a curse that she dropped it. If she had not, it would never have come into my hands."

Trejaeran blinked at her in confusion.

"When I found my father murdered, my heart was consumed with rage," Orlaith said, lowering her eyes to the hilt between her hands. "My fury, my grief ... They drove me nearly mad, and at the Orbhui'treas, the Siege of Orbhui when the Feachd de'Sgathan decimated my Ollabhar'Orga, slaughtering them without mercy, my madness was complete. Ciardha fled from me and I chased her until I came upon her here, beneath this arc of stone."

She turned to face him and within her mind, he could see what had happened; a fierce and brutal battle. Orlaith had at last disarmed Ciardha, striking her sword from her hand, knocking Ciardha off of her feet.

He could see Ciardha within Orlaith's mind; a woman of similar countenance to Orlaith herself, with long golden hair, pale skin and striking beauty. He could see her cowering against the ground, her blackened steel armor dented and bloody. She raised her hand as if to ward off a blow, and he saw her eyes were not like Orlaith's; Ciardha's eyes were black and glittering, filled with shadows.

"You ... you would kill me, Orlaith?" she gasped, exhausted, wounded. "Your ... your own ... sister?"

Orlaith curled her fingers against the hilt of the anam'cladh, its brilliant, golden fire blazing in her eyes, illuminating her face in sudden, vengeful light. "Tell me, sister," she hissed. "Did you show our father any tender mercies before you ran him through?"

Ciardha cried out, turning her face to the ground and covering her head with her hands. Trejaeran heard her within his mind murmuring swiftly, desperately:

Iompreann me o'thuaidh uisce'milis

Carry me northward, sweet water

ligaim me codladh ionam do doimhneactas ... ligaim me faim neart seo

Let me sleep in your depths ... let me find strength there

Orlaith drew the anam'cladh back in her hand and then hesitated as within her mind, she heard a voice
command

Do not, daughter of Aonisteor

Spare her, that you might spare them all to come

Trejaeran stared at Orlaith, incredulous, his eyes wide, his mouth agape. "She spoke to you," he gasped.
"The Mathair Maith! She spoke to you!"

"Yes," Orlaith said, her brows lifted in sorrow. "If only I had ears at the time to hear her."

She had clasped the hilt of the anam'cladh between her fists and rammed the burning blade with all of her
might through Ciardha's heart.

Trejaeran looked at Orlaith in amazement. "You killed her."

Orlaith shook her head. "In the end, all I did was set Ciardha free. I did not realize the invocations she
uttered. When I drove the blade through her, I released her spirit into the waters of this very stream,
letting her soul free to seep into the current and travel northward beneath the mountains where she found
her way to the Nocturn Spring.

"And as she slept there, as Ciardha grew strong again beneath the Bith, I learned that the Mathair Maith
metes out her punishments accordingly. For my defiance, my disobedience, she imprisoned me here, in
the Naofa'Ionad, for eternity, banished from Tiralainn and unwelcome in Tirmaithe.

"Millennia have come and gone since; the world has moved on without me. New histories have been
written, and even newer still remain to be told. But my bloodline, my royal heritage, lives on and you are
a part of it, Trejaeran. A part of me. And that is why I have called you here."

"But ... but I do not..." Trejaeran stammered.

"Ciardha's time has passed as much as mine has," Orlaith said, holding the anam'cladh out. "This is yours
by right, Trejaeran, by blood, yours and Qynh's. Take it with you. Finish what I could not. Send Ciardha
before the Mathair Maith and let her reap the punishment she deserves."

"But you ran her through with the anam'cladh," Trejaeran said, confused. "You told me you thrust it
through her heart. If you could not stop her with it, then how could I possibly...?"

"The strength of the anam'cladh in my hand was not its fullest, because my heart was tainted with hatred
and rage," Orlaith said. "Your heart, Trejaeran, is pure. You know nothing of hatred, no matter how
Ciardha has tried to instill it within you. The true power of the anam'cladh lies in that. It is only as noble
and true in its purpose as the one who bears it."

Trejaeran took the hilt of the anam'cladh in hand, lifting it from Orlaith's palms. He gasped loudly, his
eyes flying wide in surprise and awe as the blade appeared before his eyes, pale blue fire, bright and
beautiful at his touch.

"There is still hope, Trejaeran," Orlaith said, smiling at him. "Hope yet for us all."

The Elfin women came to meet him at the threshold of the tunnel when the time came to leave. He gazed up at Orlaith as they stood one last time together, and she smiled at him, cupping his face between her hands.

"Keep it hidden," she whispered to him. "Hidden on your person, hidden within your mind. Do not let her know you bear it until you would strike with its fire, or she will try to take it from you."

"I will," he said, nodding. He knelt, tucking the hilt of the anam'cladh beneath the cuff of his boot.

Suille remained where they had left him, and he turned at Trejaeran's approach, his hand grasping the hilt of his sword, his expression puzzled and concerned.

"Have you changed your mind, then?" he asked as Trejaeran drew near.

"What do you mean?" Trejaeran asked.

"You only just left, not a moment ago," Suille said. "And now you are back. Is all well? You have changed your mind?"

Trejaeran blinked at him, perplexed. He had been gone at least an hour, surely, if not more. "I have been already, and returned once more," he said. "Maybe it is this place. The Elves told me it is sacred. There is draiocht here in these woods. I can feel it."

Suille raised his brow. He studied Trejaeran for a long moment and then shook his head, turning on his heel and walking away. "Then I say the sooner they are behind me—the sooner you are behind me—the better."

Trejaeran blinked, startled. "What?" Suille did not stop or turn around, and Trejaeran ran after him.

"Suille!" he cried. He caught Suille by the edge of his cloak. "Suille, please, what do you—"

"Turn me loose," Suille snapped, catching his cloak in hand and yanking it free from Trejaeran's grip.

Trejaeran stumbled, staring at Suille with large, wounded eyes. "You cannot mean to leave me behind?"

"I can indeed, and I do," Suille replied. "There is something peculiar about this place and about you, lad. I do not know what it is, and I do not care to learn. I should have left you as I found you."

"But you said you would take me northward," Trejaeran said. "You said I could go with you."

"I lied," Suille said. "I am no Elf. It is fully within my nature and my right."

He whirled about, stomping once more toward his horse. Trejaeran did not follow him; he stood confused and hurt beneath the laden pine boughs.

"Please," he called out, his voice trembling and piteous. "Please do not leave me. I ... I must get to Dorchadas. Please, they have my father and I have to rescue him. I have to try, Suille."

Suille paused in mid-stride, his hands closing into fists. "Your father is gone," he said. "I do not know what they have promised you, but they are made of lies. He is either dead or taken by the duchar—and

believe me, boy, death is the kinder of the two fates. Forget about him. Turn around and go home."

"He is my father!" Trejaeran cried. "I cannot forget about him! You are wrong—he is not dead! He is alive! I know he is. I have felt him in my mind! He is not taken by the duchan. They promised me! Phyndaegon said Poppa would be spared so long as I come. And I am coming!"

He fell to his knees in the fallen leaves and pine needles, pressing his hands over his eyes, struggling against despondent, frustrated tears. He heard the leaves rustle before him and he jerked his head up, startled. Suille had come to him, squatting on the ground, folding his long legs beneath him.

"Please do not leave me," Trejaeran whispered. "Please, Suille, I need you. I will not make it to Dorchadas in time without you."

"I will not leave you," Suille said. "I spoke out of turn to you, and I am sorry. This place, these woods, those Elf women in white ... They have left me ill at ease and I am frightened enough as it is by the prospect of riding upon Dorchadas by nightfall." Trejaeran blinked at him and Suille chuckled. "What? You did not think a Giant could be frightened?" He smiled at Trejaeran, his expression soft and kind. "I am sorry I upset you. You have brought none of this on me. It is not your fault and I should not have spoken to you so harshly."

"But I have brought this on you," Trejaeran said unhappily. "Some of it, at least."

"No, Trejaeran," Suille interjected, his brows lifting plaintively. "Lad, there are many things you do not know about me, and—"

"And there are many things you do not know about me, either," Trejaeran insisted, looking up at him.

"I am not a good man, Trejaeran," Suille said. "I have done many things in my life for which I am not proud."

"You saved my life," Trejaeran said. "You are my friend, Suille."

"No, I am not," Suille said, but his eyes were profoundly touched by Trejaeran's words. "I am not the sort of man anyone calls his friend."

Trejaeran opened his mouth, drawing in breath to protest, and Suille said, "Trejaeran, I am a santach by trade. Do you know what means? It means I am a mercenary, lad. It means I have made a living by hurting others, killing them when necessary, all for money."

Trejaeran stared at him, startled and aghast. "What?"

"Three weeks ago, I returned to my home in the village of Scoite and found the Damantas had burned it to the ground. My people have lived there for thousands of years, hidden and unbothered, the last of the race of Giants—the Fathacan—but the Damantas found us somehow, and they butchered my friends, abducted my family."

Suille's eyes filled with tears and his brows drew together. "They are all gone now, Trejaeran. I am the last. I do not hold out hope that those who were taken have been spared the duchan. But that is why I ride. I would see my fellows rescued, if their souls are yet untainted. And if they have fallen to the Queen and her dark waters, why then, I mean to carve out that bitch's rotted heart."

Suille fell silent, his expression pained as he turned his face toward the ground.

"I am King Herdranges's son," Trejaeran said quietly, and Suille's gaze immediately raised.

"What?" he whispered, hoarsely. He blinked at Trejaeran. "What did you say?"

"I said I am the first born son of King Herdranges and Queen Lythaniele," Trejaeran said.

"You are one of the twin heirs?" Suille asked, his eyes growing round in astonishment. "The heirs of the Elfin prophecy?"

Trejaeran nodded. "I was smuggled from Belgaeran when I was a baby and brought to live in Edenvale. The Damantas murdered my Mam, and he.. Petrich Muirel is the only father I have ever known. They took him from me, because they knew I would come for him."

"Then, as you said, you do indeed have something they want," Suille said. "Hoah, lad, it is you. They would see you dead? To keep the prophecy from coming to pass?"

"I do not know," Trejaeran said. "I do not know why Ciardha wants me, just that she does." He looked at the the ground. "I am sorry. I should have told you before now. You were right, Suille. It will mean nothing but trouble if I ride with you."

"I am unafraid of trouble," Suille told him kindly, drawing the boy's gaze. He smiled. "I have made trouble my life's work. Come on, lad. You have an appointment to keep. And as for me, hoah, I have a little business with the Damantas myself that needs tending to."

Chapter Thirteen

Dagarron and Kierken followed the narrow passages that honeycombed through the Uaimhas'salann, making their way to the small cavern where they had set up camp among the Fiainas.

Kierken ducked his head and stepped from the corridor into the cave. "Please do not let Keena punish Eamon," he said, turning to look at Dagarron with round, plaintive eyes. "Would you ask her, le do thoil? It should be reprimand enough that I have embarrassed him and he did speak truly, Dagarron. I know he meant only decent manners when he offered me the leann. I should have just accepted the mug. There would have been no offense drawn if I had."

"I will speak with her on the matter, a'mac," Dagarron said, nodding. He wanted to throttle Eamon until his eyes bulged from his skull for raising his hand against Kierken, but did not express this desire aloud, knowing it would only further distress the Elf.

"Go raimh maith agat. I would be most grateful," Kierken said, lowering his face in a respectful nod. "I should tend to my meoraich. I have not observed it for many days now. Mo'altrum will be displeased to learn of my digression."

"I do not think Iasal would mind given our present circumstances," Dagarron said. "By any chance, do you have that volume of poems by Heighaos with you?"

Kierken smiled. "The one you gave me? Yes, it is in my pack. I enjoy it dearly."

"It has long been a favorite of mine as well," Dagarron said. "May I borrow it; do you mind? I thought I might read awhile as you observe your meoraich."

Kierken raised his brow. "You do not need to stay with me," he said. "All is well, Dagarron."

"I would only see to it that all remains well, a'mac," Dagarron said.

Kierken smiled. "They will not come upon me unawares. Even when I am meditating, I keep my ears sharp, my mind alert. I can defend myself."

"I know this, a'mac," Dagarron said. "If you would rather I leave, say but the word."

"But-the-word," Kierken said, arching his brow and smiling in good humor, making Dagarron laugh out loud. "It is fine. Le do thoil, return to the others and have some fun."

Dagarron cupped his hand against Kierken's cheek. "My mind is always open to you. If you need me ... If something should happen, le do thoil, call to me."

"I will," Kierken said, nodding.

Dagarron hooked his arm around Kierken's neck and drew him against him in a brief, warm hug. He realized somewhat remorsefully that he had neglected such affectionate gestures toward the young Elf since they had embarked so long ago from Tirnag'crann for Lyhndale. "I have not made time for you lately as I should, a'mac, and I am sorry," he whispered.

"Qynh and Trejaeran have needed you," Kierken said. He smiled at Dagarron as they stepped apart. "And you have needed them as well. I understand. I do not mind."

"You are a good lad, Kierken," Dagarron said. "And I am proud of you."

Kierken smiled again. "Go raimh maith agat, Dagarron," he said, pleased by the compliment. *Thank you.*

"Ta failte romhat, a'mac," Dagarron said, pausing in the doorway as he headed out of the cave. He met Kierken's eyes and smiled. *You are welcome.*

Tressach proved a splendid dancing partner, and a perfectly charming consort to Qynh for the evening.

He kept her suitably presented with mugs of ale or a guiding arm toward the dancing area. At first, tension remained nearly palpable in the air following the incident between Eamon and Kierken, but as the hours passed, the night wore on, and the leann continued to flow, the conflict seemed all but forgotten.

At last, Qynh grew exhausted from so much dancing, and found herself quite dizzy from so much whirling, twirling, and ale. She staggered against Tressach as they walked away from the bonfire, catching herself against his shoulder as her boots stumbled clumsily, wearily beneath her.

"My lady, are you alright?" Tressach asked, slipping his arm about her waist and drawing her against him to help steady her. Qynh giggled as she nodded, pressing her hand against her mouth.

"Hoah, I am fine, Tressach," she said. "Merely addlepatated from too much leann. I should take my leave, I think."

"I would be glad of heart to escort you, my lady," Tressach told her, smiling. "If it would please you, that is."

"It would please me very much, yes, Tressach, le do thoil," Qynh said, nodding. She giggled again, her footsteps faltering as she swayed. "You have been rather pleasant company this evening, and I have enjoyed our time together." She slapped her palm against his chest and laughed.

"You sound surprised by this," Tressach said, raising his brow.

"I am surprised by this," Qynh replied, smiling goofily. "I think I must have all along been mistaken in your regard, Tressach. Please accept my most humble apologies for having thought of you in untoward fashion."

"What do you mean?" he asked, pausing.

Qynh blinked at him and then giggled, drawing her hands to her mouth as her eyes widened. "Hoah, did I say that? Aloud, even? Oh, Sweet Mother," she said. "I meant nothing, Tressach, truly, it is just I thought you were quite boorish, if you must know, when you arrived at Orinein and we met."

He looked wounded. "Whatever I did to warrant such opinion, please know I am sorry for it. I have never meant to treat you in discourteous manner."

"It is not me, Tressach," she said, wagging her finger at him. "You are rude to Airrenigh and she has treated us kindly, all of us, but especially me and Trejaeran. At the Council meeting, you spoke nastily to her and then you embarrassed her and Iasal in front of everyone, the whole Council. Why would you do such a thing? Truly, Tressach, you have been very charming this evening. Why must you be so dreadful to Airrenigh?"

He offered no reply at first. He looked down at his boots, his expression shamefaced. "You are right, my lady," he said at length, with a weary sigh. "I spoke out of turn to Lady Airrenigh and to Iasal as well at the Council meeting, and I am sorry you had to see me in such debased form." He turned his eyes plaintively to meet hers. "I loved my father and when he was murdered, it felt ... it felt to me as though my heart had been wrenched from my breast. My mother died when I was only a baby, and growing up, all I knew was my father. I idolized him. Even now, if someone were to tell me Aossach an'Clare had fashioned the very moon itself and set it against the sky, I would believe it."

Qynh smiled at him softly, touched. Tressach's affection and adulation for his father were apparent in his face.

"It was very difficult for me when Father first brought Airrenigh to the manor house. I was too young to understand that it was possible for Father to love me whole-heartedly and yet feel lonely for another. I suppose for that reason, I did not like Airrenigh from the first."

"Tressach," Qynh said. She stumbled, her knees buckling and he caught her easily, his arm tightening about her. "Hoah, many thanks," she breathed, pressing her palm against her forehead.

"Are you unwell?" Tressach asked gently.

She shook her head, eyes closed, brows pinched. "No, no, I am alright."

"Here, my lady, lean against me. I will lead you," Tressach said.

When they reached the small chamber, Qynh stepped through the narrow entrance first, blinking owlishly in the dim candlelight. "Kierken?" she called, bewildered. The chamber was empty; of the young Donnag'crann, there was no sign.

"He is not here," Qynh said, confused and distraught. "Oh, Tressach, we must go back. We must go back at once and find Dagarron! If those boors from the Fiainas came after Kierken, they might have—"

"Qynh, le do thoil," Tressach said. "Kierken is of the Buion. You saw how he dispatched Eamon in the Seomra'brea. If some of the Fiainas came upon him with a brawl or swordplay in mind, Kierken could more than capably handle even a large number of them. Why do you not lie down? You are nearly asleep in your boots. I will find Kierken."

"You do not mind, Tressach?" she asked. "That would be kind of you, thank you."

"I do not mind at all, my lady," he said softly. "Indeed, it is my pleasure."

He helped her lie against a pallet of woolen blankets. He ran his fingertips lightly against her cheek, drawing a smile from her as she lay on her side facing him.

"You are certain you do not mind looking for him?" she asked, her voice fuzzy and thick with drowsiness, her eyelids drooping wearily.

"No, my lady," he said. "I shall be back with our young Buion in tow before you know it."

"You are kind to me, Tressach, and I thank you," she said, reaching out and stroking his sleeve.

She wore her silver chain about her neck, the necklace Deog and Mahres had given her for her birthday, and Tressach reached down, tapping his fingertips against the pendant. "This is lovely," he remarked.

Qynh smiled sleepily, her eyes heavily lidded. "It was a gift," she murmured. "From my Poppa. I ... I very seldom take it off anymore."

Her eyes fell closed, her sweet, delicate smile slowly easing from her lips. Her fingers slipped from his arm and slumped limply against the floor. He gazed upon her for a few long moments, listening as her breath grew steady and deep, watching as her body relaxed beneath the blankets.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead, drawing a soft whimper from her. "Codladh samh duit, Qynh," he whispered. *A pleasant sleep to you.*

Qynh stirred restlessly in the night, writhing beneath her blankets. She murmured fitfully, her quiet voice rousing Dagarron on the pallet beside her.

"Kierken," she whimpered. "Kierken, no, no! He is falling!"

"Hush, muileach," Dagarron whispered to her, reaching out in the darkness and resting his hand against her shoulder. "All is well, Qynh." His words seemed to comfort her, and he felt the tension in her drain at his touch, her pleas fading into silence.

He wondered if Kierken had returned to their camp. Dagarron had come from the festivities among the Fiainas to find Qynh and Tressach both asleep on their respective pallets, but of Kierken, there had been

no sign. Dagarron had been initially alarmed, but then he had spied a note Kierken had left for him, tucked beneath the edge of his blankets, written on a slip of parchment.

Dagarron—

Please do not worry. The fiddles and drumbeats drift back here and I have no mind to concentrate with such sounds to distract me. I have gone into the caverns to observe my meoraich. I will venture no further than I know to be safe. I bear my sword against my hip and if I have need, I will call to you. Oiche mhaith is codladh samh duit.

—Kierken

Qynh moaned softly in her sleep again, shuddering beneath his hand. “Rest now, muileach,” he said, stroking his hand against her arm. “All is well.” He settled his head comfortably against his blanket roll and as Qynh quieted, he, too, drifted back to sleep.

When Dagarron awoke again, several hours later, he had no idea whether morning was upon them or not. In the utter darkness of the Uaimhas'salann de Abhacan, he lost any and all sense of time passing. He sat up on his pallet, reaching out, his fingers fumbling against the ground until he found a candle. He unfastened one of his belt pouches and withdrew a pair of flints, striking against the wick until a flame appeared. In the narrow proscenium of candlelight, he saw Qynh on her side, burrowed beneath her blankets, sleeping soundly. Nearby, just barely visible in the flame's glow, he could make out Tressach's silhouette as he slept.

Dagarron held the candle higher and looked around. There was a fourth pallet on the floor, Kierken's blankets on the other side of Qynh, but these remained undisturbed. Kierken was not among them.

Dagarron drew in a startled breath, shoving his covers back, looking around. When he realized Kierken had not simply crept into the cave in the middle of the night and curled up to sleep near the entrance rather than pick his way over his slumbering friends in the darkness, Dagarron's uneasiness mounted into alarm.

He rose to his feet, taking his scabbard in hand. Using his free hand, he fastened the sheath securely to his belt and stepped beyond the threshold of the cave, keeping the candle aloft to spread as much light along the long, cramped tunnel as possible.

Kierken, he called, opening his mind, hoping the young Donnag'crann would sense his thoughts. *Kierken, a'mac, where are you? If you hear me, give reply.*

There was no answer. Dagarron's heart fluttered, quickening beneath his breast, and he began to stride briskly down the corridor, following the direction that would have led as Kierken had indicated in his note, away from the Seomra'brea and deeper into the mines.

Kierken! he called out again, more sharply this time. He thought of Qynh rousing him earlier in the night with her frightened murmurs. Why had he not struck light to a candle then and checked on Kierken? Dagarron cursed himself under his breath. That had surely been hours ago; Kierken had been gone for most of the night. Qynh's words, her distressed pleas echoed in his mind and Dagarron drew to an abrupt halt, his eyes flying wide.

Kierken, no, no! He is falling!

Qynh had the sight. If something had happened to Kierken

he is falling!

mayhap she had sensed it somehow, even in her sleep.

"Kierken!" Dagarron gasped. "Le do thoil, no, no! Kierken!"

He began to run, sprinting through the passages. He kept his hand cradled around the candle tip to shield the flame; the fire licked at his palm, singeing his skin, but Dagarron paid no mind to the heat, the sting of the flame. He ran in a blind panic, screaming for Kierken, his voice bouncing off of the cavern walls and echoing down the length of the tunnel.

"Kierken!" he cried desperately. "Kierken, it is Dagarron! I am coming, a'mac! Where are you? Le do thoil, answer me!"

At last he stopped, leaning breathlessly against the wall. He felt tears burning in his eyes and he thrust his palm against his forehead, gritting his teeth in a rueful grimace. "How could I have left him alone?" he whispered in despair. "Mathair Maith, he is no Buion yet. He is only a boy. What was I thinking? How could I have left you, a'mac?" He tilted his head back. "Kierken!" he cried, his voice hoarse and ragged. "Kierken, le do thoil, ca bhfuil tu?" *Where are you?*

He knew he had to turn back before he became hopelessly lost among the Uaimhas'salann. He knew this in his mind, but could not reconcile it within his heart.

"Kierken!" Dagarron wailed again, striking his fist against the wall in helpless frustration. Something had happened to the boy; Kierken would have answered, either with his voice or with his mind, had he been conscious and able. He would not have stayed away from the camp all night long, no matter how upset he had been after his confrontation with Eamon.

Dagarron's brows drew sharply together. "Eamon," he hissed, ramming his fist against the wall again. "You rotted bastard."

He cupped his hand about the candle once more and stormed back toward the Seomra'brea where the Fiainas slept, where Eamon would be found. The flame flickered; he shielded it poorly and it winked out, snuffed by the breeze of his passage. Dagarron cast the candle aside and strode on in the darkness, his fists clenched, his rage burning so brightly, he needed no other light by which to see.

"You rotted, stinking bastard!" Dagarron roared at Eamon, seizing the man by the throat and slamming him forcefully into the wall. The back of Eamon's head struck the stone hard and he uttered a strangled, bewildered yelp around Dagarron's crushing hand.

"Where is Kierken?" Dagarron bellowed at him, his face flushed with fury. He put all of his weight, all of his might behind his palm, shoving against Eamon's windpipe, fully intending to crush it if so antagonized. "Where is he? By the Good Mother, Eamon, if one drop of that boy's blood has spilled, I will spend the tenure of my remaining days making sure that you suffer for it."

Eamon squirmed. His face had turned nearly violet in hue and his eyes bulged from their sockets as he looked beyond Dagarron's shoulder, staring desperately at Keena for aid. Judging by the drawn, seething mask of fury on her face, he could expect to find no rescue from her.

"Dagarron!" he gagged. "Please ... I ... I have been here all night ... I have done nothing to the Elf!"

"You lie!" Qynh cried, rushing into the Seomra'brea. She lay her hand against the hilt of her sword, drawing the blade as she marched toward him. "You bastard! Where is Kierken? I cannot sense him in my mind, and he would never keep his thoughts from me! What have you done to him, you stinking, lying bastard?"

Eamon cried out hoarsely as she jerked her sword back, meaning to ram the blade through his forehead.

"Qynh!" Tressach cried, running behind her, catching her by the shoulders. "Qynh, no!"

"He is lying!" she shrieked, her blue eyes ablaze. She struggled against Tressach's hands. "Where is Kierken? Tell me where he is! Tell me!"

"I do not know!" Eamon gasped, pawing at Dagarron's hand. "Keena! I swear it! I swear I was here the night through!"

"He is telling the truth, Keena," Aedhir said, walking toward them. "He has been among us all night."

Dagarron wheeled to face him, his expression twisted with rage and Aedhir held his hands out in supplication. "Dagarron, I feared he might take after the boy, and we kept an eye on him without fail, my fellows and I each taking turns. He passed out drunk some time ago and has not moved since."

"Then one of his friends acted in his stead!" Qynh cried. "It is not by coincidence that he attacked Kierken in plain sight and now Kierken has turned up missing! One of you has done something to him, and by the Good Mother—by my father's blade—you will answer for it!"

"Whatever the cause, whoever is responsible, we waste time here laying blame," Aedhir said. "If Kierken is lost among the tunnels, we must find him. These caves are dangerous and the passageways stretch for many long miles beneath the mountains. We should split up at once and spread out, fanning among the tunnels to search for him."

"Aedhir speaks wisely, Qynh," Tressach said, his voice calm and soothing. "Dagarron, le do thoil, do not waste your strength on that rot. Kierken needs it—needs you. Come, let us go now. Let us find him."

Dagarron relinquished his grip against Eamon's throat. Eamon staggered, his feet stumbling out from beneath him. He fell, landing hard on his rump, clutching at his neck as he whooped in heaving mouthfuls of air.

Keena addressed Dagarron with her hands. He looked at Aedhir with sorrow-filled, helpless eyes. "Do you know what my lady says, Aedhir?" he asked, the rage in his voice replaced with a tremulous, mournful quaver. His eyes flooded with sudden tears. "Kierken has been offering us translation for her. He ... he can understand her in his mind..."

Distressed all the more by the sight of Dagarron's anguish, his tears, Qynh hurried to him, putting her arms about him, tears of her own spilling. Dagarron clutched at her, tucking his head against her hair.

"Keena said she will lead you through the tunnels, that she knows the ways beneath the mountains," Aedhir said.

"Go raimh maith agat, mo'cara," Dagarron said, lifting his head and looking toward Keena. She nodded

at him in reply, her lips drawn in a thin, anguished line, as she, too, struggled not to weep.

"Qynh, I am sorry," Dagarron whispered. "I am so sorry, muileach. This is my fault. I should never have left Kierken alone in the caves. I should not have listened to him. I should have stayed with him. Le do thoil, forgive me!"

"It is not your fault, Dagarron," she said. She stepped away from his embrace and thrust her finger angrily at Eamon. "You are to blame, you nasty, stinking bastard. You are to blame, and you will answer for it."

Tressach had removed two burning torches from nearby nooks within the cavern walls; he presented one to Keena, keeping the other for himself. "Aedhir, divide the others into groups as you see fit," he said. "We should tarry no longer. Let us go."

"Muise," Dagarron agreed, his brows knitted, his jaw set at a grim and determined angle. He glared at Eamon and the man cowered from his hardened gaze. "There will be time aplenty later for reckoning. By my breath, I will see to that."

They searched for what felt like an eternity in the long, cold, unending darkness of the Uaimhas'salann. As hour stretched upon hour with no sign of Kierken and still with no sense of his presence within her mind to give her hope, Qynh's despair grew all the more. She cried out his name into the dank shadows until her throat was raw, her voice hoarse. They followed Keena deep beneath the mountains and still found nothing to tell them what might have happened.

They stopped at last so that Keena could reorient herself among the caverns and tunnels. They had obviously moved well beyond the boundaries of any passageways familiar to her. She stood by herself ahead of the others, one hand perched against her hip, the other holding aloft her torch so that she could gaze down the passage ahead and gather her bearings.

Keeping his own torch in hand, Tressach wandered down a tight, narrow opening that branched off from the main corridor they followed. He disappeared from view; only the glow of his fire reflected along the crevice's walls marked his progress.

"Tressach, do not go far," Dagarron called. He and Qynh sat side by side on the cavern floor. He put his arm about her and drew her against his shoulder.

"This passage widens up ahead, cousin," Tressach called in reply. "Another mining tunnel, I think."

"We do not need another lost in these caves," Dagarron warned. "Come back now, Tressach. Let us follow the passage Keena chooses."

Qynh shivered against him, her eyes fixed on the ground between her boots, her gaze distant and dazed. Dagarron stroked her hair gently and kissed her temple. "Do not give up hope," he whispered. "We will find him, muileach."

"Do you think so, Dagarron?" she asked. "I do not. I cannot feel him in my mind." She stared at him, her eyes enormous and agonized. "He is dead, I think," she whispered and she began to cry. "I ... I do not know why else I would not sense him."

Dagarron drew her close to him, embracing her as she shuddered. "Qynh," he said. "Muileach, I—"

"Dagarron!" Tressach cried out, his voice sharp and urgent. "Dagarron! Come quickly!"

"Tressach! What is it?" Dagarron called as he and Qynh both scrambled to their feet. Tressach had disappeared deep within the crevice he had set off to explore; at first, even the dim glow of his torch was not visible. The fire moved into view at the far end of the narrow corridor and they heard Tressach's voice, excited and anxious, calling to them.

"I think I have found something! Come quickly and see!"

"What is it?" Qynh cried. Dagarron turned toward Keena, reaching for her torch, and Qynh brushed past him, pivoting her shoulders and hips so that she could squirm along the passageway. "Tressach! What have you found? Is it Kierken?"

"Qynh, wait for me!" Dagarron called after her.

Qynh did not wait; she hurried down the corridor as quickly as she could. She heard Dagarron and Keena moving behind her but kept her gaze fixed on the light from Tressach's torch as she moved toward him.

The passage grew wider as she neared the end, and at last she stumbled out into a wide, open chamber where Tressach waited. She could hear the dim roar of swift-moving water and realized the chamber ended with a treacherous precipice, a cliff that plummeted down a slim ravine to a subterranean stream below.

"What is it, Tressach?" she cried desperately. "What have you found?"

Tressach's brows knitted, pained and he touched her face gently. "My lady..." he began. Qynh frowned and ducked away from him.

"What is it?" she snapped. "Why will you not..."

Her voice faded as she stepped around his shoulder and saw Tressach's grim discovery along the precipice's edge. There was visible evidence of a terrible struggle; the silt-covered floor of the cavern was disturbed with scuff marks and footprints, soaked in places with spattered blood and something black that could only be...

"Duchan," Qynh whispered, aghast, feeling her stomach twist in a sickened, painful knot. Not all of the footprints on the ground came from bootmarks; she saw pawprints among the scuffed imprints and she moaned, staggering backwards. "There was a cat?" She blinked at Tressach in stunned disbelief. "Like in the forest? One of Ciardha's mountain cats?"

"I do not know with certainty, my lady," Tressach said. "But I think so, yes."

In the glow of Tressach's torch, toward the edge of the ravine, Qynh caught sight of something laying against the cragged rocks: a slim, leather-bound book. She cried out in horror, rushing toward the ledge.

"Qynh!" Tressach cried after her.

Qynh fell to her knees, her breath knotted in her chest, her eyes filled with tears. Her mouth fell open, but she could not scream. All that issued forth was a soft, fluttering moan as she lifted the book between her fingers and stared at it in shock.

"Oh, no!" Qynh whimpered, tears spilling down her cheeks. The cover was smeared with blood and duchan but remained unmistakable to her. She opened the book, cradling it against her lap, her tears spilling onto the parchment pages within, falling in fat, round droplets against Kierken's handwriting.

"What is it, my lady?" Tressach asked. She heard the distinctive scuffle of Dagarron's boots as he emerged from the passageway, Keena almost immediately behind him. Dagarron surveyed the gory scene and cried out softly, his voice choked with horror and anguish.

"It is Kierken's journal," Qynh whispered, her shoulders shaking. She lifted the book in her hands, pressing it against her bosom. In her mind, she could see him in the arbors at Orinein, smiling at her as he sat beneath the shady boughs of a tree, his quill in hand.

"It is his leabhar de'laen," Qynh said, holding the book against her heart as though it was Kierken himself somehow. She uttered a low, hurting sob. "You write in it, Tressach. The things in your life that are worth remembering."

She lowered her head and wept because she understood what had happened. Her hair tumbled into her face as she folded herself against Kierken's book, his thoughts and memories, everything she had left of him.

"It was a cat," Tressach said grimly. "A mountain cat from the Dubholc'rainn, the sort that attacked us before."

They had returned to the Seomra'brea, the search called off and all of the Comhar and Fiainas gathered together in the expansive communal cavern. Qynh sat against the wall by herself, her eyes glassy and dazed with shock, her knees drawn toward her chest. She still clutched Kierken's leabhar de'laen against her; she did not think she would ever be able to let loose of it again.

Keena shook her head insistently, her fingers dancing in the air. Aedhir stood beside her, watching her gestures intently and offering translation. "You are right, Keena," he said, nodding. He looked at Tressach and Dagarron. "We have never seen mountain cats in these caves. They would not venture so deep into the mines."

"Ordinary cats, mayhap, but these are not," Tressach said. He paced back and forth before the smoldering coals of the previous night's bonfire, his brows drawn, his face haggard. "These are Ciardha's minions, and they go wherever she bids them. One of them, mayhap more, must have come upon Kierken in the caverns and attacked, forced him over the edge of the ravine into the torrents below."

"He had his sword with him," Dagarron said. He, too, paced about the embers, but he seemed to be among them in form only. His heart was broken, his mind anguished and distant. "I do not understand. Kierken had his sword with him. He left a note for me; he told me so. The cats would have been no match against him armed, be there one or a dozen."

"There was no candle," Qynh said, her voice soft. Dagarron lifted his eyes and she met his gaze. It was as though the two of them had traveled someplace beyond the boundaries of the caves, and together in their sorrow, they were only aware of each other. "He would have brought one with him to write by. It must have fallen over the brink in the struggle." Tears welled in her eyes and she turned her gaze to the ground again.

"He could not have fended the cats off in the dark," Tressach said softly, laying his hand against

Dagarron's shoulder. "Not even a Buion could have accomplished such a feat, cousin."

"How did the cats make it so deep within the Uaimhas'salann without us seeing them?" Aedhir asked, translating again for Keena's swift, darting fingers. Her brows were knitted, her mouth pressed into a thin line. "Keena does not think that is possible. We have sentries posted throughout the Uaimhas'salann tunnels and entrances."

"Mayhap my Lady Keena would care to explain the duchar on the ground, then?" Tressach snapped, wheeling around to face her. "The paw prints in the dust? Kierken's blood staining the cave floor where the wretched beast tore at his flesh before it forced him over the cliff's edge to die?"

At his words, sharp and loud, resonating through the vaulted chamber, Qynh uttered a low, anguished moan and wept.

Keena met Tressach's gaze evenly, her eyes flashing hotly, her frown deepening. She gestured and Aedhir spoke. "Dagarron, she does not think it happened like that. She says we should not necessarily trust what our eyes would lead us to believe."

"It does not matter what I believe," Dagarron said quietly. He drew in a deep breath and exhaled in a long, heavy sigh. "Kierken is gone. There is evidence of Ciardha's cats at hand, and I am inclined to believe Tressach's scenario of events. It makes no difference. Kierken is gone and there is nothing that we can say or discover that will bring him back to us."

He walked across the room, standing before Qynh and gazing down at her with mournful eyes. "Qynh, we have to go," he said.

"I know," she whispered.

"Our original purpose has not wavered," Dagarron said, turning toward Keena, Tressach, and the others. His face was set with stony resolve, his brows pinched with grave intent. "In only a few brief days, Eisos and the rest of our Comhar fellows are due to arrive at Tirnag'crann, if there is a Tirnag'crann left for them to defend, and for our part, we are to lay siege against Belgaeran. Already, we have tarried. However good our intentions in the delay, such luxuries can no longer be afforded. Let us take one hour to prepare ourselves and then we will move as was our original intent. Today we ride south for the Dubholc'crainn, and the walls of the royal city."

"Dagarron," Tressach said, stepping toward him. "We cannot ask Qynh to ride. It is too soon and her heart is aching—it is broken, cousin. Please, we cannot ask her to—"

"You ask nothing of me, Tressach, I do not freely choose or readily accept," Qynh said. Her brows were narrowed, her tears waned, her mouth set in a grim, determined line. She stood, keeping Kierken's leabhar de'laen in one hand, laying her other against the pommel of her sword. "Ciardha would take everything from me, it seems," she said, her voice trembling with rage. "First my father and brother—my life in Lyhndale—and now she would take my love? I am tired of hiding from her, tired of waiting. Let us go. Let her do her best to try and stop us. I am ready. Ciardha has much now to answer for—too much—and if it is my destiny to take her to task, then by the Good Mother, I mean fully to do it."

Chapter Fourteen

"What are they, Ollamh?"

Rhyden felt gentle, inquisitive hands settle against his face and heard voices all around him, a flurry of anxious chatter drawing him from unconsciousness.

"They are Elves, Gleoman," said a soft voice from directly above Rhyden. He had a dim sensation of pale light seeping through his closed eyelids, but now that faint illumination faded into shadows as someone leaned over him, a body blocking the sun.

Rhyden stirred, moaning softly. "Le ... le do ... thoil..."

"Easy, lad," the voice above him murmured and then the soft pad of a thumb pressed lightly against his eyelid, drawing it open. Bright, blazing light seared through Rhyden's skull and he cried out sharply, jerking his head away.

"This one is coming 'round," said the person above him. "Sraoth, le do thoil, strip off your cloak and cut it into four or five wide swaths, would you? We will need to bind that one before we try to move him."

"Elves, the both of them? But they do not look the same, Ollamh. This one, with the broken leg, now he looks like the Elves I have heard tell of passing through these parts. This one ... I have never seen the likes of him. He has hair like a woman's, down past his shoulders and twisted in braids! And look at him! He is all legs!"

"I think he must be a Gaeilge, Gleoman, from the southlands. The other is plainly a Mianach. Do you not read books?"

"A Gaeilge? You mean a lurgagh? But they are—"

"Sraoth, le do thoil, just your cloak," Ollamh called out. "I will set his leg. No, do not touch him—"

Rhyden heard Fiontan cry out from nearby, his voice piteous and filled with pain. "Cuidiann ... me ... Oh, Mathair Maith ... le ... le do thoil!" *Help me ... Oh, Good Mother, please!*

At the sound of Fiontan's pleas, Rhyden felt the hands on his face slip away. His eyelids fluttered open and he blinked dazedly up at stark, glaring daylight. He could see the silhouette of someone standing above him, rising from a kneeling posture and hurrying away from his side.

"...oh, a pian ... Le do thoil, ni fulaingim me ea," Fiontan pleaded. *The pain ... Please, I cannot bear it.*

"Airilleach, you have your flask with you, do you not?" Ollamh said. "Give it here. It will dull his pain."

"Lift his head," Airilleach griped. "You will spill it upon the ground and waste it. Here, let me—"

Fiontan screamed, his voice shrill and agonized, and the wrenching cry galvanized Rhyden, jerking his mind out of the shadows of sleep and pain. He sat up abruptly. "Leave him alone!" he cried.

He drew his legs beneath him and stood, reeling unsteadily. He stumbled as though drunk, pressing his hand against his forehead and wincing. He hurt all over, in every nook and joint of his body and he groaned as he staggered forward.

"He is awake!" someone cried in dismay and there was a collective, alarmed gasp and a flutter of

panicked squawks.

Rhyden opened his eyes, blinking owlishly as his vertigo began to wane and his vision began to adjust both to being upright once more and to the bright light of the day. He saw Fiontan laying nearby on the ground, shuddering in pain, his face ashen and bruised. Fiontan's right leg was shattered; ragged edges of stark, pale bone jutted out of a gory wound just below his knee.

They had been discovered by a party of seven men who all stared at Rhyden with horrified expressions on their faces. Something about them struck Rhyden as peculiar, but he was dazed and it took a few moments before it occurred to him—they were short. Very short. They were as petite as children, but obviously were not.

"Mathair Maith, ta se abhalmhor!" one of them gasped, stumbling away from Rhyden. *He is enormous!*

"He has seen us," the oldest among them said, his brows drawing over his dark eyes. He swept the hem of his cloak aside and lay his hand against the pommel of a sword. "Are you pleased now, Ollamh?" he asked, cutting his eyes angrily toward the small man who knelt beside Fiontan. "He has seen us and most plainly at that."

Rhyden felt bewildered and frightened; he had no memory of how they had come to be at this place or how Fiontan had been so gruesomely injured. His fingers fumbled against his hip, finding the hilt of his father's sword.

"Get away from my friend," he said. The act of speaking, of drawing a full breath sent a searing bolt of excruciating pain through his chest. He groaned again, stumbling.

"Keep your distance, Elf," the oldest man warned, drawing his sword. "Ollamh, you heard him. Step away from the Mianach."

"Frith, sheath your blade, le do thoil," Ollamh said. "He is frightened and in pain. He means us no harm." He stood and stepped toward Rhyden, his hands raised. "Your friend is hurt," he said. "His leg is badly broken."

In his mind, like the sudden flicker of lightning through thick rain clouds, Rhyden remembered standing on a rope bridge with Trejaeran, Fiontan, Airrenigh and Iasal.

The Thar'tir, he thought. We were crossing the Braon i'Tir on the Thar'tir bridge and

He remembered the wolf, an enormous, duchar-tainted beast stepping forward, laying its paw against the foot line of the bridge. *If I am to die, it had hissed. I will take you with me, rotted Elves.*

He remembered and his head swam with sudden, dizzying recall. The wolf had fallen onto the bridge, snapping the ropes and sending them plummeting down into the ravine towards the rapids of the Riastail River and certain death—only, death must have been not nearly so certain, because obviously they had survived; at least he and Fiontan had, somehow.

"You are weak yet, injured," Ollamh said, stepping closer. "Let us help you."

Rhyden swooned, collapsing to his knees. Ollamh knelt, touching Rhyden's shoulders, and Rhyden recoiled, drawing in a sharp, painful breath. "No! Ceapeann de me!" he cried. *Keep away from me!*

"Do not be afraid," Ollamh said softly, and Rhyden raised his head, blinking at him. His vision was fading, and he realized he was about to faint.

"Le do thoil!" he whimpered, reaching for Ollamh, grasping blindly at the folds of his cloak. As he crumpled to the ground, he heard Ollamh's voice, soothing.

"It is alright, lad. You are safe now."

When Rhyden came to once more, daylight had waned into darkness and as his eyelids fluttered open, he found himself laying before the warm blaze of a campfire. Someone had tucked heavy woolen blankets about his shoulders and another blanket, rolled into a bundle, rested beneath his head, the coarse fabric pressed against his cheek.

Soft voices were engaged in affable conversation around him and he could smell food cooking, the heady aroma of spiced meat sausages, mushrooms and onions. Laughter rippled around him, voices raised in harmonious good cheer, and he closed his eyes, anxious that he should not be discovered awake.

"...I tell you, I have never run so hard or so fast in all my days as when she threw that door open and stood there in naught save a smile and her stockings, calling my name," someone was saying. His voice went shrill, imitating a woman. "Sraoth! Sraoth! Where did you go? Where are you?" The laughter swelled into a roar.

"Hullo, I think his eyes were just open again," someone said, and the laughter abruptly faltered, fading into silence. Rhyden's breath stilled as he realized he had been caught. "He just peeped at us, and then closed his eyes right away."

"Are you with us, lad?" a familiar voice asked and there was a soft, rustling sound as someone knelt beside him. Rhyden felt a gentle hand drop against his shoulder and he opened his eyes warily, blinking at the man who smiled at him. At the sight of his face, Rhyden remembered his name: Ollamh. "Are you hungry?" Ollamh asked him, still smiling. "We have just put supper on and there will be plenty to share."

Rhyden nodded mutely, his eyes enormous and glistening in the firelight. Ollamh reached for his face and Rhyden cowered, drawing his shoulder toward his cheek. "It is alright," Ollamh said. "We will not hurt you."

"Hoah, Elf, you are too big for us to hurt," someone guffawed and snickers and chortles resounded once more.

"What is your name?" Ollamh asked. He made no further move to touch Rhyden, placing his hands on his knees. Rhyden blinked at him, uncertainly.

"Why does he not speak?" a voice asked. "He spoke just fine before!"

"Mayhap he is deaf," said another.

"How can one be deaf with ears so big?" someone laughed.

"Quiet. You are frightening him," Ollamh said, looking over his shoulder, aggravated. He turned Rhyden once more. "I am Ollamh Leigheas, lad. Will you not tell us your name?"

"Rhyden," Rhyden said in a hoarse croak. "My name is Rhyden Fabhcun."

Ollamh smiled again. "Beannacht, Rhyden Fabhcun," he said.

As he sat up, Rhyden looked at Ollamh's small hands and short, stubby fingers. Ollamh could have spread all of his fingers wide and barely covered the surface of Rhyden's palm. "You..." he said softly. "Le do thoil, are you a Dwarf?"

Ollamh blinked at him, startled, and then his friends began to laugh again. Rhyden feared he had inadvertently offended and shrank back, abashed. Ollamh realized the boy's fear and smiled at him. "We are Abhacan, descendants from Tirgeimhreadh and sometimes, in the popular tongue, yes, we are called Dwarves."

"I thought Dwarves were sgeul ... folklore," Rhyden whispered, incredulous.

"We could say the same for you," the eldest Abhacan told him, his brows narrowed. "None of our people have ever seen the likes of you, one of the lurgagh, the long-legged Elf breed, the Gaeilge."

"Hoah, indeed, we are the first," another Abhacan cried, pleased at this notion. "Mayhap we should bring him back to Iarnrod to prove he is real and we have not just made folly!"

"He is not going to Iarnrod with us," said the older Abhacan. His glower only grew deeper as he leveled his gaze at Rhyden. "He should not be with us now. We should have left them where we found them, both of the Elves."

"Have peace, Frith," Ollamh said.

"What are you doing here, lurgagh?" Frith asked, rising and folding his arms across his chest. "Our legends tell that the Gaeilge live among the trees of the southlands. How did you come to be upon the banks of the Riastail, beaten and robbed, nearly dead, so far north from your home?"

"Frith, leave him be," Ollamh said.

"We were not robbed," Rhyden said. "We were crossing the Braon i'Tir along the Thar'tir bridge and we..."

If I am to die, I will take you with me, rotted Elves.

"We fell," Rhyden whispered, shuddering to recall the fire of the duchar blazing in the wolf's eyes as it stepped out onto the droichead'rioghan.

"You fell from the Thar'tir?" Ollamh asked, his eyes growing very round and Rhyden nodded.

Frith snorted. "You lie," he scoffed. "We stand at the bottom of Braon i'Tir, boy. This canyon is a half-mile deep. Elfin healing or no, you would not have survived such a plummet."

"I am not lying," Rhyden said, bewildered. In all of his days, he had never been accused of lying. He found this inaugural occasion quite disturbing and offensive. "That is what happened. We rode across the Dithreabh for Dorchadas in the Barren Mountains, and we were attacked by wolves. The Damantas took my friend's father and we rode to rescue him. We were crossing the Thar'tir when the wolves came at us. There was one; it was enormous. It fell on the bridge and ... and it collapsed beneath us."

Frith laughed again, but at Rhyden's mention of Damantas and Dorchadas, the other Abhacan looked uneasily among one another, their eyes widening in sudden, anxious alarm.

"He is lying," Frith insisted. "Do not tell me any of you would believe such nonsense!"

"I am not lying!" Rhyden cried. "I do not know how Fiontan and I survived the fall from the Thar'tir, but that is what happened!"

"Frith, settle down," said one of the Abhacan. "What difference does it make if the boy says he fell from the Thar'tir or from Tirmaithe itself? Sit down, will you not? Mathair Maith!" He shook his head as if exasperated.

"Do not let Frith trouble you, lad," another said to Rhyden. "He is grumpy by nature. He enjoys unsettling others."

While the other Abhacan supped and conversed, Ollamh rose quietly, walking around the edge of the fire to kneel beside Fiontan. Curious, Rhyden turned to watch as Ollamh carefully tended to him; the Abhacan had apparently done their best to reset the shattered bone in Fiontan's leg, having removed his boot and torn open the seams of his trouser leg to bathe and dress his wounds.

"It has not bled through," Rhyden said.

"I had some powdered banrua in my pack," Ollamh replied. "It is a common forest herb. You can make a poultice of it and—"

"It will stop the bleeding," Rhyden nodded. He realized Ollamh now regarded him with moderate surprise and he felt color rise warmly in his cheeks. "Among my sect of the Gaeilge, the Donnag'crann, my mother is considered a healer. I have learned from watching and listening."

Ollamh smiled. "I have studied among the Slaneyder, our own Abhacan healers," he said. "Much of the knowledge we have of the medicinal plants and herbs was gleaned in our first generations here, from our Elfin neighbors."

Rhyden blinked at him, startled. "Your people know Elves?"

"Not anymore," Ollamh said, and he smiled slightly. "At least, not until today. But our ancestors did. Thousands of years ago, they lived among the Mianach in the Midland and Barren mountains. They did not hide beneath the Bith as we do now, always trembling in fear that we will be discovered."

"Your people have hidden all of this time?" Rhyden asked, puzzled. "Why? And why would you come out now?"

Fiontan moaned softly and Rhyden was startled to find him awake and blinking at him, his eyes glassy and dazed. "Fiontan!" Rhyden exclaimed.

"Na ... na ulchabhana," Fiontan breathed in a faint, fragile voice. *The owls* ... His eyelids fluttered as he tilted his head back, gasping quietly. "Le do thoil, I ... I can hear them ... na ulchabhana. They are surely all about us."

"Fiontan, it is alright," Rhyden whispered, stroking his hair.

"He does not know what he is saying," Ollamh said. "It is the beacana'collach—boar's toadstool. I gave him some to ease his pain, but it can cause visions, hallucinations. He has murmured of ulcabhana earlier, too."

"Owls?" Rhyden said, softly, puzzled.

"She sent them to us," Fiontan whispered, his eyes falling closed, his voice fading as his consciousness waned. "Golden owls from ... from the Naofa'Ionad ... so lovely ... and we could fly."

"You should let the Mianach be, Ollamh," Frith said from behind them. "And the Gaeilge, as well. Gleoman, take the Elf down to the water's edge. I am certain he must wish to bathe. As for the rest of you, mind the supper dishes and collect enough wood to keep the fire through the night. I expect less chatter and more work from the lot of you."

The Abhacan scurried into action at his words, scrambling to their feet and tending to their various assignments. Rhyden limped away from the campfire, following Gleoman toward the riverbank. The young Abhac glanced occasionally over his shoulder toward Rhyden, at last letting his footsteps slow so that the two walked abreast of one another. The cap of his skull fell in line with the crest of Rhyden's hip; for every one of the Elf's long strides, Gleoman scurried three. "Did you really fall from the Thar'tir?" he asked in a soft voice.

"I do not know," Rhyden said quietly.

He thought Wyndetta and Eoghan had made it across the bridge before the wolf had fallen, snapping the ropes. Iasal, Trejaeran and Airrenigh had been close to the far edge of the Thar'tir when it collapsed, but he could not recall whether or not they had leaped to safety in time.

"Have you come upon any others along the river?" he asked Gleoman. "A boy my age with dark hair? A woman, mayhap? A Gaeilge like me, his hair long and pale, nearly white?"

Gleoman shook his head. "You are the only of the Tall Peoples I have ever seen," he said.

Rhyden thought of Fiontan murmuring fitfully about owls and jerked all at once, his breath shuddering from him in a startled gasp. His fingers danced across his shoulder as something flashed within his mind.

their talons

they caught us in their talons

"What is it, lurgagh?" Gleoman asked in alarm. "Are you unwell?"

"I do not know," Rhyden whispered. From behind them, in the direction of the campfire, they heard Frith's sharp voice reverberating off of the high walls of the Braon i'Tir as he offered stern reproach to an Abhac named Soch for some anonymous offense.

Gleoman's brows drew together and he hunched his shoulders. "Hoah," he muttered. "Frith is in a state tonight."

"Is Frith your leader?" Rhyden asked.

"Frith is in command of our scouting patrol, yes," Gleoman said. "The rest ride behind us a half a day, mayhap a full one at the most."

"The rest of you?" Rhyden looked at him, puzzled. "There are more, then? More Abhacan?"

Gleoman laughed. "Hoah, yes, I should think," he said. "Quite a few more of us indeed! We have an army of fifteen hundred on the march for Dorchadas. Our liege, his majesty, King Neisrod, takes unkindly to those who would sneak into our fair Iarnrod and steal our people from their beds."

Rhyden blinked. "An army? Gleoman, there is an army of Abhacan afoot to lay siege against Dorchadas?"

Gleoman's expression faltered and he blinked in dismay. "Hoah, I was not supposed to speak of such things," he said, walking hurriedly away from Rhyden. "We should go back," he said. "Hurry and finish your bath. I would not have the others think I dawdle."

Rhyden lay on his side by the fire, snuggled beneath wool blankets with his knees drawn toward his chest, his hands near his face. His eyes were closed, his breath falling slowly, steadily, and from all outward appearances, he seemed asleep.

Ollamh had offered him a cup of tea when he and Gleoman had returned from the riverbank. "Here, lad, the air is chilled and you are shivering," he had said, pressing the cup between Rhyden's palms. "This should help warm you."

The tea had a peculiar flavor, a faint but discernable aftertaste. When Rhyden had drained the cup, he had felt vaguely light-headed and dazed, his eyelids drooping so suddenly and heavily that he had swooned.

"Stop pouting, Ollamh," Frith said, his gruff voice rousing Rhyden from his near doze. "The lurgagh only sleeps. We have not harmed him, and it is for the best this way."

"It is not right," Ollamh said, his tone sullen and disapproving. "We should not leave them. Rhyden is only a boy, Frith, and not fully healed yet. He can barely tend to himself, much less to the Mianach's injuries without—"

"He has no place among us," Frith said sharply. "There is no room in war for lurgagh children and crippled Mianachs. Already the Elves have cost us precious time, and we will have to make haste in the morrow."

No, please, Rhyden thought. He wanted to sit up, to plead with them, grovel on his knees if need be, but he could not move. He could not force his eyes to open. *No, please. Take me with you. Please.*

"We are not supposed to mingle with the Tall Peoples," Frith said. "It is forbidden. It has always been forbidden. No one among the Tall Peoples has seen an Abhac since the gates to Iarnrod were sealed. And now, thanks to you, Ollamh, not only have the Elves seen us, but the lot of you fancy we should keep them as some manner of pets! Hoah, how this would suit his majesty, King Neisrod! How pleased he would surely be to come upon his scouts in the company of two Tall Peoples!"

Please, Rhyden thought desperately. *Please do not leave me here. Trejaeran needs me. Please take me with you.*

"We are heading north at first light," Frith said. "The Elves are not coming with us."

There was more, but the conversation faded, the voices of the Abhacan growing distant and faint as Rhyden succumbed at last and against his will to the effects of the tainted infusion. His mind faded, slipping into a deep and sound state of unconsciousness.

He dreamed of falling; a horrifying sensation of wind rushing against his face, tearing his piteous screams from his mouth and casting them roughly over his shoulder. He could not open his eyes against such immense force; he felt the wind tangle in his cloak as it flew behind him, yanking taut against his throat, strangling him. His long hair whipped behind him, pulled loose from his scalp by the wind, and, terrified beyond any measure or reason, Rhyden wailed for his father, pleaded for Eisos to save him.

"Father!" he screamed, unable to hear his own voice over the roar of the wind. "Father! Coigleann me! Coigleann me!" *Save me! Save me!*

And then, more within his mind than with his ears, he had heard a woman's voice crying out

Go forth upon swift winds!

and he could see her even with his eyes closed: a woman with long golden hair standing at the bottom of a steep, wooded embankment where limestone cliffs met the edge of a forest. Water had eroded the mountainside in a great and expansive archway, a natural tunnel through the stone with sun-drenched forests plainly visible on the other side. Beneath this massive eave, in the cool, tranquil shadows of the mountain, the woman stood, her hands outstretched.

Naofa'Ionad, Rhyden thought, his shrieks fading from his throat, his terror dissipating. *This is the Naofa'Ionad ... the sacred place ...*

Rhyden could hear her voice as she called out, her eyes closed, her brows drawn as though she concentrated deeply.

Orlaith, he realized. *This is her place, secret and sacred.*

"Go forth upon swift winds!" Orlaith cried. "Take them and bear them safely!"

Rhyden opened his eyes and realized the air around him was filled with owls, dozens of *ulchabhana'orga*—golden owls—their wings spread in broad arcs, talons poised and outstretched, as they swooped about him. He felt one grasp him, its long claws sinking into his shoulders. The owl closed its talons, tearing into his flesh, but Rhyden felt no pain at its touch.

Rhyden dreamed of another voice within his mind, and the image of another woman appeared to him, this one raven-haired and blue-eyed. She stood upon the threshold and moors of an enormous, looming tower hewn of immense, black stones; a fortress of darkness.

"Is liomsa sin siad!" she shrieked. "Ni feadann stad de an tuirlingt dibh a scath!" *They belong to me! You cannot stop the descent of the shadow!*

Something struck the owl carrying Rhyden; he felt its talons sink deeply into his flesh at the impact and heard its shrill voice as it squalled in surprise and protest. He looked up and saw ravens; a cloud of angry, shrieking crows. Rhyden cried out, throwing his hands up to protect his face as they dove at him, attacking, ripping at him with their talons, thrusting their beaks toward his face.

"No!" Rhyden cried as his owl released its talons, grappling with the crows. The expanse of air between Rhyden and the ground had narrowed, but remained enough to be brutal and Rhyden dropped like a stone.

He dreamed he slammed against the ground in a bright and blinding burst of pain, catching the brunt of the impact on his right side. He rolled down the shallow slope of an embankment along the river bed, bouncing against the cragged ground, feeling sharp corners and rough hewn rocks pummeling him. He heard someone screaming nearby in a shrill and agonized voice.

Fiontan, he thought. Fiontan broke his leg when he landed. It is his screams, then...

He felt something brush against the side of his face, gentle but persistent against his cheek and ear. Rhyden groaned, drawing his shoulder toward his face to ward off the unwelcome advance. Something warm and heavy pressed against the corner of his jaw, trying to nudge his chin up, and there was a loud, snuffling sound almost directly in his ear. Hot, moist breath blew against his cheek and Rhyden cried out, frightened, twisting onto his backside and scuttling away.

"Dherga?" he whispered, his eyes flown wide.

The stallion stood before him, nodding his enormous, pale head and stomping his front hooves in affirmation against the ground.

"Dherga!" Rhyden cried, leaping to his feet. He threw his arms about the stallion's broad neck. "Dherga, you are alive? Ta se dodheanta! Ni creidaim ea!" *It is impossible! I do not believe it!*

He drew back from the horse, realizing Dherga did not come unscathed from his battle with the wolves. The stallion's heavily muscled shoulders and thighs were deeply gouged and battered; dried blood caked in stark smears against Dherga's pristine fur. His head, neck, chest and belly bore the cruel evidence of the wolves' teeth and claws.

"Dherga!" Rhyden whispered. His hands trembled as he reached out, stroking Dherga's snout, and Dherga pressed his muzzle against Rhyden's throat, his lips wriggling against the boy's neck as if to offer reassurance.

As Rhyden hooked his fingertips beneath Dherga's chin to scratch, he realized the campsite was oddly quiet. He turned to look over his shoulder and gasped softly in dismay. "No," he said. "Oh, no!"

The sun had nearly risen in full and true to Frith's promise the night before, the Abhacan had left.

"Oh, no," Rhyden whispered, turning about, staring at the abandoned camp. He ran his fingers through his hair and stared up at Dherga, his eyes stinging with helpless, frustrated tears.

"What am I going to do?" he whispered. *If only I had talked to them, he thought, despondent. If only I had tried.*

We are heading north at first light, Frith had said. The Elves are not coming with us.

Rhyden blinked.

We are heading north

"Hoah," he said. The sun was still pale and low in the sky; surely it had only risen within the last hour or so. Even if the Abhacan had left with the first light, as Frith had ordered, they could not have gotten too far from the campsite.

"I could catch them," Rhyden whispered. He looked over his shoulder toward Dherga. "They are following the ravine. Wherever they are going, the Braon i'Tir will lead them there."

The Abhacan astride their stocky ponies had not covered too great of a stretch and Dherga's broad, fleet-footed stride closed the distance between them in less than an hour. Rhyden rode astride the white stallion's loins, with Fiontan in front of him.

"They do not have much of a lead, but we will have to ride hard nonetheless to catch them," Rhyden had said to Fiontan when they had set off from the campsite. "It may be uncomfortable for you, Fiontan. Le do thoil, I am sorry."

Fiontan had shaken his head, semi-lucid and dazed. "Do not worry for me," he had whispered. "It is Trejaeran we must think of now. Ride as hard as you must."

One of the ponies charged forward as Dherga approached. Rhyden saw sunlight wink against unsheathed steel and pulled against the reins, bringing the stallion to a halt.

"Keep your distance, lurgagh!" Frith shouted, raising his sword in the air. "You are not welcome here! Go away! Leave us!"

"No!" Rhyden cried. "Let us ride with you, Frith! We need your army to help our friend, Trejaeran!"

"The Abhacan do not ride to the rescue of Elves!" Frith snapped. "You have caused us enough trouble, boy! Go away!"

"Trejaeran is not just an Elf!" Rhyden shouted. "He is heir to the throne of Tiralainn! He has the power to defeat Ciardha—it has been foretold in our prophecies! But he cannot do it alone. Please, we must help him! You must help him, Frith, or we are all lost, the lot of us—Elves, Abhacan and menfolk alike!"

The tip of Frith's sword wavered and then, to Rhyden's utter astonishment, he lowered the blade to his side. "You rode in the company of one of the Elfin twin heirs?"

Rhyden blinked in disbelief. "Yes, I did," he said, nodding, wondering how in the Bith the Abhacan knew of such things. "Fiontan and I both rode in his company. His name is Trejaeran. He is my best friend."

Frith shoved his sword down into its scabbard. "I am listening, lurgagh," he said in a low and tempered growl. "Speak your piece, then. Let us hear what you have to say."

"You know of the prophecy?" Rhyden asked, somewhat bewildered.

"Do you think you of the Elfkind are alone in the gift of foresight?" one of the Abhacan, Airilleach asked, arching his brow beneath the edge of his helmet. "We Abhacan have seers of our own. And we have known about Ciardha longer than you."

"Our forefathers to Tiralainn discovered her ages ago, and locked her away beneath the mountains,"

another named Saidealta said.

"But it was inevitable that she should be freed again," Ollamh said. "Even the Seal of our Seven Ancient Kings was not powerful enough to contain her forever. She is stronger than any magic we Abhacan wield."

"Ciardha found us somehow, our underground city of Iarnrod, and she sent her Damantas to steal our brethren from us," Saidealta said.

"I do not understand. Why would she abduct Abhacan?" Rhyden asked.

"Nocturn was dammed by our ancestors, Rhyden," Ollamh said. "The black spring lies trapped and buried beneath the Barren Mountains, contained by the impenetrable walls of our forefathers' crafting. Who better to dismantle an Abhacan dam design than an Abhac?"

Rhyden blinked in startled realization. "She would release the Nocturn Spring once more," he said.

"Of course she would," Airilleach said. "She has steeped in those foul waters for eons now. If it flowed again, it would pollute every river and stream in Tiralainn. The land would grow tainted by the waters. The descent of the shadow would be complete."

"Once the Abhacan she stole from us have been tainted with the duchar, she will learn from them, use them to destroy the dam our ancestors built to contain her," Frith said. He had remained silent and pensive throughout the entire exchange and as he spoke now, he regarded Rhyden with a heavy gaze. "And then, little lurgagh, all hope will be lost."

"Trejaeran can defeat her," Rhyden said. "But he needs the help of your army. He cannot stand alone against Ciardha, but with our help, with your forces behind him, he can stop her. He can destroy her. I know he can."

"You offer compelling argument for your cause, lurgagh," Frith said. He folded his arms across his chest. "But I cannot tell you our army would ride to such purpose."

Rhyden's face fell in visible distress, his mouth opening as he drew breath to protest.

"I cannot," Frith interjected. "But his majesty, King Neisrod can. We ride to rejoin him and our army. Bring this fire of yours before him, Elf, and see what he would say."

Rhyden grinned and offered his hand in friendship. "Go raimh maith agat, Frith," he said.

Frith clasped the Elf by the forearm. "You have yet to speak to my King; do not thank me just yet," he said. The corner of his mouth lifted in a fleeting, crooked smile. "But verily, lurgagh, you are welcome."

After they had ridden for the better portion of an hour, following the deep cleft of the Braon i'Tir, a faint smell found its way to Rhyden's nose. He lifted his chin, his brows drawn in sudden curiosity as he canted his face into the breeze, inhaling deeply.

"What is it, Rhyden?" Ollamh asked.

"Wood smoke," Rhyden said. He began to scan along the ravine walls, peering through the tumbled rocks and sparse scrub.

"I smell it, too," Frith said in a low, wary voice, reining his pony to a halt. His hand fell against the pommel of his sword and his brows drew narrow as he followed Rhyden's gaze along the cliff base.

From his vantage point astride Dherga's tall back, Rhyden caught the first faint glimpse of smoke rising in a thin haze from behind a tangle of thorny brush.

"There," he said. He could make out the smoldering remains of a campfire visible through the scrub and felt his heart tremble anxiously as he spied a figure lying huddled on the ground.

"There is someone there!" he cried out. He swung his leg around from Dherga's loins, hopping to the ground. He did not know what had happened to Trejaeran, Iasal or Airrenigh, but it seemed logical to him that if owls had plucked him and Fiontan from mid-air, then one or all of them might have met with similar rescue. "Bidein!" he gasped, his eyes flown wide, his heart seized with bright hope.

"Rhyden, what are you doing?" Ollamh asked, alarmed. Rhyden paid him no heed; he ran across the riverbank, heading directly, fearlessly toward the wafting ribbon of smoke.

As Rhyden came upon the meager campsite, his boots skittered to a stop and his breath caught against the back of his throat. A woman lay asleep beside the small fire, her cloak drawn about her in heavy folds.

"Airrenigh," Rhyden whispered, kneeling beside her.

Airrenigh stirred at his voice, rolling her shoulders back against the ground. "Iasal," she murmured. "Iasal, mo'ghra..."

"Airrenigh, it is Rhyden," Rhyden said, leaning over her. "It—"

There was a flash of sunlight against metal as Airrenigh shoved the blade of a dagger beneath the shelf of his chin. She recoiled from him, fully awake and aware now, her eyes flashing in simultaneous anger and terror. As recognition dawned upon her almost immediately, she let the edge of the knife fall, her breath escaping from her mouth in a sharp, joyous cry.

"Rhyden!" she exclaimed, and she threw her arms about him, hugging him fiercely. "Rhyden! You are alive! Oh, praise the Good Mother, you are alive!"

"Rhyden?" he heard Ollamh call out uncertainly from behind him. When he turned, he found several of the Abhacan standing nearby, having followed him through the brush. Airrenigh gasped, startled and frightened by their appearance. She drew back reflexively, her eyes widening, her hand darting for her fallen dagger.

"Airrenigh, it is alright," Rhyden said. "These are the Abhacan. They rescued me and Fiontan; they are friends." To the Abhacan, he said, "This is the Lady Airrenigh Atreile an'Clare. She is Baroness of Ciarrai County, one of my friends and fellows who rode with Trejaeran toward Dorchadas."

"Beannacht," Airrenigh said, hesitantly. She glanced at Rhyden, bewildered and surprised. "They are Dwarves?"

"They are Abhacan," he said. "They are allies to us. At least, I think they are. I hope they are. There are more of them yet; will you not come and see?"

"Hoah, many more indeed," Frith said. "Le do thoil, join us, my lady. We can all go to meet them together."

Airrenigh looked at Rhyden, bewildered. "I do not understand," she said.

"We ride for Dorchadas, Airrenigh, but this time not quite so on our own," Rhyden told her, the corners of his mouth lifting in a wry smile. "I think I have found us an army."

Chapter Fifteen

"My Lady Qynh?"

At the sound of Tressach's voice, his tentative footsteps, Qynh raised her eyes. She sat beneath a pine tree, her legs drawn toward her chest. She cradled Kierken's leabhar de'laen against her thighs, although she did not yet have the strength of heart to read from its pages.

The army of the Comhar rested along the boundary of the Dubholc'crainn, the forest that surrounded and protected Belgaeran. They had ridden nearly without stop from the Uaimhas'salann. Dagarron had spurred them on with a determination that was both admirable and frightening in its intensity. He did not know how to mourn for Kierken, Qynh realized, and he rode so doggedly to lay siege against the royal city because he needed some way to cope with his profound grief and remorse. Dagarron blamed himself for the young Buion's death, and no amount of tender reasoning, no measure of gentle reassurance would ever convince him that the blame was not his.

Tressach ducked his head beneath the pine boughs and approached her. "My Lady Qynh," he said again, pinching his fingertips to his thumb and tapping his forehead and chin. "Forgive me. I do not mean to disturb you."

"It is alright, Tressach. You do not," she said, smiling for him. "What is that you have brought?"

"Some lunch, if you would like," he said, holding out a hank of bread and a green apple. He knelt before her, offering the food.

"That is kind, Tressach, but I am not hungry," Qynh said, closing Kierken's journal and setting it beside her. Tressach recognized the book and gazed at her, his expression kind and sympathetic.

"You should eat, Qynh," he said. "You may not get another chance any time soon. Dagarron wants to be on our way, and it is unlikely we will stop again through the night. We can reach Belgaeran before first light if we keep the brisk pace he has set for us."

"I will carry the food with me. How would that be?" Qynh said, glancing down at the bread and fruit without any real interest. "If I grow hungry along the way, I will eat it then."

"Maith thu," he said with a smile, relenting in his efforts. "As you wish, my lady." His eyes traveled to her side, to the journal once more and he said quietly, "I would be glad to leave you, then, if you would rather be alone...?"

Qynh glanced at the leabhar de'laen and let her fingers brush briefly against the battered, stained

covered. "No," she said with a heavy sigh. "You need not go, Tressach. I would be glad for some company awhile."

Tressach settled back on the ground. "Dagarron has not heard from Keena?" he asked.

Qynh shook her head. Keena and Aedhir had remained in the Uaimhas'salann while the rest of the Fiainas army—nearly four hundred battle-ready soldiers—had left under Dagarron's command. Despite the grim evidence they had discovered in the caves, Keena remained stubbornly resolute that mountain cats could not have slipped past her sentries and guard posts. She wanted to search the tunnels further, to find Kierken's body if they could and the answers she believed remained somewhere deep beneath the mountains. She had promised to rejoin them within two days, whether she found her answers or not, and by that encroaching sundown, the deadline of the second day would have passed.

"I do not know if that bodes good or bad," Qynh said.

"Qynh," Tressach said gently. "Ciardha's cats killed Kierken. You saw the paw prints plainly for yourself in the dust, the duchan on the ground."

"Keena is not so certain," Qynh said.

He raised his brows. "Keena does not want to admit culpability in Kierken's death," he said. "If her tunnels and caves were guarded as well as she has claimed, the cats would never have gotten inside. She only gives you false hope and, I fear, more pain in the end."

"She does not, Tressach. I ... I know Kierken is dead," Qynh said.

"But do you believe it yet?" he asked, expecting no reply except the one that was apparent on her face. A wayward strand of hair had fallen across her forehead and he reached out, brushing it behind her ear with his fingertips. "I ride at dusk. Do you know?"

She nodded. "I heard you and Dagarron earlier this afternoon. You and four hundred of the soldiers will head west with one of the battering rams?"

"We are to attack the western gates, yes," Tressach nodded. "A two-sided affront is sound strategy. We cannot afford for Lahnduren and Ciardha to escape." He smiled at her somewhat sadly. "I am confident about our chances of success, but I wish it did not take me from your side."

"I can take care of myself, Tressach," Qynh reminded, but she was touched by his kind words.

He chuckled, nodding his head in agreement. "I know, Qynh," he said.

"And Dagarron will be with me," she said. "He has barely let me out of his sight since leaving the Uaimhas. I am surprised he has left me alone this long." She smiled, a faint, melancholy lift of her mouth. "He thinks it is his fault, what has happened ... because he did not stay with Kierken in the caves."

"What happened to Kierken is not Dagarron's fault," Tressach said.

"No," Qynh said, her eyes sorrowful. "But he thinks so nonetheless. Dagarron is so heartbroken, Tressach. He has known Kierken since he was just a boy, and he loves him as much as any son of his own."

"Dagarron is not alone in his heartbreak, my lady," Tressach said, touching her face.

Qynh's hand lighted against the cover of the leabhar de'laen once more, as though it held talismanic qualities to her, some sort of draiocht from which she drew comfort and strength. "I do not think my heart will ever mend," she said, tears stinging her eyes. "I feel him there. I do not sense Kierken within my mind and that is how I know he is dead, but within my heart, I feel him still, as though he is not gone at all; he has only left me for a brief moment and will shortly return."

"You loved him very much," Tressach said softly.

She nodded, feeling a tear slip down her cheek. "With all of my heart," she whispered. "I will never love another."

"Never is a very long time, my lady," he said. "And your pain is yet new upon your heart. I have shared such pain, Qynh, and I know how easy it is to seal your heart away, to protect yourself from the world. But that only leads to bitterness and loneliness. I know this, too. I lived my life in that wretched state for many long years after my father's murder." He caressed her cheek. "I would not wish such despair on anyone, but especially you, Qynh. I may not be Kierken, but I have come to know your heart, at least in part, and I have found it—like you—to be tender and beautiful."

She smiled at him, reaching out and squeezing his hand gently. "You are a dear friend to me, Tressach," she said. "Thank you for that."

He leaned toward her, pressing his lips gently against the corner of her mouth. "Always, my lady," he said.

As the sun drew near the western horizon and shadows lay heavily upon the land, the Comhar forces prepared to ride once more, dividing their numbers and embarking in opposite directions through the Dubholc'crainn.

"Keep your archers at the ready and your shields close at hand," Dagarron said to Tressach, laying his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"I will, cousin," Tressach said. "I will see you at the palace."

Four hundred of the Comhar's allied army turned west with Tressach, while Dagarron, Qynh, and the remaining four hundred and seventy-five rode for the eastern gates of Belgaeran.

Qynh rode astride Toit, Kierken's stallion, as the forests thinned about them, giving way to the stark and blackened landscape of the Dubholc'crainn. Trees remained within the dark forest, but they were unlike any Qynh had ever seen before. They sprouted twisted and hunched from the ground, blackened and barren as though scarred brutally with fire. No leaves remained in their tangled boughs and they grasped upward like the hands of poor souls buried alive, groping desperately for aid. The ground beneath their horses' hooves lay desolate and blackened as well, tainted with the duchar and covered in a low-lying, filmy mist. The air felt cold and stagnant, foul with the lingering stench of rancid meat, and as the night fell and they crossed deeper into this grim terrain, Qynh could hear things rustling about in the darkness, scuttling through the duchar-rotted remnants of underbrush and thicket, scurrying about in crooked tree limbs overhead.

Along the course across the Comhar counties and southward, she had heard a cacophony of amicable conversations held in quiet tones throughout the ranks, but now all of the soldiers rode in uneasy silence.

Archers bore their bows in hand; swordsmen rested their gauntlets against hilts. Helmets were donned and armor fastened into place.

Dagarron had helped Qynh into the plate armor he had packed for her use before treading even one brief measure beyond the boundaries of the Dubholc'crainn, and she also carried a round metal shield. The Elfin steel armor was uncomfortable and somewhat cumbersome, the shield was heavy and she wielded it with an awkwardness born of unfamiliarity, but Qynh was grateful for them nonetheless. The Dubholc'crainn seeped with ominous energy; it seemed nearly as visible as the creeping, spiraling mist upon the ground.

In the past, the Comhar had sent spies into the Dubholc'crainn. Little was known about the forest, and little had apparently been gleaned from these reconnaissance missions. The woods lay mysterious, dark and deep, guarding their secrets well and letting precious few who entered ever make their way out again to divulge any discoveries made within.

A soft, skittering sound in the trees overhead attracted her attention and Qynh looked up, struggling vainly to peer into the lofty, barren boughs. The moon had moved behind a thick, expanding line of clouds, and without its dim illumination, darkness and shadows had enveloped them fully.

Dagarron heard the noise as well and raised his eyes. His brows furrowed as he gazed intently into the trees.

"What was that?" she whispered.

"I do not know, muileach," he replied softly. He glanced at her, his eyes grave. "Keep close to me. Do not let Toit stray."

Other riders had taken notice of the peculiar, quiet scuttling sounds and shared in Qynh's unease.

"Did you hear that?" she heard one hiss. "It came from right above us."

They saw no signs of whatever crept about hidden in the shadows overhead, but as several hours passed and they rode onward, the sounds persisted. Dagarron conferred with several battalion leaders from among the ranks in low, murmured conversation. The men and Elves held brief but grave counsel, their faces grim, their brows furrowed, as they spared fleeting glances now and again towards the trees. As the battalion commanders spurred their horses away from Dagarron's side, Qynh could hear them calling out to their soldiers to keep their shields in hand, their archers to stand ready.

"What is in the trees, Dagarron?" she asked, frightened.

"I do not know," he told her again. "Whatever it is, it is keeping pace with us. It knows we are here. And within these woods, that means Ciardha knows, too."

From behind her, a wave of soft, fervent conversation rippled through the riders; a hushed and anxious flurry of indiscernible words, and Qynh looked back over her shoulder, her curiosity aroused, her disquiet deepening. "What is it?" she whispered to one of the Elves behind her.

"I do not know," he said. "Someone is moving through the ranks to reach Dagarron, from the sound. Draw your horse aside; let them pass."

A sudden, piercing shriek ripped out across the night. The sound was shrill, so filled with stark terror,

Qynh jerked in her saddle, frightened and startled, yelping aloud.

Dagarron whipped his face toward the cry, and another scream rang out, and then another and another. The horses reacted to the anguished shrieks, dancing about in fear, hopping and whinnying.

"What in the—?" Qynh heard a rider exclaim and metal hissed as hundreds of Comhar soldiers immediately drew their weapons.

"Taimid fuinn muid ionsai!" a voice shouted out loudly over the rising din of frightened, anguished screeches. "Draw your weapons! Hold them fast! We are under attack!"

"Dagarron!" Qynh cried. She screamed as she saw something large and black, shrouded in shadow, drop down from the trees directly toward him. She caught sight of an oblong silhouette and long, spindly fingers like a hand splayed wide and groping, reaching for the cap of Dagarron's skull, and then sudden movement above her wrenched her eyes skyward. She threw her shield up toward her face, moving instinctively, and wailed as something heavy slammed against the rounded plate of Elfin steel. It landed with enough brutal force to send her sprawling sideways; Qynh felt her foot tangle momentarily in Toit's stirrup and then she fell, tumbling off the right side of the saddle and landing hard, the breath knocked from her.

She regained her wind quickly enough; whatever had smacked against her shield remained on its perch. Qynh could feel its weight bearing down against her forearm, forcing the shield toward her face, and she could see tapered points like fingertips spread wide along the buckle's plate, eight in all, poking over the edges, grasping the shield.

Qynh shoved the shield away from her, feeling whatever clung to the other side slip loose, scrabbling for purchase. The black fingertips clutched at the rim of steel, curling beneath the edge, and she shrieked as she saw eight glittering, scarlet eyes appear over the top of the shield, staring at her; a pair of immense, hooked fangs wriggling together with an obscene and horrifying chittering sound.

"Sweet Mother!" Qynh screamed, thrusting her shield away once more just as the creature—an enormous spider the size at least of hunting spaniel—lunged forward. It leaped at her face, and as she swung the shield, it flew away from her, losing its tenuous grip against the metal.

"Dagarron!" Qynh cried, scrambling to her feet, jerking her sword loose from its hilt. A second spider came crashing down from the tree limbs directly over her head, and she wailed, swinging her shield and striking it squarely, sending it reeling into the darkness.

A third flew at her, its legs outstretched, its fangs poised and aimed for her face. Qynh lowered her shield, swinging her blade and slicing the creature in two just as its legs came near enough to brush against her. Duchan sprayed out of the spider, splattering across her face, and Qynh recoiled, sputtering in disgust.

"Qynh!" Dagarron roared. He had somehow found his way from his saddle as well and he rushed toward her, his sword in his hand, swinging madly as the spiders fell upon him.

Another spider swooped down from the trees, its fangs spread and ready to punch into her cheeks. Qynh jerked her shield up in time and the spider knocked her back as it struck against the steel. She stumbled, crying out as she fell onto her rump. She felt the reverberation in the shield as the spider's fangs slammed against it in futile strike. She felt its weight shift against her arm as it scuttled along the shield, its legs hooked along the rim as it moved to strike again at her head.

Dagarron appeared above her, his hilt clasped between his hands, his blade raised above his head, and he skewered the spider, flinging it away.

"Dagarron!" she cried as he grasped her firmly by the arm and yanked her to her feet. She stumbled against his shoulder and saw a blur of sudden motion as another spider plummeted toward them. "Duck your head! Get down!" Qynh shrieked, throwing the disk of her shield above their heads. Dagarron shoved his forearm alongside hers to brace the shield as the spider struck; it lunged against the steel and Qynh felt its legs fumbling in her hair, groping against her forehead, just as Dagarron flexed his arm, putting his full weight behind the shield, throwing the spider away from them.

"They are everywhere!" Qynh cried, whirling about as yet another leaped at her from a low-hanging bough. She thrust her sword out to meet it, and the long blade punched through the spider's head, slamming between its wriggling fangs, piercing its glittering, blazing eyes. All around them, the spiders mercilessly attacked the army of the Comhar; the air was thick with the stink of blood and duchar, ringing with the shrieks of soldiers and horses.

She spun toward Dagarron, her eyes enormous with terror. She looked over his shoulder, seeing a spider flying at him, and she opened her mouth to cry out just as his hands fell heavily against her shoulders and he started to shove her sideways.

"Behind you! Look out!" they both shrieked in unison, and as they staggered apart, Qynh heard the hiss of wind through goose-vented fletchings. Two arrows, fired from the same bow, the same draw and with the same lethal accuracy, skewered both of the spiders simultaneously. Dagarron looked up and Qynh jerked her face to look back over her shoulder as three Fiainas warriors rushed towards them, all in full battle armor with helmets covering their faces, two with swords in hand, one wielding a bow. The archer cast aside his bow and drew his sword, and the five of them stood together, Dagarron, Qynh and the Fiainas soldiers, battling against the rain of spiders.

Qynh shrieked as one plowed into Dagarron, striking him in the chest and knocking his feet out from beneath him. She shrieked again as another dove at her face, and one of the Fiainas tackled her. He landed hard against her, and she gasped loudly, breathlessly, as she stared up into his helmet, the dark steel of his face plate. She could not see his eyes within the narrow slit in the helm, but he reached up with one hand, his leather glove brushing against her face. She felt his other hand reach between them, his fingers against her hip, and as he sat up, his hand darted out, throwing the dagger he had pulled from her belt. The blade sailed into the head of a spider that rushed at them along the ground.

The Fiain scrambled to his feet, his blade whistling in the air as he greeted another advancing spider. Qynh rolled, tucking her legs beneath her and scampering upright once more.

With the aid of the two other Fiainas, Dagarron had dislodged the spider that had pounced against his chest; she could see the dents against the breast plate of his armor where it had driven its fangs repeatedly into the steel, trying to pierce through to his heart.

"Dagarron!" she cried, running toward him.

"Qynh!" Dagarron shouted, holding his hand out, his fingers splayed wide, his eyes round with alarm. "No! Watch out—!"

She felt something hook against her foot and she went tumbling to her knees. There was a whistle of wind as a sword swung above her, and the Fiain who had tackled her only moments before—and had

now purposely tripped her—stabbed his blade deeply into the heart of a spider about to land on her head.

The soldier looked down at her, his face obscured by his helmet and then his eyes shot toward Dagarron. In a preternaturally swift movement, he jerked a dagger loose from his belt and let it fly straight for Dagarron's nose; Dagarron jerked himself sideways just as a spider's long legs fondled his hair with keen interest. The dagger blade struck between its eyes, spraying duchan against the ground as the spider collapsed dead.

"Who are you?" Qynh cried at the Fiain as again, he turned his helmet to regard her. She screamed, cowering, ducking her head as an enormous spider darted past her, swinging down out of the trees. It slammed into the Fiain's chest and he fell backwards, throwing his arms up and crossing them between his throat and the spider's fangs as he collapsed. He shoved the spider back far enough to plant the sole of his sabaton against its abdomen. As its hooked fangs battered the couters of his armor, he kicked it mightily, hurling it into the air. One of his fellows drew a dagger and flung it wide, skewering the creature in midflight.

The Fiain who seemed so bound and determined to come to Qynh's aid sprang nimbly to his feet, kicking his legs from the ground and rolling his hips, spine, and lastly his shoulders gracefully up in turn so that he landed lithely on his toes, sword yet in hand, poised and ready to fight again. When another spider darted down from the trees toward him, he canted backwards, flexing his knees and arching his spine as though he meant to do a backbend. He did not bring his hands back to balance himself against the ground; rather, he bore his weight upon his feet and as the spider sailed over him, he righted himself once more, effortlessly.

He whirled toward Qynh and his hand danced against his belt, drawing another knife; she felt the soft breeze as the blade whispered past her cheek, striking a spider behind her just as its legs draped against her shoulder.

The army of the Comhar held its own against the onslaught, and when it was over, the spiders scuttled back into the trees, scurrying in hasty retreat, slinking back into the shadows above. All around them on the forest floor, the beasts lay slain and skewered, the ground soaked with duchan and stained with blood. Many of the Comhar soldiers lay among the fallen spiders, paralyzed and dying from their swift, deadly venom.

When they were gone, Qynh rushed for Dagarron, crying out his name. He caught her in his arms, drawing her against his chest, pressing his lips against her dirty, duchan-spattered forehead. "Are you alright?" he gasped, cupping her face between his hands. "Qynh, are you alright?"

She nodded, feeling tears burning in her eyes as she drew in a ragged breath. "I ... I am unhurt," she whimpered as her tears began to fall. "Are you alright? There were so many, Dagarron, and I ... I..."

"I am alright, muileach," Dagarron said, embracing her once more as she began to shudder, weeping. "Thank the Good Mother, we are both alright."

He raised his head, gazing across the narrow clearing toward the three Fiainas who had come to their aid. One of them, the one who had so many times drawn sword and knife in Qynh's defense reeled, stumbling as though drunk. He dropped his sword and collapsed to his knees, crumpling forward and catching himself feebly with his hands. His comrades rushed to his aid, kneeling beside him, laying their hands against his shoulders.

"Easy now, lad," one of them said, a familiar voice that drew Qynh's attention. She turned, still standing in Dagarron's embrace, her brows pinched.

"Easy now," said the Fiain again, loosening the chin straps of his helmet. "You are still weak. This was too much, too soon."

He reached up, pulling off his helmet and casting it aside, and Qynh blinked, stunned to recognize the dark eyes and dusky complexion beneath the helm's steel. The second Fiain removed his helm as well, and it was not a man beneath at all, but a woman with long dark hair twined back in a plait she had worn tucked beneath the helmet; a woman with a face as familiar as her companion's.

"Keena!" Qynh breathed, feeling Dagarron jerk against her in simultaneous recognition. "And Aedhir!"

As Keena and Aedhir helped the Fiain to his feet, she realized. She realized why the soldier had fought so valiantly on her behalf; why he had touched her face with such seeming tender regard after he had knocked her to the ground.

She saw something slip out from beneath the edge of his armor breastplate; a necklace, a silver chain affixed with a small pendant, a charm in the shape of a woman with her arms outstretched. Qynh drew in a sharp breath as her fingers danced against her own throat, searching vainly for the necklace she had believed lost somewhere deep within the Fiainas caves.

"It cannot be," she whispered, wrenching herself loose from Dagarron's arms and rushing across the clearing.

As his helmet was lifted from his head, she saw his long, tawny hair tumble loose from the steel, spilling down the length of his spine. He raised his face and looked at her, his eyes as green and bright as sunlight against new ivy.

"Kierken!" Qynh cried out, her tears falling anew. She threw herself into his arms and he held her fiercely, burying his face into her tangled hair.

"My lady," he whispered against her ear. Qynh sobbed, trembling in his arms and he stroked her hair gently.

"You are alive," she said. "You are alive."

"Yes, mo'ghra," Kierken said, drawing her so near to him she could scarcely breathe, holding her as though he feared to ever turn loose of her.

Dagarron staggered toward them, his eyes flown wide with shock. Kierken looked up from Qynh's shoulder, tears in his eyes and she turned in his arms as Dagarron approached.

"Oh, Dagarron!" she said, her breath hitching in her throat.

"Kierken?" Dagarron whispered, stunned. He reached out with trembling fingers, touching the young Buion's face. "You live, a'mac?"

"Yes," Kierken nodded, laying his hand against Dagarron's shoulder, smiling at him wearily but happily. "Dagarron, it is me."

"Thank the Good Mother," Dagarron said as he burst into tears. Qynh stepped away as Dagarron hugged the young Elf, clutching at Kierken as though he needed to cling to him to be certain of his presence. "Oh, thank the Mathair Maith, a'mac, you are alive." He turned his face toward Qynh and reached for her, drawing her into their embrace, holding her against them. She wept all the harder to see the astonished joy in Dagarron's eyes.

"How? How can this be?" Dagarron gasped as they parted. His hands kept returning to Kierken's face, touching him in amazement. He looked between Aedhir and Keena each in turn. "But we searched the tunnels. We ... we saw the duchan on the ground, your blood ... !"

"I think those are questions best left to Tressach an'Clare to answer," Aedhir said, his brows drawn gravely.

"Tressach?" Qynh asked, drawing in a sharp breath. She blinked at Kierken and Dagarron, bewildered.

Dagarron turned to Kierken. "What has Tressach to do with this, a'mac?" he asked.

Kierken shook his head, glancing toward Aedhir. "Aedhir, mo'cara, I think mayhap you draw conclusions where there are none to be drawn," he said. He met Dagarron's gaze. "I do not have much memory of what happened." His eyelids fluttered and he moaned, stumbling as the strength in his legs waned. Qynh cried out in alarm, and Dagarron caught the young Elf against him.

"A'mac!" he exclaimed, his eyes round with worry.

"I ... I am alright," Kierken whispered. He looked at Qynh and struggled to smile. "My strength has not yet fully restored, that is all."

Keena's hands moved through the air and Dagarron looked toward Aedhir for interpretation. "She says he is frail yet, and she speaks truly," Aedhir said. "He took a terrible fall. We tried to convince him to remain at the Uaimhas'salann, to gather his strength, but he rested only a few brief hours before pressing us on our way to find you. By his insistence, we nearly met our deadline. We were making our way through the cavalry ranks when the spiders attacked and the first screams rang out." The corner of Aedhir's mouth lifted in a wry smile as Keena's fingers twisted and moved before him. "She says Kierken is a stubborn little Buion, nearly as obstinate as Eoghan when his mind is set upon a task.

"We found him almost five miles deep within the mines," Aedhir said, frowning. "There is an underground river there, the Fansruth. It is flooded with storm waters and it carried him into the belly of the Midlands." Aedhir nodded toward Keena and then lay his hand gently against Kierken's shoulder. "We found the poor lad there, washed ashore, nearly drowned and more than nearly dead from a blow to his head. He is lucky to be of the Elves. He would not be with us if he were not blessed with their healing."

"But what has this to do with Tressach?" Qynh asked, confused. "What about the mountain cats? We saw their footprints on the ground, we..."

Keena's hands darted imperatively, and Aedhir spoke for her. "There were none, just as Keena has insisted all along. She says Kierken spoke of Tressach coming upon him in the tunnels. Tressach told him Qynh was lost in the tunnels, in danger and Kierken was frightened for her. Tressach led him deep into the mines toward the Fansruth River."

"Why would Tressach tell you I was lost?" Qynh said, bewildered. "I do not understand."

"I do," Dagarron said quietly, his rage apparent on his face. "I understand it fully now." He met Qynh's eyes and his harsh expression softened. "Qynh, if we succeed against Belgaeran, you would become our Queen," he said. "You do not know Tressach, but I do. I have known him many long years, and all he has ever wanted is power. I cannot believe I fell for his ruse, not after all of the torment he has put Airrenigh through trying to usurp Orinein and Ciarrai County from her."

"You love Kierken, Qynh, and Tressach knows this. He knows if you were Queen, you would want to make him your King. If Kierken was gone, Tressach would have an opportunity to take his place in your regard."

"No." Qynh shook her head. "No, that could never happen, I could never. Not with Tressach, not with anyone!"

"That rotted bastard," Dagarron muttered.

"But what about the duchan?" Qynh asked. "We found it all over the place within the mines where we thought Kierken had fallen. I found the leabhar de'laen there. I thought surely it must have meant..."

"I had the leabhar de'laen with me when Tressach found me in the tunnels," Kierken said. "I carried it with me when I left for my meoraich, meaning to write in it awhile."

Keena's hands moved once more. "Keena suspects she knows where the duchan came from, the pawprints," Aedhir said. "You encountered mountain cats in the forests beyond the Torainn bridge, did you not? And Kierken felled them with his bow. It would have been simple enough for Tressach to hack a limb from one in the aftermath of your fall, Qynh. If he had planned far enough ahead to murder Kierken, an attack by mountain cats would make for a splendid cover story once the deed had been committed."

"Mathair Maith," Dagarron whispered. "How could I have trusted him?"

"Dagarron, le do thoil," Kierken implored, shaking his head. "It is not your fault."

His hands fell against Dagarron's shoulders and Dagarron's face softened to see the beseeching look on the young Elf's face. "I do not know what happened to me in the tunnels," Kierken said. "And I do not know who—if anyone—is to blame, except it is not you."

"A'mac," Dagarron said, drawing Kierken against him once more. "It does not matter," he said, although the pained, guilt-ridden expression on his face said otherwise. "All that matters to me is that you are safe, Kierken, that you are with us once more." He looked toward Keena and Aedhir, tears glistening in his eyes. "Thank you both for that, mo'cairde."

Sharp, imperative voices called out for Dagarron and he turned, spying several of the commanders making their way through the ranks, seeking him. His expression grew solemn. "I must meet with the battalion leaders," he said. "I fear others have not fared as well against the spiders as we have, and I am certain we have not seen the last of them tonight. We must regroup before moving again."

While Dagarron, Keena, Aedhir and the others met in counsel, Kierken knelt on the ground, lowering himself carefully as though the movement brought him pain. Qynh folded her legs beneath her, kneeling with him. The Comhar soldiers nearby regarded them curiously. The Fiainas in particular seemed befuddled and startled to find a Gaeilge in the armor of their exclusive brigade of men. With so many

soldiers gathered about, there was slim chance for a private moment between them, but as Qynh gazed at Kierken, as he lifted his tired eyes and smiled, she felt the Bith around them fade into shadows, shrouded in silence.

"Those were some magnificent fighting skills you displayed, Kierken," Qynh said. She raised her brow at him. "Sixteen years worth of Ag'iarraidh have not been wasted effort, I see."

The corners of his mouth lifted in a wry, weary smile. "You think so? You did not fare so poorly yourself. I watched you wield that sword rather deftly."

Qynh smiled at him, feeling fresh tears sting her eyes as she reached out and tugged lightly at one of his braids. "I have a splendid teacher," she told him, and his smile grew all the wider.

"Have you now?" he whispered.

Qynh caressed his face and he turned his cheek, closing his eyes and resting his head against her palm. "I am quite smitten with him, if you must know," she said.

"As he is with you," Kierken breathed.

"Oh, Kierken, I thought you were dead," Qynh said, feeling a tear roll down her cheek.

"I had many similar thoughts myself," Kierken said, drawing a fleeting smile from her.

"I could not feel you within my mind. Even now, I cannot sense you with my sight," Qynh said, blinking against her tears, her eyes puzzled and distraught.

"It is this place," he said. "The Dubholc'rainn. Ciardha's power is strong within these borders, capable of blocking our sight. I have had no sense of you, either. And before, in the Uaimhas, you did not sense me because I was unconscious."

"I kept trying to tell myself this meant you were dead," Qynh said. "But in my heart, I could not believe..." More tears spilled and Qynh turned her face toward the ground.

Kierken reached behind his neck, unfastening the clasp that held her necklace in place. "I found this among the rocks deep in the caves," he whispered, his fingers moving lightly through her hair as he slipped the chain about her throat. "Tressach told me you were lost, and I ... When I found this, I thought..."

Qynh remembered that Tressach had made mention of her necklace on the night Kierken had disappeared. She had not considered his comments until that very moment; only then did she realize that was the last time she remembered having the necklace around her throat. It had disappeared sometime after that. "Or Tressach took it from me," she whispered.

"When I found this, I have never known such pain," Kierken told her. "I know now, Qynh, I understand."

He cupped his palms against her tear-stained cheeks and she blinked at him, confused.

"I love you," Kierken said to her. "Nothing on this earth means more to me than you—not my Ag'iarraidh, or the Buion, my vows, my honor—and I would give them all up gladly for one moment with

you, one touch ... one kiss."

He drew her toward him. "I love you, Qynh," he whispered.

"Oh, Kierken, I love you, too," she breathed, stroking his hair. He kissed her, catching her laughter and tears against his mouth.

Chapter Sixteen

"So much blood," Wyndetta murmured, staring down at the stained leaves and soaked pine needles. "Yet there is no sign of struggle here. What does it mean? Is it ... Iasal, do you think it is Trejaeran's?"

They had come upon a clearing in the pine woods that appeared to be a recently abandoned campsite. The discovery of the blood along the perimeter of the clearing, a broad, grim swath of it, had left them decidedly uneasy and alarmed.

"I do not know," Iasal replied quietly. He stared down at the blood, troubled, unable to sense anything about whatever gruesome events had transpired on that narrow patch of ground.

"Was Trejaeran even here?" Eoghan asked. He walked slowly around the campsite, his eyes trained on the ground, his brows furrowed. "I can see footprints here, small enough to be the boy's, and others besides." He frowned, the cleft between his brows deepening as he deliberately set his boot sole against one of the more distinctive footprints. "Someone very large," he said, glancing toward Wyndetta and Iasal. "I am not a small man by anyone's standards, but these boot marks would make me a Dwarf."

"There are hoof marks, as well, near the trees," Iasal said. "A very large horse tread about this place."

"A very large horse for a very large man," Wyndetta said, looking at Eoghan, worried. "What does it mean?"

"It means Trejaeran now travels with someone by horseback," Iasal said. He genuflected, reaching down and brushing his fingertips against the blood, hoping that the physical contact might stimulate his sight, open his mind. He felt a peculiar, icy shiver race through his arm and he drew his hand back, his brows narrowing. "It means we have even less time than we thought. By steed, they could well have reached Dorchadas already. This blood is old, those cinders long since dead. This site has been abandoned for at least a day."

"But who would Trejaeran have met out here?" Wyndetta asked.

"Mayhap he did not meet them by chance," Eoghan said grimly. "Or go willingly in their company, if that blood is any indication."

They traveled on as dusk settled and the skies faded into darkness. The moon rose above them, swollen and bloated, sending pale light through tree limbs and pine boughs. Hours passed; it was well after midnight when Iasal drew to an abrupt halt, his head lifted suddenly as though he scented the wind or heard an unfamiliar sound.

"What is it, Buion?" Eoghan whispered, laying his hand against the hilt of his sword.

Iasal made no move for his own blade and stood motionless beneath the trees, more curious than alarmed. "Do you feel it?" he whispered.

Wyndetta looked at Eoghan, puzzled. "Feel what?" Eoghan said, frowning.

Iasal turned and looked at them. "There is something in the air," he said. "Something near to this place. Something ... golden. It trembles in the air. You do not feel it?"

"I feel a breeze against my face, an aching in my back and a rumbling in my gut that means it has been too long since I have eaten more than dry-rotted cheese and stale bread," Eoghan growled. "Nothing more."

"What is it, Iasal?" Wyndetta asked. "What do you sense?"

"Something ancient," he replied. "And sacred. Strange and frightening and wonderful all at once. Trejaeran would have been drawn to it." He turned his face toward the tree crowns, closing his eyes, the corners of his mouth lifting in a soft, fragile smile. "Ta se a naofa'ionad," he whispered. "Ta an aiteigin neonach." *It is the sacred place ... Somewhere wondrous.*

He turned and began to walk among the trees, changing the course they had been marking entirely, and leaving his companions somewhat stupefied. Wyndetta and Eoghan blinked at one another, and then hurried after Iasal. "Hoah, Buion," Eoghan called. "What are you playing at?"

"He was here," Iasal murmured, following a relatively steep embankment down toward a stream bed.

"Who?" Wyndetta asked, nearly running as she drew alongside of him. She had no accounting for the distant, nearly dazed look on Iasal's face; it was as if he was sleepwalking, or in a trance. "Iasal, who was here? Trejaeran?"

Iasal offered no more; he moved easily down the treacherous slope while Eoghan and Wyndetta, not endowed with Elfin coordination, stumbled and picked their way more carefully. He led them along the winding stream bed until they came to a place where a cragged growth of stone jutted out of the earth; a natural tunnel hewn by the stream.

Eoghan and Wyndetta drew to uncertain halts, blinking up at the towering arch, but Iasal continued fearlessly, walking toward the shadows beneath the stone entrance. "Wait for me here," he said.

Eoghan glanced at Wyndetta and frowned, draping his hand against the pommel of his sword. "Rot on that, Buion," he said, stepping forward, moving to draw his blade.

Iasal turned, his brows narrowed, his gaze sharp enough to give Eoghan pause. "Wait for me," he said again.

Iasal knelt beside the water's edge beneath the tunnel. He could see moonlight dancing against the brisk current, but precious little else. He reached for the water; he felt compelled to, as if someone whispered in command against his ear. It was unlike any sensation he had ever felt in his life.

He dipped his fingertips into the stream, and as the cold water swirled against his skin, he jerked, gasping sharply, his eyes flown wide as he saw a woman in his mind. He recognized her long, golden curls, her yellow eyes and grave expression. He had seen her before at the ruins of Orbhui.

"Orlaith," he whispered.

"You must be strong, Iasal," Orlaith said. Her words shuddered through him, making him convulse, his breath fluttering, his eyes rolling back into his skull. "You must be stronger than you have ever been before. Trejaeran needs your strength, your spirit. He will fall to the darkness unless you reach him in time."

His mind filled with horrifying images

Trejaeran astride an enormous black stallion, dressed in the ebony steel of Ciardha's forces, a long, scarlet cape flapping in the wind behind him.

It was Trejaeran and yet it could not be; his face was twisted with cruelty. His eyes blazed in crimson points of fire and he held a sword aloft in his hand, a blade made of fire like the one Iasal had seen Orlaith brandish in his dreams at Orbhui—an anam'cladh, a soul-sword of the ancients—only instead of golden fire, as Orlaith's had burned, Trejaeran's anam'cladh burned cold and dark, more shadow than flames, and terrible to behold.

Trejaeran threw back his head and howled, a shrill battle cry that was echoed by thousands of voices; he rode at the helm of an immense army of Damantas, whose ranks spread as far as the eye could behold. They raised their swords, their spears, their flails, and screamed with him, and Iasal understood; Trejaeran was their King.

"No!" Iasal cried aloud. "No, it cannot be! It cannot!"

"A terrible shadow will pass across your land," Orlaith said. He could see it; she showed him plainly within his mind a ruined landscape that once had been the rolling, fertile plains of the southrealm. The lands lay spoiled now, stained with duchan, the trees twisted, barren and blackened, like the hands of rotted corpses thrusting out from funereal cairns.

"She will rule eternally. That is all she has ever desired," Orlaith told him. "From the age of the a'Tosach, it is all she has ever sought and with Trejaeran at her side, with his power to call her own, she will bring an age of darkness that will know no end."

Iasal could see her now, Ciardha standing poised atop a tower of the royal palace in Belgaeran. She was dressed in black armor, with a vermilion cloak whipping back from her shoulders. She wore a helmet reminiscent of Orlaith's golden owl, only Ciardha's crest was that of a winged wolf, its muzzle rippled back in a vicious, feral snarl. Her skin was translucent and ashen; her scarlet eyes blazed as she regarded the lands that she now claimed as her own.

Iasal recognized her; although he had never beheld the visage for himself, his gift of the sight had made the lovely face, the pristine features, apparent to him from the minds and memories of others, and he cried out in dismay and horror to realize Ciardha somehow wore Queen Lythaniele's form, Lythaniele's face and body as her own.

Trejaeran knelt huddled on the ground in supplication by her feet and Ciardha's fist tangled in his hair, forcing his head up to look at her. His eyes smoldered with duchan and he cried out to her, "Mo'banrion!" *My Queen!*

"It is Lythaniele!" Iasal cried. "It cannot be!"

It is only Lythaniele's form, Iasal, Orlaith said within his mind. Banaltra healing saved it that Lahnduren might present it as a gift to Ciardha sixteen years ago and she has worn it as her own ever since. Lythaniele's womb is warm and fertile; she can bear children, and Ciardha will seek that, to lay with her King, to give him children, to fill the world once more with her kind, and with his.

"Her King?" Iasal blinked in stunned horror. "You cannot mean she would wear Lythaniele's form and ... and lay with Trejaeran?"

You must help him, Iasal. Trejaeran needs you. These things you have seen, that which I have shown you, they will all come to pass if Trejaeran falls to the duchar. You cannot let that happen, Iasal.

"Buion!" Eoghan's hand fell heavily against his shoulder, snapping him from his reverie as the man yanked him away from the water. Iasal turned, momentarily disoriented and dazed, and his eyes widened as he caught a flash of moonlight off of Eoghan's brandished sword. Iasal jerked himself loose, scrambling to his feet as he scuttled back. His hand fell against his cleadh mor and he drew the sword in a swift motion.

"Iasal, no!" Wyndetta cried, rushing out of the darkness behind Eoghan, her hand outstretched.

Eoghan blinked, wide-eyed at the tip of the cleadh mor. "Hoah, Buion, have peace," he said softly. He raised one hand toward Iasal. He lowered his blade in the other fist, moving slowly to return the sword to his sheath.

"You have peace, Eoghan. You drew on me," Iasal said sharply, his eyes bewildered and alarmed. He made no move to lower his sword. His feet were light and cautious against the ground as he stepped back, putting more space between him and Eoghan.

"We thought you were in trouble," Wyndetta said. "Iasal, you were screaming. We heard you and it scared us."

Eoghan slid his sword slowly, deliberately into his scabbard and held out both hands, empty now, for Iasal to see. "Iasal," he said softly. "Tell us what has happened."

Iasal lowered his sword to his side and stumbled, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow. "Eoghan, Wyndetta, forgive me, le do thoil. I ... I am not myself." He sheathed the cleadh mor at his hip. "Orlaith came to me."

"The golden lady?" Eoghan asked, surprised. "The one from the ruins?"

"What did she show you?" Wyndetta asked.

"She showed me Ciardha," Iasal said. "Or at least, the body she wears as her own." He looked at them grimly. "That of Lythaniele."

Wyndetta gasped sharply, staggering, her face ashen. "What?"

"Lythaniele?" Eoghan said. "The Queen? Trejaeran's...?"

"His mother, yes," Iasal nodded.

Wyndetta shook her head, her eyes enormous with shock. "That is not possible," she whispered. "Lythaniele is dead. She threw herself out of the palace tower sixteen years ago."

"Lahnduren had stolen some of our Banaltra women from Tirnag'crann only weeks before that. He gave them over to the duchar, and they must have used their ancient healing secrets to restore Lythaniele's body," Iasal said. "She lives, Wyndetta. Ciardha wears her form and would use her to bear children with her King, to restore the race of Na'Siogai, I think, and reclaim Tiralainn from us both, Elves and men."

"What does this have to do with Trejaeran?" Eoghan asked. "Lahnduren sits on the throne of Belgaeran; he is her King."

Iasal stared at him gravely. "Eoghan, hear me. Lahnduren has never been King. Ciardha used to him to free herself from beneath the mines of Dorchadas and to settle her forces in a position of power within Belgaeran. She would make Trejaeran her King. I think this has been her intention all along. Mayhap his power was strong enough, kindred enough to her own that she could sense him in Lythaniele's womb. Mayhap this is what stirred her from eons of slumber beneath the mountains. I do not know. But we cannot fail. We must find the lad, rescue him, and keep her from him. We must, Eoghan."

Wyndetta's brows twisted. "We have delivered him into her hands, then, have we not? She would do such a thing to Trejaeran ... and in the guise of his own mother?"

"Lythaniele is descended from the Na'Siogai, according to our legends," Iasal said. "And Trejaeran is as well. Together, they could not restore that ancient race, but they could create something close."

"An abomination," Wyndetta whispered.

"Muise," Iasal agreed, nodding. *Indeed.*

A shrill screech broke the stillness of the night, and Wyndetta jerked, alarmed by the sound. She looked up in time to catch a glimpse of a shadowy figure, broad and silent wings, as an enormous owl glided over their heads, swooping through the tunnel and out into the moon-draped forest beyond.

"Mathair Maith!" she exclaimed, hunkering her shoulders and ducking her head reflexively.

"Hoah! What manner of devilry—?" Eoghan cried out, his voice overlapping hers.

The three ran outside together and looked around wildly. Another screech drew their attention; the owl perched on a low-hanging pine bough, folding its wings against its sides, fluffing the spread of down about its face and neck.

"It is a ulchabhan'orga," Iasal said. "A golden owl."

"Ta se alainn," Wyndetta whispered. *It is beautiful.*

Eoghan stared at the owl and the owl rotated its head on the swivel of its neck to meet his gaze. "What does it want?" he asked with a frown.

Iasal stepped toward the owl. The bird arched its wings and lifted once more into the air, sailing quietly to another tree limb further down from them. Iasal paused, his brow arched inquisitively, and then followed. Again, as he drew near, it flew to the next tree.

"I believe it wishes us to follow it," Iasal said.

"Do you not remember our dreams at Orbhui?" Wyndetta asked. "We dreamed of Orlaith. She wore armor fashioned with the visage of an owl. And she just came to warn Iasal about Trejaeran. She must mean for the owl to lead us to him."

The owl squawked at them, raising its wings and giving its feathers a shake as it shifted its hooked talons on the tree limb.

"It is an impatient creature, is it not?" Eoghan remarked as it met his gaze and raised its voice once more. He cracked a wry smile. "Hoah, I like it better already, then."

By nightfall, Trejaeran and Suille had left the woodlands behind and found themselves within the Barren Mountains, great, cragged corners of bedrock and limestone cutting through the landscape, rising all about them. Suille led the horse on foot over the top of a slope and as Trejaeran gazed out across the land below, he drew in a sharp breath. "Oh," he gasped quietly.

The mountains fell away beneath them, cleaving the Bith into a broad valley marked by the dark, meandering ribbon of a long, wide river. In the distance, to the west, he saw a massive lake, so vast in circumference it could well have been an inland sea. Along the far northwestern shore, nestled among steep cliffs, was an immense fortress rising above the water to heights that rivaled even those of its neighboring precipices.

"It is *Dorchadas*," Suille whispered. "The black tower."

"Poppa," Trejaeran breathed, his heart fluttering in sudden, tremulous excitement. He opened his mind, trying to extend his sight by will to seek out Petrich, to call to him.

Poppa, can you hear me? Poppa, I am here!

In his mind, he saw a fleeting, flashing image of Petrich crouched on the floor of a dungeon cell, lifeless and yet alive, weak and battered, shivering in the darkness.

Poppa! he cried out helplessly and then he saw an expansive cave and towering, black granite doors thrust open wide, revealing a dark and ominous subterranean chamber beyond their threshold. He saw Ciardha, but not as he expected, not as she had looked in Orlaith's memories. Long dark hair tumbling down her shoulders in a cascade of glossy waves had taken the place of golden curls. Her face was different, her features sharper and more lovely, but her eyes remained the same—dark and terrible. She stood nude before an enormous mirror, staring into the glass. It was as though Trejaeran peered over her shoulder; he saw her face reflected toward him as the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile.

Failte, Trejaeran, she whispered inside of his mind. *Welcome.*

And then Suille was there; Trejaeran slumped sideways, spilling out of the saddle, and Suille cried out his name as he darted to catch him. "Trejaeran! What is it? What do you see?"

Trejaeran's eyelids fluttered dazedly as Suille tried to help him stand. "It is in my head," he moaned, his voice slurring. "Like centipedes crawling. Oh, Mathair Maith, it creeps!"

"Trejaeran!" Suille said sharply, frightened, and he gave Trejaeran a brisk shake that roused the boy from his reverie immediately.

"Suille?" Trejaeran blinked at him. "Hoah," he murmured, swaying dizzily on his feet. "What happened?"

"You must have had another vision, lad," Suille said, his face drawn with worry. "You spoke of centipedes in your head. You said 'it creeps.' You said that earlier, too, in the forest. 'It creeps.' What creeps, lad? The sight when it comes upon you?"

Trejaeran's brows drew narrow, and his eyes were troubled as he shook his head. "No," he said. "No, it is not the sight. I think it must be the duchan. I do not see it, but I sense it plainly and that is how it feels inside of me. Like bugs crawling and creeping around inside my head."

As the night drew long and late, they at last came upon a cragged edge of cliffs that jutted out over the great stone terraces of Dorchadas. They crouched behind the shelter of a tumble of large boulders, pressed between the rocks and the steep edge of a high cliff face. Trejaeran knelt beside Suille, craning his head back and staring up into the night sky, following the immense walls of Dorchadas as they loomed within his line of sight, reaching up toward the moon.

Suille surveyed the tower landing below, his brows drawn, his lips pressed together in a thin line. "There are no guards," he said quietly.

"No guards?" Trejaeran asked. He poked his head around the corner of the rocks, gazing down at the terraces. The black stone patios lay empty and quiet below; torches set within the fortifying walls cast flickering, dancing light across the granite, but there were no signs of Damantas, or of anything else stirring.

"She knows we are here," he whispered. "She wants me here, Suille."

"As much as she might want you here, lad, she will not keep you here," Suille said. "I will see to that."

He carried Trejaeran down to the terraces, letting the boy hook his arms around his neck and ride against his back. When they reached the ground at the base of Dorchadas, he took a torch from a stand and held it aloft, looking about the abandoned terrace with undisguised suspicion. "Stay close to me," he said, laying his free hand against the hilt of his sword. He drew the blade and firelight danced along its shaft.

They crept slowly across the terrace. As they drew closer to the threshold of the tower, Trejaeran saw a doorway that vaulted a good two storeys into the air and stood wide open, as if inviting their entry.

"Hoah, we are indeed expected," Suille breathed, shifting the hilt of his sword against his palm, tightening his grip.

Inside, the dark tower of Dorchadas appeared as barren and abandoned as its terraces. The door through which they entered opened onto a long and winding corridor. Torches were set into the walls to light the way, but the ceilings were immense and vaulted, rising into deep, looming shadows above them, and the fortress seemed filled more with darkness than light. The floors were hewn from long slabs of dark, polished stone. Their footsteps fell softly against this glossy, smooth surface as Trejaeran and Suille stole along, following the narrow hallway deep into the belly of the tower.

Trejaeran shied close to Suille, his eyes darting all about, enormous with fright. Suille carried a torch in one hand, his broadsword in the other. His brows were furrowed, his eyes narrowed, his lips turned down in a severe frown. "Where are they all?" he whispered. "They know we are here. Why do they not

show themselves?"

They followed the corridor for nearly ten minutes; the meandering passage seemed to lead them deep into the fortress, opening onto no chambers or stairwells they could observe. They saw no signs of life, heard no indications of footsteps following them, and rather than draw relief from this lack of confrontation, Suille and Trejaeran grew all the more unsettled.

"I do not like this, not at all," Suille said in a low voice. He drew to an abrupt halt, angling himself protectively in front of Trejaeran.

"Ceard e fein?" Trejaeran gasped, alarmed, trying to peek around Suille's arm. *What is it?*

"There is something ahead of us, a doorway of some sort," Suille said. "Keep behind me, Trejaeran."

Trejaeran could see the doorway Suille had noticed; a wide archway carved into the stone wall ahead of them. Torches had been affixed at either side of the doorway, but their dim illumination offered no hint, no clue as to what lay beyond the dark threshold.

Trejaeran coiled his fingers against the folds of Suille's cloak as they padded cautiously toward the doorway. At the first torch alongside of the arch, Suille reached out, pressing Trejaeran back against the wall. "Keep here," Suille whispered. "Let me go first. Do not follow unless I call to you."

Trejaeran nodded mutely.

Suille stepped into the doorway, brandishing his sword at the ready. He frowned and stepped beyond the threshold into the chamber. After a moment, he stepped back into the corridor.

"What is it?" Trejaeran whispered.

"An empty room," Suille said, looking puzzled. "It opens onto a broad staircase leading down."

Trejaeran blinked. "I saw Poppa held in a dungeon cell," he said softly. "I do not know for certain where it might be, but in my mind, I could sense ... It felt deep to me, as though beneath the tower."

They stepped together, moving past the archway and into the chamber. As Trejaeran approached the staircase, he felt something pass through him; a sort of icy, ominous energy that caused him to shudder suddenly, violently. "There is something down there," he whispered, drawing Suille's attention.

"Where, lad? I do not see anything."

"You cannot see it," Trejaeran said softly. The frigid sensation, like a bitter draft had faded, but he still shivered. "But it is there. I felt it just now. Something dark and cold and evil." He looked up at the Fathac, his eyes round and troubled. "I have never sensed the likes of it."

It took almost two full hours for them to reach the bottom of the stairs, and by that time Trejaeran and Suille stumbled with fatigue. Suille had sheathed his sword and lay the torch on the ground. He rested his hands against his thighs, leaned over at the waist and uttered a loud, deep sigh. "Mathair Maith, I hope there is a shorter route back to the top."

They stood in a large cave chiseled out of the bedrock beneath the mountains. Trejaeran walked slowly out toward the middle of the underground chamber, keeping his footsteps well within the circle of light

cast by the torch.

"This does not look like a dungeon," he said quietly. The walls of the cavern seemed to converge at a far corner of the chamber, at a place where a wide tunnel had been hewn, its dark expanse leading deeper still beneath the Bith.

"It looks like a cave," Suille said. "I think this must be part of the old Mianach and Dwarf mines. Have we come too far, then, lad? Too deep?"

"I do not know," Trejaeran said.

Trejaeran kept close to Suille as they followed the length of the tunnel. His sight remained quiet within his mind, but nonetheless, he felt a pervasive sense of dread as they moved deeper, as though they drew all the more near to something ominous and foreboding buried beneath the ground.

The tunnel led them along a fairly straight course and then the torchlight fell upon a wall ahead of them as the passage veered around a sharp bend. As they turned the corner, the ground beneath their feet became littered with debris, covered with piles of dirt and rock, discarded and forgotten mining tools.

"Watch your step, lad," Suille said, frowning. "What is all of this, do you think?"

"They were digging for something," Trejaeran whispered, staring down at spades and pickaxes abandoned with their blades thrust into mounds of earth.

"They found what they were looking for, then," Suille said in a faint, peculiar voice. Trejaeran turned and gasped aloud, his eyes flying wide as he saw Suille's discovery illuminated in the torch's glow.

It was the threshold he had envisioned in his mind; an immense and gaping entrance into a distant chamber, marked by twin doors hewn from black granite that swung inward into darkness.

Trejaeran cowered against Suille. "What is this place?" he asked. "I have seen it in my mind, Suille, but I do not..." His voice stilled as he felt it again, that frigid energy passing through him like an abrupt breeze.

"There is something in there," he whispered, his eyes round and afraid. "I can feel it."

"If it means harm to you, it must get past me first," Suille said, his brows narrowing. He stepped forward, striding boldly toward the threshold.

"Suille, no!" Trejaeran cried, catching the Fathac by the sleeve. "Something is wrong here. I can feel it. We should turn back."

"But what if your father is in there?" Suille asked. "And the Fathacan stolen from Scoite? We cannot just abandon them."

Trejaeran blinked, frightened and uncertain. "Suille, I..."

"Trejaeran," Suille said. "Let us look. We have to at least see. Your sight has guided us this far. We cannot turn back until we know for certain." He genuflected, laying his sword aside so that he could rest his hand against Trejaeran's shoulder. Trejaeran could see Suille's own fear plainly in his face, shimmering in his eyes. "I am with you, Trejaeran. I cannot tell you not to be afraid, but I can tell you nothing will harm you so long as I draw breath and bear my sword in hand. You have brought us here. Let us at least discover why."

Trejaeran nodded, trembling. "You are right," he whispered. "If Poppa is there ... No matter what, I cannot leave him."

"There is my lad," Suille said, cupping his hand against the side of Trejaeran's face. He stood, lifting his sword against his palm. Trejaeran followed closely behind him as they crept toward the dark threshold, drawing comfort and courage from the Fathac's resolve.

As they drew near to the doorway, Suille stayed Trejaeran with his arm. "Wait here," he whispered. "Let me see what lies beyond."

He stepped across the threshold and as the light from the torch fell in full against the smooth, polished stone of the doors, Trejaeran could see they were covered with unfamiliar writing, each meticulously etched rune inlaid with gold that sparkled in the torch's fire. Suille looked around cautiously, his shoulders tensed, his sword gripped lightly and at the ready. He stepped further into the chamber and the torchlight spilled around his feet in a wide circumference, illuminating a coarse, pebbled ground.

Trejaeran thought he heard a faint sound from beyond the threshold; the soft, melodic lapping of water against a shoreline.

Suille stepped further still past the doorway and now the circle of light fell closed behind him, and Trejaeran stood in sudden shadows. "What is it, Suille?" he whispered.

"It is water," Suille replied, sounding bewildered. "I see nothing but water."

"Water?" Trejaeran blinked, confused, much of his stark, nearly paralyzing terror dissolving. He followed Suille beyond the threshold.

They stood together on a narrow slip of rough beach that slipped out into the darkness, sinking beneath the edge of a large, tranquil body of water. Trejaeran could see the torch's flames reflected against the softly undulating surface.

"It is some sort of underground lake," Suille said. Judging by his expression, he was as baffled as Trejaeran.

"Ni tuigim," Trejaeran whispered, approaching the water. *I do not understand.* "Why would I dream of this place? Why would my sight bring us here?"

He froze in place, his breath tangling in his throat, his chest seizing tightly as he remembered his first night upon waking at Orinein.

The Abhacan realized Ciardha's deception before it was too late, Dagarron had told him. They were able to contain her, to bury her beneath the mines. They sealed the cavern through which the spring flowed with granite doors marked with the most powerful draiocht totem they possessed—the Seal of the Seven Ancient Kings of Tirgeimhreidh.

Trejaeran turned to look behind him at the doors with their curious writing, their foreign runes carved in gilded gold.

They built a massive and impenetrable dam beneath the mountains to stave the flow of Nocturn eternally, Dagarron had said. The stream, it is said, has pooled beneath the ground into an immense

underground lake.

"Mathair Maith!" Trejaeran whispered in horror. He turned toward the water, taking slow, hedging steps away from its edge. "It is Nocturn!"

"This is where they brought me," Suille said from behind him, and Trejaeran spun about, startled and confused.

"Wh-what?" he asked, blinking in bewilderment.

Suille smiled at him gently. "This is where they brought me," he said again as he slid his sword into its scabbard. He nodded his chin toward the dark lake. "One month ago, as I crossed the Dithreabh northward toward Scoite, they found me, captured me. They brought me here. To Nocturn."

Stunned, Trejaeran staggered back, feeling his stomach draw into a tight, painful knot. "Suille?" he whimpered, his eyes enormous with terror, his voice trembling. "What do you mean? What are you saying?"

"It creeps," Suille said and he began to walk toward Trejaeran. "Is that not how you put it? Behind your eyes, like maggots in soft loam, I think you said. You kept sensing it, lad, and I thought surely you would realize."

Trejaeran stumbled away from Suille. "No," he whispered, shaking his head. "Not you, Suille, please, it cannot be! Not you. You are my friend ... le do thoil!"

"It is indeed the duchan you sense, lad," Suille said softly, still smiling. He threw the torch into the air. As its bright light flew away from his face and soared out across the lake of Nocturn, Trejaeran could see that Suille's eyes were aglow, twin points of scarlet light blazing through the darkness.

"It is my duchan," Suille said as the torch struck the water and extinguished, plunging them into complete and absolute darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

"Saoreann sibh ea anois! Uair amhain eile—ligeann ea theirig!" one of the Mianach battalion leaders cried out hoarsely in Gaeilgen.

"Release it now! Once more—let it fly!" bellowed one of the menfolk commanders, offering simultaneous translation as his voice boomed out over the Comhar ranks, overlapping with the Elf's.

A group of eight burly soldiers had drawn a battering ram back on its pivot point, hauling it into the ready position with thick hanks of rope. At the shouted command, they turned the ropes loose, feeling the taut lines whip against their leather gloves as the battering ram sailed forward. The steel-capped tip smashed into the gate of Belgaeran with enough force to tremble the ground beneath the soldiers' feet. Crumbled chips of masonry and broken stone wafted down from the battlements over their heads, and as the great beam swung back once more, it left an indelible mark in the splintering, dented wood of the gate.

Qynh listened to the battering ram's progress as she crouched among Fiainas, tucked beneath the shelter

of more than thirty shields. The soldiers held their shields above their heads, with the edges overlapped and squatted beneath them to keep from being struck by the rain of arrows fired from Belgaeran's high battlements. She sat hunched in close quarters, nearly shoulder to shoulder with the other soldiers.

Kierken knelt before her, facing her in the gloom.

She cringed as she heard the distinctive clamor of new arrows bouncing against the steel plates above her head. She heard the cry ring out once more

"Saoreann sibh ea anois!" *Release it now!*

followed by the distinctive thunder of the battering ram slamming into the gate. The ground beneath her knees, her feet shivered and she glanced up at Kierken, her eyes wide.

"Surely they are nearly through now," she said, her voice muffled as she spoke through the faceplate of her helmet.

"I do not know," Kierken said as a Fiain soldier scurried beneath the protective cover of the shields, keeping his head ducked and his shoulders hunkered just as more arrows pelted against the steel bucklers.

"Where are our archers? And who is manning our trebuchets, blind half-wits?" someone complained. "Can they not hit those wretched Damantas? I thought there were not many of the rots left here anyway; they had all moved west for Timag'cramn."

"Ciardha keeps at least five thousand strong behind those walls," the newcomer said in a low voice Qynh immediately recognized. "She has sent nearly all of them to the west, or so it would seem, but there are plenty left to defend in their stead." He loosened his chin strap, lowered his head and removed his helm.

"Dagarron!" Qynh exclaimed.

"How fares the gate, sir?" one of the Fiain asked.

"It still stands," Dagarron said. "But the walls surrounding it crumble. It will not be much longer." He reached out and placed one hand against Kierken's shoulder and the other on Qynh's. "Keena and Aedhir have gathered the supplies we need. The others are waiting for us closer to the walls. We should move now; the gate will not withstand much more."

As if on cue, they heard a loud voice cry out, "Uair amhain eile!" *Once more!* Qynh flinched as she listened to the battering ram pummel into the gate. There was a grinding, rending sound as the masonry surrounding the fortified gate crumbled all the more; this was met with an uproarious, enthusiastic cheer from the Comhar soldiers.

"Come now," Dagarron said to Qynh and Kierken, pulling his helm over his head again and resealing the chin strap in place beneath his jaw. "Bring your shields. The rest of you, close in behind us."

He pivoted on his toes, turning about in the close confines of the shelter. He paused at the perimeter of shields, poking his head out, and then motioned to Qynh and Kierken as he ventured into the daylight.

Qynh crawled forward and saw Dagarron scurrying for the towering, blanched stone walls of Belgaeran, toward another cluster of soldiers hidden beneath their shields. She crept out into the sunshine and raised

her shield to protect her head as she hurried after Dagarron.

The Damantas fired a volley of arrows as they darted across the field. Qynh screeched as steles smacked into the ground around her feet and clattered against her shield. She ducked her head and scurried after Dagarron beneath the shelter of the new group of soldiers. Kierken ran behind her, letting his feet fall beneath him, sliding beneath the cover of the shields.

An arrow had struck Dagarron between the plates of armor covering his left hip and thigh, and the shaft protruded at an awkward angle. He grasped it with his gauntlet and yanked it loose, tossing it aside.

"Dagarron, you have been hit!" Qynh cried out in alarm.

"It lodged in my gambeson, muileach, it is alright," he said. He dabbed at the exposed gambeson with his fingertips; the gauntlet came away spotted with blood and Qynh gasped. "It is naught," he reassured her. "A scratch, that is all."

"What about the gate?" Aedhir asked, crouched nearby in the huddle. He and Keena squatted beside one another; at least, Qynh assumed it was Keena beneath the steel helm, as she used her free hand to gesture toward them, and Aedhir offered appropriate translation. "It sounds like that last blow nearly toppled it."

"It is close now," Dagarron told them. He turned his faceplate toward Qynh. "Keep close to me and Kierken, muileach," he told her gravely. "If the Damantas engage us, go with Keena and Aedhir. Do not try to fight, Qynh. That is why the rest of us are here."

"But, Dagarron, I—" Qynh began.

"Qynh," Dagarron said, his imperative tone quieting her. "If you do not reach the palace, then all of this has been for naught. Nothing matters in this siege except that. Do you understand?"

Qynh nodded her head, her helmet hiding her disapproving frown. "Yes, Dagarron," she said.

"Faichill!" a voice near to their huddle cried out sharply. "Hoah! Seachaim!" *Look out!*

A rain of wooden barrels came crashing down out of the sky. They flew from over the battlements of the royal city, smashing against the ground, the flimsy wood and shoddy seams bursting upon impact. Fluid spurted from the shattered barrels, splattering against the ground, and spraying across any troops crouched close at hand.

Qynh cried out as she felt the barrels plow into the shields above their heads; first one and then another, and then a third. The barrels split open, bouncing against the shield roof over them, tumbling to the ground. The liquid pooled against the nearby grass, flowing in slow moving rivulets between their sabatons. It dripped beneath the edges of the shields and plopped against their helmets. The fluid had a tangy, acrid smell that seemed somewhat familiar to Qynh and she looked up at Dagarron, confused and alarmed. "What is it?" she whispered.

Dagarron's eyes flew wide as he recognized the odor. "Lantern fuel," he hissed. "It is oil! Aedhir, Keena—everyone—move! Move!"

"What—?" Qynh began. The cluster of soldiers broke apart abruptly, all of them scrambling at once, crying out in sharp, frightened voices as they parted shields with one another and scampered across the

lawn.

"Qynh, come on!" Dagarron cried, seizing Qynh around the waist and forcing her to her feet, to run beside him, hunkered beneath their shields.

The Damanta archers atop the walls of the royal city sent a round of flaming arrows down toward the Comhar; as the fire-kissed piles struck the oil-sodden grass, the ground burst into flames. All around them, soldiers who moved too slowly or could not dance around the patches of earth soaked with fuel began to burn. The flames chased along the pools and puddles of oil, darting up the sabatons and seams of soaked plate metal. The soldiers shrieked as the fire twined itself around their legs, grasping with greedy fingers for their groins, their chests. The flames could not burn them outright, but the sudden, searing heat seeped through the steel plates, igniting gambeson and infusing into chain mail beneath. Dropping to the ground and rolling about to snuff the flames was no option; the Damantas continued to catapult barrels of oil, and all around them, the grass was soggy with spattered fuel.

"Dteann sibh! Dteann sibh!" Kierken yelled to Dagarron and Qynh, waving his hand. *Go! Go!* They ran together, sprinting towards the walls of Belgaeran and the rest of their party who had gathered beneath the battlements, safely beyond the range of the archers.

The soldiers surrounding the battering ram withstood the brunt of the archers' attack with astounding courage and resolve. The ram itself now blazed, and for every Comhar soldier who fell as he tried to haul it backwards into the ready position, his armor afire, his screams ripping into the air, another sprang forward to take his place. The tethering lines between the men and the battering ram smoldered and burned, but they drew upon them doggedly nonetheless, yanking the ropes taut and then releasing them, sending the ram careening into the city gate. Again and again as they pulled the battering ram back and let it fly, they struggled against the flames. Comhar archers came to their defense, sending a rallying volley of arrows skyward toward the battlements, trying to keep the Damantas from them as they worked fervently, desperately.

All at once, as the ram smashed into the gates again, their efforts paid off. The left wall surrounding the gate, which had begun to crack and crumble from the repeated impacts, finally gave way, the ancient stones riving in a wide, thick seam and tumbling down in a thunderous collapse. The gate was wrenched loose from its moorings and listed clumsily. When the Comhar let the battering ram sail one last time, the steel head smashed into the wooden gate, pummeling it off its hinges, sending it crashing atop the ruined rubble of the walls.

The Comhar ranks began to cheer triumphantly, and battalions of soldiers surged toward the opening, drawing their swords and bearing their shields. They rushed past the battering ram and through the fallen gate, pouring into the royal city in howling droves.

The Damantas were ready for them along the battlements, and as the soldiers shoved and shouldered their way through the crumbled stones and rubble, they were greeted with burning oil, ignited while in great vats along the defensive walls and dumped on them as they passed through the gate. Qynh watched in horror as dozens upon dozens of the Comhar troops backpedaled across the threshold, their armor engulfed in flames, blazing fuel falling into the eyeslits of their helms, seeping between plates of their armor, chinks in their chainmail. Their shrieks flew high and shrilly in the air as they thrashed about, stumbling into their fellows, their arms flailing madly, their sabatons skittering across the debris from the collapsed walls.

As the first throng of soldiers staggered back, burning and screaming, the battalions behind them moved forward, undaunted. "Draw your blades and stand ready," Dagarron said, and his hand fell against the

pommel of his sword. He drew it free from its scabbard. "Some of the Fiainas are moving forward now, entering the city. We will move with them. Come on."

They raced to join the ranks of the Fiainas who advanced upon the city's gate with their swords drawn and their shields raised. As they moved beyond the crumbling threshold, clambering madly over the ruins of the defensive walls, they found themselves stumbling headlong into a bloody, massive, violent battle.

Ciardha kept five thousand Damantas stationed at Belgaeran; nearly four thousand of these had indeed ridden forth for the woods of Tirnag'crann, but those who remained behind—one thousand strong and battle-ready—greeted the Comhar forces beyond the gate. There was no sign of Tressach's battalions from the western quadrant of the city, and the less than five hundred soldiers beneath Dagarron's command found themselves fully engaged and overwhelmed by a brutal margin of more than two to one.

The siege had dissolved into crazed, chaotic battle, and from the moment they stepped foot within the royal city, they were in the midst of it. Bellows of rage and pealing screeches deafened Qynh. Arrows whipped through the air, hissing down at them from the battlements in a swift and lethal rain. Everywhere around her, Comhar soldiers fiercely swung swords and flails, jostling shoulders with one another and fighting wildly, valiantly against the onslaught of Ciardha's forces.

"Keep close to me!" Dagarron shouted at Qynh, screaming to make himself heard above the horrific din. Damantas came at him in a sudden horde, and Qynh wailed as he swung his shield up, blocking a forceful swing aimed for his head. He knocked the sword point away from him with the plate of his shield and swung his own blade wide, sending the Damanta's head flying. The soldiers in their party rushed forward, engaging the advancing Damantas and driving them back from Dagarron and Qynh.

While the soldiers waged battle, the five of them—Dagarron, Qynh, Kierken, Keena and Aedhir—raced forward, struggling to move deeper into the city, further beyond the gate. Dagarron fought his way through the Damantas, swinging his sword and shield about, cleaving a path for them. As he battled, Dagarron kept himself between the Damantas and Qynh, using his body to shield her from the sword strikes as she stumbled behind him, crying out in fear.

Kierken and Keena pressed closely behind her, their swords clattering as they fended off blows, while Aedhir flanked Qynh on the right, driving back the Damantas who came at them from the side.

"Keep your shields raised!" Dagarron bellowed, sending his buckler smashing into the faceplate of an attacking Damanta. "Keep moving! Do not stop!"

A sword slammed into Dagarron's side, cleaving through armor and gambeson, sending him staggering, yowling in sudden pain.

"Dagarron, no!" Qynh screamed as the Damanta reared its sword back to strike once more. She clutched the hilt of her blade between her hands and rammed it forward, thrusting the shaft of the sword deep into the creature's breastplate, skewering its heart.

Another Damanta came at her, its sword poised, and Qynh pivoted, wrenching her blade free from the first. She swung her sword to her right, battering aside the creature's attack. The Damanta curled its free hand into a fist and punched her in the helm, sending her reeling, dazed. She tripped over her own sabatons and fell to the ground as the Damanta lunged forward.

"Qynh—!" Kierken cried, leaping in front of her. He caught the brunt of the Damanta's blow against the flat of his sword and his foot darted out, hooking against the creature's sabaton, knocking its foot out

from beneath it. The Damanta went crashing backwards, floundering into its fellows, sprawling against the ground, and Qynh felt Kierken's fingers grasp her firmly by the arm, jerking her up. She staggered to her feet and fell against him, feeling dizzy, her head careening from the punch. Kierken grasped her about the shoulders and forced her to move, to match his long, frantic strides.

The Comhar soldiers closed in all around them; Fiainas by the looks of their armor. The diversion worked, as the Damantas were drawn away from Dagarron, Qynh, and the others, and forced to engage the advancing brigade. As the battle raged all around them, Qynh cowered next to Kierken and they ran, fleeing through the fracas. While the Damantas and the Comhar clashed along the broad main thoroughfare of Belgaeran, they followed Dagarron as he ducked into a narrow alleyway between two buildings, a slim margin of space between the hewn stone walls scarcely broad enough to accommodate their shoulders as they ran.

They fled undetected, the five of them darting among the buildings, winding their way through a seemingly endless maze of cramped alleys and tight corridors, moving toward the heart of the city.

At last, Dagarron staggered to a halt, leaning his shoulder heavily against the wall and letting his head hang as he gasped to reclaim his breath. The wound to his side was deep and blood streaked down the length of his left leg and hip. He rested his weight against his right side, pressing his palm against the sheared plate armor and torn, blood-soaked gambeson.

"Dagarron!" Qynh exclaimed, hurrying to his side. She fumbled with the chin strap of her helmet. She pulled the steel helm off and cast it aside. "Oh, Sweet Mother, you are hurt!"

"I am alright, muileach," Dagarron said in a hoarse voice.

Aedhir peered down the length of the alleyway behind them. He turned to Dagarron, raising his brows, his mouth spreading in a broad grin. "They do not give chase, Dagarron, or follow. We have done it!"

"Peace, Aedhir," Dagarron said quietly, raising his palm, but he, too, smiled. "We have yet to make it to the palace. Let us save the celebration for the moment, mo'cara."

Keena's hands moved and the grin on Aedhir's face faded abruptly, his dark eyes growing round and solemn.

"She says the army will be massacred," he said, glancing toward Dagarron. "They are outnumbered, and too confined within the city to fight effectively. Where is Tressach? Why has he not arrived yet?"

"I do not know," Dagarron said. "But he will be here, if he is able. He has looked forward to this battle for more years than even he could probably measure. The rotted bastard would not miss it for the whole of the Bith."

"We should keep moving," Aedhir said. He kept shooting wary glances over his shoulder, his exuberance over their lack of pursuit waning into suspicious caution.

Dagarron nodded, stepping away from the wall. His brows twisted slightly as his weight settled against his injured side, but he pressed his lips together in a thin, determined line.

"How much further to the palace?" Keena wanted to know, as Aedhir lent his voice to her gestures.

"We follow this alley to its end," Dagarron said. "From there, we turn south, move around the rear walls

to the rose garden."

They crept along the meandering alleyways, keeping a brisk but cautious pace. Soon the spires and turrets of the palace came into view, poking out from over the rooftops of buildings, the stark, pale stones keeping regal, vigilant watch over the city surrounding it. As they drew near, Qynh became aware of a soft voice within her mind. It was not so much a lifting of the muffled sensation that had fallen over her sight and kept Kierken's thoughts, and those of the others from her; rather, it felt to Qynh as though something called to her, something powerful and insistent, with strength enough in its quiet, plaintive voice to punch through the block within her mind and reach her.

Help me, daughter of Orlaith, the voice whispered, passing through her like a swift and fleeting breeze.

Qynh's footsteps faltered at the words. "Kierken, did you hear...?" she began, and when she looked at him, she knew the voice had touched his mind as well. He had slowed his gait, and his eyes were round and startled.

"I heard it," he breathed to Qynh.

le do thoil I beg of you

set me free

"There is something here," Kierken whispered. "Something beckoning to us. I can feel it within me." He raised his eyes to look towards the towers of the palace. "It feels ancient and strong—strong enough to defy the duchar, the Dubholc'crainn."

"There is nothing left within these walls that lies untainted by the duchar," Aedhir said.

"No." Kierken shook his head fervently. "No, Aedhir, there is something here that remains untouched. It knows we are coming. It can feel us."

From somewhere nearby, along one of the city's wider thoroughfares, they heard the sudden, piercing roar of Damanta war cries, and the thunder of sabatons striking the earth as a battalion rushed toward the eastern gate and the Comhar army.

"Sweet Mother," Aedhir whispered, drawing back against the wall. His eyes were enormous, and he clutched his sword between shaking fists. "More of the rotted bastards!"

"We must keep moving," Dagarron said. "It is not safe here." He clapped Kierken on the shoulder. "Come, a'mac. Whatever voices call to you will have to wait their turn."

Chapter Eighteen

Wyndetta squatted between Iasal and Eoghan, curling her fingers around the hilt of her sword, her eyes wide. "What now?" she whispered.

They had reached a narrow crevice that led down to Dorchadas' stone terraces, and crouched together beside the rocks, pressing their shoulders against the stone.

Iasal risked a quick peek over the crest. "There are terraces below," he said softly. "A broad patio of some sort."

"How many Damantas stand guard?" Eoghan asked.

Iasal leaned out over the edge. He squatted once more, his expression puzzled. "There are none I can see."

"What?" Eoghan arched his brow. "That cannot be." He stood, stretching his torso out across the rocks. "I will be damned," he said as he scooted back down. "Not a one."

"It is a trick," Wyndetta whispered, looking between them.

Iasal glanced at Eoghan. "What do you think we should do?"

"Wyndetta, climb on my shoulders," Eoghan said. "We will scale down to the terrace together. Buion, you keep up here, cover us with your bow. You are the most nimble climber among us, so you follow when we have reached the bottom."

Wyndetta nodded. "And once we are on the terraces?"

"I saw a doorway along the westward facing wall," Eoghan said. He raised his brow. "One must assume it leads somewhere."

Wyndetta wrapped her arms around Eoghan's neck, holding tightly as he stood, bearing her on his back. As he lowered himself slowly, deliberately over the side, Iasal nocked an arrow against his bowstring and leaned out over the rock face.

Eoghan glanced up at met Iasal's eyes. "See you below, Buion," he said.

Iasal nodded. "This day ends with us together," he said. "Come what may."

They met with no resistance, and no Damantas emerged to greet them. When they had reached the terrace, Iasal followed and the three of them stood together in uneasy silence. They each lay their hands on the hilts of their swords, drawing them loose from their scabbards.

They started for the door and had made it halfway across the terrace, standing poised and out in the open on the barren slabs of granite, when suddenly an enormous figure stepped beyond the threshold of darkness in the doorway, striding out onto the patio. It was dressed in the blackened steel armor of the Damantas; the most immense and massive they had ever seen. The creature loomed above them, more than eight feet in height from the base of its sabatons to the cap of its helm. It bore a blade in hand, a broadsword that looked long enough to cleave a river valley in one stroke. Its red eyes blazed beneath the shadows of its helm.

"Beannacht," the towering Damanta said, its voice low and baritone like distant thunder.

"Mathair Maith!" Iasal gasped, drawing back.

"Sweet Mother!" Wyndetta exclaimed.

More Damantas emerged from behind the first; a flood of the dark soldiers surged forth from the walls

of Dorchadas, spilling onto the terrace from every darkened nook and shadowed corner. Damantas streamed down from the nearby cliffs, clambering and climbing from clandestine hiding places among the rocks and stones and they converged upon the trio within less than the measure of a heartbeat, swords poised, spears and flails in hand.

Wyndetta, Eoghan, and Iasal drew together, standing with their backs to each other, watching in helpless horror as the enemy surrounded them.

"I thought you said five hundred Damantas, Wyndetta," Eoghan said, his brows pinched, his mouth drawn in a grim line.

"Where did they all come from?" Wyndetta gasped, clutching her sword. "Mathair Maith, there are a thousand of them at least! Why?"

"To greet us, of course," Iasal said with a frown. He spun his cleadh mor in hand. "Very well, then. If we are to die upon these stones, at the least, we will take some of them with us."

"Hoah, that is the spirit, Buion!" Eoghan cried. He brandished his sword in one hand and motioned to the nearest throng of Damantas with the other, beckoning to them. "Come on now, one at a time or all of you at once. It makes no difference to me. Duchan is going to spill no matter what."

The towering Damanta strode through the ranks, walking directly toward Iasal. It nodded its helm toward the cleadh mor Iasal clasped between his hands and canted its head back, chuckling with dark mirth.

"You must be the Buion of whom the boy spoke," it said, and Iasal understood the large footprints at the campsite they had discovered. Here was the creature who had found Trejaeran in the woods, the giant who had delivered him to Dorchadas. "I am going to enjoy this," the Damanta said. "I have been longing for the chance to carve flesh from the bones of one among your rotted little aicmeach."

"Mathair Maith!" Iasal whispered, staggering back, his eyes flown wide as the creature lunged at him, drawing the broadsword back to strike.

The Damantas pressed forward, coming at them, and Wyndetta jerked her face toward Eoghan, her eyes flown wide with terror.

"Eoghan!" she cried.

"It has been an honor to fight by your side, Wyndetta," he said, reaching for her.

"Gurab amhlaidh duit, Eoghan," Wyndetta whispered, coiling her fingers through his in fierce camaraderie. *The same to you.* There was a darting gleam of sunlight against poised and ready steel and then the Damantas were upon them.

I knew you would trust Suille.

A woman's voice—Ciardha's voice—drifting within Trejaeran's mind drew him slowly from unconsciousness. He groaned, moving slowly, stirring against the coarse, pebbled ground.

That is your nature, Trejaeran.

You trust too completely. You trust too easily.

He opened his eyes but saw only blackness, complete, cold and suffocating. He lay on his stomach, crumpled in a heap. He could hear the soft, babbling waters of Nocturn nearby as the edge of the lake lapped against the shore. His head ached; his neck felt swollen and bruised and he remembered Suille's immense and enormous hand grasping out of the darkness, seizing hold of his throat. Suille had jerked Trejaeran off of the ground, holding him aloft as he had struggled vainly against the Fathac's grip, his feet kicking and swinging in the open air. Suille had throttled Trejaeran in the darkness, the only visible light coming from the searing points of fire within his eyes. Trejaeran had fought desperately to draw breath but had not been able to force air past Suille's crushing fingers and in the end, he had passed out.

"He ... he bled," Trejaeran gasped. "In the forest, Suille cut his wrist and I saw blood, not duchan."

I knew you would see the blood and believe him safe. I knew you would take pity on him; you would help him, care for him.

"No," Trejaeran whispered, shuddering. "Get out of my head."

You must be so tired of so many betrayals.

"Stop it," Trejaeran hissed, his voice ragged and hoarse. The effort to speak hurt his damaged throat and he groaned again, curling onto his side and drawing his knees toward his chest. He splayed his fingers through his hair, pressing his palms against his temples as if he hoped to physically keep Ciardha from his mind.

So many who have deceived you, she murmured. So many who have caused you pain.

"No one but you, Ciardha!" Trejaeran cried out.

I have never lied to you, Trejaeran.

"You are lying to me now," he seethed.

I have done only that which was necessary to bring you here, into my company, Ciardha said. I am not the one who has brought such heavy burdens upon your heart. Your parents betrayed you...

Petrich and Naera

All of your life they lied to you. With their every breath they betrayed you

"No!" Trejaeran cried.

every moment of every day they cheated you out of what is yours by right

your birthright, Trejaeran

your crown, your throne

"That is not true," Trejaeran whispered. "No, no, no ... That is not true."

Dagarron lied to you

"No, stop it! Stop it, please!"

How many times has Dagarron betrayed you, Trejaeran? He knew you were not Petrich's son.

So many lies he has told you, Trejaeran

So many betrayals...

"It is not true!" Trejaeran cried. "Get out of my head!"

Orlaith beguiles you, as well. I know you met my sister in the forests of the Coill'siuil. What did she tell you? What secrets did she reveal? Nothing but deceptions, Trejaeran. Nothing but lies.

"No," Trejaeran said. "No, Orlaith did not lie! She would not betray me!"

And yet she does, for where is she now, when you think you need her most? Where are her owls, incantations and draiocht to save you? She lied to you, Trejaeran. Just like the others, Orlaith fears you. She fears your power.

"No," Trejaeran whispered.

The Comhar fears you. They have seen what you can do; the power that dwells within your mind.

They fear you and would betray you. They would all betray you in the end.

"I will make you great, Trejaeran," Ciardha whispered in his ear, her breath rustling his hair. Trejaeran cried out in alarm, scuttling back, staring wide-eyed, unable to see in the darkness.

"Ceapeann de me!" he cried hoarsely. *Keep away from me!* He thrust out his hands, waving them around him wildly, trying to fend her off.

"They will never deceive you again," she said. "Never lie to you again, never hurt you. I will make you my King, Trejaeran, and together, we will make them rue their treachery, their lies."

"No," Trejaeran whispered, shaking his head.

"Drink from the water," she breathed, and her voice came from directly in front of him, so close he could feel the push of her breath against his face. He recoiled, but his shoulders struck cold, unyielding stone; he had unwittingly backed himself into the side of the cave.

He felt her fingertips brush lightly through his hair and he cowered.

"No, do not touch me!" he gasped as he knocked her hand aside.

"I love you, Trejaeran," Ciardha said softly. "I sensed you when you were only a murmur in your mother's womb. Your power called me forth; your mind drew me from the depths of Nocturn, from my eternal, wretched slumber. We are alike, you and I, kindred spirits. I have longed for this moment since I first felt your stirrings sixteen years ago."

"I am nothing like you," he hissed into the darkness.

"But you are, Trejaeran," she whispered, touching him again, running her hands lightly against his face.

"Please do not," he said, pushing at her hands.

"Drink from the water," Ciardha said, as her lips brushed against his. Trejaeran drew back, turning his head away from her.

"No," he told her, shaking his head. "Please, where is my father?"

He is safe, she whispered, her voice within his mind caressing as gently as her hands against his face, her fingertips in his hair. "I promised I would set him free, and I will keep my word to you, Trejaeran, but first, you must drink from the water."

She kissed him, her mouth fleeting and sweet against his. She touched his face with her hands and leaned toward him, the soft swells of her breasts brushing against the front of his leine.

As her lips danced against his, he had a vision within his mind, a glorious image of himself astride an immense black stallion draped in the blackened steel bard of Ciardha's Damantas cavalry. He wore steel of his own, an imposing suit of armored plates and a long silk cape stained the hue of fresh blood; the hem snapped and fluttered behind him in the wind. He carried his helmet against his hip—a massive, gilded helm crafted to resemble the head and front haunches of a snarling, winged wolf. His stallion stood on a mountain pinnacle overlooking a deep, expansive valley, and Trejaeran gasped at the army that lay before him, hundreds upon thousands of Damantas.

"Failt do ar'ri dorcha!" a loud voice roared from behind him. *Hail to our dark king!* Trejaeran turned and saw Phyndaegon, his broadsword raised as he cried out to the throngs of soldiers below. "Failt do ar'ri dorcha!"

The Damanta army roared in salute to Trejaeran, waving their swords and shaking their spears. Trejaeran exalted in the sensation of them all within his mind, their collective strength and vigor, their exhilarating power coursing through him.

"All of that will be yours, Trejaeran," Ciardha murmured, and she kissed him again, drawing a faint whimper from his throat. "I promise you." She spread her fingers through his hair, drawing him against her, opening her mouth and tasting him. "All of that ... and more."

Chapter Nineteen

"Stand back, Qynh, have a care," Dagarron said.

They had reached the perimeter of stone walls that surrounded the royal palace's rose garden and stood looking up at the castle battlements and towers. Aedhir slipped a rope from over his shoulder and let it uncoil at his feet as he gripped an iron grappling hook lightly.

Aedhir tossed the hook, craning his arm over his head in a quick, deliberate thrust, and one by one, they scaled the wall. When at last Qynh stood beside Dagarron along the crest, she drew in a sharp breath, frightened by the steep plummet only a few centimeters beyond the toes of her boots. The garden below lay filled with the blackened, rotted remnants of rose bushes. A magnificent, towering maple tree rose

majestically from the middle of the courtyard, its crown filled with a thick growth of green leaves, its limbs and boughs untouched by the duchar. Qynh gasped, her eyes flown wide.

Aedhir and Keena saw the tree as well, and both of them gasped in unison. "How can it still live?" Aedhir asked, breathlessly, his eyes enormous. "It is surrounded by duchar, by the Dubholc'crainn!"

"That is my clann's symbol, the Mailp," Kierken said, staring at the tree in wonder. "The maple. Its image is cast upon the hilt of the cleadh mor I hope to bear one day." He smiled softly, faintly. "That is what called to us, Qynh," he said. "That is what we felt in our minds."

They made their way carefully down the wall. The ground was carpeted with brown, decomposing leaves, sodden from recent rains, squelching underfoot as they crept toward the palace. "How will we find Lahnduren once we are inside?" Aedhir asked.

"I am not sure," Dagarron said. "I think we should check the throne room first. Surely that is—"

"He is there," Qynh whispered, pointing toward the tower. She looked up at the spire, her brows drawn. "He is in the tower."

"How do you know that, muileach?" Dagarron asked.

"I do not know," she said. "I just do. I was born in the tower chamber; my mother cast the prophecy there." She turned to Dagarron and found him staring at her, wide-eyed and startled. "I am right, am I not?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, muileach."

As they talked, as Qynh's attention had been drawn to the tower, Kierken's attention had been likewise drawn to the maple.

Cuideann tu me, he heard the tree whisper within his mind as he approached. *Help me*.

He closed his eyes, listening to the melody of soft breezes rustling through the leaves. He could feel the maple within his mind; it reached into his heart, his soul, delving into his every hidden, secret place inside, filling him with such tenderness, such radiance, he thought he might weep.

"Ta me anseo," he whispered. "Ta me libh, a'crann milis." *I am here. I am with you, sweet tree.*

He walked beneath its expansive, outstretched limbs and held his hands out before him. His fingertips brushed against cragged bark and he pressed his palms against the trunk of the tree. He could feel the tree surging through his mind, his soul; it knew his history, his life, all of his desires and shames, the merits and weaknesses alike of his heart. He could feel it drawing strength from him, comfort and compassion, and he offered himself freely, letting it take from him what it needed.

Cuideann tu me ... help me

"What must I do?" he whispered, turning his face toward the crown, exalting in the glorious sensation of this ancient, magnificent being within his mind. "I am here, mo'cara. Do not be afraid. I will help you."

she must use the anam'cladh

Kierken's eyes flew wide at the tree's words and he blinked in surprise.

she is the daughter of Orlaith

descendant of the Na'Siogai

she must use the anam'cladh

"Kierken," Dagarron said, laying his hand on Kierken's shoulder and Kierken whirled, startled, snapping out of his daze. The sensation of the tree within him, warm and bright faded abruptly, and he nearly stumbled. Dagarron stared at him, his eyes round and alarmed. "Kierken, what are you doing?" he asked quietly. "Do not wander, a'mac. It is not safe here."

"But I..." Kierken glanced at the tree, his expression troubled. Its words echoed within his mind.

she must use the anam'cladh

Dagarron led them into the palace and they made their way down a long, winding hallway, at last coming to the staircase that led into the tower. As they neared the top of the stairs, they could see an orange glow cast by torches, dancing against the walls. Dagarron reached the crest first and turned to look over his shoulder. "Lythaniele's chamber?" he whispered to Qynh.

"Yes," she said, nodding.

They crept down the corridor, their shadows splayed long, distorted before them along the stone floors and walls. Their footfalls were silent, their breaths nearly stilled as they followed the passageway. They came to a doorway at the end of the hall. Dagarron stopped at the threshold, his brows drawn.

"He will have Damantas with him," he whispered. "He would not risk facing us alone. He will be well guarded."

"They will not stop us," Aedhir said. His words were brave in the utterance, but his eyes were wide with fear.

Dagarron lay his hand against the iron handle of the door, twisting it against his palm. The door swung inward, moving in a slow, creeping arc, sending a pool of faint, flickering light spilling out into the corridor. Dagarron gripped his sword hilt between his fists and stepped inside. Qynh saw him pause, his footsteps faltering, and then he moved forward, entering the chamber.

Aedhir followed him, and then Keena. Qynh and Kierken stepped into the room together, and Qynh drew in a sharp, startled breath as they crossed the threshold.

The tower chamber was empty.

Hundreds of candles burned throughout the room, lodged on windowsills, the mantle and hearth, scattered around in alcoves and abandoned shelves, lining the floors, spilling puddles of molten wax onto the stones beneath them. An enormous mirror hung against the wall, framed in gilded twists of gold; a flawless sheet of polished glass towering from floor to vaulted ceiling.

"I do not understand," Qynh whispered at last.

"Now what do we do?" Aedhir asked softly. "Dagarron, you know the palace, you have been here before. Where else might Lahnduren be?"

"I do not know," Dagarron replied.

Keena motioned with her hands and Aedhir spoke. "You said the throne room earlier. Mayhap we should start there."

Dagarron walked slowly toward the fireplace, peering into the shadows. "And if he is not there?" He glanced over his shoulder at Keena. "We do not have time to waste creeping from one end of the palace to the next." He closed his hand into a fist and struck the mantle; four candles toppled to the floor, spattering hot wax as the heavy wooden shelf trembled at the blow. "Why would Qynh's sight have shown her this place, this specific chamber, for no cause?" he said. "There is something here; something we are missing. There must be."

"Well, he is not hiding among the stones or crouched behind the candles," Aedhir said. He walked back toward the threshold and swung the door closed. "And he is not laying in wait behind the door. That leaves precious few options, I believe."

Qynh walked toward one of the chamber windows and gazed down at the duchan-stained remnants of the garden. She could see the uppermost boughs of the maple tree as she stood with her forehead pressed to the glass, watching her reflection wavering in the flickering candlelight. "I do not understand," she whispered.

Kierken stepped toward the mirror, his footsteps light and cautious. He could see the room reflected all about him; the glass was wide enough to provide nearly a panoramic reflection.

"If not the throne room, then what about a bedchamber?" Aedhir asked. Kierken watched through the mirror as the Fiain crossed behind him, moving to join Dagarron beside the fireplace. Among them, only Keena remained rooted in the center of the room; she stared about her, moving in small, nervous circles.

"He must sleep somewhere!" Aedhir exclaimed, throwing up his hands in exasperation. "We cannot waste the day creeping about the castle, Dagarron, but we cannot squander it here, either, shuffling our feet and pondering aloud!"

"I know, Aedhir," Dagarron said.

Kierken could see Qynh in the mirror. She continued to look down at the garden, at the maple tree. She lifted her hand and brushed her fingertips lightly against one of the panes of glass. He wondered if she could hear the tree now, if it called to her and told her of the anam'cladh, as it had whispered to him.

He meant to ask her; Kierken began to turn, to walk away from the mirror and go to her side when suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of sudden, swift movement. He whirled back to the mirror, startled, and gasped softly.

He could still see the chamber reflected within the glass, but now there was something more, images that floated against the surface of the mirror like phantoms. He could see the Comhar army waging battle with the Damantas in a dense and ancient forest he recognized as Tirmag'crann. Kierken stared in amazement as he beheld the battle unfolding; he could see Eisos in gleaming silver armor, his sword flying before him, his long hair streaming from beneath the steel hem of his helmet as he fended off a throng of advancing Damantas.

It is the mirror of Ciardha, a voice whispered in his mind. Her eyes and ears...

Ioruan came into his view, as though he rushed past the mirrored glass behind Kierken; Kierken caught himself averting his gaze, glancing for a moment to see if the Mianach lord was somehow in the chamber.

Some of the soldiers he recognized; now, he saw Lamiel Reuel charging past, his sword raised and swinging madly, his mouth thrown open in a soundless roar, his face twisted with rage. Some he did not, and they flew past the glass, shields raised, swords poised, clashing with the Damantas.

her doorway to anyplace in the Bith...

Kierken stared at the mirror, transfixed by the visions. He stepped closer to the glass, his eyes growing all the wider as he watched his reflection stand immersed in the fray. He raised his hand slowly and pressed his fingertips against the mirror. He stood close enough that he could see his breath form a soft mist against the surface.

Qynh averted her gaze, drawing her eyes away from the tree below, the ruined garden and back toward her own reflection in the glass. From the corner of her line of sight, winking in the darting candlelight, she could see Kierken standing with his back to her, looking into the mirror.

It is the mirror of Ciardha, she thought she heard a voice whisper. She glanced behind her, but there was no one nearby. Her eyes and ears ... her doorway to anyplace in the Bith...

Kierken lifted his hand, reaching for the mirror, and Qynh's heart seized with bright, sudden panic. "Kierken, no!" she cried. "Do not touch the glass!"

Dagarron's head snapped up at the alarm in her voice and he saw Kierken touch the mirror, his expression filled inexplicably with wonder and curiosity. "Kierken!" he cried out, brushing past Aedhir and rushing forward.

Kierken blinked at Qynh's cry and turned to face her. As he moved his head, he caught sight of something else reflected in the glass—a hulking, looming shadow that towered over him, a form as black and translucent as smoke. He saw twin pinpoints of scarlet fire blazing from the shadow and he drew back, his eyes widening in surprise and sudden terror.

A hand burst out of the mirror, thrusting through the surface of the glass as if through water; a hand wrapped in blackened steel that seized Kierken by the throat with brutal force.

Qynh shrieked from behind Kierken, and he gasped breathlessly, vainly for air around the crushing might of the gauntlet. He was lifted off his feet and he dropped his sword in his panic, pawing desperately against the fingers that mashed his windpipe closed. He whimpered, terrified as a Damanta stepped out of the mirror; an enormous Damanta whose visage Kierken knew solely by his helm. The crests of the helm branched out to the sides; matching spirals of thick, blackened steel framing the helmet like the horns of a ram.

Daele emerged from the mirror, one hand clamped against Kierken's throat, holding the young Buion aloft and struggling before him, the other clasping a massive broadsword. His long, scarlet cloak fluttered behind him as his sabatons settled against the stone floor of the chamber.

"Kierken!" Qynh screamed.

"Kierken!" Dagarron roared, and he ran toward Daelle. "Let him go, Daelle, you rotted bastard!"

Dagarron skittered to a halt and scrambled back, gasping in horror as four more Damantas stepped from the glass, brandishing their broadswords at the ready, their fiery eyes glittering beneath the black steel of their helmets.

"Mathair Maith!" Dagarron whispered. He shifted his sword in his hands and his brows furrowed as he glared at Daelle. "He is only a boy," he said, watching Kierken struggle to draw breath, his face flushed crimson. "I am here, Daelle. Fight me instead, you bastard. Let him go."

"As you wish, Dagarron," Daelle said, his eyes flashing. He drew the broadsword back and rammed the blade through Kierken's chest, impaling the Elf. Kierken convulsed at the impact, his body writhing against Daelle's fist, strangled, birdlike cries gargling from his throat.

"No!" Qynh shrieked, rushing forward. Keena grabbed her by the arm and Qynh struggled wildly, thrashing against Keena as she screamed. "No! No, no, Sweet Mother, no! Kierken!"

Daelle wrenched his sword loose from Kierken's body and the young Elf dangled limply in his hand, his arms drooping to his sides, his struggles subsiding into stillness. Daelle turned his faceplate toward Dagarron and chortled softly, wickedly, to see the shocked disbelief, the horror in the man's stricken expression.

"Kierken!" Dagarron whimpered, stumbling as he felt the strength sap abruptly from his legs.

Daelle swung his arm and Kierken flew across the room, slamming against the wall across from the mirror and crumpling lifelessly to the floor. Blood sprayed with the impact, splattering against the walls and floor, pooling around him as he lay face down on the stones.

There was another faint and distant chuckle and then a sixth Damanta emerged from the mirror. Like Daelle, he wore a long, sweeping cloak the hue of blood and carried his sword in his fist; like Daelle, he boasted an immense and terrifying helm, only this one was crafted in the visage of a winged wolf, its lips wrinkled back to reveal its hooked fangs, its throat encircled with a collar lined with spikes.

The Damanta leaned his head back and laughed again, a deep, resonant rumbling. He turned his fiery gaze toward Dagarron. "Do not weep for the little Buion, Dagarron Atreile," the Damanta said. "You will soon be at his side along the golden plains of sweet Tirmaithe."

"Lahnduren," Dagarron breathed, his voice trembling with rage. His brows drew together, cleaving a deep furrow against the bridge of his nose. He threw back his head, bellowing in fury, shock, and grief, and then he charged forward, his sword clenched in hand. "You will answer for that!" he screamed. "By my breath, you rotted bastard, you will answer to me with your very heart!"

Chapter Twenty

Iasal jerked his head, throwing himself sideways as the gigantic Damanta swung its sword with lethal purpose. He felt the whip of wind against his face as the edge of the blade sliced within scarce millimeters of his nose and he staggered away, his eyes wide and alarmed. All around him, the Damantas surged forward, forcing their way between him, Wyndetta, and Eoghan, and Iasal could hear Eoghan howling with rage, his blade singing as again and again he struck against blackened steel.

None of the other soldiers moved to engage Iasal, however, and when he moved to rush to the aid of his friends, they stepped into his path, shoving him back, blocking his every attempt. He whirled around to face the enormous Damanta, realizing to his horror that it had singled him out with deadly intentions: it meant to have him all to itself.

The Damanta laughed, its voice rumbling from deep beneath its cuirass. "You should have let Phyndaegon take you in Edenvale," it said. "The duchan is a far kinder fate than what I intend. Beg me for mercy, little Buion. Mayhap I will grant it."

Iasal's brows drew together and he spun the hilt of his cleadh mor against his palm, gripping it at the ready. "I am Iasal Gabhlan," he said. "Fourteenth son of Dunnaghan, eleventh son of the Uasal, Tyrahns and high ceannaire among the Buion aicmeach of Donnag'crann Gaeilge. I beg for nothing."

The Damanta laughed again. "Beannacht, then, Iasal," it said as it advanced. "I am Suille Buichard, third son of Daevon Buichard and the last of the Fathacan. The pleasure is all mine."

He charged forward, swinging his broadsword in a wide arc. Iasal knocked the blade aside and pivoted his hips, driving the wedge of his boot heel in a high, sharp kick that connected solidly with the Damanta's faceplate.

Suille's hand darted out, catching Iasal by the ankle. Iasal's eyes flew wide as the Damanta snatched him from the ground and threw him as though he was a child's toy. He slammed into Damantas and crashed to the ground.

He scrambled to his feet as Suille came at him again, his sabatons shuddering the ground with each step. "Is this the best you can do, Buion?" Suille taunted, his eyes searing beneath the dark steel of his helm. "I have fought women who fared better."

He charged, letting the broadsword swing. Iasal floundered backwards, parrying the blow, but Suille closed his free gauntlet into a tight fist and let it sail, his knuckles battering against the side of Iasal's face, sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Mathair Maith!" he gasped, his nose and mouth bleeding. He tried to raise his head and spat weakly. Two teeth tumbled to the ground, landing in a thick spatter of blood.

He felt Suille's fist close against his quiver and suddenly he was yanked off the ground, dangling helplessly in the air. He kicked his legs out, planting the soles of his boots squarely against the Damanta's breast plate. He pistoned his legs out, springing against Suille's chest, knocking the Fathac back, sending him stumbling. Suille roared as he tripped and fell, crashing to the ground, taking Iasal tumbling along with him. He still held the Buion by the quiver; Iasal thrust the blade of his cleadh mor up between his leine and the taut straps that held the quiver in place at his shoulders, slicing through them, freeing himself. He fell onto his knees and scrambled forward.

He yelped as the Damanta grabbed him roughly by the ankle. Suille dragged Iasal backwards and hoisted him into the air. Desperate, Iasal spun the cleadh mor between his palms and twisted his hips, plunging the blade deeply into the armored plates of Suille's chest, stabbing for his duchan-tainted heart.

Suille bellowed in pain and threw Iasal in the air; Iasal cried out sharply as he slammed against the granite floor of the terrace. He heard ribs snap like dried kindling and the pain was blinding, searing. The side of his head smacked sharply against the ground and he saw sudden, dancing sparkles of light before

his eyes.

He heard Wyndetta scream, her voice shrill with sudden agony, and Eoghan roared out her name, anguished. Suille canted his faceplate toward the cries and then stared down at the Buion, his eyes burning with sadistic mirth to watch despair drain the strength from the Elf's shoulders, twisting in his face.

"Your friends have fallen, then," Suille told him. "There is nothing left for you, is there? Nothing except pain and death."

Iasal pressed his hands against the ground and forced his shoulders, his head up. He glared at Suille, his head swimming dizzily and he spat at the Damanta, another tooth flying free from between his bloodied lips.

"Long ... long live ... Lythaniele's prophecy," he whispered.

"Now this is a battle!" Eoghan cried, grinning broadly, slamming his sword through the side of a Damanta's helmet, sending its duchan-rotted brains splattering out the far side. "Hoah, what is the matter, Damantas? Stand still, will you not? It is easier to run you through that way!"

Three Damanta heads went flying; he leaped in broad, hopping steps to avoid stumbling over them as he charged forward. "Duchan-tainted bastards!" he howled, letting his hilt slip between his hands. He tightened his grip and thrust the blade back into the midriff of a Damanta. As another rushed at his face, he bellowed again, his brows furrowed with rage as he rammed his forehead squarely into the Damanta's helm, denting the steel and sending it reeling.

Wyndetta swung her blade, parrying blow after seemingly endless blow. She ducked as a sword sliced through the air toward her head; she felt the breeze of the blade rustling in her hair and she lunged forward, thrusting her sword through the breastplate of the offending Damanta. It staggered and collapsed, but there were one hundred more to take its place, and she yowled in pain as she blocked one lunging sword too slowly, and the steel punched deeply into her side, spearing beneath her breast, drawing blood and staggering her.

"Wyndetta!" Eoghan roared, wheeling about. He swung his blade wide and as she reeled, her eyelids fluttering in sudden shock and pain, he threw his arm about her waist, jerking her against him.

"Keep away from us, you bastards!" he cried out, stumbling about in circles, his sword flying in broad arcs as he tried to shield Wyndetta with his body. He felt a sword punch into his lower back and he howled, turning about, swinging his sword. Another sword point caught him in the stomach and he twisted, trying to keep the blades away from Wyndetta.

"Bastards!" he shouted, plowing the flat of his sword through the air, pummeling aside sword strikes. He felt a blinding pain spear through his back. He looked down, startled, as the broad tip of a sword punched through his abdomen, thrusting out of his stomach.

"You fight for nothing," said the Damanta that had run him through, its eyes burning within the eyeslit of its helm as he turned in a staggering, clumsy circle to face it. "We have the boy now. He is ours."

The furrow between Eoghan's brows drew to new depths. "Rotted, stinking, duchan-tainted bastard," he hissed, his cheeks flushed with rage, his eyes ablaze with fire of their own. "You lie!" he shrieked, and he jerked his sword up into the air, pistoning his arms out, his large fists clamped against his hilt. His feet were planted against the ground and he swung from his hips, twisting his torso at the waist and putting all

of his strength behind the blow.

The Damanta had no time to react; the edge of Eoghan's blade slammed beneath the shelf of its chin and its head was pummeled from its neck, soaring so high into the air that wayward beams of evening light filtering through the low-lying clouds momentarily sparkled against its helmet; so high that it disappeared into the clouds themselves, gone from view overhead.

"Eoghan!" Wyndetta cried, as he stumbled, his sword dropping from his fingers. He collapsed to his knees and she knelt with him, staring in horror at the sword protruding from his belly.

Eoghan smiled at her, reaching up and touching her face with his bloody, duchan-stained fingers. "Do not fret," he murmured as he fell against her. "It ... it does not hurt..."

"Eoghan!" Wyndetta screamed, clutching at him. She froze, her eyes flying wide as she felt the flat, cold edge of a sword press against her throat, settling beneath her chin.

"Save your tears, bitch," she heard a Damanta say as the blade dug into her neck. "You are about to join him in Tirmaithe."

Wyndetta closed her eyes, drawing in a ragged breath. She opened them again, wide and stunned as she heard the distinctive hiss of wind sliced by an arrow's fletchings and felt the sword waver against her throat, slipping away from her. She watched in stunned disbelief as the Damanta fell, a war stele protruding from the side of its helmet.

She heard the sudden, sharp trill of horns and the baritone thunder of drums calling brigades into battle and she gasped aloud, jerking against Eoghan's crumpled form as her gaze fell upon the line of ragged cliffs overlooking Dorchadas. "Mathair Maith!" she whispered.

All about her, the Damantas drew to sudden, uncertain halts, staring at a massive army—armored warriors by the thousands—that lined the cliffs and ledges as far as the eye could see. Unfamiliar banners flapped in the wind above the heads of the newcomers, and the drums continued to beat out their measure of war, the horns sounding rallying cries into the sky.

Wyndetta saw one rider among the group along the closest precipice, distinctive to her because he rode astride a magnificent white stallion; a rider with a streaming mane of long, blond hair, clad in the silver of Elfin armor, brandishing a gleaming sword in hand.

"Eireon as!" the rider cried out loudly, his voice carrying over the valley below. *Let us end this!*

The army flocked against the cliffs of the Barren Mountains all raised their weapons—swords, spears, bows and long, curved blades the likes of which Wyndetta had never seen before. They roared in response to the Elfin rider's cry, their voices raised in a mighty, unified din, and then they charged forward, spilling over the sides of the cliffs in a sudden, thunderous flood, screaming battle cries as they rushed down from the mountains and into the fray.

"Mathair Maith!" she gasped as she realized, as she recognized the white stallion and the armor-clad rider upon its saddle. "Eoghan!" she cried, grasping his shoulders and shaking him roughly, feeling him drag a ragged breath against her throat as he raised his head weakly.

"Do ... do not wake me so, Sorcha ... You ... you can bloody well wash the sheets when ... I am not between them..." he growled dazedly, blinking up at Wyndetta.

"Eoghan, look! It is Rhyden!" Wyndetta cried, shaking his shoulders again. She threw back her head and began to laugh and weep all at the same time. "Blessed be, it is Rhyden, Eoghan, and he ... Sweet Mother above, he has brought us an army!"

As the Abhacan army charged into battle, Rhyden dug his heels into Dherga's underbelly, spurring the great stallion forward, galloping down the mountainside and into the fray.

To have spent the majority of their days in relative seclusion from the rest of the races of Tiralainn, the Abhacan warriors rushed headlong and fearless against the Damantas as though they had known nothing in their lives except the vicious art of battle. The infantry soldiers bore swords at their hips, wielding between their fists one of the most fierce and versatile weapons Rhyden had ever seen. The weapon, called a lann'corran or crescent blade, consisted of a sickle-shaped, double-edged blade nearly three feet in length hinged on a stout wooden handle that could be deftly maneuvered by either one or both hands.

Rhyden stared in amazement as the Abhacan wielded these amazing weapons; they charged the Damantas, their lannas'corran swinging like scythes through fields of ripened wheat. With the added reach of the shaft and blade, even the most petite among the warriors could strike at their opponents' heads and shoulders, with as much force and strength behind their blows as soldiers twice their size brandishing broadswords.

The thunder of combat roared in Rhyden's ears; the stink of blood and duchar filled his nostrils, and he swung his father's sword as Dherga plowed through the Damanta ranks. As the two armies fell upon one another, everything descended into madness and confusion, and Rhyden looked about desperately through the swarming, raging throng.

"Wyndetta!" he screamed. He had seen her crouched on the ground, with Eoghan slumped and bloody, crumpled against her shoulder, just before the Abhacan had charged. The Damantas had moved, racing forward into eager battle, and he had lost sight of her.

He felt a large hand close against his forearm and he whipped his head, bringing his sword around in a wide, reflexive arc as a Damanta tried to yank him out of his saddle. Eisos' blade smashed through the Damanta's arm and it recoiled, shrieking and thrashing, duchar spraying wildly.

Another sprang at him, throwing itself into the air, meaning to pummel Rhyden from Dherga's shoulders. There was a sharp hiss of steel slicing through the air, and then the Damanta shrieked as its body split, its head and shoulders flying in one direction, its legs and feet in another. Rhyden pivoted in the saddle and saw Frith below him, wielding his lann'corran; he had drawn the blade toward the shaft to swing toward the Damanta, unfolding it fully as it had completed its arc before him, the keen edge cleaving easily through blackened steel.

Frith glanced up at him, smiled only briefly, his face smeared and splattered with duchar, and then spun about to battle more Damantas.

Rhyden jerked his head as he heard Wyndetta cry out shrilly: "Bastard!"

"There she is, Dherga! Hoah, Wyndetta!" he cried. He saw her ahead of him, bloody and battered. Eoghan lay face down and motionless on the ground, with the hilt of a broadsword protruding from his back, a wide swath of blood soaking through his cloak and pooling on the granite beneath him. At his cry, Wyndetta looked up, her eyes flown wide. She was hurt; a deep gash in her side had nearly crippled her, but she struggled to protect Eoghan from the Damantas, swinging her sword to greet each strike and

attack.

Dherga charged toward her, and as they reached her, Rhyden leaped from the saddle. The white stallion drove the Damantas back from Wyndetta and Eoghan, using his broad, muscled body and heavy hooves to force the creatures away.

"Wyndetta!" Rhyden cried, grasping the woman by the shoulders. She stared at him, her eyes round and stunned, her mouth agape. Her face was streaked with blood and duchan and her hands fell against him, her fingers clutching at him.

"Rhyden?" she gasped hoarsely. "But ... but ... it cannot be ... the Thar'tir ... I saw you fall ... !"

She stumbled dizzily, and he caught her as she fell against his chest. As the strength in her legs waned and her knees buckled beneath her, Rhyden knelt, supporting her in his arms. She wore no armor; they had all abandoned their armor plates along with their horses at the brink of the Braon i'Tir in their race to escape the wolves, and she had suffered terribly, her poor body pierced and bleeding from dozens of deep sword blows and stab wounds. Rhyden sheltered her with his body, his armor, drawing her close.

"Wyndetta!" he whispered, tears welling in his eyes. He looked over her shoulder toward Eoghan.

"Eoghan," he said, anguished. "Is he...?"

"No," Wyndetta shook her head. "No, he lives. He is still alive. We have to help him, Rhyden!"

The Abhacan reached them, surging forward, driving the Damantas back along the terraces of Dorchadas, and Wyndetta cried out, cowering against Rhyden as they charged around them, swords and lannas'corran brandished and swinging.

"Get up, lurgagh!" Frith shouted, bringing his folded lann'corran about in a swift, sharp arc, disemboweling the nearest Damanta. He staggered, knocking into Rhyden as the creature's blackened, steaming entrails spilled out of its gut and splashed against the granite. "Do you want to be trampled? On your feet!"

"She is hurt, Frith, help me!" Rhyden cried, struggling to stand as Wyndetta leaned heavily against him.

"They are both hurt. We have to get them out of here!"

"Give her to me, Rhyden, le do thoil, let me help," Ollamh said, ducking between soldiers, sheathing his sword. "Can you carry the other?"

Wyndetta blinked as Ollamh slipped his arm about her waist, drawing her hand over his shoulder to support her. She looked at Rhyden, bewildered.

"They are friends, Wyndetta. It is alright," Rhyden said. "Go with Ollamh and Frith. They will keep you safe. I will get Eoghan."

He knelt, laying his hands gently against Eoghan's face and shoulder. "Eoghan," he said, hoarsely, his voice choked with tears. The broadsword had done more than pierce Eoghan's body; it had run him through, and how the man had survived was beyond Rhyden's comprehension.

Rhyden caught hold of Eoghan's wrists and eased the man into a clumsy seated posture. The effort hurt Eoghan, and he moaned, stirring. "Little Eisos," he croaked. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly in semblance of a smile and he reached up, brushing the cuff of his fingers feebly against Rhyden's cheek.

Rhyden ducked his head, squatting and shifting his weight so that his shoulder pressed against Eoghan's chest. He draped the big man's arms over his back and tucked his legs beneath him, crouched and poised.

"Eoghan," he said. "You are bigger than me. You will have to help. Push with your legs. Help me lift you."

"Rhyden," Eoghan said softly. "Rhyden, leave me. Do not..."

"I am not leaving you, Eoghan," Rhyden said. He struggled to rise, feeling Eoghan's heavy, limp weight crush against his shoulders, his neck. "Push, Eoghan. Help me, Mathair Maith!" Rhyden grunted, furrowing his brows. "I am not leaving without you! Help me, damn it! Push!"

Eoghan kicked feebly with his feet, shoving against the ground, and Rhyden staggered to his feet, hoisting the man over his shoulders. Rhyden stumbled beneath Eoghan's weight, struggling to maintain his balance. He reeled, gritting his teeth as he forced himself to move, to follow Ollamh, Wyndetta and Frith.

As the Abhacan army surged into the valley, as their battle drums and rallying horns cried out in the air and they rushed upon Dorchadas, Suille turned, stunned and startled. His footsteps faltered at the sight of the massive horde, and Iasal seized the opportunity while the immense Damanta was distracted and surprised.

He sprang forward, pistoning his legs out and as Suille caught sight of the movement out of the corner of his gaze, as he started to turn, the Buion slammed into the side of his face, feet-first. Suille reeled from the blow, toppling to the ground. He crashed against the terrace, bellowing in outrage, and Iasal sprawled on top of him, springing away as Suille's massive shoulders struck the ground. Iasal tucked his head, dropped his shoulder, and rolled, landing nimbly on his knees and dancing onto his feet once more.

Suille sat up slowly. He moved his hands, his broadsword scrabbling against the granite as he dragged it toward him, his eyes ablaze with fury. He rolled onto his knees, pushing his hands against the ground, meaning to rise.

"It will take more than that to stop me, Buion," he seethed.

"We will see," Iasal said. He swung his cleadh mor, striking for the vulnerable point where the hem of Suille's chain mail coif met the collar of his breastplate; Suille recoiled, but was not nearly fast enough.

The blade—meant for the back of the Damanta's broad neck—instead struck Suille's left forearm, cleaving his hand and wrist. Duchan sprayed as Suille floundered, staggering to his feet. He shrieked loudly, shrilly, flailing his severed arm about.

Iasal shifted his weight and drove his right leg up in a sharp, deliberate kick into the side of Suille's helm, rocking his head back, sending the enormous Damanta crashing to his knees.

Iasal drew his cleadh mor back again and in another swift, sharp blow, he severed Suille's right hand from his wrist. Suille's voice ripped into shrill, soprano octaves and he thrashed the ragged stumps of his arms in the air.

"Is this the best you have to offer, Damanta?" Iasal said, lifting Suille's fallen sword in hand. He crossed the broadsword and his own cleadh mor, ramming the apex of the blades beneath the shelf of Suille's chin. Suille shrieked at him as he battered at Iasal with his ruined arms.

"It is not enough," Iasal hissed, and he jerked his arms sharply, bringing the swords together, slicing through chain mail and flesh, cleaving through muscle and bone. Suille's shrieks fell abruptly silent and his red eyes fixed on Iasal's bloody face.

"You ... you cannot," he whispered and then his head rolled back, parting company with his shoulders, whapping loudly against the granite floor.

As Suille's body crumpled, Iasal staggered back, limping and breathless, the strength waning in his shoulders, draining from his knees. His head was spinning, his vision blurred. All around him, the Abhacan battled with the Damantas, and Iasal stared, stunned and astounded at this unfamiliar army.

"Iasal," he heard someone say, and he felt light, insistent hands against his shoulder. He cried out, whirling clumsily in bright alarm, drawing the cleadh mor before him. The point of the blade wavered almost as soon as he leveled it and he recoiled, stumbling, his eyes flown wide.

"Ta se dodheanta!" he whimpered. *It is impossible!* "Ta me ... ta me marbh ... go deimhin—feicaim taibhsean!" *Surely I am dead—I am seeing ghosts!*

"Iasal!" Airrenigh said. She reached for him, but he pulled away, his eyes shocked and frightened, his breath ragged in his throat.

"It cannot be!" he gasped, shaking his head.

"Iasal, leannan, it is me—it is Airrenigh," she said, tears welling in her eyes at his confusion and pain. She gasped against a sharp sob as she reached for him again, cupping his face gently between her hands. He trembled at her touch, flinching, whimpering softly, uncertainly. "Iasal," she whispered. "Oh, my Buion."

More soldiers engaged in battle rammed into them, slamming into Iasal's back, and he stumbled forward, his eyelids fluttering as he swooned. Airrenigh ducked, catching him across her shoulder, hefting him over her back as he fainted. She raised her head in time to see a Damanta rushing at her; she held her sword clasped in one hand, keeping the other pressed against the back of Iasal's thigh as she stood, hoisting him against her. The Damanta swung its sword and Airrenigh batted the blade aside with her own.

"Rotted bastard!" she screamed, canting her wrist, thrusting her sword forward, punching into the creature's eyeslit, ramming the blade into its skull. She whirled about as another Damanta came at her; she sidestepped its attacking thrust and swung her blade sharply, opening its throat.

"Lady Airrenigh!" one of the Abhacan nearby cried to her; she recognized him as Sraoth, one of the seven who had found Rhyden and Fiontan in the Braon i'Tir gorge.

"Sraoth!" she yelled. "Where is Ollamh, your healer? I need him!"

"He went that way!" Sraoth shouted to her, pointing toward Dorchadas. "He and Frith both. I think they followed Rhyden!"

"Lead me there. Hurry, Sraoth!" Airrenigh cried. She wheeled about as a Damanta rushed at her from behind. She parried as it swung its sword toward her face, blocking the brunt of the blow with the shaft of her own blade, and the creature shoved against her, meaning to force her to her knees.

The curved blade of a lann'corran hooked beneath its chin from behind and the Damanta uttered a sharp, startled yelp as the blade swung, moving swiftly on its hinge, shearing through its neck, severing its

head. As it fell, Airrenigh saw another Abhac, Sraoth's brother Soch, behind it, his eyes wide and startled, as though his own brave act surprised him.

"Soch, hoah, there you are," Sraoth said to his brother, as nonchalantly as though they had just bumped into one another at a neighborhood pub. "Good, then, you can help us. Come on, let us find Ollamh."

Chapter Twenty-One

Trejaeran stirred in darkness, shivering in the cold. He could hear the sounds again, distant banging noises that floated across the black waters of Nocturn, emanating from somewhere deep within the mountains.

The noises had come to him for some time now. If someone or something lurked within the cave with him, even if only upon some distant shore of the lake, Trejaeran was helpless against them. He could not see his hand before the tip of his nose, much less across the expanse of Nocturn's waters. There was no light and he huddled in the absolute and utter darkness, alone and afraid.

Ciardha had sealed him inside the cave. Trejaeran had not realized this at first; it was not until he had mustered the courage to rise to his feet and fumble his way along the walls of the cavern, his hands pressed against the cold, clammy stone, that he had made this grim discovery. His fingers had slipped from the cragged surface of the bedrock walls against the polished, smooth face of the granite doors, and his heart had stilled in his chest. He had stood before the doors, groping desperately along them, at last finding the seam that separated one block from the next.

He had fallen to his knees in horror and dismay. He was trapped, buried alive with Nocturn. Ciardha meant for him to drink from the water; her voice came to him repeatedly out of the darkness, purring to him, bidding him to take a taste. He had refused every time, but knew she would not relent. If he did not choose to drink of his own free will, then she would eventually force it upon him.

A sudden, new and unfamiliar sound met his ears and he raised his head, blinking against the darkness. It sounded like something heavy, grinding and grating, close at hand, and he realized it was the doors. The granite doors were moving, swinging apart in the icy blackness.

Trejaeran whimpered, sitting up and scrabbling back, his boot heels kicking in the soft, pebbled sand. His shoulders smacked against the stone wall of the cave and he cowered, staring into the expansive darkness before him, his eyes flown wide with terror.

He heard an abrupt, rushing hiss of air and he cried out, frightened, as a torch set along the wall near the doors burst alight. He yelped again as another torch, closer along the wall to him, spat sudden fire, searing through the darkness.

He could see the doors standing open; the illumination of the torches gleamed against the polished surface of the black stone, glittering along the gold lines of each etched rune. A third torch sprang alight directly above his head, sending glowing embers spewing down at him, and Trejaeran cried out, scuttling away from the wall.

"They are nearly through now," Ciardha said. She crossed the threshold and stepped into the warm circumference of light.

"Le do thoil!" Trejaeran whimpered. He staggered clumsily to his feet, his boots slipping in the damp sand.

"They thought they could hide from me in their secret city, their forgotten lair," Ciardha said, and the corner of her mouth lifted in a cold smile. "Foolish Abhacan. I roamed these lands while they simmered within the Good Mother's imagination. There is no place in the Bith unknown to me."

He did not understand what she was talking about; his confusion and fear must have been apparent on his face, because her smile widened. "The Abhacan dammed my spring," she said. "It is their mark upon those doors, their draiocht that sought to contain me." She laughed. "Feeble hopes from feeble minds. The Abhacan built their dam, and now the Abhacan rend it asunder. When the dam is broken, and the waters of Nocturn flow freely once more, our victory will be complete, our reign eternal."

Trejaeran saw Phyndaegon stride through the doorway, firelight dancing against the seams and plates of his blackened armor. He bore his broadsword against his hip and rested the palm of his gauntlet against the hilt as he walked purposefully behind Ciardha, his scarlet eyes aglow beneath his crested helm. Trejaeran backed away from them both, his eyes round and frightened.

"The time is at hand," Ciardha said. "Drink from the water, Trejaeran."

Phyndaegon swung his arm toward the boy, and Trejaeran flinched, startled, as something flew through the air at him. It was a cup, a goblet fashioned out of gold, and it smacked against the sand by his feet.

Trejaeran shook his head. "No," he whispered.

Ciardha's brows drew together, her dark eyes suddenly ablaze with the fire of the duchar. "Take the cup, Trejaeran," she said. "Take it in hand, dip it in Nocturn's shallows, and drink from it."

Trejaeran thought of the anam'cladh hilt tucked beneath his boot cuff. He had kept his word to Orlaith and said nothing of it, not even to Suille, and it had yet gone unnoticed by Ciardha. "No," he said, shaking his head again. "I will not."

Phyndaegon advanced, his gait wide and swift, his hands closed into massive, menacing fists. Trejaeran glanced at Ciardha, frightened and alarmed, but she only smiled at him.

"You could have chosen this freely," she said. "The pain is nearly bearable if you choose to drink of your own will. When it is forced upon you, I am told the torment of the duchar is most exquisite."

Trejaeran stumbled away from Phyndaegon, his eyes enormous with terror, as the Damanta's broad stride closed the brief distance between them. Trejaeran cried out, cowering as the Damanta's hand shot out, his fingers grabbing him roughly by the folds of the cloak gathered at his collar. Trejaeran buckled his knees, reaching blindly for his boot, for the anam'cladh hilt, and then Phyndaegon jerked him off his feet and hoisted him into the air.

"No!" Trejaeran cried, struggling against Phyndaegon as he was hauled toward the water's edge. He fought wildly, his hands pawing against the Damanta's gauntlet, groping for the silver penannular brooch that held his cloak about his neck. His fingers fumbled against the damp woolen folds, and as they brushed against the silver hoop, he ducked his head and wriggled, unfastening the brooch and slipping beneath the cape, away from Phyndaegon's grasp.

He fell to the ground, scrambled to his feet, and ran. There was no place for him to go but he bolted

nonetheless. He scurried against the wall of the cavern and pressed his shoulder against the rocks, his breath fluttering in his throat, his heart thrumming frantically beneath his breast.

He glanced toward the doorway and watched a figure step out of the shadows and into the torchlight. The figure began to cross the beach, walking slowly toward Trejaeran. As the glow of the fire fell upon the man's face, Trejaeran's breath stilled, tangling in his chest. "Poppa?" he whispered.

Petrich walked toward him, smiling, his face soft and kind, his eyes shimmering with tears. "Trejaeran," he said, his voice trembling. "Trejaeran, oh, a'mac!"

"Poppa!" Trejaeran cried, rushing to his father. He fell against Petrich's chest, burying his face against his father's warm shoulder, throwing his arms around his waist. "Poppa!" he cried again, bursting into tears.

"I am here, a'mac," Petrich whispered, wrapping his arms around the boy's shoulders. Trejaeran felt his hands stroke his hair gently, his lips press against his pate. "It is alright now, Trejaeran. Do not be afraid. I am here."

"Just as I promised," Ciardha said from the water's edge. "I have kept my word to you, Trejaeran."

"Let him go," Trejaeran said. He stepped back from his father, feeling Petrich's arms loosen against him. "You said you would let him go. Set him free."

"I am already free, a'mac," Petrich said softly, and Trejaeran jerked his face toward him, confused.

"What?" he whispered.

"My soul is free," Petrich said, and as he stepped toward Trejaeran, the boy backed away, frightened once more. He could see it now, the dim glow of red fire smoldering within Petrich's eyes. "This place has set me free ... these waters ... my Queen."

A tremulous, anguished moan fluttered from Trejaeran's throat, and he shook his head, his eyes widening with shock. "No," he whimpered. "No, please, Poppa, not you ... not you, too, no..."

"I have been waiting for you, a'mac," Petrich said, reaching for him. "Waiting for you to join me, and now, at last, you have come."

"No," Trejaeran pleaded, shaking his head, stumbling away from his father. "No, no, they promised me." He whirled toward Ciardha, his hands clenched in desperate fists. "You promised me!" he screamed, his voice shrill and hoarse.

Petrich's hand lashed out, tangling in Trejaeran's hair, wrenching his head back. Trejaeran cried out in pain, staggering, as Petrich began to walk with him, forcing him toward Nocturn.

"It is time, a'mac," Petrich said, looking down into his son's upturned face, his eyes gleaming with duchar.

"No!" Trejaeran cried, struggling. He tore himself loose from Petrich's fist, wailing as he felt large clumps of hair rip from his scalp between Petrich's clenched fingers. He spun around and floundered, his chest hitching with sobs as Petrich strode toward him, reaching for him again.

"Poppa, no, no, please!" Trejaeran cried and Petrich curled his hand into a fist. Trejaeran's eyes flew

wide and he cowered as Petrich let his hand fly. His knuckles slammed into the boy's face, shattering his nose and knocking him off his feet.

Trejaeran sprawled in the sand, dazed and stunned by the blow, blood coursing from his nose. He raised his head dizzily and spat a mouthful of blood against the ground. Something flew from between his lips, smacking against the pebbled soil, and it took his bleary, terrified mind a moment before Trejaeran realized it was a tooth.

"It is time, a'mac," Petrich said again, his hand closing in Trejaeran's hair. He jerked Trejaeran's head back and as the boy looked up at him, his face filled with terror and confusion, as he watched Trejaeran's hands flutter toward his face in frightened anticipation of another blow and heard the shuddering, frantic sounds of the boy's sobs in his throat, Petrich hesitated. He loosened his fingers, letting Trejaeran slump back against the sand. "What have I done?" he whispered, aghast.

"Take him to the water, Petrich," Ciardha said.

Petrich's brows furrowed and he reached for Trejaeran, but again, his hand wavered and his face twisted with uncertainty as the boy shrank from his touch.

"Poppa!" Trejaeran whimpered.

"Take him to the water," Ciardha hissed. She thrust her hand toward Petrich, her fingers splayed wide, and Petrich staggered, crying out and shoving his palms against his eyes, reeling as the duchan within his mind squirmed and writhed at her bidding.

"No!" Petrich shrieked, throwing his head back. He collapsed onto his knees, clawing at his face. "No, no, please, Mathair Maith! Do not make me hurt my son!"

"Poppa!" Trejaeran cried in horror, and he scrambled on his hands and knees toward Petrich, his eyes flown wide.

"Keep away from me, Trejaeran!" Petrich screeched at him, flailing his hand in the air to stay his approach. Trejaeran froze, whimpering.

"Poppa!" he whispered.

"You will not defy me, Mianach," Ciardha said, and as she began to close her hand, folding her fingers toward her palm, Petrich's shrieks intensified, ripping up shrill octaves and bouncing against the cavern walls. He shook his head and convulsed, howling in agony.

"Trejaeran!" he screamed. "Run away, a'mac! For the love of the Good Mother, run!"

"Stop it!" Trejaeran screamed at Ciardha. "Leave him alone!"

At his cry, Trejaeran felt something within his mind snap, like a door thrown open wide, bursting loose from its hinges. "Leave him alone!" he roared again, and he felt that force, that massive, blazing energy rush from him, plowing across the beach and striking Ciardha like the edge of an immense wave.

Ciardha's eyes flew wide and then she flew through the air, jerked backward like a naughty puppet tethered to strings. She slammed into the wall of the cavern and collapsed to the beach, lying on her face, trembling in the sand.

As suddenly as it had come upon him, it was gone, the surge of energy winked abruptly out, and Trejaeran recoiled in its wake, staggering dazedly. He heard Petrich moaning and he rushed to his father's side. "Poppa?" he whispered, pressing his hands against Petrich's shoulders. "Poppa, le do thoil!"

Ciardha lifted her head from the ground, duchan searing in her eyes as her brows furrowed and her bloodied mouth twisted into a furious snarl. "Bastard pup," she seethed, drawing her knees beneath her and rising to her feet.

"Trejaeran," Petrich whimpered. He reached up with trembling fingers and caressed Trejaeran's cheek. "I ... I love you, a'mac."

"Poppa," Trejaeran breathed and then Ciardha thrust her hand out, her fingers coiling together tightly, and Petrich shrieked, tangling his fingers in his hair.

Trejaeran backed away, frightened, and when Petrich's screams faded, when he lowered his head toward the ground and his shoulders slumped weakly, Trejaeran whispered to him. "Poppa?"

Petrich raised his head, and the duchan blazed in his eyes. "There is no defying the duchan," he said as he stood. He closed his hands slowly, deliberately into fists, his knuckles cracking and popping as they folded.

"No," Trejaeran pleaded, reeling back, stumbling in the sand as Petrich walked toward him. "No, no, do not!"

Petrich came at him and Trejaeran fell, his fingers groping wildly against his leg, fumbling desperately beneath the cuff of his boot and coiling against the anam'cladh.

"No!" Trejaeran wailed as Petrich lunged at him, his hands grasping for his throat. As Trejaeran jerked the anam'cladh loose from his boot, the blade seared before him, a blinding, shaft of blue fire ablaze above the tang. Petrich fell against the blade, and the fire of the anam'cladh pierced his heart, skewering him. Trejaeran screamed as Petrich gaped at him, his eyes flown wide in stunned surprise, and then he staggered away from the boy.

Trejaeran huddled in the sand, still clutching the blazing anam'cladh between his fists, staring in wide-eyed horror at Petrich. "Poppa!"

Petrich pressed his hands over his heart, the scorched and smoldering place on his shirt where the anam'cladh had stabbed him. He groaned, a low, terrible, warbling sound, and then collapsed to his knees. He began to vomit, his body convulsing as he spewed mouthfuls of black, reeking ichor onto the ground. Duchan sprayed from Petrich's nose, his mouth, spurting from his eyes and ears. Petrich writhed, his voice strangled and gurgling as the ichor filled his throat and spattered from his mouth against the sand.

"Poppa!" Trejaeran cried, casting the anam'cladh aside. As the steel parted from his fingers, the blade extinguished and was gone. Trejaeran rushed toward Petrich, falling onto his knees, heedless of the duchan. "What have I done?" he cried out, grasping Petrich's shoulders. "I have murdered you, oh, Mathair Maith, no, le do thoil, no!"

Petrich spat duchan out of his mouth, his wracking heaves subsiding. He trembled beneath Trejaeran's hands and turned his face toward the boy, his cheeks streaked with duchan.

"Not murdered me," he gasped weakly. He touched Trejaeran's face. "It ... it is gone, a'mac. You saved me from the shadow."

Trejaeran blinked at him in stunned disbelief and then Petrich's eyes flew wide. "Trejaeran, look out!" he cried out feebly.

Trejaeran started to whirl about, alarmed, and he felt Phyndaegon's fist close in his hair. He cried out as the enormous Damanta jerked him roughly to his feet and threw him aside, tossing him roughly across the beach.

"The anam'cladh," Ciardha hissed. "So the sword of my father remains. Orlaith has kept it secreted away in her pathetic prison of stone. How fortuitous. A pity you have lost it so soon. I promise you will not have another chance to bear it in hand."

Phyndaegon seized Petrich by the hair and forced his head back. Petrich cried out hoarsely as the Damanta shoved the sharpened edge of a dagger against his throat.

"No!" Trejaeran cried. "No, Phyndaegon, no!"

"You have saved him from the duchar, but you will not save him from the blade," Ciardha said.

"No, stop!" Trejaeran cried out, holding out his hands. "I will drink! I will drink from the water!"

Petrich stared at him, wide-eyed, desperate, shaking his head. "No, a'mac," he whispered, pleading. "No, no!"

The cup is waiting, little one, Phyndaegon seethed in Trejaeran's mind.

Trejaeran turned and saw the goblet laying on the beach. He walked over to it and knelt, slipping it against his palm. He looked toward Ciardha. "Please," he begged softly. "Let my father go."

"He will go home today," she said. "Free and untainted, back to Edenvale. You can see it done, Trejaeran. But you must drink."

Trejaeran dipped the cup into the water; it sloshed softly against the gold as it flowed into the goblet's basin, filling it. His hand trembled as he drew the cup to his face.

"Trejaeran, no!" Petrich moaned, and then he gasped as the dagger silenced him, as Phyndaegon jerked against his hair.

Ciardha smiled at Trejaeran. "Drink," she said.

Trejaeran closed his eyes and pressed the goblet to his mouth. He felt the water against his lips and he opened his mouth, tasting Nocturn against his tongue, feeling it coursing down his throat as he swallowed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Sixteen years," Lahnduren said as Dagarron charged, swinging his sword in a wide, fierce arc. Lahnduren brought his broadsword around, battering aside Dagarron's attack, sending the man sprawling

to the ground.

"For sixteen years, you have waited for this moment," Lahnduren said, drawing his sword back over his head. "A pity it will be over in only a few, short breaths."

He drove the sword down with brutal force and Dagarron rolled. He felt the wind from the broadsword whip against his back and the stones beneath him shuddered as the massive blade cleaved the space only just abandoned by his head. Dagarron scrambled to his feet and danced back from Lahnduren. "You have not won yet, bastard," he said.

Lahnduren laughed at him, wrenching the tip of his blade loose from the floor. "You do not think so? You are a fool, Dagarron Atreile. You have always been a fool to think you had hope against my Queen. She has won. She defeats you as we speak."

Lahnduren swung at him and Dagarron parried the attack, knocking aside the shaft of the broadsword with the flat of his blade. "She will never win!" Dagarron cried. He sliced his sword through the air and Lahnduren recoiled. "So long as I draw breath, she will not!"

"The boy is ours now," Lahnduren hissed, swinging his broadsword, knocking Dagarron's blade aside. "He will drink from the waters of Nocturn and then he will belong to us."

"What?" Dagarron said, startled. He drew his sword sharply toward him as the Damanta struck, and the blades rang loudly, steel against steel as they crossed in front of his face. He staggered beneath Lahnduren's tremendous weight, his strength.

Lahnduren laughed. "Do you think my Queen has ever feared your foolish prophecy?" he asked. "She has wanted to claim Herdranges's heir. You delivered him into her hands. The power of the ancients, the Na'Siogai, is strong within him and he will give his precious seeds to my Queen. She will restore the Bith to them. The Age of Darkness is at hand!"

Dagarron stared at him above the vertex of their crossed blades, stricken. "And what of you, Lahnduren? If she makes Trejaeran her King, what does that leave you?"

"Her faithful servant," Lahnduren said, shoving against his broadsword, sending Dagarron stumbling, toppling back to the ground. "I would relinquish my crown gladly if it means my Queen will triumph. My love for her is that strong. You once loved her as much, Dagarron. Would you not love her so again?"

He drove the broadsword at Dagarron, and Dagarron scrambled sideways, crying out as the blade plowed a deep rift into the stones behind him. He staggered to his feet, staring at Lahnduren in aghast. "What are you saying?" he gasped.

Lahnduren laughed again. "You do not know, then?" he asked, hefting his sword between his fists. "Hoah, you are truly an fool, Dagarron Atreile! How do you think my Lady would hope to bear children? She needs a womb for such purposes, a body to call her own! A body I gave to her, one that I healed and preserved, lovely and lissome and filled with the same Na'Siogai blood that flows through the boy heir's veins."

Dagarron's eyes flew wide in sudden, horrified realization. He stumbled backward, shaking his head. "No," he whispered. "No, it cannot be."

"Lythaniele threw herself from this very tower," Lahnduren said. His vermilion eyes blazed as he drew

close to Dagarron. "But she did not die. Banaltra draiocht saved her. Did you think it was without purpose that we stole the Donnag'crann healers? She lives, Dagarron. All of this time, all of these years, Lythaniele has drawn breath upon the Bith, and you have not known."

"You lie!" Dagarron roared, springing forward, bringing his blade around again and again, driving Lahnduren back as their swords slammed together. "You rotted bastard! You lie!"

"You are the blacksmith's lass," Daelle said to Qynh. While Dagarron and Lahnduren fought, the five remaining Damantas closed in on Qynh, Keena, and Aedhir.

"Qynh, get behind me," Aedhir said as he and Keena stepped between the girl and the approaching Damantas, both of them clasping their swords at the ready.

"I will not," Qynh hissed, and she brushed past Keena, striding boldly toward Daelle. She felt Keena's fingers grasp tightly against her sleeve, her mute voice drawn in a sharp, imperative gasp and Qynh shrugged her arm fiercely, dislodging her hand.

She spun her sword, narrowing her brows at Daelle. "I am the blacksmith's lass, indeed," she said. "Come on, you bastard. I have my father's blade in hand. Let me show you his handiwork."

As the other Damantas moved forward to engage Keena and Aedhir, Qynh sprang at Daelle. Daelle brought his blade up to greet her, pummeling aside her attack, sending her reeling backwards. "You cannot defeat me," he said.

"I do not mean to defeat you, Daelle," she said. "I mean to carve your black, murdering heart from your breast and shove it down your rotted throat."

She swung again and he blocked her once more, using the flat of his blade to bat her Elfin steel aside. She recovered more swiftly than he anticipated, and as her blade sang again, sailing through the air in a sharp arc, Daelle recoiled, feeling the edge of the sword slice through the chain mail links at the base of his throat. He thrust his broadsword toward her vulnerable left, and Qynh jerked sideways out of the blade's path. She canted her wrist and pivoted her hips, swinging again for his throat, again nicking across the mail as she danced back, putting distance between them.

"You are nimble with that blade, lass," Daelle said, his eyes blazing as his fingertips brushed lightly against the sheared mail. Duchan seeped forth in a thin, glittering line; her sword had delved deep as it had cut.

"I have had an excellent teacher," she replied, spinning the hilt between her hands, adjusting her grip.

"Muise," he agreed, nodding his helm once. He lunged at her, bringing the broadsword sweeping down over his head, clasping the hilt between his fists. Qynh sprang sideways, grasping her sword in her hands and swinging from her hips, twisting her spine, her shoulders, as she plowed his blade aside. Before her sword had even completed its initial arc, she drove it back in the opposite direction, striking again for his head. Daelle raised his arm, and the sword kissed against his armor as he slapped it aside, sending Qynh staggering.

Daelle turned, following her, driving his sword at her. Qynh yelped as she jerked her blade before her, blocking his attack, the force of the blow knocking her to her knees. He raised the broadsword, meaning to swing it down and split her skull, and Qynh leaped to her feet, ramming the shaft of her sword with all of her might through the center of his breastplate. She buried the blade nearly to the hilt in his chest,

feeling it punch through armor and flesh, spearing bone and crushing soft, rotted tissue. Duchan spewed from the wound, splashing against her hands, her face, and she recoiled, sputtering.

The back of Daelle's fist plowed into her face, sending her careening across the room. She fell to the ground, yelping as she caught the brunt of the tumble on her hip.

"Nimble indeed," Daelle remarked as she raised her head, shoving her disheveled hair back from her face. She watched, her eyes flown wide with shock and horror, as he curled his fingers against the hilt of her sword and drew it out of his chest.

"Sweet Mother!" Qynh gasped breathlessly as he held her sword in hand. She had struck for the heart, plunging her blade through to Daelle's spine, and though the wound still spurted duchan, he stood before her as unscathed as though she had spat against his sabatons.

She scrambled to her feet and staggered back as he approached. "Here, lass," Daelle said, and he tossed her sword to her. It clattered against the floor at her feet and she blinked, startled.

"Take it in hand," Daelle told her gently, nodding his chin. "Try once more."

Qynh snatched up the sword, shifting the hilt between her hands. "Bastard," she hissed.

He chuckled. She rushed at him and he parried her proffered blow, sending her staggering sideways. He stepped away from her, a cat playing with a mouse, waiting patiently for her to regain her footing.

"Try once more," he invited, and she shrieked as she charged, driving the Elfin steel toward his neck. He blocked her attack, swinging his broadsword around in a swift motion, and she stumbled again.

She stared at him, winded and shaking, clutching her sword between her hands as he stepped away from her, circling slowly behind her, the tip of his sword drawing small, lazy spirals in the air.

"Have you more, lass?" he asked.

"You rotted bastard," she seethed. "I have plenty more."

She came at him, wielding her sword defiantly. Daelle blocked her blow and as their steels crossed, he leaned against her, watching the fury in her face shift suddenly, swiftly to fear as her knees buckled beneath her.

"You have given your best," he said, putting his weight fully behind his blade. Qynh gasped as her legs crumpled and she fell. "It has been an impressive effort. The Comhar has taught you well."

He jerked his blade back; she did not expect his recoil and lost her balance, spilling onto her rump. He swung at her, and she drew his sword up to block him. He swung again, unanticipated, the tip of his broadsword slamming against her wrist, and she cried out, loosening her grip reflexively on her sword.

Daelle flicked his blade once more, catching the underside of her hand, driving the shaft of his sword against her tang. The Elfin steel flew from her fingers, clattering to the ground beside her. She reached for it, her hand darting, but she drew still, frozen as he caught her beneath the shelf of her chin with the edge of his sword.

"But not well enough," Daelle said. Qynh's breath tangled and her eyes flew wide with fright. "Oiche mhaith, lass," he whispered to her. *Good night.* "A pleasant sleep to you, Princess Isgaara."

Qynh's hands shot out, coiling against his swordarm, her fingers tightening against his wrist. She twisted his arm, jerking his wrist to the side, hyperextending it at a painful angle. As his fingers slackened against his hilt, Qynh swept her foot around, hooking his ankle with her boot and punting his leg out from beneath him. Daelle roared loudly as he staggered and fell, crashing to the floor. His shoulders and helmet slammed against the granite and Qynh snatched up her sword, leaping to her feet.

Daelle lifted his head, his eyes blazing with rage, and as he groped for his fallen broadsword, Qynh stomped on the blade with her boot, kicking it away from him.

"Forgive me, Daelle. My sparring etiquette abandoned me," she hissed as she stood above him. She clasped her hilt between her fists and raised the sword above her head. "It will not happen again."

She swung the blade down and he shrieked as the Elfin steel cleaved through his chain mail, neck and spine, riving his head from his shoulders in a spray of duchar.

Qynh staggered, watching the scarlet light beneath his helm flicker dimly and then fade. She spun on her heels and rushed across the room toward Kierken.

He lay on his stomach facing Ciardha's mirror. He was surrounded by blood and as she drew near to him, her sobs hitching in her throat, she could see his fingertips moving slightly, feebly.

"Kierken!" she wailed, and her tears flowed freely, streaming down her cheeks. She collapsed to her knees beside him, gathering him in her arms, cradling his head in the nest of her lap.

He moaned softly as she moved him, his voice fragile and tremulous. He began to choke, and blood splattered out of his mouth and nose, peppering his cheeks. "Qynh," he breathed. He reached up, his fingertips trembling uncontrollably as he caressed the side of her cheek. "Qynh ... le ... le do thoil..."

"I am here, Kierken," she whispered, kissing his forehead, his face, pressing her lips against his mouth and drawing a faint, hurting whimper from him. "I am here. I am with you, Kierken."

"The mirror," he gasped. "Qynh ... le do thoil, the mirror!"

"I know," she wept. "They came through the mirror, I know."

Kierken shook his head. "Nuh-n-no," he whimpered, and blood splattered from his lips. "No ... look ... look in the mirror. Trejaeran ... he ... he..." Kierken twisted against her, crying out in pain, drawing a helpless sob from Qynh.

Kierken reached for her, cupping his hand against her face. "Qynh," he whispered. "In the mirror ... just now, I could see Trejaeran. He ... he has the anam'cladh. You must ... you must go ... go through the mirror. Help him, mo'ghra. He ... he is all alone there ... against the shadow!"

"What?" Qynh blinked, raising her head, looking across the room toward the mirror. She could see nothing in the glass but her own heartbroken reflection.

"Help him," Kierken whimpered, and he moaned again. "Please, Qynh ... please ... He is at the water's edge ... It ... it is Nocturn ... He means to drink, Qynh, le do thoil ... help him ... Go to the mirror!"

He pressed his hand against her shoulder. "Go," he whispered to her. "Save him. Save us all."

Kierken slumped against her, his eyelids drooping closed. "Do not leave me," she whispered, as she eased his head from her lap. "I will do what you ask, I will go to the mirror, but please, Kierken, please do not leave me." She leaned over him, kissing him once more, and he stirred beneath her, his voice fluttering momentarily in his throat. "I love you," she said, stroking his hair.

She drew her knees beneath her and stood, taking her sword in hand. To her right, Keena and Aedhir battled the Damantas, their swords battering against blackened steel. On her left, Dagarron swung his sword wildly, striking at Lahnduren. She walked toward the mirror, her gaze fixed upon the glass.

It is the mirror of Ciardha ... her eyes and ears ... her doorway to anyplace in the Bith...

Qynh stopped before the glass, staring at her reflection, at the fighting behind her. Kierken had seen Trejaeran in the mirror, before the waters of Nocturn; he had told her that her brother meant to drink from the black spring.

he has the anam'cladh

She did not know what that meant; what *ananam'cladh* was. She gazed at the mirror and gasped suddenly, drawing back from the glass as the scene reflected within shifted before her eyes. She watched in breathless astonishment as the chamber behind her faded from view. Shadows closed in upon the glass and she gazed at the interior of an immense cavern. The darkness within the cave was punctuated only by the dim, flickering glow of torches; firelight danced in fleeting sparkles against a great and expansive lake.

He is at the water's edge, Kierken had whimpered.

it is Nocturn

Qynh leaned toward the mirror, her brows drawn as she peered through the shadows. She could see Trejaeran on his knees beside the water, genuflecting before a woman in a long, black cloak.

Ciardha

Trejaeran held a golden cup; Qynh could see torchlight gleaming against its basin as he lowered it into the water, filling it to the brim from the shallows of the lake.

"Trejaeran!" Qynh cried out, slapping her hand against the mirror. "Trejaeran, no! No! Do not!"

His hands were trembling, his eyes enormous with fear, and he glanced uncertainly at Ciardha.

Ciardha smiled at Trejaeran as he brought the cup toward his face. "Drink," she said to him.

"Trejaeran!" Qynh screamed, curling her fingers into a fist and smashing at the glass. "Trejaeran, no!"

She cried out in horror as he tilted back his head and drained the cup. A thin line of water trickled from the corner of his mouth and then he convulsed, choking violently, his fingers splaying wide as the goblet tumbled to the ground. He staggered, uttering a strangled cry, and shoved his palms against his temples. He stumbled drunkenly, his voice fluttering, his cries growing more shrill until he began to thrash his head from side to side, shrieking.

"Trejaeran!" Qynh wailed helplessly, realizing the *duchan* was upon him; it was searing through his mind,

devouring him. "Trejaeran! Oh, Sweet Mother, no! Trejaeran!"

Trejaeran floundered toward her. His mouth and nose had been bloodied, and now he hooked his fingers into desperate claws and gouged at his forehead, his nails digging into his flesh as he screamed.

"It is in me!" he shrieked, and he slammed against the glass. He leaned his shoulder against the mirror, standing directly in front of Qynh, oblivious to her as she pawed at the glass, weeping, screaming his name.

"Oh, Mathair Maith, it burns!" he wailed, tearing at his face. "It is behind my eyes! It is burning me! Mathair Maith, help me!"

"Trejaeran!" Qynh cried, and he whirled about, pressing his palms against the glass. His brows were furrowed and he shook his head violently, screaming and striking his forehead with all of his might against the mirror. "Trejaeran!" Qynh sobbed. She cast her sword aside and raised her hands, touching her palms to the mirror, placing her fingers against his.

Trejaeran's screams faded as her hands met his, separated only by the glass, and he raised his bloodied face to look at her. She could see the duchan in his eyes, scarlet flames searing, fading in and out, winking beneath the delicate blue like feeble candlelight caught in a draft.

"Qynh?" he whispered, shuddering. He fell to his knees, his hands dragging against the mirror, and Qynh knelt with him, keeping her palms raised to his.

"I am here, Trejaeran," she cried. "I am here!"

"It is in me," he whimpered, his brows twisting in anguish. "Oh ... oh, Mathair Maith, I can feel it in me. It is in my mind. Help me!"

"I cannot get through the glass!" she wailed, slapping at the mirror. "How do I get through, Trejaeran? Tell me how!"

Trejaeran looked at her and his eyes were filled with sorrow and fear. The light of the duchan flickered within him and he raised his hand once more, his fingers trembling. He pressed his palm against the glass; their old and familiar greeting to one another.

"I love you, Qynh," he whispered to her.

Qynh raised her hand, weeping, pressing her palm to his. "I am with you," she whispered. "I am with you, Trejaeran, and I love you. You are not alone. I am here. I am with you."

She could feel him within her mind; all at once, she could feel his presence as though they were in the same room together. It was more than the sight that bound Qynh to her brother; it was something deeper, stronger—something Ciardha and her Dubholc'crainn could not block or hinder. It was their ag'roinnt, their bond as twins—their love—and as Qynh touched her fingers, her palm to the glass, she felt her hand pass through the mirror as if through the surface of a tranquil pool of water. She felt her hand rest against Trejaeran's, and then she moved forward, drawing her legs beneath her and rising, never tearing her eyes away from his. She stepped through the mirror, and the sole of her boot settled against the damp, cold beach of the Nocturn shoreline. "I love you," she whispered, falling on her knees before her brother.

He crumpled against her, shuddering. "Help me," he begged. "Take the anam'cladh, Qynh, the sword.

Orlaith's sword. Set me free with it."

He shrieked suddenly, shoving her away, battering at her with his fists. He staggered to his feet and threw himself against the wall, his fingers tangling in his hair. "Do it, Qynh!" he screamed, his voice shrill and piercing. "Mathair Maith, it is eating at my eyes, my mind! Do it!"

Qynh scrambled to her feet and saw a silver sword hilt lying in the sand. It had no blade, but there was no other sword in sight, and she reached for it. Just as her hand fumbled against the hilt, a fist coiled in her hair, jerking her face up.

"Where did you come from, little heir?" Ciardha hissed, her eyes flashing, her mouth set in a snarl.

"From your mirror, you bitch," Qynh said, closing her hand into a tight fist and letting it fly. She smashed her knuckles into Ciardha's cheek, sending the Queen reeling sideways and crumpling to her knees.

Qynh saw a Damanta moving behind Ciardha's fallen form, abandoning the crumpled body of a man lying still and lifeless on the beach. It was enormous, more immense even than Daelle or Lahnduren. It grasped the hilt of the broadsword sheathed at its hip, drawing the blade loose. "You will die for that," it said to her.

She drew in a sharp breath. "Bugger me," she whispered. She scrambled away from the Damanta's advance, bending down and curling her fingers around the hilt of the anam'cladh.

"No!" Ciardha shrieked.

At Qynh's touch, as her palm gripped the silver hilt, the blade roared to life, a blinding, dazzling shaft of pure, white fire, blazing through the darkness, searing in an amazing corona. Qynh screamed at the sight of it, staggering back in fright, and the Damanta cowered from her, drawing its gauntlet toward its helm to shield its eyes.

"Qynh!" Trejaeran whimpered from behind her, and Qynh whirled, waving the flaming sword before her, squinting at its glare. He reached out, clasping her wrists between his hands, jerking the anam'cladh toward him. He threw himself against the blade, impaling himself on its pale, blazing shaft and she screamed, her shrill voice echoing through the cavern.

"Trejaeran, no!" Qynh shrieked as Trejaeran collapsed, falling away from her, crumpling to the ground. She dropped the anam'cladh and the fire immediately snuffed out. She blinked dazedly in the sudden gloom and fell to her knees, her hands fluttering over Trejaeran's body. "Oh, Sweet Mother, no!" she wailed. The front of his shirt was torn and scorched; tendrils of smoke wafted from the smoldering fabric and he lay limp and still against the sand. His eyes flew open wide and Qynh screamed again, scuttling away from him.

Trejaeran rolled onto his side and began to vomit. He cried out hoarsely as his stomach heaved and duchan spurted out of his nose, his mouth, streamed from his eyes, spattered against the ground.

Qynh felt an enormous fist close against her hair; she had forgotten about Ciardha and the Damanta, and now it yanked her to her feet. Qynh shrieked, struggling. She felt her boots leave the ground as the Damanta hoisted her aloft by her hair, and her scalp seared with pain. Qynh screamed, slapping her hands above her head, striking at the Damanta's gauntlet desperately.

"Kill her," Ciardha spat. "She is nothing. Carve her open."

"No!" Qynh yelled and then her voice stilled, her breath coming to a sharp and frightened halt as the Damanta pressed the edge of its broadsword beneath her chin. She whimpered, feeling the steel cut into her flesh, slicing into her neck, and then she screamed as the blade delved deeper, drawing blood.

Ciardha leaned down, reaching for the anam'cladh, but it shot across the sand, slipping past her hand as though drawn by an invisible line.

"No."

Ciardha whirled and saw Trejaeran crouched on his knees, his hand outstretched. The anam'cladh hilt flew across the beach toward him, settling against his palm, and as he curled his fingers against the steel, his blade, blue as the sea, bright as the sun, blazed above the tang.

Ciardha's eyes flew wide and she stared at him.

"You cannot have it," Trejaeran told her, his brows drawn and furrowed. There was a light in his eyes again, but it was not the duchar this time; it was rage. He thrust his hand toward her and Ciardha flew across the cavern, wailing shrilly. She smashed into one of the towering granite doors, cracking her head against the smooth polished stone. She fell to the ground, moaning.

Trejaeran stood, turning his gaze toward Phyndaegon. "You cannot have my sister," he said.

Qynh heard Phyndaegon utter a sharp, warbling squeal and then his fingers opened against her hair and she fell to the ground. She scrambled away, running toward Trejaeran.

"You cannot have me," Trejaeran said, and he held his palm out toward Phyndaegon, raising his arm in the air. Phyndaegon's body went rigid; his fingers splayed wide and the broadsword dropped from his hand. He began to rise in the air, his sabatons lifting from the sand.

"Trejaeran!" Qynh gasped, staring in amazement as Trejaeran lifted the Damanta into the air. Her brother wore the same grave mask of fierce determination she had seen so long ago at the Council of the Comhar, when he had reached into Eoghan Drouin's mind.

"Take this, Qynh," he said, tossing the anam'cladh to her. As the hilt left his hand, the brilliant blue fire diminished; as Qynh caught it between her palms, the dazzling spear of white fire appeared once more.

"Use the anam'cladh, Qynh. Kill Ciardha. Run it through her blackened heart and end this."

"But I..." she began, and he turned to look at her. His face softened, some of the terrible severity draining from his eyes.

"It is the only way to defeat her," he said. "I cannot wield it against her, Qynh. Not now, not in full. I have tasted of the duchar and it is gone from me, but I can still feel it. I will always feel its taint, its shadow upon my heart. To bear the anam'cladh, to call its full power forth—to kill Ciardha—your heart must be pure." He smiled at her softly. "It is you, Qynh," he said. "All along, it has been you, not me. You are the one."

"The prophecy," Qynh breathed.

"Yes," he told her, nodding. "See it fulfilled, Qynh."

Qynh's brows drew together and she nodded her head. "Alright, then," she said. "Let us end this." She turned on her heels and walked across the beach toward Ciardha.

Trejaeran returned his attention to Phyndaegon, and he slowly, deliberately began to fold his fingers toward his palm. As his hand moved, as his fingers curled, Phyndaegon's body began to curl as well. His knees drew toward his chest, and his shoulders hunkered, collapsing in toward his sternum. He began to mewl, his voice pathetic and pleading beneath his helm, and as Trejaeran's fingers closed more tightly, his body twisted further. The steel of his armor began to groan and squall as it bent and dented, its seams bursting wide. Phyndaegon's cries ripped into agonized shrieks as ligaments tore loose from their moorings, as bones crushed and splintered and his body contorted.

"Long live Lythaniele's prophecy," Trejaeran whispered, crushing Phyndaegon, feeling it within his mind as the Damanta's spine snapped, his ribs collapsed, his skull shattered beneath his helm. He let his fingers fly open wide and he shoved his palm forward, watching as Phyndaegon's broken body flew out over the black, glistening waters of Nocturn, disappearing into the shadows, splashing into the depths.

Trejaeran could feel the sight coursing through his mind. If he closed his eyes, he could make himself aware of every cognizant mind within the Bith; he could feel them all within him. He could see Eisos waging battle in the forests of the southrealm, a place called Tirnag'crann, where the Donnag'crann lived. He could sense Dagarron in Belgaeran; he could feel the hilt of Dagarron's sword between his hands as he brandished the blade, swinging it toward Lahnduren. He could sense the Abhacan above him on the terraces of Dorchadas, an army of warriors who had come to rescue their kin from Ciardha and now waged war to rescue him as well. He felt Kierken's pain and fear as he lay dying in the tower of the royal palace; he sensed Eoghan's suffering as he lay on the patios of the dark tower.

Trejaeran could feel them all within his mind, and the sensation, the awareness filled him with strength and power. The trapdoor had blown open wide within his mind, and this time there would be no closing it. This time there would be no need.

Qynh strode across the beach, the anam'cladh ablaze in her hand as she approached Ciardha. The Queen had managed to stagger to her feet, and she reeled along the water's edge.

She heard Qynh's footsteps in the sand and wheeled about, her eyes flown wide. "It is not possible!" she shrieked. "You are nothing! Nothing!"

She thrust her hand, and Qynh yelped as her feet flew out from beneath her. She landed on her back in the pebbled sand, her legs sprawled, the anam'cladh tumbling from her fingers. The pale fire of the blade fell dark and Qynh cried out again, hoarse and strangled, as she felt something invisible, as cold as ice, as unyielding as steel suddenly clamp about her throat. This unseen, crushing hand shoved her back with amazing force and speed across the narrow width of the beach until her shoulders, the back of her head, smashed into the stone wall of the cave, knocking the senses from her.

"Do you think that you can stop me?" Ciardha hissed, and she began to laugh, a shrill cackle.

Qynh's hands fluttered toward her face and she grimaced, moaning. She glanced to her left and saw the man crumpled on the ground, Trejaeran's father, Petrich stirring. He looked at Qynh, his face bloodstained and caked with duchar. "No," he whispered, trying, to stagger to his feet. "Leave them alone."

Ciardha threw back her head and screeched with laughter. She swung her hand toward Petrich and he flew through the air, striking the wall beside Qynh. He cried out loudly, breathlessly as he slammed

against the stone.

"You cannot stop me! You cannot defeat me!" Ciardha shrieked, and the invisible gauntlet coiled around Qynh's throat again, closing with brutal strength, crushing her windpipe. Qynh gargled frantically, struggling, smacking helplessly at the open, empty air before her face. Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see Petrich fighting desperately as well, his legs kicking, his breath wheezing. Ciardha throttled them both at once, and she swung her gaze toward the fallen anam'cladh, her brows pinched with rage as she extended her other palm toward the hilt, willing it to her hand.

"My time has come!" Ciardha cried. "The age of the Darkness, of the Na'Siogai, has come!"

She reached out for the anam'cladh as it flew toward her. Just as she was about to close her fingers about the gleaming silver hilt, the sword wavered, freezing in mid-air. She blinked, drawing in a sharp, startled breath, and then the anam'cladh flew away from her, sailing across the beach and dropping into the sand within Qynh's reach.

"Your time on this land has passed, Ciardha," Trejaeran said, walking down the length of the beach, his blue eyes ablaze with murderous intensity. He turned to his father and sister and drew his hand lightly in the air.

Qynh felt the mashing force against her neck suddenly disappear, as though a taut line had just been severed. She slumped against the ground, clutching at her throat and gasping loudly, dragging in whooping mouthfuls of air. Petrich collapsed beside her, crumpling into the sand and moaning softly.

"The time of the Na'Siogai has passed," Trejaeran said.

"Rotted, half-Elf, bastard pup," Ciardha spat at him. "You cannot defy me!"

She raised her hand to him, but the blow from her mind, meant to send him sailing across the cavern, only made him stumble slightly.

The corner of Trejaeran's mouth lifted in a cold and mirthless smile. "You are bound in that form, Ciardha," he told her. He raised his hand, bringing his fingers together swiftly, sharply, and Ciardha shrieked in pain as the bones in her forearm snapped like dry-rotted wood. A new and crooked joint seemed to form between her wrist and elbow as the bones splintered and folded, piercing through her flesh in jagged, bloody fragments.

"You cannot flee from it; you cannot escape. I will not let you," Trejaeran hissed, and he shoved his hand forward, throwing her across the sand, sending her careening again into the rocks of the cave wall. "And while you wear that form, Ciardha, you are as bound by pain—by mortality—as the rest of us."

He glanced at Qynh, watching as she rose, taking the anam'cladh in hand. "Do it, Qynh," he said.

Ciardha stumbled to her feet and backed away from Qynh, clutching her broken, bleeding arm against her belly, muttering rapidly, frantically as she reeled.

"Iompreann me ... o'thuidh uisce'milis," Ciardha hissed. "Ligaim me codladh ionam do doimhneactas ... ligaim me faim neart seo..."

"No, Ciardha," Trejaeran said. "You will not escape into the waters this time."

He nodded his head, and immediately, her voice cut short, as though he had clamped his palm against her mouth and stifled her. "I am stronger than you, Ciardha," he said. "I know it now, and I can keep you here."

"I am stronger than you, too," Qynh said. She spun the anam'cladh between her hands, watching the fire dance against the walls, the ground, the water. "You think you can discount me? That I am nothing?"

She drew the flaming blade of the anam'cladh back, and Ciardha stood before her, her eyes flown wide, her body and voice immobilized by her brother's hand.

"I am something, Ciardha," Qynh said. "I am one of a pair, the twin heirs of Tiralainn. Our time has come, Ciardha, not yours. The prophecy lies fulfilled with us both."

She rammed the anam'cladh forward, stepping fully into her lunge as she drove the pale fire through Ciardha's heart. Ciardha convulsed, her body crumpling forward, her hands slapping against Qynh's shoulders. She collapsed to the ground, the scarlet light fading in her eyes, her mouth frozen in a startled, disbelieving gape.

Qynh staggered away from the Cailleach. "It is over," she whispered, her fingers loosening against the anam'cladh. The hilt fell to the ground, the bright flame of its blade faded into darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lahnduren stood no chance against Dagarron. The King had spoken truly; Dagarron had waited for that opportunity for sixteen years; sixteen long years filled with loss and sacrifice, grief and rage. He brandished those years behind every blow of his sword, every strike and swing, each parry and attack. He fought not only for himself, but for Herdranges, his friend and cousin; for Deog, whom he had held as close to his heart as a brother; for his beloved Kierken, whose blood yet flowed against the stone floor of the palace tower; and for Lythaniele, the queen he had once served, who was still defiled and tormented by Ciardha's evil taint.

Lahnduren struggled, but he was no match for Dagarron's relentless rage, and when at last Dagarron swung his sword wide, slamming his Elfin steel against the shaft of Lahnduren's blade, splintering the blackened sword into a shower of shards and fragments, Lahnduren crumpled to the floor.

"You cannot kill me!" he shrieked, cowering. Dagarron stepped toward him, his blade poised in hand. Lahnduren kicked feebly with his feet, trying to scoot away from the man's advance. "You cannot kill me!" he screamed again. "It is not in the prophecy!"

Dagarron thought of the words Eoghan had offered him at Orinein. He smiled at Lahnduren, the corners of his mouth lifting in a thin, humorless smirk. "A wise man once told me no matter what our prophecies tell us, we each ultimately decide our destinies for ourselves," he said, spinning the hilt of his sword against his palm. "Here is your destiny, Lahnduren. Come and claim it."

He thrust his sword forward, ramming it through the middle of Lahnduren's chest. Lahnduren shrieked hoarsely and Dagarron pressed both of his palms against the pommel, shoving his full weight down against the blade, plunging it straight through Lahnduren's heart. Lahnduren's hands thrashed against him, pummeling, and then fell limply to the floor.

Nearby, Aedhir and Keena dispatched the last of the Damantas. Kierken lay sprawled and motionless on the floor, and close to the enormous mirror, Dagarron could see Daelle lying prone, a pool of duchan spreading widely about his shoulders.

Dagarron drew in a sharp breath as he realized Qynh was gone.

"Qynh!" he cried, rushing toward the center of the room. He spun around, looking for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. "Qynh!"

"What is it? Has she fallen?" Aedhir exclaimed, darting toward Dagarron. He was battered and bloody, limping, his eyes flown wide in alarm.

"She is gone!" Dagarron cried, still staggering about in wide, helpless circles. "She is gone, Aedhir!" he said frantically. "Where could she be?"

"The chamber door is still closed," Aedhir said. "We would have heard her, seen her—seen something—if she had fled."

Keena limped over to Daelle's body. She looked toward the men and snapped her fingers to glean Aedhir's attention. When he met her gaze, she nodded grimly at the fallen Commander of Caladh, drawing her bloody fingertip along her throat. She raised an eyebrow, impressed, and nodded once more.

"She killed him," Aedhir whispered, astounded, turning to Dagarron. "Qynh killed Daelle!"

Kierken moaned softly, weakly from behind them, and Dagarron turned, his expression twisting with anguish as he ran to the fallen Donnag'crann.

"Kierken, oh, a'mac," Dagarron breathed, dropping to his knees in the broad puddle of Kierken's blood. He pressed his hands against Kierken's cheeks, cupping the boy's face between his palms.

"Kierken," he whispered helplessly, staring at the horrible, gaping wound in his chest. He could hear air whistling feebly through the Elf's punctured lung as he struggled to draw breath. At Dagarron's touch, his soft voice, Kierken moved, his brows knitting in pain, blood gurgling from between his lips.

"I am here, Kierken," Dagarron said. He leaned over Kierken, pressing his lips against his forehead. "I am here, a'mac. Do not be frightened. I am with you."

His voice dissolved into sobs, and he shuddered against Kierken, clutching at the boy helplessly. Keena knelt beside him, tears falling from her eyes as she lay her hands gently against Dagarron's shoulders.

A sound, distant and faint, drifted through the windows of the tower. "What is that?" Aedhir asked. "Do you hear?"

He crossed over to the windows, throwing back the latches and shoving the hinged panes open. They could all hear the sound clearly now; hundreds of voices raised together in unison, cheering in triumphant joy.

"Those are not the cries of Damantas. It is the Comhar!" Aedhir exclaimed, his eyes round and bright. "They are cheering! It is the army—they are cheering!"

"But why?" Dagarron asked. "What does it mean?"

"It means it is over," Qynh said from behind him, and he spun about to see her standing before the mirror.

"Qynh!" Dagarron exclaimed. "Where did you—?"

"It is over, Dagarron," she said again. "I have been to Dorchadas. Ciardha is dead. Without her power to sustain the duchar, all of her Damantas have fallen."

She went to his side, crumpling to her knees. "Kierken!" she gasped. She stared up at Dagarron, her eyes flooding with tears. "We have to help him!"

"Qynh," Dagarron said gently, reaching for her. "There is nothing we can do, muileach. The wound, it is grievous. He is beyond our help now." He lowered his face as more tears came to his eyes.

"No, that is not true," Qynh said, shaking her head. "Trejaeran told me we could still save him."

Dagarron blinked, startled. "Trejaeran?"

"I told you. I have been to Dorchadas. I saw him there and we defeated Ciardha together," she said. "Trejaeran said you told him about something called adhmaid le'draiocht when he was a boy, the summer you came to teach him to read. He told me to ask you about it, that you would know what it means. He said it could save Kierken. What is adhmaid le'draiocht?"

"It is an ancient Banaltra healing ritual," Dagarron said. "The adhmaid le'draiocht—the magic of the wood—is when a member of the Banaltra aicmeach would beseech the spirit of a tree to help heal an Elf of his injuries, to share its lifeforce with the Elf, its spirit to give the Elf strength once more."

Qynh's eyes flew wide with excitement. "Then that is it!" she cried. "The maple tree in the garden—we can bring Kierken beneath its boughs and figure out some way to beseech the tree, to ask it to heal him!"

"Qynh," Dagarron said, his eyes sorrowful and pained. "It takes a Banaltra to perform the ritual. I do not know how it goes with any certainty. The tree can choose not to help."

"It will help him," Qynh insisted. "I know it will."

"Qynh," Dagarron said, his voice hesitant and uncertain. Kierken whimpered, his voice weak and faint, and Dagarron turned to the young Elf, his expression softening with heartache.

"We have to try," Qynh said, reaching out and laying her hand against his. "Please, Dagarron, we must. He is dying!"

Dagarron nodded. "You are right," he whispered. "Let us get him to the garden."

Dagarron gathered Kierken in his arms, carrying him as they hurried down the stairs from the tower. Kierken moved against him, moaning feebly, and Dagarron whispered to him. "Stay with me, a'mac. Just awhile longer, Kierken. Stay with me."

They brought him outside. Dagarron bore Kierken beneath the boughs of the maple. "You will have to speak to the tree, muileach," he said to Qynh. "You are the only one among us of Elfin blood."

"What do I say?" she whispered.

Dagarron touched her face, cupping his palm against her cheek. "Whatever is in your heart, Qynh," he said.

Qynh closed her eyes, pressing one hand against the cragged bark of the maple's broad trunk and resting the other gently against Kierken's chest. She lifted her chin, tilting her head toward the canopy of leaves above her.

Please, she whispered, opening her mind to the tree. Please, I beg of you. Hear me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Six weeks later, as the sun sank beneath the horizon at the end of a glorious day of celebration, Rhyden stole out onto one of the palace's secluded stone terraces, not the least bit surprised to find Trejaeran standing alone by the stone balustrade, a smoldering pipe cupped against one palm, a half-emptied snifter of brimague in the other.

"Here you are, bidein," he said, smiling. Trejaeran turned his head, as unstartled to see Rhyden approach as Rhyden had been to discover him there.

"Rhyden, beannacht," Trejaeran said, the corners of his mouth lifting. He blew a soft stream of smoke out from a small part in his lips and turned his gaze once more toward the sunset.

"Why are you out here all by yourself?" Rhyden asked, coming to stand beside him. He leaned his elbows against the rail and pressed himself forward, mimicking his friend's casual, comfortable posture. He glanced at Trejaeran and arched his brow. "There is quite a celebration underway inside. You might want to come and see for yourself. After all, it is not everyday that one's twin sister is married."

Trejaeran laughed. "I have seen it for myself, Rhyden, thank you," he said. "I know it is splendid. I have only just come from there."

Rhyden studied him for a long and pensive moment, and Trejaeran glanced at him. "I am leaving tomorrow for Edenvale, you know," he said. "Poppa and I together, at the dawn's first light."

Rhyden nodded. "Does it bother you?" he asked. "That Kierken will be King now? Is ... is that why you are leaving?"

Trejaeran blinked at him, genuinely surprised. "No, Rhyden," he said. "Of course not. Kierken will be an excellent King. I have never wanted the crown."

"I think you would be an excellent King, Trejaeran," Rhyden told him, quietly. "I would trust in you, I know."

Trejaeran smiled, a genuine smile this time and not one of the fleeting shadows that had seemed to hold sway over the corners of his mouth lately. "You are biased, I think, Rhyden Fabhcun," he said, balancing his pipe against the railing so that he could reach out and tug one of Rhyden's long, elaborate plaits. "You have only known me since birth, practically."

Rhyden laughed, swatting at Trejaeran's hand, catching his friend's palm against his own. "Yes, you are the brother I have never wanted, bidein," he told him fondly.

For a moment, everything was just as Rhyden remembered, just as it had been before the ides of March, before the descent of the shadow. It passed all too fleetingly and they stood together again in silence, looking out over the balustrade, watching the backslash of vivid colors fading from the sky in the wake of the sunset.

"And what about you, Rhyden?" Trejaeran asked, glancing toward him, his brow raised. "Where will the dawn of this new day take you?"

"Who is to say?" Rhyden said with a shrug. "Father will remain here, at Belgaeran. Kierken and Qynh have offered him a generous appointment to their royal council. Mum will stay, too, of course, but as for me?" He sighed. "Qynh asked if I would like to be her ambassador to Iarnrod. They have signed a treaty of some sort with the Abhacan king, you know. The Abhacan have their own kingdom again, all official and proper, in the eastern Midland Mountains."

"I know, yes," Trejaeran nodded.

"It is nice of her and all," Rhyden said. "But I do not fancy myself as much of an ambassador. Far too many fancy clothes and prissy parties for my liking."

Trejaeran laughed, shaking his head and taking another long draw from his pipe.

"I will miss you, bidein," Rhyden said quietly.

Trejaeran blinked, and his gaze fell to his toes. "I will miss you, too, Rhyden," he said. He looked up, meeting Rhyden's gaze, and his eyes glistened with sudden tears. "You could come with us," he whispered. "With Poppa and me to Edenvale."

Rhyden shook his head slowly. "I do not think I could be happy there again, Trejaeran," he said softly. "I feel as though destiny is calling me, and I have only just begun to see where she might lead me."

Trejaeran reached out, cupping his hand against the back of his friend's neck. He stepped toward Rhyden, and the two embraced. Trejaeran felt tears spill down his cheeks as he pressed his face against Rhyden's long, heavy sheaf of hair.

"To greatness, Rhyden," he whispered. "She is leading you to greatness."

The evening of Qynh and Kierken's wedding found Dagarron much as it had Trejaeran, alone on one of the tower terraces, overlooking Lythaniele's rose garden. He held a cup of brimague in his hand, his eyes distant and thoughtful as he regarded the sunset.

He heard sudden, quiet laughter from below and followed the sound with his gaze. He watched Iasal and Airrenigh walk out into the garden, stealing away from the wedding celebration. Airrenigh laughed as Iasal slipped his arms about her waist, drawing her near. He lifted her feet from the ground and twirled her in a slow circle, drawing giggles from her. She pressed his face between her hands as he set her daintily down, and he smiled as she kissed him.

"He left the Buion aicmeach today," Wyndetta said softly, coming to stand beside Dagarron on the

terrace. She folded her hands together and leaned her elbows against the railing, peering out over the garden. "He sent word by courier this morrow to Tirnag'crann."

"Yes," he said, nodding. "He spoke with me about it last evening. He and Airrenigh will marry, and he will stay with her at Orinein."

"He loves her so," Wyndetta remarked, smiling as she gazed down at Iasal and Airrenigh. "She is his a'leitheid, his match. She completes him, makes him whole. It is wondrous indeed, that discovery, when you find the soul the Good Mother intended you to be bound to eternally. We all have one, I think, but it is a rare and precious thing when you find one another in this life."

Dagarron glanced at her, but she did not avert her gaze from the garden.

They heard Eoghan's voice booming out in the evening: "Hoah! Here is where they are hiding!"

Iasal and Airrenigh turned back toward the palace, laughing as their friends joined them in the garden. Fiontan walked toward them, limping still and leaning on a cane. Eoghan shuffled outside with pained, tentative footsteps, his arm about Keena's shoulders to help support him. Aedhir strolled beside him with an amicable and steadying hand against the man's broad shoulders. The group stood below, their laughter like music as the daylight waned, and Wyndetta smiled again.

"It is a good day," she said.

"Muise," Dagarron agreed. *Indeed.*

"Our new bride and groom are looking for you, by the way," she said, glancing at him. "I think mayhap Qynh is ready for another dance."

Dagarron groaned. "Hoah, she would see me keel over with exhaustion," he said.

"You will return to the party, will you not?"

"In a while," he said. He glanced at her and smiled. "I know you will not let me tarry here alone longer than is polite fashion."

Wyndetta laughed. "Tressach is noticeably absent from the festivities," she remarked, and Dagarron snorted, his brows drawing together. "People are asking after him," she said. "He is one of the heroes of the day; he led the westward assault in the siege. It seems improper that he is not here."

"Tressach is no hero," Dagarron said.

"I heard he has returned to his home in Ciarrai County," Wyndetta said. "With a broken nose and four of his front teeth missing. Strange wounds from a battle, do you not think?"

"Not to me," Dagarron muttered, his mouth turned down in a frown. He set his glass aside and absently fondled the back of his bruised, swollen knuckles. A glance told him Wyndetta had not missed these fading wounds, and he shook his head. "It is a long story," he said. "For now, let us just say that there was more behind Tressach's endeavors than met the eye."

"And you took him to task for it," Wyndetta said.

"Indeed I did," Dagarron replied with a nod. "I will tell you about it, muirmin. But not at this moment, not on this day. I would not see such a joyous occasion spoiled."

Wyndetta pressed her lips together, her brows raised as she nodded. She watched as their friends in the garden made their way indoors again. The corners of her mouth lifted as she watched Eoghan hook his arm fondly about Iasal's shoulders, drawing him against his chest. Eoghan canted his wrist and tousled Iasal's hair, making the Elf laugh.

"I am thinking of traveling to Edenvale tomorrow," Dagarron said softly, drawing her gaze.

"You will not remain here?" she asked. "You would leave Kierken and Qynh?"

"Kierken and Qynh have more help, advisors, and friends than they have probably ever dreamed possible," he said with a laugh. "And they are both fully capable of taking care of themselves. They do not need me."

"You have been like a father to them both, and they love you for it," Wyndetta said. "They will always need you, Dagarron."

He smiled softly. "Petrich and Trejaeran are leaving with the dawn, and Eisos and I ... we have talked of me taking over his plot of land." She looked at him, her brow arched and he laughed again. "No, I have not been struck daft. I grew up on a farm, and I have long entertained the notion of trying my hand at it again."

"You are worried for Trejaeran," Wyndetta said.

He lowered his face toward the ground. "I am, yes," he said. "A shadow has come to pass over him, and it lingers on his heart even now. I can see it in his eyes."

"One cannot have gone through what he has these past months and not feel some effect," Wyndetta said.

"He is different now," Dagarron whispered, anguished.

"We are all different now," she told him. "He will never again be the boy who left us in Orinein for the north. But he still has the same heart. There is still a tenderness, a kindness that no shadow can touch or taint."

"The sight is so strong within him, and Qynh told me he unleashed it fully, brutally against Phyndaegon and Ciardha. In all of my days, Wyndetta, I could not have imagined such immense forces, such horrifying capacities in his soul."

"Trejaeran says he can control it."

"But can he?" Dagarron looked at her. "Or does it now hold sway over him? Is it the ghost of the duchan we see in his eyes? Or is it the darkness of his own mind, his own power? I am afraid for him."

"We must trust Trejaeran, Dagarron," she said. "Trust him, trust in him. Be patient with him, and kind. He is hurting. We cannot see his wounds; we cannot heal them with Banaltra wiles. Time alone will mend his spirit, his heart. All we can do in the meanwhile is love him the best that we can."

He arched his brow. "Have you always been so wise?"

She laughed. "Of course. You are only just now realizing?"

They chuckled and a comfortable silence settled between them. They stood together and watched the sun disappear beneath the horizon.

"Come with me tomorrow," he said. "Come with me to the north, to Edenvale. We can build a life there, a new life, together."

"And why would I do that?" she asked, glancing at him, her brow arched.

He looked at her for a moment and then found the words he should have offered to her a long time ago. "Because you are my a'leitheid," he said. "My match, Wyndetta."

She smiled. "You are only just now realizing that, too?" she asked.

Dagarron drew her in his arms and she raised onto her tiptoes, wrapping her arms around his neck, kissing him.

Qynh awoke to find Kierken sitting up beside her in bed, with his customary candle aglow on the bedside table, his favorite book of poems opened in his hands. She rolled toward him, murmuring sleepily, and he smiled softly, tenderly.

"Beannacht, my Queen," he whispered, raising his arm so that she could nestle against him, pressing her cheek against his chest.

"Beannacht yourself, my King," she said. She tilted her face toward his and he kissed her.

"Does the light disturb you?" he asked.

"No," she said with a smile, shaking her head. She brushed her fingertips lightly across the stark, scarlet line of scarring that cleaved a path down the center of his rib cage, nearly to his heart.

"I do not mind putting it out," he offered. "I know you would rise early in the morrow to see Trejaeran and Petrich off."

Qynh grew quiet at this. She was troubled and saddened by her brother's impending departure, and Kierken stroked her hair, kissing her forehead, offering her comfort.

"Dagarron means to go with them," she said at last, her gaze distant and forlorn.

"I know," he said. "He told me. I could sense it in his mind even before then. For several days now, he has thought about it."

"He is worried about Trejaeran," she whispered.

"You are worried about him, too, mo'ghra."

Qynh pressed her lips together and nodded. She blinked against the sudden, unbidden sting of tears. "I feel as though he has already left in many ways. And I ... I miss him so."

He kissed her forehead and she looked up, letting his mouth settle sweetly, lingering against hers. "You are not sorry?" she asked.

"For what? Marrying you?" he asked with a smile.

"That, yes," she said. "And giving up your Ag'iarraidh, your home in Tirnag'crann ... leaving your family behind."

"I have no regrets, Qynh," he told her and he dropped her a wink. "And thus far marriage has proven far more fun than my Ag'iarraidh."

Qynh slapped his stomach and he laughed. His expression softened, and he touched her face. "As for home? My home is wherever you are, Qynh."

She smiled at him. "You are a goose," she said fondly.

He pinched her nose lightly between his knuckles, drawing laughter from her. "Yes, and you are stuck with me now, my bride."

She sat up, poking her fingers beneath his arms, tickling him. "Hoah, bring back Ciardha!" she cried. "Surely the duchan is a kinder fate than this!"

Kierken jerked beneath her hands, drawing his knees toward his chest, laughing. "Is that so?" he exclaimed, and he pounced playfully at her, clasping her wrists and laying her back atop the covers. He leaned over her as she squirmed against him, giggling madly and twisting her arms in half-hearted effort to free herself.

A small, slim parcel, bound in pale blue paper and fastened with gold twine, had rested in his lap against the embroidered quilts; as he had moved, it had fallen against the sheets and Qynh saw it now for the first time.

"Hoah, what is this?" she asked, reaching for the package.

"I nearly forgot," he said, drawing onto his knees. "It is a gift from my mother. She gave it to me just as we were leaving the celebration to come upstairs."

"It is nice that you have shared it with me," she said, pretending to frown.

Kierken arched his brow at her. "Forgive me, my lady," he said, pinching his fingertips and thumb together and brushing them against his forehead and chin. The corner of his mouth hooked wryly. "It is my wedding night, you know. I had other matters on my mind by the time we reached the chamber."

Qynh laughed, shaking her head. "Here, then," she said, handing the gift to him. "Open it and see what it is."

Kierken turned the package over against his lap, sliding his fingertip beneath the twine and easing it free from the paper. "Do not be too excited, mo'ghra. Knowing Maime, it is a book."

He let the golden cord fall against the bedclothes and broke the wax seal holding the wrapping paper in place. He turned the edges of the paper aside to reveal a slender, leatherbound book within. "I should have made a wager with you," he told Qynh, glancing up and chuckling. He lifted the book from the

paper and balanced the spine against his hand, letting it fall open. The pages inside were all sheets of blank parchment.

"A leabhar de'laen," Kierken said.

"A new book of days for you," Qynh said, meeting his gaze and smiling.

Kierken turned to the inside front cover of the book, where Qynh could see lines had been written. Kierken read the words inscribed on the parchment and his mouth unfolded in a smile.

"What does it say?" she asked.

"Here, mo'ghra," he said, offering her the book. "Read for yourself."

She held the leabhar de'laen and she read the brief but tender note Kierken's mother had written against the cover.

Kierken—

A new book for a new day, and for all of the new legends yet to come.

—Maime

Qynh let the book fall closed in her hands and she looked at Kierken, smiling again. "I think that is as good a sentiment as I have heard all day," she remarked.

He reached for her, drawing her against him. "Muise," he murmured as he kissed her. *Indeed.*