**Chapter 1 On a Mission**

**C**iara rubbed her nose glaring at the offending door and cursed at it like an old sea dog. Yeah, like it could hear her, or cared. It’s not like the bloody thing attacked her. Striking back at a bloody door wouldn’t do her any good. And, if she wasn’t desperately clinging to the edge of the anxiety cliff, she might’ve closed the door politely and forgotten the whole bloody mess. Nay, the eejits inside taunting her didn’t deserve forgiveness. She threw her weight against the door fighting the freakish storm front—shoved it with a grunt, banging against the wrought-iron railing. Ciara turned her back to the door, leaned into it, creating an Elf-sized door stop.

She whoop-whooped and punched a fist in victory. The arctic wind blasted newspapers and pamphlets into the air to fall like parade day confetti in the waiting room. Aye, the door would bloody well remain open until she felt the whankers understood her chilly response to their snorts, snickers, and lewd comments. Ciara rubbed her sore nose and cursed through the stars in her vision at the sadistic gimps who got their rocks off from her embarrassing moment.

Oh yeah. The fools ran down the hall crying for mommy. Ciara Talked fire to her middle finger and waved it at the stooks with a little vertical umph added for effect. She released the door and thrust her hip at the bloody thing to help it along. The massive slab of carved oak boomed against the frame and rattled all six doors to City Hall. But, damn it to nine hells, she had hoped for something more dramatic—something like the wall caving in on their fat heads. Aye, something like that might’ve quenched her outrage.

Her fingers found the hilt of her favorite knife.

A wintery blast rocked her on her feet. The chill shove doused her anger like the gods stepped in to wake her—or save her from irritating foolishness. Ciara clenched her fists and cursed herself for the thought of violence. Aye, Sheridan wouldn’t approve a lethal response either, and she couldn’t afford to hang around for a trial.

Aye, her Máistir would scorch her pointed ears for her lack of discipline, zero tolerance, and no bloody sense of humor. It was, after all, only her bloody pride injured. Sheridan taught injury to pride created callouses on the soul, toughened the heart, and made future incidents less painful because people learned to deflect prideful moments with experience.

OK, damn it. There’d be no bloodletting to appease her desire for revenge. Nope. The fools only injured her pride, and she was taught to ignore words used as weapons. A few deep breaths freezing her nose hairs frosted over her anger and iced her resolve to play nice. Aye, she’d forget the incident. Instead, she pulled her black beret from a pocket and slapped it on her head. She set it proper. Oh Yeah, her new Master Ranger tab had to show prominent and proud. Ciara spat a few choice words at the storm—the bloody source of the winds that caused the fiasco with the door. Bloody hells, when she arrived, the stars sparkled in a brightening sky void of clouds. Aye, but nature’s beast loomed above in all its dark glory and potent energy for the world to see.

The humungous winter storm that gathered in the time it took to register the wagon, and collect the papers from a brain dead clerk, raged across the western horizon like a monstrous warped mushroom twisting in a stew of gloomy nastiness over the shops on Broad Street. The pretty little globes of light atop the fancy poles lining City Hall Square would remain lit for hours longer because of the storm. A bloody snowstorm that shouldn’t exist so early in the season. Bel’s shiny balls, the first week of October hadn’t entered the bloody history books, and already a tumultuous winter storm roiled in Somerset’s western sky.

Yeah, the cloud formation was gorgeous, and in a better frame of mind, Ciara might appreciate the raw beauty and the contrast of morning’s golden light edging the dark and dismal tempest, but it just wasn’t right, damn it. What did Sheridan declare last night? Oh, her Máistir insisted Ciara had no cause for concern—Second Harvest should hang on for eight more weeks of warm weather. Well, her favorite Teacher should take a gander at all the silvery-purply-black, churning, and angry clouds festering like a nasty bruise in the frosty glint of first-light. Oh bloody hells, she forgot to thank the workers in the registration office for opening early for her. Hah, no skin off her nose. Well, considering the disaster with the door, it was a bad choice of words, but it didn’t matter. Ciara was one sweetheart of an Elf who wouldn’t be around past noon. Sheridan was sending her home—damn lovely, stubborn man.

Aye, well, glaring at the tumultuous clouds wouldn’t bring back sunshine and spring up daisies across the land, and considering her predicament with Sheridan wouldn’t change his pig-headed intentions. Oh yeah, her mood was about as frigid and gloomy as the clouds that would bloody well dump the hail or snow with a vengeance. And there she stood in just her tactical leathers and a silk blouse with nothing under it to hide the effects of the chill. Aye, the snow would ruin one of Sheridan’s favorite shirts, or so he claimed.

Her nose itched, and she scratched at the annoyance glaring at the clouds with a new awareness. Magic saturated the air. The bloody storm was Talked into existence. Some bloody mage intentionally Talked the storm into place, and it wouldn’t be anyone who lived in Somerset—not anyone with half a brain. The snow and plummeting temperatures would ruin the Second Harvest crops. She’d bet the Farm the enemy had their filthy paws in the storm’s appearance. Bloody hells, even if the storm intrigued her, Ciara couldn’t hang around gawking at gold-edged clouds, she had a job to do for her handsome Ranger.

The vital papers went in the hip pocket of her tactical pants, she tugged her Ranger beret tight and huffed an angry breath to forget the idiots inside. One more challenging sneer up at the turmoil in the sky and Ciara ran west heading back, registration papers for the new wagon secured, mission accomplished.

She hustled past the dark shops on Broad Street in the pre-dawn chill, turned left on South Street, right on Ranger Way and through the gates returning a polite salute to the sleepy guard. Another young person in need of caffeine. Maybe he and the nearly comatose city clerk who helped her stepped out together last night. Or, got lucky all night.

Ciara entered the Farm—the only farm in the area at one time, and unimaginative people named it the Farm. Duh. The bloody name stuck even after the kingdom granted the huge tract of land to the Rangers. The Farm held the distinction of being the headquarters and training grounds of the 10th Mountain Rangers and Esak’s (Eastern American Kingdom’s) Guardians. And, by the bright gods’ blessings, her home with Sheridan for five years. The Farm incorporated the town of Somerset inside its boundaries, but the town’s sole purpose was to support the Rangers—and to make Sheridan a fortune with his successful enterprises.

The Ranger’s kitchen emitted teases of a delicious breakfast from the chimneys. She almost stopped when her stomach grumbled, but after a stutter-step, she ran past. She didn’t want him to wait on her. Ciara jogged across the staging field, hugging the exercise buildings that blocked the frosty wind. She glanced up at the torture tower Sheridan had them run up and slide down—run and slide down, over and over until her legs gave out, and he’d ask them to do one more just for grins and giggles. It was one bit of history she wouldn’t miss. Aye, it toned her legs and butt, strengthened her stomach and back as Sheridan promised it would, but good gods, she didn’t call it the torture tower for fun. It boasted thirty-five tall steps corkscrewing up around the pole they used to slide down. Ciara’s blood stained many of the blasted steps. She slowed a wee bit on the culvert bridge icing over in bloody September, damn it. She picked up speed entering the area folks dubbed Barntown.

Barntown. The second most boring name the Rangers could ever conceive—West Somerset made more sense, but nobody asked her. Barntown was a damn village in its own right where Rangers housed their squires, laborers, horses, mules, wagons, and a shit-load of other critters and junk in hundreds of tall buildings packed neatly in squares with fenced off paddocks at the center. Shining gods forbid two stallions shared the same yard if a frisky mare escaped her stall.

Stately, three and four-storied barns painted in earthy colors nestled on tree-lined streets of brown cobblestone. Well, stones covered in a layer of old hay usually until cleaning day or a bloody storm cleared it away by blowing bits and straws to smack her face too bloody often. Ciara slowed to a walk on the hay-strewn bricks. New riding boots were not the ideal choice for slick surfaces, and she wasn’t about to slip and fall on her ass with young squires, hostlers, and stable hands around to witness. Three of the young troublemakers bumped her racing by pushing and shoving each other in typical asinine fashion on their way to breakfast.

The Ranger squires and laborers lived above the stables in apartments turning Barntown into a pubescent nightmare at times. Aye, when the Rangers returned for conventions, overflowing the town with angst and adolescent hormones, she made a point to stay away.

Young boys—one facet of life in Somerset she wouldn’t miss. In her opinion, puerile boys of any species were peculiar creatures better observed from a distance and required a boat-load of patience when forced to engage the stinky little buggers. Add a question to the list for her favorite Ranger. At what age did boys make the transition from never bathing or brushing their teeth to four showers daily, and carrying a toothbrush at all times—and why, in nine bloody hells, did they wait so long? Ok. Ciara could count. She came up with two brilliant questions.

Aspen Grove was the first street in town. She turned left passed the duh, small grove of aspen trees and faced the fury of the frigid wind. Ciara fought off the bits of straw and yellow leaves and lost too many times. She earned a reprieve turning down White Oak Street with barns shielding her from the force of nature. Good gods, the sky was gorgeous. It’s an amazing fact about Mother Earth. Even with the potential disaster caused by the storm, the Earth goddess created it with an artistic flair no mere mortal could match.

Ciara took a short cut through a back alley to Elm Street. Oh yeah, the naming of streets, like the town, wasn’t the planners most imaginative concoction, but if looking for Red Maple Street, find the bloody trees with the pretty red leaves. Or, in the winter months, street signs served well if a visitor couldn’t distinguish a bald red maple from a bald eagle.

She spat out bits of litter tossed by the winds when she turned on Elm. Bloody hells. She spotted trouble ahead at the corner, and no way to avoid it. Ciara slowed to a walk, grabbed hold of her long hair streaming behind her like a battle banner and held it against her chest with a two-fisted purpose. She called up a wee bit of magic and Talked her body warm to cease the bloody teeth clattering. Aye, controlling her body temperature, ranked on the top of her favorite magical talents. Like her best friend declared—In the worst heat of summer, never let them catch you sweating. And, like this bloody morning in the arctic wastes brought down upon her, never let them spot the prickled skin and perky—yeah, she needed to dig out her hoody.

Ciara took a left turn at the maple trees, branches click-clacking in the wind, and red leaves skittering east in frantic whorls towards the eejits loitering at the cantina. She strolled with care past the gaping fools, fists clenching hair to cover her blouse. Oh, yeah, a crowd of budding perverts leered at her. Drink your bloody tea and get to work boys. Why weren’t there any female hostlers? Girls could saddle a bloody horse. Chalk up another question for Sheridan, and why the hells did she wait until she was leaving to notice the discrepancy?

Why in bloody hells did she follow Einin’s suggestion and dress to catch his eye? Elves didn’t flirt, damn it, and she was way out of her element. Hells, Sheridan wouldn’t notice what she wore. He certainly wouldn’t ogle like the young whankers at the cafe. Aye, the tall heels of the riding boots altered the way she walked. Why, in all nine bloody hells, didn’t she ride her horse to town? Nay, her common sense validated the better question—why did she dress so out of character to tease her best friend? Hells, bloody halls, she was, and would always be his best friend, and not a love interest.

Sheridan would never comment on her walk like the yokels at the cantina—especially not with the bawdy taunts the young creeps spouted from filthy mouths. She could stop and chastise the half-baked morons, but she had places to be, and Sheridan wouldn’t appreciate her singeing the hides of a few dozen hostlers for grins and giggles. Hah. If Sheridan heard the creeps, he’d tear their tongues out.

Two younger boys faced the loudest eejit and berated him for disrespecting a Ranger who was too good to respond to his vulgar abuse, but they would stand up and defend her. Ciara halted, and a flush of pride warmed her heart. She smiled at the sight of two boys beating the shit out of four older and larger boys who charged at them. The two fought with skill and discipline belying their age. Hah, the older boys were outmatched. Her two heroes must be Ranger squires.

An eagle’s screech preceded the attack. She glanced up and spotted Ice—one of Sheridan’s oldest raptors who seemed to be in the skies above her at all times lately. Hmmm? Should she add that to the list of questions? The golden eagle folded her wings, dropped from her vantage point and attacked the lewd eejits. Her two defenders stood tall an unafraid while the others scurried for cover like rats when the Terriers entered a barn. The eagle chased the whankers at eye level, beating them with her wings, raking talons at faces and shrieking her outrage. Four big, bad boys screamed like little sissies to get the bird away.

Ciara Talked her thanks to the gorgeous raptor and hollered at the freaks that their behavior guaranteed Ranger Sheridan Kingston would never hire them to care for his horses. Ice would recall each face of the vulgar bastards. She gestured a come here wave to the two young boys dressed in worn clothes. Aye, but they were cleaner and better groomed than the best dressed ignorant scumbags. Yeah, she’d buy them work boots at least.

The whanker who instigated the barrage of obscene comments declared she would hear from his uncle the mayor of Somerset. Ciara laughed at his cocky attitude and shook her head in disgust. She would not argue with an idiot to give credence to his rants. His uncle, the bloody mayor of Somerset, did not govern Barntown. Her two protectors stood at attention and saluted with a fist over their hearts.

“Mo Comhluadar Mo Neart, Ranger Ciara.”

Aye, they knew Sheridan’s personal salute—the declaration that all he held close to his heart was his strength. Ciara returned the Kingston dogma with a fist over her heart pledging she would fight to protect what he cherished—what she cherished.

“At ease, gentlemen. Who are you, and how do you know my name and our family salute?”

The two boys shot glances at each other, and both nodded like they reached a decision after a nonverbal conversation. She’d seen the same a gazillion times.

“You’re Talkers? OK, Ranger Sheridan must know about you. You’re not yet squires, but I’d wager you are in the squire training class, or what you call the new kid’s class, huh? So, tell me the rest. If you know who I am, you know I won’t spill secrets.”

“Aye, Ranger Ciara. I’m Scotty, and he’s Ted. We are in the new kid’s class and live in Ranger Sheridan’s apartments. The squires—sorry, I mean the new Rangers Odhran, Deaglan, and Ardan tutor us at night in school work, and squire’s duties to help us reach our goal. We passed all their tests and almost have enough to pledge.”

Ciara understood what almost implied. Some ignorant, and wealthy members of the Ranger’s Board of Administrators declared a squire must have two sets of new clothes, boots, and a new knife to offer the Ranger before he pledged. But, not Sheridan—he accepted his first two squires who walked halfway across the continent dressed in rags, wearing cardboard taped to their boots for soles and offering homemade knives. Her favorite Ranger obviously assisted the two nervous boys with obtaining the necessary supplies and funds. Aye, but he made them work for it instead of handing out charity. Scotty confirmed her thoughts by admitting Sheridan set them to work with the other hostlers for experience and to build muscle hauling hay and hefting saddles. She sure witnessed their strong moral convictions and lack of fear in defending her honor against greater numbers.

“You two will receive what you lack for standing up for me. When you visit Mrs. Baker this morning, tell her Ranger Ciara will donate whatever you need plus two extra sets of work clothes and a second pair of boots. Hah, don’t be shocked. I am aware of Mrs. Baker’s role in Ranger Sheridan’s plans. You’re not the first boys he assisted. The mayor’s nephew proves wealth and privilege does not ensure a person is squire material. Actually; you two should come with me. Ranger Sheridan will hire you to care for his stable of animals and maintain the buildings. The eejits at the café would gang up on you for defending me this morning. You could probably handle them, but why waste your time and efforts on the worthless stooks. Aye?”

The two squire trainees saluted and stepped in line beside her like an honor guard.

“I can understand Odhran and Deaglan helping you with homework, but what does Ranger Ardan teach you?” The youngest of Sheridan’s squires had an ego the size of his barn and wouldn’t be ready to accept a squire for years if she had a voice.

“Ranger Ardan taught us tracking and trapping. We found prints the older boys couldn’t see when we went on a field trip, and we bagged the first rabbit. One time, he had us stare at the grass on the staging field for a whole day to track its movement with the sun. It wasn’t even boring.”

Well, she had to admit Ardan was the best tracker of the three for sure. The young Ranger needed to find a female who would deflate his ego and open his eyes to the real world. Or, just pound some sense into his thick skull.

Sheridan’s barns were dark and quiet. Oh, hells, she’d put lighting the hearths down as one of their chores. The equines needn’t freeze in the freak storm. They reached the fourth of Sheridan’s five barns and opened the door just wide enough to slip through without losing control of the huge beast. She tousled the boys’ hair as they walked past, entering ahead of her. Ciara made a mental error and released the bloody door to pet the mastiffs guarding the stables. The wind slammed the heavy wall of white oak with a thunderous crack panicking the animals napping in their stalls. Damn. Her day bloody well started out with two bangs for sure.

Ciara and the young Talkers visited each stall and Talked the horses calm. She hurried from critter to critter and finally convinced the skittish equines it wasn’t the end of the world nor her intention to startle them. Barn four housed the pretty riding and carriage horses that his mate once used. They weren’t trained like the rest of his stock and jumped at their own shadows. He should sell the prissy beasts, but he wouldn’t hear it from Ciara.

Praise the bright gods above, the barn quieted.

With all the animals satisfied the roof wouldn’t collapse on their heads, she rushed to the brood’s wagon sitting ready to roll out on its maiden voyage. The team of six Percherons already hitched to the huge wagon whinnied a greeting, stomped hooves, shook heads, rattling chain, and creaking leather. Aye, they were antsy. The six matched gray beauties stood waiting a while, but it shouldn’t be much longer before they headed out.

Two maintenance workers had a grand time watching them scuttle about like fools. One fella stood on a ladder with a lamp torn apart with wires sticking up like the quills of a lionfish. He twisted a pair together and glanced at his partner doing nothing but holding the six-foot ladder like the working man might fall.

“Buck, needle nose.”

“Damn, pencil dick, there ain’t no call for insults.”

“You blathering fool. I meant to pass me the needle-nose pliers.”

“Well, bugger me naked running through the market. How am I supposed to know? It’s my mammy’s fault I gots a pointy nose.”

Ciara pulled out her journal from her hip pocket and wrote down their hilarious conversation to use on Sheridan one day, for sure. She might just get a smile, or if she was really lucky, he’d actually laugh. He didn’t laugh enough anymore. He would ask for the snub-nosed pliers as usual, but it would still work. Hah, pencil dick—it’s a new one on her.

One of the young boy’s stomachs grumbled. She would not laugh and embarrass the cuties.

“Have you fellas eaten breakfast?”

They nodded and informed her they made their breakfast in the apartment above the barn and promised the kitchen was clean like she’d rush up there to inspect. She’d bet their beds were made, and she could bounce a coin off the blankets. So, they could cook and clean up after themselves at a young age. And, Sheridan kept another bloody secret from her. Ciara would’ve gladly helped the boys with their studies if she knew they existed. Aye. Well, if they could saddle a horse, and meet the education requirements, Ted and Scotty would be squires before spring, and she’d be home, damn it. Odhran should accept their pledges. Sheridan’s oldest squire, now a marked Ranger himself, had the qualities to make a damn fine Máistir.

Ciara led them to the clothing locker, and they fidgeted like they needed to pee. She looked them over and pulled down two hooded tabards in the Kingston Family’s emerald green with his insignia on the fronts. She shook them out and inspected them for holes and draped one over each boys’ head. Their faces beamed with pride when the cloth settled on their shoulders.

“There you go, and I’ll be damned if they don’t look grand on you. There are ponchos inside the locker to use on rainy days if you’re unlucky enough to be fetching horses in the pasture. Keep your tabards laundered and deliver them to the seamstress if you tear one worse than you can repair. A squire should always look sharp, mucking stalls or riding shield for the Máistir, huh? The Kingston tabard is Máistir Sheridan’s colors, and you should wear them with pride.”

She’d swear the boys stood an inch taller. Ciara wrote a list of chores on the blackboard for the boys and left them to work. She waved to the whacky maintainance guys leaving the barn and yelled thanks for replacing the light. Ciara faced the brood’s wagon, concentrated on the blank wall, port side, just rear of the cab beside the spare wheels. She spoke the command to open. The magical illusion faded exposing the cabinet door, the seals released with a hiss, the locks clicked open, the lid dropped, and the cables snapped taut holding the lid in travel desk mode. Her brain fuzzed to blank—stuck on the fact she had to leave and how much she dreaded parting from her best friend. She shivered awake, spat a curse, and focused on the present, damn it.

The barn darkened from the cloud cover rolling in like a god draped the building in a wool blanket. Oh, yeah, the sky would open, and the white shit would fall, turning their trip north into a bloody miserable mess. Please let it be the soft white shit. They couldn’t travel if hail fell with a fury.

She pulled out the file box and tucked the registration in her teeth, flicked through the folders, shot a glance at the cabinet where her fleece-lined hoody hung and discarded the idea of fetching it when she spotted the gray, sweat-stained document in the file box. Her curses buzzed the papers clenched in her teeth like a kazoo, and she played a whole bloody tune with her ranting. The paper shouldn’t exist. Ciara retrieved it from the folder and replaced it with the slightly damp registration bearing a faint indentation of her bite. Sheridan would never notice. Aye, like bloody hells. The man never missed the tiniest detail. Well, maybe one day when she sat home alone, and miserable, he’d smile when he spotted the teeth marks. It’s the same with the silk blouse. She just wanted to give him something to recall about her and smile. Her dear Sheridan didn’t smile often enough. It was his bloody mate’s fault. Bloody hells, Ciara shouldn’t curse the dead, even if for the entire time she lived with Sheridan, Rihanna was a nasty back-stabbing bitch.

It took a few deep breaths to calm. That woman had a way to anger Ciara even from the bloody grave. She must pay attention, damn it. Oh yeah, the paper—she focused on the present, and she sure as nine hells recognized what she held but couldn’t comprehend why he kept it for five years. Ciara’s heart raced like a new bride with hope. Her blood roared in gale force through her ears, and her hands shook betraying her ridiculous emotions over a bloody letter. Damn her mushy sentimental bullshit. Ciara searched the barn for any witnesses who might snitch. Aye, the boys made themselves busy cleaning stalls. She would blame it on the plummeting temperature if her sister spotted the paper trembling in her grasp.

Ciara unfolded and flattened the page on the door lid and sputtered a blast of annoyance at her damned tender feelings for an old bit of news. Dark gods be damned, she was a warrior, not some prissy little girl to tremble in her boots and go all weak-kneed and misty-eyed over a letter—even a crucial, life-changing letter written, as they had since discovered, by the Master of Rangers. When first dispatched, Athair signed the document anonymously, for a damn good reason, and distributed it to the monarchs of the world six years back. Ciara skimmed through the first few paragraphs of flowery greetings and bullshit salutations to reach the meat of the missive. The Master of Rangers took his sweet-ass time getting to the point.

—We can no longer doubt the reports from our friends in the Southern Forest, the European and Slavic Kingdoms. Confirmed sightings of Orc, Goblin, and Trolls with the enemy’s soldiers in the southern region state unequivocally our world is under attack, and in jeopardy is the peace we have shared on Earth for a thousand years. The presence of the beasts portend their master’s designs for Earth, and since Gwydion has arrived, the god Chaos and his minions conduct the assault through Gwydion. I will add my prayers to the many, hoping the gods of chaos fail in their attempts to win Earth for their demented schemes.

The Guardians, Templar Knights, the famed Na Siúracha of Kylemore, with the Elven forces in the Southern and Northern forests, must take the field to protect the good citizens of the European and Slavic Kingdoms. If this letter reaches the hands of our Dwarven brethren, please join us in the struggle. The beings who walk in the light would welcome the Dwarves’ legendary forces.

Earth’s Ranger Bards will scout, infiltrate, spy to collect data, and assist in battles when possible. The enemy has the magical ability to transport many soldiers and beasts through magical portals across the globe, and they gain access to Earth through rifts open to other worlds straight into our home. As of yet, their attack is not organized or directed at one particular continent. It appears to us they search for their nemesis—Earth’s one true hope for success—for the salvation of all beings living in the light.

The purpose of this letter is to provide the rulers of our world a glimmer of that promised hope. Study the records, research the prophecies, and listen to the Bards tales of the Eternal Hero with renewed interest. Our blessed goddess, Máthair Danu, delivered the Eternal Hero, who in this life, bears the title An Deorái. He arrived on Earth at a young age, and it didn’t take long for the gods of Chaos to intervene. The dark gods burdened his young mind by informing him who he’d become at maturity and planted the essence of past heroes in his mind with the hope the voices would drive him insane.

Thankfully their plan failed. Instead of going mad, or quitting, An Deorái had trained with determination to acquire the skills needed to defeat Gwydion and his beasts. Even at his young age, An Deorái possesses the knowledge and skills to teach you, guide you, and eventually lead you when the hordes of Chaos assault us in force. It is time for you to unite with An Deorái in defense of our world. The gods of Chaos seek to destroy our way of life and transform Earth into a killing field for their demonic creatures. Don’t allow that to happen.

Ciara read enough. She had read it before with her mother in the throne room of the Northern Forest Elves. Hells bloody bells, she and her sister validated the warning on the day it arrived by killing Orcs searching for trouble too bloody close to their forest. The appearance of Orc prompted her mother to task her daughters with finding An Deorái. Ciara first scoured old records for five days until she arrived at a conclusion. Ranger Sheridan Kingston had to be An Deorái, and they must find him. What she never expected was to fall in love—

“What are you reading to plaster such a dreamy smile on your lips, Ciara?”

Oh, bloody hells. Braelyn would sneak in silent as a thief and catch her acting like a moonstruck mot. The two boys couldn’t blush more if they suffocated. Aye, they weren’t sure if they should alert her. Well, it’s OK. She smiled, shrugged, and winked at them. Getting caught smiling wasn’t the end of the world.

It was, for damn sure, evident to her that her sister hadn’t had her morning dose of coffee. Braelyn still spoke with the helium-huffing voice of sleep. It always took a few cups to soften up the vocal cords a wee bit saving all the glass stemware from possible disaster. Ciara swiped her face obliterating the grin to answer her big sister. She faced the doors and hissed. Bloody hells, everybody arrived to witness her mushy nonsense. Braelyn should sell tickets to the event. Ciara’s frigid lips sputtered her embarrassment, and she spoke the truth.

“Only the most significant and influential letter in my life, Braelyn. The one that sent you and me in search of our Máistir, and as we discovered to our delight, An Deorái as well.”

“Nay, little sister. It was you our mother tasked with locating An Deorái. I tagged along on the voyage simply because you needed a babysitter.”

Ciara ignored the chuckles. She would not argue with Braelyn over the same old shitty taunts. She snorted a scorching curse hoping it singed Braelyn’s ears. Her sister’s statement was bloody bullshit. Braelyn smacked Ciara’s arm indicating her pointy ears did burn. Michael, her big sister’s promised husband, smiled and shrugged. Aye, bloody hells. There’s a point of fact she could argue—if Braelyn hadn’t joined Ciara on the search for An Deorái, she would’ve never met Máistir’s blood brother to fall in love at first sight. One day Ciara would dig out the story she wrote about the day Braelyn met Michael—the day they arrived in Liberty City with Sheridan and read it to a crowd to embarrass the shit out of her sister.

After Ciara refolded the letter, she stuck it in the first file sleeve, shoved the file box inside and lifted the cabinet door to click shut. She spoke the command. The magic engaged sealing and securing the compartment behind an illusion. Nobody could open the hidden cabinet without the magical command. Hells, with the shield of protection her Máistir created, not even burning the bloody wagon down would destroy the strongbox.

She gazed at the wall of the wagon, her vision blurred, and her mind wandered lost in the confusion named Sheridan. He told her he destroyed the letter she carried while they searched for him. Why would her Máistir still have it filed away with his essential papers? Why would her Teacher lie? Braelyn laughed in her bitchy morning voice that gave Ciara worse chills than the bloody air creeping into her shirt. All she did was ask for her and Michael’s opinion of why Máistir kept the letter. Ciara couldn’t imagine a valid excuse for Braelyn to mock her for a bloody simple question.

Michael rolled his eyes and shrugged—his most normal response. Well, his typical response. Ciara wouldn’t declare it normal under any bloody circumstances. It’s the way Michael and Sheridan lived and conducted themselves. If it didn’t have teeth, tusks, horns, claws, or weapons to kill, why bloody worry for nothing. Sheridan’s rule about new situations stated if it couldn’t feed, clothe, shelter, comfort, aid, love or hate with deadly intent, she’d waste her time spending more than a moment of concern. Consider the obstacle and deal with it as needs demand with skills required. His words were the first of many lessons recorded in her journals covering the span of time training under the finest Ranger.

Ciara stared at the blank wall where the compartment disappeared. Her sister, sure as bloody hells would not relent. Braelyn grasped her shoulder and yanked her around to face the music.

“Wake up, Ciara. Máistir held on to the letter because it still holds your scent. You carried the damn thing tucked inside your shirt while we traversed Europe learning to ride a horse properly, and speak the Common language fluently before we boarded the ship to meet our destiny.”

Braelyn carried on in her squeaky voice about how the paper soaked up her sweat, and it’s now permeated with her scent. Blah, blah, blah. She claimed their Teacher would never discard the letter because it reminded Sheridan of the intimate times with Ciara—before she broke his heart. Aye, well, he’s a human, and it just wouldn’t work.

Even if she wished with all her heart, it could.

Ciara would not accept Braelyn’s bloody hair-brained opinion. Sheridan didn’t love Ciara as Braelyn continually and annoyingly claimed. Hells, he had lost his baby…gods, it happened a year ago this week. What would he do? She would help in whatever he chose to do to memorialize the sad and mournful day. Aye, they should plant flowers where he buried Aoife. Well, what he could find of his baby’s body.

She opened her eyes when Matty grabbed her arm in support and patted her shoulder with sympathy like she read Ciara’s mind. Her head tilted in compassion and Matty smiled with sincerity, brown eyes sparkling with the reflection of the sky through the high windows. Aye, the wind outside sent dust motes flying in the barn creating churning beams of light in the darkness like Pixies at a square dance. Ciara nodded and returned the smile with gratitude. Aye, Braelyn merely teased her and as their Máistir taught them words could never harm a warrior. Words shouldn’t, but his heart wasn’t the only one to break when she rejected his proposal of marriage. Bloody hells, they were the hardest words she had ever voiced. But he would live maybe a century, and she would mourn him for thirty more. Ciara would love him forever and always—in silence.

Aha, where was the man? The wagon was ready to roll out, their horses saddled, the team stood ready, and their leader was truant. They must leave…Oh, bloody hells, why rush him? At the other end of their journey, he’d leave her to go home, and she would miss him—and it had nothing to do with love, damn it. She’d miss her best friend and worry about him on his quest for Conair Spioradálta an Trodaí—The Spiritual Path of a Warrior. She should accompany him for protection with her spears and for moral support. The stubborn mule refused her offer, claiming he must learn to live alone. Bloody hells—If it weren’t for his baby Aoife, he did live alone, or lonely. Rihanna never wasted her spit for his comfort. Aye, he lived alone for a year since their murder. And, he still carried guilt and anger in his heart.

The conversation of the others burned through the fuzzy haze of her daydream. Braelyn’s whack-job comments would cease if he returned to them. Oh, damn it, she recalled where he went. Sheridan wanted to meet with Athair and ask him if he could keep the three new Rangers until he had to leave on his quest. Well, if she knew Sheridan, there’d be no polite asking. He’d tell his adoptive father his plans and wait for the approval. Aye, but it shouldn’t take all bloody morning. Ciara opened the clothing compartment, tugged her hoody from the hanger and slipped it on. Braelyn shot her the where do you think you’re going glare complete with one hand on her hip and her lips crinkled crab apple sour. Shaking her head sending the black tresses and feathers flying didn’t help. Unless she tried for snippy bitch, it wasn’t Braelyn’s finest look for damn sure. Aye, she had a grand idea. Ciara would leave on a strong note.

“Help the boys toss fire on the logs in the hearths to warm the bloody stables. I’m going to assist Máistir in convincing Athair to release the Rangers to him.”

Ciara double-checked the team of horses hitched to the wagon, considered her actions and cemented her decision to go. Sheridan wouldn’t mind a little female intervention.

“Aye, I’m using all my senses, dear sister, and they tell me it will bloody well snow any minute. And, they also shout to me loud and clear you’re full of shit. How’s that for speaking eloquent Common?” Ciara would never admit to smug satisfaction, but she savored Braelyn’s squeaky gasp of shock and Michael’s peal of laughter.

Braelyn hollered at her back to zip up her hoody. Ciara skidded to a halt at the door and turned an angry eye on her bossy sister. “What’s your point?”

“Aye, exactly. If your breasts were smaller or the blouse larger, it wouldn’t be as obvious. Oh, just button up the blouse to cover the knot and your…”

Ciara raised her hand, halting the bloody lecture, squinted indignation, and abandoned the itching desire to yell. She strolled to her horse, removed her hooded cloak strapped down behind the saddle, and slipped it on over the hoody. It would bloody well snow soon.

“Alright, damn it. I got the message. Nobody will see my knot or knockers.”

Braelyn accused her of wearing the silk shirt braless to catch Sheridan’s eye. It was true but damn the woman. Braelyn needn’t point out the obvious in a crowd. Ciara shut the door behind her, winced at the noisy hinge and zipped her bloody jacket to hide her knot. The man never noticed what she wore anymore, or what the silk shirt covered as he once did. Ciara held the gold knot and lost herself in the swirls of gold wire and the stunning renditions of mythical dragons. With the magic embedded in the Kingston emblem, it identified Ciara as Lady Ciara of House Kingston and authorized her access to his bank accounts. Ciara, Grainne, and Michael were the only three she knew to possess the magical knot bearing four dragons wound around the god’s trinity rings. The dragon’s claws grasped Sheridan Kingston’s initials from each corner. It meant more than any treasure to her simply because he gave it to her.

The door creaked open. Bloody hells, Ciara’s mind must’ve been lost in la-la land when they entered for her to miss the squeal of protesting hinges. Ciara glanced over her shoulder and halted in her tracks, happy it wasn’t Braelyn. The twins, Mat, and Matty smiled with honest concern. She’d miss them. The brother and sister were a delight to live, work, train, fight, and bleed with for more than four hard years of training. The siblings would return as Master Rangers to the Southern Elves home near Avignon while she and Braelyn headed home to the Northern Forest southeast of Hamburg. Matty placed a hand on her brother’s arm, forestalling any response from him. She came into the world a whole two minutes before her brother, and she always took advantage of the rights of the firstborn. Mathias laughed knowing full well the game his sister played, tugged on his Ranger beret, and waited patiently. Matilda patted his arm and spoke from her heart.

“Would you care for an escort? Your sister and Michael are snuggling, and we feel like the odd wheel in there. We could help gang up on Athair and make Máistir’s plan look brilliant.”

“It’s a grand scheme, Matty. Let’s attack the old Elf with force.”

Mat laughed and pointed over her shoulder. Ciara glanced back and smiled at the brat strolling towards them like he wasn’t late, or made them wait.

“We were leaving to hunt you down, Ranger.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad you didn’t miss me. I’d hate for you to be late to say goodbye to Alphonsus.”

“The king will see us this bloody early?”

“Aye.”

“Oh, good gods, you are impossible. The bloody sky will fall the day you answer a question with a full sentence.”

“Ah.”



**Chapter 2 Gwydion’s Master**

**G**wydion reared out of his dream, howling at the distracting noise. He slammed the alarm clock into submission, shook his frazzled brain, and screamed into the pillow. His body ached, and it should not be possible. He must find another world with magic to regain his powers. He couldn’t stand the advancement of human frailties and his lack of magical power. How could he destroy the boy without magic? He scratched at his beard. What the hell did he dream? Oh, he remembered each detail and must write it down.

The whimper from the girl chained beside his bed woke him further, alert for any other sounds. His reluctant sex toy whined and sobbed all blasted night. He would deal with her after taking care of some business.

He slipped out of the sheets to slap his feet on the floor, scrubbed his beard, and rubbed the last vestige of sleep from his eyes. The journal and pen sat where he needed them. His dream must be recorded before he lost it to the void.

During Gwydion’s dream walks, he had discovered two souls on earth destined for An Deorái. His sons warned him of a third potential mate, but three women on earth who could be An Deorái’s mate? How the hells did he deserve three in one life? Ach, it didn’t matter. Gwydion met her in the dreams and would all three hunted down and killed before the boy could find them. An Deorái would not enjoy love in his life if Gwydion had a choice. He would destroy any chance the boy had of a blissful life of love and happiness. If An Deorái did find a mate, Gwydion’s men would steal her from him to torture his soul. One of the women in the dream was identical, a mirror twin to the slave he had chained to his bed. According to his dream, his men were correct when they claimed her a twin. Good, they had a definite face and a general location to search for one twin meant for An Deorái on earth.

Of course, Gwydion had multiple partners on other worlds, but what gave the boy the same right? Gwydion deserved multiple partners, but the boy was a nobody from a backwoods world with little magic. Multiple mates. His slaves hadn’t learned of any society on earth, embracing polygamy. Hell yeah, if An Deorái found all three, the humans would run the boy out of town as a degenerate in the backward society. That would work in his plans as well. His slaves could not locate the blasted so-called hero in their searches. The boy he called in his dreams shouldn’t be too damn hard to locate. Not even his daughters could find the blasted hero, and he hadn’t heard from his oldest in years. They were failures—every single one.

He slapped the book closed, returned the journal to the table, rose to go pee, and pushed the call button for his secretary on the way. The girl in chains moaned something in her guttural tongue he laughed at, and it turned into a vicious tirade from her. She would pay for her obstinance. He exited the bathroom to find his slave with his coffee in hand and Gwydion’s breakfast on the table.

“Good morning, Your Majesty, how may I serve?”

Yeah, he damn well better serve well, or he’d feed the Orc. Even the esteemed Grand Mayor from some hick town on earth could learn to grovel and serve. Gwydion breathed deeply of the smoky scent of fear wafting from the man’s brow. He would scream well when fed to the beasts.

“I want my Hounds, Bleeders, Blades, Reapers, Conjurers, and twelve Swords in my meeting room at noon. I learned a disgusting fact in my dreams. They now have three distinct twins to hunt, and one is a blasted Elf. Take the girl to the latrine, clean her up, and bring her back here first. I want to take her tied to the bedpost.”

“As you wish, so shall it be, Master.”

The girl yelled in her crude language. What the hell kind of language did the girl speak? All gings and ishes that made no sense. If she couldn’t learn to speak properly soon, she’d be Orc food. Damn it to nine hells. Nobody puts out any effort on the god's forsaken planet.

“Good morning, Daddy.”

Gwydion spun and slipped on the spotlessly clean and polished floor. He made a mental note to beat the maid for the slip. Ah, what’s the daughter’s name? He should spend more time with all of them to recall them easier. She had the pale green eyes of so many of his girls. Oh, she smiled and gave him the answer. The cute space between her teeth always pleased him.

“Good morning, Deidre. What can I do for you?”

Deidre declared the slave’s guttural language attracted her when she passed by his door. She claimed the Plains people were a rare breed in the multiverse and the one chained to the bed was a fine specimen and would produce healthy babies for him.

“Is the savage a mirror twin mate of our enemy?”

“Yes. Can you imagine, the man has three possible mates on this blasted rock. The plains can be found in four places on this damn planet, from way down south in Australia to what they call the steppes in Asia. It will be a chore to find the original version. Can you speak her language?”

“Oh, yes, she mouthed off about how she wishes to be free to soar among the storm clouds and call down lightning to strike you dead. Do not permit anyone to remove her helmet. You’d wake up dead, Daddy.”

“Oh, well, I have used her for a few days. If she is old enough, she should be pregnant. I’ll trade her out, and we’ll soon learn if she can produce children. I would like a child with her coloring. It would add to the varied beauty of my family.”

Hell, he had four others like her his slave soldiers helped escape. Gwydion killed the entire company for releasing his mirror twin collection.

“Yes, Daddy, we are a beautiful collection of children.”

Deidre begged him for work. She was bored to tears and hoped to find her big sister when she arrived, but she was out on assignment. Deidre needed a meaningful duty, someone to kill, a town to raid, men to whip into submission.

“Your sister is dead. The boy told me in a dream walk. She found the famous Ranger and had the baby I sent her for, but for some gods blasted reason, she stayed with the boy. Our soldiers killed her and the brat on your stupid brother’s orders. I wanted the brat.”

Gwydion did have a job for Diedre. He could send her out with the men to find the three destined mates of this world’s opponent. They would search the plains and forests of Europe and Africa first before heading across the ocean. If they couldn’t find her in the Americas, they’d need to go on to Australia.

“Would you care to hunt? I must have the four escaped women recaptured and returned as well. There might be children of mine roaming this stinking world when I need them here learning to use their talents.”

“Oh, yes, Daddy. I will pack right away. Thank you. I will prove I am better than Rihanna. Perhaps I will find An Deorái, even if she couldn’t, and I’ll bring home a baby of his for you. Oh, Daddy, would you take this one again with me here? Please permit me to watch you dominate the savage? The fear in their eyes arouses me.”



**G**wydion fondled a breast when Deidre leaned over and kissed him, thanked him for the exercise, rolled out of bed, and slithered into her dress. With a little luck, she’d provide him a baby with magic. Deidre performed better in bed than many of the untrained women he had lately. Gwydion would need another shower. He rose, screaming at the woman whimpering in the corner and grabbed the new slave Maura attempting to escape from the bed. He locked the manacles on the latest mirror twin his men located. She cried the whole time he and Deidre played with her, screamed, and tried to fight him off when he took her, but no mere woman would get the better of him or prevent him from taking what he wanted. Hell, at least he understood the curses she yelled as he ravished her body. He waved goodbye to Deidre, left the bedroom and the slave’s weeping to discover a blasted kitten in his living room looking up at him and mewing. Gwydion kicked the thing screaming into the hall. It slammed into the wall and slid to the floor. Good. It didn’t move.

He entered his office to find Balor seated at his desk rifling through papers. The god of chaos smirked, tossed the stack of reports aside and sneered at him.

“Your lust is more like a rutting animal than a human. The playthings wouldn’t commit suicide if you treated them better. The last one in your bed is your daughter. Have you no morals?”

Balor rose, shuffled closer, dragging his bad leg oozing putrid filth from all nine hells. Gwydion forced his gaze away before he fixated on the god’s left eye and died screaming.

“Fear and pain keep them in line, Master. It’s the way humans desire to live, and morals are for the weak. I do what I want for satisfaction without concern. I take my pleasure anywhere and anytime from anyone I want. I don’t care about relations. I’ll outlive all of them. I broke in all my daughters early, and Deidre happens to be available and willing.”

“Is this the type of god you would be? Disorder and turmoil to unbalance nature do not relate to debasement and debauchery.”

A lecture from the deformed god was the last thing Gwydion needed, but Balor went on about how he didn’t come to talk about his sexual appetites or his problems with Máthair. No, Balor arrived to discuss Gwydion’s so-called lack of progress and to give him information. So, the boy quested for power and to complete his journey of the spiritual path. Gwydion understood, damn it. He traveled the spiritual path long ago and gave up on it because it became tedious. He no longer concerned himself with other’s needs and desires. Gwydion carved his own path in life and if others paid for it, so much the better. The concept of honor was a waisted attribute weak people dwelled on too damn much.

Balor claimed he placed surprises for the boy along the way. Why not kill the boy? Oh, yeah, the god berated him for not sending men out searching for more skilled warriors. The boy destroyed his armies in each confrontation. He killed fifty of Gwydion’s men standing against them alone and unarmed. Gwydion doubted Balor’s statement. No man other than himself could defeat fifty men. The god left him an opening.

“It would make my job much easier if you told me who the boy is, damn it. I have men searching for An Deorái, but it is near impossible because it’s too early for the boy’s awakening. He could be any blasted teen-aged boy on this planet.”

Gwydion could sense the boy in the west across the ocean, but he could be anyone. He didn’t understand how the boy knew his role in life. Gwydion didn’t realize his potential nor awaken with talents until his twenty-first birthday, but Balor claimed the boy knew his destiny. How?

More excuses. Balor was great for making excuses. He never provided an easy way for Gwydion to recover the magic ripped from his essence by the hated Elves. The decrepit god demanded Gwydion performed when Balor didn’t do anything to help.

“The favors I do for you already contravene the pact we made with Máthair and her family. Don’t make me regret what little assistance I have provided.”

“This world barely provides my body with magic to sustain my longevity, let alone enough to restore my magical weapons. There is gray in my hair, damn it. I’m running out of ideas to replenish my strength.”

“When I found you, your anger gave you power, your hate drove you to this world with the idea of stealing it from Máthair as revenge for her actions. What happened to that determined man? You stay inside like a worm instead of leading armies to conquer. What are you doing about your greatest fear? How will you kill the Elves?”

Blasted Máthair supported the Elves who stole his magic and his magical implements. She would pay one day. Gwydion must recharge in a world rich with magic to regain what he once had or steal from An Deorái as Balor suggested. He even lost his portal ring to the pointy-ear freaks. Depending on others with a ring to move about the stinking world frustrated him. Balor didn’t understand. Gwydion’s soldiers destroyed a new town daily, and with what they captured, he filled the ranks of slaves, and his kingdom grew. He had located the perfect warriors to exterminate the Elves and would meet with them soon to bring them to Earth. There were armies on the way who would conquer for land to occupy, or slaves to take home with them. Balor should gift him with magical strength to assault the Elves.

“Think, boy. The world must be aware of who is conquering the towns and enslaving people. All they witness now are your generals, and they don’t mention you in their victories. The female called Fiona is stealing your glory right from under your nose. Beware of the Swords boy. They plot something in the land called Lakota Territory.”

“I have learned of the Swords’ plans, and it fits in my overall scheme. I permit them their little victories and will reap the rewards for myself. That greedy Fiona will be the first to die.”

Gwydion would allow the Swords to do the dirty work and claim the wealth and territory when they won. The Sword’s planned to build their headquarters on the plains because it fed the two kingdoms. Earthlings called it the breadbasket of the Americas. Control the food, and the people would flock to the leaders. They might have a fine plan for the future, but he’d take it from them. Damn, even the Swords couldn’t find the blasted boy.

“Can you lend me the Amorok to hunt An Deorái? The beasts have his scent in whatever form he takes on this world.”

“I created the Amoroks to hunt the Eternal Hero, and they are mine and mine alone to command. I have dispatched a few young cubs already for practice. With luck, this boy will fall to one of them. The Amorok would attack you, fool. You have the same essence as he and all the shining god’s warriors. You won’t lose that slimy essence until you transcend Chaos and that won’t occur if you lose this world. Chaos will not be pleased if Máthair succeeds here.”

“Balor, I want you to cheat and help me locate the women on earth destined to be his mates. They stand out like fires at night on other worlds, but here they blend in with the rest of the populace. Why? You must make it easier for me. You must help me.”

“You want? I must? I need not do more than I desire, fool. The mates are hard to locate because they have bonded with him already. I told you to find them before he did, but all you do is cower inside your castle or scurry to the caves hiding from your destiny. So, you use pain and fear to demonstrate your pitiful power over your slaves? You hurt them to prove who dominates? Remember who controls you, boy. I can and will abandon you to Máthair if you fail me.”

Gwydion dropped to his knees and screamed as the fires consumed his body and charred his soul. The pain lasted longer than Gwydion wanted to bear, and when it stopped as quickly, he fell over and sobbed tears of gratitude for the pain ceasing. Balor didn’t give him the chance to tell him about the hunt for destined wives — filthy rotten godling. Balor’s mind must be corrupted worse than his leg and face.

He climbed to his feet and staggered back into his bedroom, wiping the blood from his nose, eyes, and ears. The woman chained to his bed would learn fear and pain before he killed her. He must send his slaves out through portals to find another mirror twin of Maura’s. Why can’t they locate the twin on Earth? How hard was it to find one blasted woman? Hell, finding An Deorái proved impossible. Perhaps An Deorái grasped what iron did to magic. No, it would mean he found the Maura on Earth. His slaves must find her. Finding twins on other worlds proved easy because they stood out like a beacon on a dark night, but on earth, among all the other like souls, it was impossible. He surrounded himself with incompetence. Ah, Deirdre would succeed. She always found her prey. Yes, if it weren’t for his children, he’d be lost here with ignorant fools.

Balor had to understand why he didn’t go out into the world. He had no plans of telling his mentor. No, he would grow in magical strength and teach Balor a lesson for causing him pain. Balor didn’t understand his ultimate goals and dreams. Perhaps Gwydion needed to aim higher. Why settle for ruling a world when he could steal the essence of a god? The gods of chaos would welcome him if he proved more powerful than one of their numbers. Yes, Gwydion would research how to kill a god and goddess to steal their powers. Once he attained godlike powers, he would make the gods of chaos pay. Yes, he would return the pain suffered at the hands of Balor.

“Master?”

Gwydion wiped his face dry before turning to face the idiot who entered without permission. He glared at the fool who fidgeted like a child in fear of punishment. Yes, he’d be punished. Gwydion nodded at the sergeant to speak.

“We finds three mores of dem twins through doors. We gots dem in cages. Two be likes the wild one you has now and one bes an Elf womans. I asked yer son if they be right and he say yeh. Is Elf fer An Deorái too?”

Máthair had to have a hand in the boy’s life. Only Máthair saw the Elves with a favorable eye. The gods of Chaos hated them as he did, and Elric loathed the freaks. Oh, blasted gods, Gwydion would not soil himself with impregnating an Elf. No, he would give her to his beasts, but not to eat, and not yet. They must perform well before receiving a treat.

“Yes, the Orc’s sense of smell is unique in how they can track magical bonds. I know Elven twins are possible even if it’s disgusting. Well done, sergeant. No, you are a lieutenant. Tell your captain to present you with an officer’s bars for your good work.”

“That ain’ts alls Masser. We be ready to rides likes yeh says. We finds a village close with portal fer yeh to have fun with peoples. Them women warriors left the peoples alone. There bes lots of babies in dis village.”

“Oh, it is good news. The Orc complained of the lack of tender sweetmeats. Call up two dark mages to warm up the town for our reception. There’s nothing like a little terror driven by magic to start the day. Yes, we will extend our control a bit farther today. In a week, with luck, we’ll step foot into Germany.”



**Chapter 3 Archery Test**

**M**uirenn took up her bow and quiver. She tried to smile, but even she knew it would appear forced. She nodded to Caitlin, and they strode to the range together. Muirenn waved to the Sister who passed her archery trials missing only one long-range shot, and several of her arrows shot at moving targets landed in the white outer ring. Muirenn had to pass the bloody test this time. Aye, perhaps she could if Sheridan stayed out of her thoughts. One day she received praise for her healing skills and for defeating the Sword and the next she would embarrass herself to tears on the range.

Her test would occur on the same range Sheridan instructed her how to Talk her arrows the day he delivered her two eagles, Ablin and Alani. Aye, and the place he fought Laurens with mental magic and spoke the bloody oath of indifference to forget her. She drifted off lost in thoughts and wasn’t aware someone approached until a tap on the shoulder woke her. She hissed through clenched teeth and spun to find Mother Veronica smiling at her. Why did she come? Muirenn curtsied to the Head Mistress of Kylemore.

“Good morning, Mother. Have you come to witness another failure on the archery range?”

“No, child. I have a letter for you. It came addressed to me, asking permission to relate the information, but the second page is for your eyes to read. It is not from your Ranger, but you will recognize who sent it once you read the lesson it includes. We will abide by what is requested. I will tell you the letter stipulated it should be delivered when you stood at the range for your archery test to advance to master classes.”

“Wow, that is spooky enough to give me chills. If it helps me pass the bloody test, I don’t care who it came from.”

Muirenn unfolded the letter, sucked in a breath, and sighed with delight when she spotted the signature. She read to learn what advice Lady Ciara had for her.

Greetings To Her Highness, Princess Muirenn O’Kelly, Duchess of Donegal.

I sat with our Máistir, observing the three young squires test in archery, and you came to mind as you often do when he and I discuss the future. I will relate to you the words he spoke to his squires before they picked up the first arrow. I needed to record them in my journal before I forgot and sending them to you in time for your test is beneficial for all. Here are his words of wisdom for your benefit.

Ask the range to turn on the motors moving all the critters. Stand on your spot and study each target to lock them in memory. Picture yourself shooting the bullseye and only the bullseye on each target. Imagine where the duck will be when you take aim for the red dot on its chest as it flies across the field. Set in your mind’s eye, the deer scampering across your field of view and your arrow striking its heart. Picture the three arrows needed to stop the boar in its tracks. Watch each moving target until striking the red dot solidifies your resolve. Burn the red center into your mind’s eye before lifting the first arrow. See yourself Talking all thirty arrows and directing their flight through the air with magic to strike dead center. Cainteoirs are the finest archers in the world, and an archer trained before they learn to Talk, as you were, are far superior.

Muirenn, you have no need to doubt your abilities because you, like the squires, stand above the best in the world. Study your targets, grab the first arrow, and show Kylemore and the world how damn good you are. I will not wish you luck because luck has nothing to do with the trials. Your skill honed by years of practice, bullish determination, and a wee bit of magic will win the day for you.

Best Regards

Ranger Ciara O’Branain (We will attend your graduation)

Muirenn handed the letter to Caitlin to read and gaped at Mother who laughed at her expression. She wiped it away and laughed at herself. Muirenn wrapped her chest and rubbed the chills on her arms away. Lovely Ciara thought of her to pass on grand advice. Mother Veronica grabbed her arm to speak with serious intention.

“I will order the range attendants to start the motors. Your test begins when you shoot the first arrow. I hope to witness perfection, not failure this day, Your Highness. Demonstrate to us the confidence Princess Ciara has in you and your abilities. He will attend your graduation. Lady Ciara would not allow him to forget his promise. You may keep the encouraging words she sent.”

“Thank you, Mother. Are they making wagers?”

“Oh, yes, and my money is on you, child. I have fifty silver riding on you shooting a perfect score.”

“Aye, so no pressure, y’know. Agghh. I will shoot a perfect score for you, Mother. The letter has set my mind right this morning, and dear Ciara will receive my heartfelt thanks when they come for my graduation. Oh, what odds are they giving I’ll fail, Mother?”

“Ten to one, child. I will spend mine on a cask of your Ranger’s reserve bourbon when I win.”

“A cask of bourbon for five hundred silver? What the hells in the bloody cask?”

“A thousand-year-old bourbon that goes down like heavenly buttered, smokey, fire, child. It is worth every coin.”

Mother waved to the range attendants and scurried away to join the other spectators. Caitlin folded the letter and stuffed it in her chest pocket with a grand smile. She grasped Muirnn’s shoulder, nodded all her confidence without need of words, and marched away to join Mother.

Muirenn faced the range and began the process of memorizing the targets as Lady Ciara suggested. As her Ranger stated and the lady recorded. She traced the passage of the ducks and geese moving back and forth on wires. She stared at the deer zipping by on its metal track and the boar charging her from out of the bushes with mouth wide open and tusks glistening in the sun. She watched the turkey leap from the grass to fly to freedom. She imagined thirty arrows leaving golden trails from her bow to the center of each target and admired the strings of light when completed.

She locked in her sights where she’d shoot the fowl to strike each chest, spotted the best location to hit the deer’s heart and pictured one arrow in the boar’s mouth followed by two in its heart when the head reared. She took a big breath and released it as she drew an arrow from the quiver at her hip. One more breath and she blew it out with the arrow drawn back to her cheek. Muirenn Talked the path to the farthest target, pulled the string to her ear and released, drew, released, drew, released, and repeated the steps for thirty arrows in a glorious blaze of magic and concentration. She shot the next arrow without watching the trajectory of the last because she Talked it home with perfection. Muirenn lowered her bow and faced the judges. The spectators were silent as a funeral.

Her brows raised in question to the judges. One smiled and informed her they waited for reports on her long-range shots. No other contestant shot thirty arrows as quickly as she did so they must wait for the men’s report on the far targets. She spun around to inspect the moving targets and spotted arrows embedded in the red center of all. The deer stopped when she hit it perfectly and the boar laid on its side signifying a perfect kill. The elk showed an arrow in red as well as the rabbit, squirrel, turkey, and pheasant. The mid-range targets still bobbing up and down displayed her green fletched arrows in the red dots as well. The long-range targets hung from trees a good hundred feet beyond the bushes and her biggest fear besides the flying targets. She’d be happy if she scored red with one of the three arrows.

Muirenn recalled the day when her Ranger put on an impromptu demonstration of Talking arrows for the school to prove to Mother that the skill could be learned. Ciara wagered a neck massage if he scored perfect, which blushed him scarlet. He had only twenty-eight arrows, but it didn’t hinder him. Nay, he killed the ducks flying by with the throwing knives strapped to his forearms.

Because of his display of expert archery, Mother agreed to permit his family to teach Talking arrows to the Na Siúracha. Muirenn could still picture Mother’s expression when she asked him what he would charge for the service, and he laughed like a loon for her answer. The Cainteoirs desired to share their talents with all capable of learning to help defeat the evil on Earth. His family would stay at the nearby Inn, and charge no fee for what they would teach. Cainteoirs from many homes had shown up for each semester since and joined in on Kylemore’s healing classes when they had spare time. He was no dummy. The Kingston family taught Talking free and took away valuable healing knowledge at the same cost.

Why in nine fiery halls of hells were the field attendants running back with the long-range target? Muirenn only needed two hundred forty points out of three hundred possible to pass. The long-range carried the most points, damn it. If she missed them, she could kiss master classes goodbye. The men ran by her without a single howdy-do or bugger-off her way.

The judges studied the target without expressions. The head judge rose, stepped to the scoreboard, and flipped the cards to show her score to the crowd. The spectators rose to their feet, roaring their approval. Caitlin leaped from the stands and ran to her. What the hells happened? Caitlin stopped at the judge's stand and smacked her hands hard in her display of appreciation for some damn thing.

Caitlin wrapped her up in a hug and lifted her to spin in whacky circles laughing her ass off. “What Caitlin? What did I score?” Caitlin dropped her on her feet and shook her by the shoulders with force to rattle her eyeballs.

“Oh, nothing shy of a perfect three hundred, My Lady. The lead judge added ten points for grins and giggles. You split one arrow with your third shot in the red on the long-range target. Mother won five hundred silver and me one hundred. I didn’t have fifty silver to bet, or I sure as hells would have. Well done, My Lady. You are headed for advanced warrior training. Damn fine shooting, My Lady. Finish your Healer classes, learn well in master classes, and you will join your Ranger within two years.”

“We will do both at the same time, Caitlin. I want to leave here as soon as possible to find him to steal a kiss. I can finish the Healer test blindfolded. Well, it depends on Mother allowing me to test, I suppose. I will ask her to schedule a field test.”



**Chapter 4 Parting Gifts**

**S**heridan stayed back with Michael when the new Master Rangers marched up the aisle to bid farewell to Alphonsus. The king played the role perfectly by conducting official business and then removing his crown to hug the four goodbye as friends. A Paladin rushed in on cue and called for Sheridan.

“Ranger, there are dogs in the back yard. Are they yours?”

“Nay, all mine wait in the front by the wagon. I’ll investigate it for you. Perhaps they are dogs hoping to join my brood.”

He strolled up the short aisle and smiled at Alphonsus. He heard him ask if the Rangers would follow and Ciara responded with a damn straight she’d follow. The king said, good, and he would follow too. Renee chimed in, and they made it a little parade to the spacious back yard. Michael caught him in the kitchen and shot him a questioning glare. Sheridan handtalked they were surprise gifts, and Michael pounded his back.

“What’s that for Michael? Are you two hooligans conspiring a prank?”

“Nay, Ciara; we would never. Sheridan was choking, and I merely helped clear his throat.”

Sheridan coughed a few times and sighed with relief maybe a bit too hard, but it was all in fun. Ciara glared with suspicious eyes and told him to move it. He was burning daylight. They exited the door, and he spotted the dogs lined up in pairs, and the birds sat in the trees scattered around the yard.

“Now, I wonder why they are sitting in pairs. Hmmm?”

He didn’t fool Ciara. She ran to the two Dogos and knelt in the snow to greet them. She looked over her shoulder and yelled for the others to greet their brood. Braelyn went straight for the Cane Corsos and the twins hustled by to greet their pairs of wolfhounds.

“You might be a brat, but you're my delightful brat for sure. Wow, you even got Alphonsus, Renee, and the Paladins to play along.” Ciara rose and sauntered over to him with her dogs at her heels. Twenty four raptors screeched, and her mood changed from sultry vixen to mushy silliness. Ciara scanned the trees, closed her eyes for one blink and her six birds took flight. Ciara screamed.

“Eagles, falcons, and kestrels? Oh, gods, you are—go fetch us meat for them.”

Sinéad rounded the corner of the house laughing at the sight of four Master Rangers behaving like kids at a birthday party. “Máistir doesn’t forget the smallest detail, love. I brought treats. I wanted to be here to witness this glorious event, and he would have a hard time hiding the smelly bag from you, huh?”

The eagles landed on Ciara’s shoulder and the falcons and kestrels perched on her arms. Ciara closed her eyes and began the imprinting. He whispered to Sinéad that they’d enjoy a blessed period of peace and quiet.

“I heard that, brat. I can Talk and talk at the same time I’m listening. I was taught by the best, huh? Oh, Ardan was never heading for the road. The dogs were in the wagon the whole bloody time. Oh, you actually pulled this one off in grand style.”

Braelyn thanked him with a hug and kiss before she called her birds. The twins stood together with the birds perched on arms and shoulders. He took a handful of meat cuttings to feed the birds for them. He could only hope all four imprinted the kestrels and falcons first.

He discussed the conjurer who Talked the wacky snowstorm overhead and the crops with Alphonsus and Michael until Ciara called out for meat. He fed the kestrels, and they took flight to wait their new family. The twins asked for meat next followed closely by Braelyn, and they all did it in the logical order. Two cups of coffee and solving the world’s problems with the king passed by in a flash. The Rangers bid farewell to the king and princess again, and they all walked around the house to where their mounts and wagon waited.

Mat and Matty said goodbye and a heartfelt thanks for their brood. They headed east while he, Michael and two delighted companions rode west for the North Road with four more dogs escorting them. Ciara didn’t know of the scheduled stops or that they really weren’t chasing the three Rangers. Aye, he added days to the trip so it wouldn’t go by quickly. Well, with the ladies playing with their brood, he might as well read a few books. Ciara would be too busy to notice him.



**Chapter 5 Caught Unaware**

**S**heridan smiled at Ciara climbing in the cab. She actually left her dogs outside just to speak with him.

“What did you name them?”

“Oh, well, my eagles are Astor and Ash. The Peregrine falcons are Shai and Shane. My Kestrels are Billy and Betty, and I named my gorgeous Dogos, Maud, and Cormac. Did I say thank you, Sheridan?”

“Aye, and you earned a brood after five years caring for mine and putting up with me.”

“Remind me to kiss you for real when we no longer have witnesses. Think you could do that? Hmmm?”

Ciara held her hand up, he shut up, and she changed the subject before it became too bloody mushy. “This trip will be hard on me, Ranger. You and I have not lived more than one day apart in the five years we shared together. You have grown on me, and our parting is a moment I dread.”

“What about the days I spent injured, unconscious in a hospital bed?”

“You can’t believe Rihanna sat at your bedside holding your hand worried for your recovery. You bloody well know I wouldn’t be permitted in the room if she graced you with a visit.”

Ciara confessed she set up a cot next to his bed and refused all orders to leave at night. Even when he didn’t wake for days, Alannah, his squires, surrogate mothers and she bathed him, spoon-fed Mrs. Baker’s broth, and spoke to his sleeping form day and night. They prayed for his sparkly green eyes to open and his sarcastic lips to inform them he’d recover from crazy heroic actions—again.

“You might have been out of it, but I count the days among the many we shared because I had your fine self to stare at and talk to all night and day.”

Rihanna informed him she was certain he’d recover and too busy to pay a visit. The truth glared, and still, he ignored it. Something was amiss. Ciara sat at the passenger door far away from him.

“I’m curious to learn what you discussed with my unconscious body.”

“Well—Oh, what the hells. Nothing is hidden from my best friend, huh? Let’s see. Oh, OK. The last time is easy to recall because Alannah caught me speaking to you about my decision to reject your marriage proposal delivered to me while lying naked, sweaty, and content in your arms. A year later when we returned home from killing beasts in Europe, a pregnant girl waited for you and you pledged to her when Aoife was born for the baby’s sake. Scattered between both mistakes lies the gist of my conversations with you. You haven’t suffered a severe injury in over a year, so I haven’t had a new discussion with you out cold.”

The cab quieted. He had nothing to add. Ciara declared she would not pledge to a human because of the disparity in life spans. She didn’t deny her love. Nay, he was a fool. Ciara didn’t love him—not romantically. She loved him as a best friend as he loved her. And, damn it, Sheridan would never desert her. She would return home after her successful mission bearing the six marks of a Master Ranger. It’s what she asked for when they first met. He sat in the wagon with a surprisingly silent lady and scanned the road ahead. Not asking her what troubled her mind would go down as a brilliant moment. He glanced at Ciara, and a day terror set her on fire. His best friend burned to death, screaming for his help, but always out of reach.

“Good gods. What did you see this time, Sheridan? Your expression is tearing my heart out.”

“A day terror. It’s gone, and obviously, you are unharmed, Ciara.”

“One day, dear man. One sweet day you will confide in me. May I sit beside you?”

“Please. The seat is cold and empty without…I mean, please do.”

She slid over whispering one day, placed a hand on his thigh, and leaned against his arm. The other wagons waiting to move waved him ahead. He nodded and pointed to change the subject. Ciara waved back in thanks. She even blew kisses at the young boys, and they reacted as typical boys did when a beautiful woman teased them. One poor kid tripped, surprised by her actions, and fell from his wagon to the raucous laughter of his workmates. Sheridan asked the Percherons to move out. Thank the shining gods, the first leg of his journey finally got underway.



**S**heridan’s face ached from his wide silly grin, but he couldn’t help it. Hells, he didn’t care. His brood headed west on Cumberland Road within the red tunnel of giant sugar maple trees lit by the morning sun and softened by the falling snow—a combination of sights not soon forgotten. The snow reflecting the light of sunrise fell like sparks from colliding stars.

In his opinion, a no more spectacular scenic route existed in the world, and the sights piqued his artistic eye. The red leaves of sugar maples set against wet black trunks created a stunning view repeated forever like the tunnel of love ride on the reservoir lake in Lexington. Aye, the ride he once enjoyed with Aoife. The length of road running along Somerset’s boundaries held the dubious affectation of lovers lane. Many couples ambled along its length between gates speaking of futures, hopes, and dreams. Well, lovers strolled hand in hand, he never had the opportunity to amble, stroll, or run along the lane with a lady. Rihanna called it a ridiculous waste of time like the ride through the tunnel of love. Aoife found the boat ride, colorful birds to Talk with, and the variety and abundance of flowers on display a delight. He sighed at how quickly he lost his good mood. Nay, concentrate on nature’s splendor.

The myriad of delightful scents and the enchanting songs of the forest’s winged denizens waking to snow, the horse’s hooves striking hard-packed sand, harnesses jingling, and the click and crunch of wheels added to the rhythm of the wipers combined to create the blissful chorus of the snowy morning’s ride. Oh, hells, the click reminded him to ask Ciara to grab a pen and record the odometer to keep track of the mileage on their trek to Liberty and his journey west.

Braelyn’s gasp of—he’d call it disgust yanked him back to the present. He chuckled over Braelyn’s dilemma. Not all the sounds on the road were pleasing. Michael’s moans of sheer delight for the pastries he consumed, imitated a walrus singing for a mate and no amount of snowfall would silence him. Sheridan would never claim the noises his brother uttered were delightful. Braelyn’s crinkled brows, wrinkled nose, and squished lips clearly announced her poor opinion of Michael’s vociferous eating habits. If Michael intended to impress, the style of the mating call he chose failed with Braelyn. Hah. He’d probably scare off a walrus cow.

Ciara slammed a hip into him and wiped the splashed coffee from his chin. He’d better grab the reins of the conversation or be lost for days. Ciara behaved more like a genteel lady than her typical hardened warrior lately, and he wasn’t certain how to react. She shook her head in a warning not to speak, and he clicked his jaw shut. Who was the Teacher here? She sat up straight and stared at his red-hot face with a smile dripping with sweet victory.

“I swear by the Home Tree you grow faster than summer corn. The last time we sat together, you were shorter than me. How tall will you grow?”

Ciara often initiated a conversation with trivial questions, statements, and concepts that had no bearing on her eventual intent while she worked her way up to the bone cutting question or topic. Sheridan had long since learned to play the game without betraying his awareness. Well, he’d hope he got away with his teasing way of stringing her along. The wagon headed out on its maiden voyage. They never sat on the seat together in the past for her to make such a statement. He surpassed her height two years back. Sheridan rolled his window down a bit and wiped the fog from the windshield. The windshield must have fogged because the cab was too damn warm. It wasn’t him overheating from their legs touching. Oh, hells, what did she ask? Aye, return to the subject before he boiled in his skin.

“Taller than Michael is all I hope for and I’m gaining on him, but my blood brother still stands a finger taller. Máthair promised me I’d be taller than him by nineteen. We were the same height when we met, dear lady, and I surpassed your height a few years back.”

“Aye, so what. Pay attention. It’s plenty tall for any human or Elf. Bel’s balls, you don’t have long to wait, huh? The big day is around the corner and a bloody shame I won’t be here to celebrate with you. Speaking of anniversaries, Sheridan. What will you do this year for Aoife?”

He didn’t need a special day to recall Aoife and how he missed his baby girl. She remained in his heart. Rihanna didn’t fit—she never did and never would. The affairs, and gods, all the things he learned about her in the last year embarrassed him to tears. He…She died and took her caustic insults and abuse with her.

“I want to bury the damn ring with Rihanna. I dread carrying it around, and I want to close that chapter for good. And as for a memorial, I don’t require a special place to focus on Aoife.”

“I’ll go with you, Sheridan. For moral support or to wake you before you freeze to death if you fall asleep on the mound. You’ve been closed off and distant for a year, dear man. I only want to see you smile as you once did, even before Aoife blessed our lives. Many people love you, Máistir. I even love you on your good days.”

A laugh escaped, and he did smile. “Aye, Ciara. I am better today, mostly because of your presence each day, your sarcastic wit, and your friendship. We’ll see what six months of solitude on my quest can do for my stubborn attitude.”

Braelyn rode up next to the wagon. The elder sister tossed her hair over her shoulder, causing the bells attached to tinkle. The feather tied in her hair fluttered once, and she wiped away one strand of jet black that stuck to her lip gloss. Princess Braelyn adopted many of the Eastern Forest Elves’ styles and adornments since promising marriage with Michael. She wore feathers in her hair, painted designs on her face, tattooed symbols with henna on her hands, and arms, and added more jewelry to her person than customary for the Elves in her native forest home. When she eventually replaced their mother as Queen of the Northern Forests, her people might emulate her new fashion statement.

“May I ask a survival question, Máistir? If Ciara is through berating you for wanting to obey your mother’s orders.”

Ciara folded up beside him and ignored all of them. Sheridan nodded for Braelyn to go ahead and ask. His companion asked a pertinent question. She wanted to know how to tell the direction of north on a cloud covered day—like the one they enjoyed or suffered in. He halted the wagon, jumped out to run around to the passenger side, drew a knife, and placed the point on his thumbnail and told them to watch carefully while he rotated the blade. At the point where the thicker back of the blade faced the sun, a shadow appeared on his nail, and both sisters gasped. The sun created sufficient light to create shadows—even through storm clouds. Once you knew where the sun stood in the sky and approximate time of day, finding north proved a cinch to locate.

“Thank you, Máistir. Michael shrugged and pointed north when I asked him. I had no clue how to tell because I couldn’t see the sun. I thought I had you both stumped, but you two brothers have spent more time in the wilderness than any two bears. Good. Oh, why did you keep Athair’s letter to the monarchs? The one Ciara carried inside her shirt when we found you?”

His skin tingled with shame. He shot a quick glance at the lady. Braelyn’s expression didn’t display sarcasm with evil intent. Aye, the truth must be told.

“Well, it’s a childish and perhaps a selfish reason, but I kept it because it bears your sister’s scent, Braelyn. It’s not like I pull it out to wallow in nostalgia daily, but I didn’t have the heart to burn it. The letter reminds me of blessed moments shared with Ciara.”

“Thank you for your candor, Máistir. Your heartfelt and honest answer proves I’m not so full of shit, after all.”

Michael barked a laugh at a private joke and covered it with a fake cough. Braelyn pursed her lips and squinted at Ciara like she waited for an argument. It must have been a wager between them, and Braelyn won. Braelyn broke off the visual confrontation to ask another question.

“What is your plan, dear Teacher? Which path will the young Rangers take to evade capture?”

Good for her. Braelyn already contemplated their route and efforts of chasing his squires, or she attempted to save him from an awkward moment with his best friend. Braelyn’s little sister ignored the glares and squirmed under the blanket, rubbing thighs and reminding him how close she sat. Ciara didn’t have a problem speaking the truth—her opinion, without thought of price or pain. Sheridan shifted away and smiled at Braelyn.

“Well, Braelyn, my first guess is the squires will run all day and night in an effort to outdistance us. I also believe they will head north first to Lexington and east using the major trade routes from there. I plan to take the train from Lexington and beat them to our home in Liberty by two days. We will set up an ambush to snare them somewhere on the road.”

Braelyn’s face squished up like he stepped on a stinkweed. Her chin dropped in disappointment, and her brows shot up in shock. She considered it is cheating? The lady wished to follow tracks for seven days? Aye, it would give the squires a better chance of winning their test. In a real-life situation, trackers hardly ever had the destination of runners and couldn’t get ahead to wait. What the hells, in the end, it’s all for fun. His squires evaded him many times in the past already. One more time wouldn’t ruin his life.

“Fine, Braelyn, we will track them until caught or we lose to make you happy. Nay, don’t fret. I’m teasing you. This is a tracking exercise. Which way would you say they run?”

Braelyn clapped her hands, turned to Michael, her future husband, and stuck her tongue out to spit razzberries. Michael shrugged and smiled, and it would have to suffice for a response. She must have won a bet. Braelyn wagered on the color of the sky or in which direction the sun would rise. If it didn’t rise due-east, she’d claim victory. “Your squires know you well, Máistir. I say they stole your idea to take the train.”

“Aye, it would be an excellent plan except I locked the entrance with a new command. They will head east from Lexington and probably rest in Carter Caves for a night if they do run as you suggest. Which way should we proceed, trackers? Remember; we won’t find any signs until tomorrow morning with this damn snow.”

While the sisters schemed and planned their route, Sheridan concentrated on the glorious and too damn early display of fall’s foliage. It slowly donned a white jacket, and he would rather enjoy nature instead of watching the debate, or consultation with a strong emphasis on personal choices. The sunlight changed the whole scene into a magnificent display of merlot colored leaves mixed with crimson and ripe-apple red contrasted beautifully with the golden yellow and orange in the branches of maple and ash trees. The sand-covered packed clay road, blanketed with a brilliant carpet of white, highlighted his favorite scenic route. The sights even made the ride satisfactory on the wagon instead of in the saddle. Well, the wagon would remain warm with the heated rocks as well. Braelyn and Michael enjoyed riding in the snow.

Pedestrians called out greetings and waved as they passed. Damn, couples ventured along the lane already with the sun barely risen. Even in the snow, lovers journeyed arm in arm whispering and smiling their affections for each other. It would be nice to experience what lovers did on the road once in his life. He tossed fire on the soapstone to reheat the cab and cover the heat from his embarrassed face.

Braelyn coughed to pull his attention back from the depressing thoughts. He laughed when he discovered how far they traveled while his mind indulged in the beauty and splendor of his favorite season. That’s what he would tell Ciara if she asked where his mind wandered, and with luck, she wouldn’t ask. His best friend hopped out of the cab and grabbed the reins to her horse from Michael. She and Braelyn spoke for a while as the snow falling slow and steady, mesmerized his simple mind. Braelyn banged on the roof of the cab to wake him out of his revelry.

“We wish to take the forest road at Eubank north of Renee’s Mountain and cut northeast to intercept them. This time of year, the road is well maintained for loggers. The eagles declare this snowstorm doesn’t exist a half-hour’s ride north. Hells, we could be in Berea for lunch and cut northeast again until we stop in Irvine for the night. Good, we ladies can soak in a hot tub and get a manicure in Irvine at the Salon and Spa.”

“Lead on, hunters. It appears you two broke a nail while you studied the maps and planned a route. I’ll be sitting on the cloud called a seat driving the warm wagon behind you. What makes you think the eagles can forecast the weather any better than our meteorologists?”

Braelyn laughed at Michaels huff of agreement and clicked her tongue to urge Stardust north on North Road. The midnight black of Stardust’s flanks bunched and rippled as she pushed off hard to comply in a hurry. The hoofs kicked up horseshoe-shaped snowballs that splattered against the cab. Ciara finished securing her hood and smiled like she caught him misbehaving.

“Just keep your eyes on the scenery and not my butt.”

Ciara waved her hand, pretending his head floated before her, and she smacked it hard. She nudged her horse, and Rust’s hooves drummed across the wooden bridge over the culvert. She laughed loud and happy at his shaking head and the results of his heated face. He didn’t glance at her butt—how many times must he remind her the cloak covered her from head to heels, damn it.

He turned the wagon onto North Road and waved to three men standing at Meili’s and Hecate’s shrine and spotted what Alannah asked him to gather. Hah, forget butts, he found burdock and dandelion plants already. He must keep his promise to Alannah and return with bags full of roots. He stopped the wagon, sent his brood off to have fun, gathered his tools, and headed for the plants on the roadside.

Sheridan sang while he dug around the dandelion to remove the root in one piece. The atrocious squawks he produced didn’t distract him from the haunting story Maura shared. How did Maura know Muirenn would betray him? Just because it happened to one woman in another universe didn’t imply Muirenn would be guilty of the same. Hells’ Muirenn wasn’t his mate. Aye, he could use similar logic to console himself about his fated death. He needn’t die at the last battle simply because other men died, or because written records stated others perished after their victory. Yeah, he should ponder that fact for a while. He’d cherish a long life after with hopes of raising many children. Aye, he couldn’t have children with his blood without a new mate—or three.

It proved too logical for even him to argue. Aye, but nobody, not even his mother, could tell him who to love. The scene before him shifted. The snow disappeared, replaced by burning grass with Aoife tied to a tree on fire. She screamed for her Pa to help. He squished his eyes shut to erase the horrific scene, but it wasn’t from his physical vision. Sheridan took a few deep breaths to calm, the vision faded, and when it passed, he returned to digging roots.

A long shadow swept across the frosted grass, and he rose, dropping his shovel and drawing his blades. A man holding a knife laughed at him. Something struck his head. He spun with stars dancing in his vision, slashed his knife without making contact and received a second blow, and his world faded away to dark stupidity for being caught unaware of his surroundings. The three men he waved to weren’t out for a stroll on a snowy fall morning. Blackness overpowered his vision. What a fool. He failed to pay attention or secure his position after the day terror.The last thoughts blurred in the void. He must improve the shield.

**Chapter 6 Hunters**

**C**iara pulled Rust to a halt and turned the chestnut mare to face south. Her right hand gripped the cloak over her heart, and it wasn’t because of the frigid wind blowing in her face. Something wasn’t right. The tingle, the pleasant sensation of her best friend’s essence in her heart, disappeared, and she hated the feeling. They hadn’t ridden far at all, and he should be closer, damn it. Her apprehension would drive her nuts. Ciara should sense him in her heart, but instead, a cold dread filled her chest.

“What do you see, Ciara?”

“That’s it in a bloody nutshell, Michael. I don’t see my favorite Ranger and I should. Bloody hells, on a clear day the roof of the Crosbhóthar Inn is visible from here. Where in the nine halls of hells is Máistir? He never rides so bloody far behind us, and the horses are fresh, damn it.”

Máistir had no valid excuse for riding so far back or so bloody slow. Why didn’t he Talk to her and tell her what he planned?

“I can’t name my premonition, but something isn’t right. He doesn’t answer when I Talk to him either. He is a stubborn mule, but he wouldn’t ignore the sincerity in how I Talked my request to respond.”

Michael chuckled, turned his horse south, and searched the road with her. Sheridan’s blood brother wouldn’t argue with Ciara if she asked to ride back. Michael barked a second laugh announcing his decision to add to his remark.

“He promised my sister to forage for burdock and dandelion roots. Perhaps he’s playing in the dirt before the snow covers everything.”

“Not for this long, Michael. He could’ve dug up the bloody forest by now. Nay, something is wrong. Deep down in our bond, I know it. There is an empty spot in my awareness that his essence usually fills. Braelyn, can you sense our Máistir?”

Braelyn’s hand grasped cloth over her heart, and she shook her head.

Braelyn drew up beside her patting Stardust’s neck. “Well, dear sister, what would you have us do?”

Her big sister knew her too well. Ciara might thank Braelyn for not voicing her concerns or spilling her secrets. Ciara would never confess to the second and stronger sensation in her heart somehow connected to Sheridan that no other shared. She turned away and hid the blush, heating her face by scanning the sky and around in the woods for his birds and dogs. She couldn’t spot either close by, and the snow falling cut visibility on the ground, and in the sky to the gods knew how high but not far. Duh, she had raptors.

Ciara Talked for her new babies, spotted one and pointed to Astor soaring on a draft in and out of the clumps of snow clouds. Ciara asked her to fly south to check on Sheridan. His oldest eagle dove out of the currents like a dark arrow against the churning gray sky to join Astor. Ice joined him teasing her mate to fly with greater speed.

Storm and Ice held the distinct position of his first and oldest birds. He said they joined him at four-years-old on the world of his birth and helped the young boy survive on his own in the wilds. Sheridan told her all his birds would be hers when he died since birds live long lives and her friend declared his life would end young. His bloody ridiculous and depressing statement brought on a heated discussion for damn sure. Sheridan convinced himself he must die to win the war, but he never took into account Ciara would join him in his life. Ciara would do her damnedest to prove the man a liar. Aye, he might live a mere century, but she’d love to share each moment with him. She’d bloody well care for him in his dotage too, damn it.

Braelyn urged her horse closer with a cluck of her tongue, and they both watched the raptors fly until they became tiny dark specs in the falling snow. A moment later, the gray-white turbulence swallowed the trio. The waiting would kill her.

The eagle’s angry screech scoured her mind. Astor Talked her the empty wagon through her vision. She Talked to her horse, and Rust bolted away. Ciara Talked to her Dogos, and they rushed out of the trees to join her in the race south. Ciara begged her red roan mare to run faster than ever, and Rust surprised her with a surge of speed racing like the wind. Snow streaked by, and dark trees blurred as they shot passed. Ciara’s hood blew off when she raised her head to wave at a wagon team, and she bent over and howled into the wind hugging the mare’s neck. If the beret blew off, she’d leave it behind.

She reached the driverless wagon way ahead of the others, leaped off Rust before she stopped, ran to the back and opened the rear door to the wagon hoping for the best. He wasn’t inside napping as she suspected. The weasels poked their heads out of the warm box. She closed the door and searched the woods. Sheridan’s horse chewed at the reins tied to the rail in annoyance he couldn’t free himself. It wasn’t a good sign. Sheridan tied Dax securely when he didn’t plan on calling for help. Ciara screamed Sheridan’s name into the falling snow repeatedly with the Thrashers’ mimicking her only response.

Her voice drowned in the deep ancient woods of red and chestnut oak, red spruce, and cedar on either side of the road. If she found him injured, she’d... Nay, she would not believe it possible. Who could sneak up and surprise the finest Ranger ever? If she found him goofing off, she would beat the silly man senseless for causing her heartache.

A search of the ground showed his size thirteens leading to the grasses on the west side where she found his shovel and a sack for collecting Alannah’s damn roots. Other prints on the edge of the road showed men trooped south but nothing threatening. The tall grasses hid any other evidence. Another hour of snow and all prints would be covered, damn it. What happened to her best friend?

Talking to him provided no response and more worry. She squatted to inspect the marks clearer. Aye, he knelt and obviously didn’t pay attention while he dug out the damn plants. She spotted the ominous prints and bent grasses and more heading west. The dogs showed up from all four directions and asked about their friend. They couldn’t sense his essence. Damn it to all the hells, where were the dogs when he needed them? Her Dogos arrived tired from the run. She Talked heat to her hands to warm them with a rubdown while she thought.

Michael and Braelyn arrived on opposite sides of the road searching the forest and calling out his name. They stopped and dismounted to stand with her. Ciara clenched her fists and shook violently to chase away her anxiety and still her nerves. Her Máistir taught her anger, and fear wouldn’t help in a search. Máistir compared panic to a leak in a boat that only grew worse when excited. Calm down and patch the bloody hole with steady hands. She would not scream or cry. They would find her Teacher. Oh hells, the horses witnessed what occurred. Aye, calm a bit—as he taught; maintain calm and rational thoughts would follow. Ciara Talked with Dax and the six Percherons. The horses bloody well confirmed her worse fears.

“Three men abducted Máistir from here. They came from the woods, stalked the road a bit and backtracked to sneak up on him. They struck while he dug for Alannah’s roots, and carried Máistir west into the trees. Aye, look damn it. They walked without a care to cover tracks. We are lucky the horses witnessed the abduction. It’s obvious Máistir’s mind drifted off. He was bloody absorbed in his thoughts, and they caught him. I don’t understand. The man is aware when a fly passed behind him.”

He must have experienced a day terror when they attacked. She knew bloody well he was unaware of his surroundings when a terror struck. He experienced too damn many horrid visions. Alannah couldn’t diagnose a cause for his nightmares and day terrors. She offered drugs as a solution, and Sheridan refused. Ciara would bet the Home Tree he had more bloody scary images than last year, and they grew worse with frequency. But would he ask for help? Nay, of course, he wouldn’t. Forget the reason; the man should have a constant guard with him twenty-four seven, three sixty-five, and it would never happen again.

The scent hounds went to work without her needing to ask because Sabra, the Chéad Deirfiúr, the First Sister of the brood took command. Ciara scratched the Argentine Mastiff’s head while the dogs scoured the ground. Sabra was the reason she wanted a Dogo, and he gave her two.

Harriette and Bruster, the two Plotts, howled when they found his scent and took off west with their noses following spore and ears dragging on the grass powdered with snow. OK, at least he could stand and walk. The Bloodhounds took the scent and bounded off following the Plotts with noses and ears scraping the ground. While Ciara changed into her forest boots, Sabra Talked images of Sheridan heading toward them with his typical wiggling fingers for a wave and impish smile on his face. She stomped her feet to settle the boots when she rose.

“Aye, Sabra, let’s go find the man with his crazy smile and whacky wiggling wave.”

She asked the brood to spread out instead of staying in a pack. The captors might change direction, and they would find him sooner if the dogs covered more ground. Oh. She wanted the weasels with them. A sneak thief might come in handy.

Ciara opened the back door of the wagon and needn’t call for Minnie and Max. They leaped into her arms, chittering like drunken fools. The weasels heard and were anxious to help free their friend. Sabra remained at her side with her Dogos while the rest of the dogs ran north or south before dashing into the trees.

She Talked to Sabra asking again if she needed sweaters for the Argentine Mastiffs. They lacked the undercoats of other breeds and chilled easily. Máistir’s dress factory produced camouflaged colored sweaters for them. Well, for all the dogs in his brood. The sweaters also helped hide their white coats in dark woods. Sabra sneezed, shook violently, demonstrating she declined the offer a second time. She wasn’t cold, and the rest of the Dogos wouldn’t wear a sweater if Sabra didn’t. She asked her two mastiffs, and they refused. If Sabra said no, they all said no.

The weasels squirmed into the bag made for the sole purpose of carrying the critters. She retrieved quivers packed with hunting arrows from the weapons box. Aye, she’d hunt and kill the bastards if it took her a lifetime. She passed a quiver to Michael and Braelyn and slipped the bow from her saddle straps. She hung the last quiver on her shoulder. Ciara bent the bow to string. Oh, they waited for her opinion of what came next.

“Oh, bloody hells, one of us should take the wagon south to the Crosbhóthar Inn and turn west for Glasgow. The captors must have a wagon waiting. He’d fight them the whole way until they tired and tied him up to throw in a wagon. Máistir is too large for any two men to control on his feet.”

Braelyn led her and Michael’s horse to the rear of the wagon and tied them with Dax. She returned and grabbed Rust’s reins.

“I’ll collect the roots and harvest more before the snow covers this patch. The roots are, after all, for my promised husband’s favorite cordial. I’ll direct the wagon toward Glasgow with our horses. Oh, damn, I must travel north for the turnaround at Frog Hollow Road. Good, I don’t mind riding in the cab all warm and cozy with my new Corsos. You follow the dogs, Ciara. Talk a mental message or send a bird to pass it on if the distance is too great. Good. I’ll take the small dogs with me as well.”

Ciara nodded her agreement and kissed her sister for the offer. Sabra ran into the woods with her, both anxious to find the man. She Talked her mind to connect with her eagle, Astor and watched the dogs searching using the raptor’s vision from overhead. Ciara asked Michael to hold her arm to prevent her from smacking face-first into a tree. Ciara kept watching where she walked as Sheridan taught her, but it gave her a bad case of vertigo watching through the bird’s eyes. Her Astor wasn’t experienced, and it would take them both some time. Sheridan promised it would fade with practice, but hells, it didn’t help at the bloody moment.

The trail the dogs followed for half an hour didn’t veer from the worn path running due west through the forest dropping leaves and the sky dropping snow in hushed flakes of white between trees. It didn’t take long for the snow to cover their tracks and confuse the dogs.

Ciara asked Astor to fly ahead of the dogs. If the men hadn’t turned, perhaps, they’d be spotted soon. Ice banked right to line up with the dogs and dropped lower over the foliage of maple, oak and ash trees with a few tall pines trying to infiltrate the hardwood forest. All the trees bore a dusting of the white shit, and the snow didn’t show a bloody sign of slowing anytime soon. Sheridan said the weather station didn’t forecast precipitation? What in the bloody hells did the mulish man call all the white shit falling from the sky?

She didn’t run another ten steps when she spotted the oddity.

“Michael. Look at the pine trees on the left. Every other bloody tree dumped the snow from its boughs. I’d bet the Farm our Máistir pushed his captor into the tree, leaving clues for us to follow. We are still on the right trail.” Astor Talked her an image she could scream at all bloody day.

She Talked to the dogs and told them to wait. Astor tipped her wings and circled the small clearing where the captors held her favorite Teacher tied to a tree. Ice and Storm, flying with her raptors cried out in anger and sympathy for their life-long friend. Sheridan wore a hood to block his magic, and they stripped him to the waist. Her best friend bled from many fresh wounds. The bloody whankers would die horribly for what they did to him. It’s too bloody cold. With the hood on, he couldn’t warm his fine body with magic.

With the Ranger marks and a multitude of scars from previous whippings across his broad back, Ciara would never mistake him for another. Even with the snow falling so thick, and blurring the scene, she would recognize his bare back at first-sight. Ciara shuddered the memory away. She shouldn’t recall their time together. Ciara gave him up because bonding with him was out of the question due to the disparity in life spans. Aye, think of something safe. Scars and wounds were a safer subject.

Sheridan had his Ranger marks magically tattooed on his back instead of his arms like most Rangers. The fact his arms were scarred worse than his back justified his decision. Aye, all those bloody scars inflicted at the tender age of five—and that’s all she knew.

The camp the three foul men occupied wasn’t built for one night. An outhouse sat north away from the stone fire pit, and a lean-to identified the sleeping area. Several spots resembled graves too damn much for her to ignore. Three dark rectangles sat stark against the white snow on the colder ground. Damn bloody abductors took other people. One of the men struck her Máistir with a wicked multi-strand whip, and she watched the blood drip down his back. The damage it caused proved it wasn’t a plain whip. The bloody sadistic fool would pay. Sheridan didn’t flinch which enraged the man, but he told the other to beat him with a cane. She watched as they struck Sheridan several more times without an outward sign of pain. Aye, her Máistir demonstrated his self-discipline, and mule-headed stubbornness at its best.

“We have them. Sheridan is tied to a tree, and the bastards are whipping and caning him. Máistir isn’t panicked by the restraints and is accepting the beating with silent arrogance. All his practice to erase the fear of bondage worked for him. Aye, why should I be surprised, huh? The man is incredible. I’ll run faster now. We can’t rush in, or they might kill him, but we will pick off two bloody pukes with arrows and allow the dogs to take the third before they know what hit them.”

Shining gods, how many more strikes will her best friend receive before they arrive to end his torture? The man should select a set number of dogs and birds to stay close to him like a shadow day and night. With the number of animals in his brood, a personal guard for the Ranger should exist. Aye, Shadows to stick close to him at all times. Ciara released the weasels and told them to try and lift his hood without detection. The two chittered until they disappeared in the distance. Bloody hells, they’d never sneak up on the abusers chittering worse than two squirrels fighting over a stash of nuts.



**S**heridan’s awareness lay in a miasma of pain stabbing lightning bolts into the darkness of his mind. On second thought—If he experienced pain, he remained among the living. Sheridan coughed a weak and quiet laugh really not caring one way or the other. Would death be warmer and quiet? Muffled voices and an incessant tick-tock entered his world of dark and bitter cold. His skin tightened on his face and scalp, itching from a bout of panic, and his bare skin prickled in the frigid air. Each snowflake landing on him tickled with a frosty kiss and chilled his body to shivers.

The tick-tack, tick-tack, tick-tack, driving him insane, approached. The muffled voices cleared as far as they ever could. Three men stopped, and the tick-tack stopped with them. Oh, one walked with canes. They spoke with smoke scratched voices about harming him. Heaving breaths and a grunt warned him of the violence he suffered as a child. Sheridan shifted, searching for fabric. Relief came instantly. He wore his pants. The whip struck, and he flinched, sucked in the scream, and he shuddered hard, maintaining his discipline.

His captors bound his hands, hooded his head with iron to prevent him from using magic, and suffocate him. He didn’t face a test this time. Don’t dwell on it, breathe in and out damn it. No matter how bad he suffered, he had enough air. He wouldn’t die. The inside of his arms rubbed raw wrapped around a post or tree. He moved a bit to discern rough, uneven bark. They tied him to a tree to torture him. His mind raced back to receiving punishments from his first Máistir, and he flinched.

The damn whining must stop.

Sheridan stood on tip-toes to relieve the pressure on his arms and allow the blood to flow into his hands tied tightly in a ring squealing with his movements. Footsteps crunching new snow drew near. Multiple snaps of leather gave him ample warning. The man grunted again, and the whip struck his back, tearing flesh with metal barbs.

He sent his physical mind into the bright room where he learned to hide as a child. Sheridan couldn’t help or stop the first cry of pain, but the man would not receive the satisfaction of a second. The man shuffled closer, cursed and grunted. The whir of the whip, the grunt from the man, repeated, and Sheridan relaxed. He let himself go, separating his body from his spirit. He imagined watching the whipping from above, and he pitied the man bound to the tree accepting the whips without uttering a complaint. His torturer changed whips, and Sheridan smiled. He’d take a conventional whip all day.

“Where’s An Deorái? He’s got to be a Ranger close to twenty-one in age. Name him, boy. You ain’t got to be so damn stubborn. Just tell us what we want.”

Sheridan denied knowledge of An Deorái each time, and the man whipped him to the rhythm of his questions. Guttural, chopped, short, and he huffed, grunted, and tired quickly. Sheridan remained silent. Gwydion knew he lived in Esak? Nay, he must search for him in each kingdom. He couldn’t know who Sheridan would be when he reached twenty-one. His torturer stopped to breathe heavy and loud, out of shape and irritated. Sheridan’s imagination watched the man from above and wished him dead. He sought the light in the center of his essence and stepped into it uncaring, unaware, unconcerned for the body he left behind.

“Answer my question, boy. I don’t care how tough you think you are. You’ll break under my whip, or you’ll get my six little biters instead and die. We know he’s a Ranger. Put a face on An Deorái and tell me where to find him.

Sheridan eased his consciousness back into his body when the eagle’s mournful cry reached him like a call of hope from a dear friend, and he discovered he still had a smile or two left. They found him. He would survive the ordeal as he did at seven when he laid on a rock shelf with a broken body unable to move. Ciara would undoubtedly give him grief for his mistake of losing focus while digging plants. He allowed the men to sneak up on him. Sheridan taught his charges always to be aware of their surroundings. Never discount the insignificant. The smallest mote might kill. Aye, his second foolish error of sending all the brood away to have fun would haunt him. But Maura’s words consumed his mind, and he didn’t pay attention to the squirrel chittering at unwelcome visitors in the woods or the bluejay squawking at the squirrel to quiet. He conjured it all up from memory, but it didn’t do him much good in hindsight. He failed his own test and broke his inflexible rule. Damn, the day terror distracted him. He need not berate himself since there were many who bad-mouthed him on a daily basis.

The man’s telltale grunt warned him the leather strips headed his way. Sheridan sucked in a breath and clamped his mouth shut. He must remain alert, but would not give the fool the satisfaction of a whimper. The whip struck and welted more skin. The man cursed for not drawing a cry with the slashes. Sheridan’s warm blood chilled quickly running down his back and prickled his tortured skin in the autumn air. He tried Talking fire to his hands again without results. The men spoke the truth, and it disturbed him. The iron net in the hood severed his connection to magic. It worked the same as his iron laced vest preventing Gwydion from sensing his location. Aye, he recalled an iron helmet used on another person, but couldn’t call up the image of the face who wore the iron cover.

“Tell us, boy. Damn, you needn’t suffer this pain for some damn Ranger. We don’t want to kill him. We want to talk to him is all. If he’s smart, he’d agree to join us.” The nasal voice stopped whipping, out of breath.

“I have told you enough times I am not aware of a man named An Deorái. I am familiar with all the Rangers, and the name and description doesn’t match any of them. I suggest you return to whoever sent you and inform them Ranger Sheridan couldn’t help you. I chose to dig roots while on a Sunday ride into the country. What in the nine hells is wrong with that?”

One of the idiots freed him from the ring, and two men turned him. He didn’t care where they brought him. He’d take a few down with him. Sheridan struck out at the face of the man before him. His thumbs found the eyes and his fingers grasped his skull, and he pushed feeling the orbs squish and his thumbs dug into the brain. The man dropped and screamed until death found him.

Stick-man whacked the back of his legs a few times to drop him and huffed from the exertion. Whip-man told the other to move away. He wanted to work. Footsteps of many people approached, and yelling voices ordered his abusers to stop, and one who limped and complained with each step drew the closest. A man with a whiskey-rough voice cursed his captors.

“Does this man have three claw marks scarred on his head?”

“How am I supposed to know. We’re hunting for answers, not scars. We spotted the beret and picked the kid up for questioning and stuck the hood on first thing as you said. My little whip friend and I leave scars on the survivors. Take the hood off and check for yourself. I ain’t going near the man. He killed Billy with him blinded by the hood and his hands tied.”

“You’re a blasted idiot, Spoons. This guy must be Ranger Scar, and he’s one of them, Talkers. At least you were smart enough to hood him. Take the hood off, and we’ll be burned to death before we reached the road. What about his animals, or the Elf who travels with him? No, of course, you didn’t look for animals. You don’t hunt for partners either. I’d bet his damn cats lie in wait for us already. Six of you backtrack to ensure these idiots weren’t followed. The Ranger never travels without his brood, so return with his wagon the bloody fools left like a sign pointing right to us. You sorry lot should be able to handle one Elf Ranger and a few animals.”

Sheridan smiled. Spoons would beat him again for the smile if caught. They won’t survive three Elves, and his dogs and birds. The cats chose not to join them on the trip. The family headed for the Rockies after delivering the sisters to Liberty, and the big sissies don’t like cold weather. Well, they had an excuse. The cats originated from Africa and India. Sheridan listened in earnest to determine how many occupied the site.

“I think we should cut the Ranger’s throat. We owe him for killing Billy.”

“Damn you Spoons. We can’t kill this guy if he’s Ranger Scar. The two American kings would turn over every flaming rock on the blasted continent searching for who killed the blasted famous Ranger. Don’t you ever listen? No more whipping, Willa, shake your bones and call up your demons to tickle the Ranger’s fears and make him talk. He of all the Rangers has to know who An Deorái is. Hell, we should ransom the fool for gold and disappear to the islands we saw coming here.”

A grating, high pitched voice hard to believe it came from a human throat spoke in an unknown and savage language full of exes and zees. The tenor rose while the cadence increased until she sang her words in the foul language. His ears couldn’t buzz louder if stuck inside a hornet's nest. Sheridan’s skin prickled from an icy scrape on his back.

The men gasped, a few cursed, and by the rasping of steel, four men drew blades. Aye, the captain wouldn’t, and Raspy used wooden clubs. He had six to deal with plus the new intruder.

“Who the hell are you, and where did you come from? We had guards posted out there.”

The captain obviously didn’t approve of the person arriving. Footsteps entered the camp with short swishes of feet moving like a warrior. There were no boot stomps or scrapes. The newcomer padded with the graceful steps of an Elf. The man harrumphed his disapproval of the camp.

“You had guards posted out there. Nine distinct hells make up the halls guarded by Hel’s hounds, heralded by Cailleach and ruled by Arawn, and if you don’t wish to visit them one by one, you’ll show some respect for Gwydion’s champion. I am Ten and came at the master’s bidding to check your progress. So, you believe a witch has real power on this world?

The woman hissed. She screamed at the men she must continue or risk the demon escaping and take one of them. The newcomer guffawed in an belligerent tone and ignored the woman’s outburst.

“I smelled your captive’s essence as soon as my portal closed. If he is so crucial, why would you whip him? Why injure a man you wish to ransom and subjugate him to demonic torture if you hope to claim a reward? You talked of abandoning your assignment, and I assure you it will not play well when I report to Gwydion. Who is this man you hope to ransom and flee like frightened children?”

The woman screeched and took up her song where she left off singing faster and with urgency. The men shuffled around on nervous feet. Who could frighten six men so easily? And what was a portal?

Sheridan planted his feet, preparing to move if the idiot gave him a chance. The captain explained to Ten who they guessed Sheridan to be and Ten tsked with skepticism. Sheridan set his thoughts in order. He’d Talk a shield first and burn all of them when the idiot removed the hood. If Ten proved as arrogant as five—hells, he should be twice as cocky and stupid. Something tugged at the hood. It lifted. He spotted Max. Men screamed, and the woman wailed.

Sheridan shuddered from the hand, touching his shoulder. The soldiers yelled a warning Ten ignored. The hood lifted free. He Talked his thanks to his weasel Max, Talked fire to his hands and burned his ropes away. Ten sucked in a gasp of surprise at the sight of Sheridan’s fingers burning with magical fire. He faced the magician prepared to fight and stopped mid punch. His throat choked with bile, his scalp tingled and he stared brain-numb at the man who could be a close relative.

“Holy shit, Cap’n, they be brothers.”

Sheridan recovered from the shock before Ten, grasped the man’s throat with white-hot knives of fire and squeezed. The razors of molten light dug into the flesh of his neck. He twisted his hand, ripping out and burning his larynx. Ten dropped to the ground both hands at his throat, trying to stem the flow of blood and breathe through the hole in his neck. Ten’s legs spasmed, his boots bounced and slapped hard on the freezing ground. Air hissed from the open wound and blood gurgled as it filled the lungs. Ten jerked one last time, and his neck bubbled blood from the air expelled by drowned lungs. Sheridan turned to face the others. The woman cackled, screeched a summons for Cailleach to aid her. Sheridan’s attention on the twin caused him to sense the witch’s command too late and cost him his freedom.

“Hold him, you, idiots.” Her voice grated his nerves. He’d hate to listen to the whiny voice that befitted her ugly countenance for long. Sheridan attempted to Talk fire and the magic stalled, rejected by his mind and dissipated. The woman somehow had his mind in her control.

“A Talker he be? He likes to play with the animals, does he? Hold’em tight lads. I got his mind closed off from magic. Let me take a gander at’em.” She did have his mind. Each attempt to Talk a shield slithered away. The woman hobbled over to him, clacking her cane in the annoying cadence he heard earlier and glared with two pupils black and dull as soot set in red-veined orbs bulging from her green-tinted scaly face. The witch appeared more frog than human.

“Aye, a Talker yeh. Magic yeh gots aplenty. It ain’ts do’n yeh no good now, eh? Cailleach be my matron, and she be tell’n me to change yeh. What’ll it be? Shall I make yeh a dog or a bird? Aye, I see yeh simple pictures in yeh head. Aye, it’ll be one of them goldie birds. Yeh never will return as long as I be liv’n.”

Sheridan closed his eyes and Talked for his mother. He hadn’t a clue how to deal with the witch.

*“Mother?”*

*“Praise the All Father for granting you wisdom. I just wish it came sooner. Thank you, son. I couldn’t be more relieved you called out for me. We are here observing and interested in how you respond. I’m also curious why you didn’t request assistance when they beat you.”*

Yeah, he knew how she felt about him not calling her for help. Asking his mother to save him from a whipping would never happen. He’d call for help when he had no other recourse.

*“Nothing? OK, son, you win the most obstinate man award. The hag is not Cailleach’s creature. She is in the grips of a demon masquerading as the gate keeper’s herald. It is not the witch who controls the coupling. When someone smaller, weaker, and less skilled attacks you, what is your response?”*

*“Aha, reject her. I will ignore her spell. Aye, evil cannot harm if you scorn the attempt, dismiss the temptation, and repulse the attack. I will, Mother.”*

*“Good luck, son. When the witch fails to bring it across, the demon will turn on her for its reward. Be prepared to drop behind cover. The result of the rift to the demon’s world slamming shut while she holds it open with magic will disrupt the area with a violent concussion.”*

The witch continued her chanting reaching ear-splitting notes. Sheridan’s efforts to reject her magic failed. His skin tightened and itched from fingers of magic all over his body. He doubled over holding back his moans of pain. A brilliant fiery ball of energy enveloped the hag, and it exploded throwing bodies to the ground, in the air, or into trees. His vision faded, and he stumbled, throwing his hands forward to cushion the…he had no hands. Immense wings struck the ground. He failed to reject her magic.

Sheridan flapped his new wings, rose from the ground, and he couldn’t have been happier. Someone grabbed his leg, pulled him back, and stuffed the hood over his head. They shoved him into a box and slammed a cover on it. His body vibrated, shifting back into human form. The men hammering the lid shut ensured he acted too damn slow again. He quit struggling. Damn. The witch granted him the ability to shapeshift.

*“Mother.”*

*“You certainly have a propensity for straining my patience.”*

*“I detect a wee bit too much humor in your voice, Mother. How does one shift shapes at will?”*

*“Oh, Sheridan, you are a treasure. You are tied up, hooded, and beaten, but your thoughts turn to how you could use a new magical talent. Oh, Ciara’s patience is legendary. Desire, son. Desire is the key to all magic. You fuel your desire with a will and make it a reality if your will is resolute. I am laughing at you. Laughter is healthier for my mental state than crying. You passed up at least five opportunities to escape. What are you doing?”*

*“I want to know where in Esak they would shelter, how many more are with them, and the identity of their leader would be beneficial to learn—until we kill him or her.”*

*“I don’t understand how Ciara has not yet beaten you to a pulp. Get out of the box and fly away. Oh, alright, be that way. Ciara is closing in on the culprits. Stay alive long enough for her to rescue you.”*

*“Do you always watch me?”*

*“No, son. I sensed your pain and ran for the viewer, praying you would survive. I am not so nosey a mother to keep an eye on you day and night. I do have other duties, and if I did watch you more, I’d have a head full of gray hair. Don’t you laugh at me. Ciara is correct. You are a brat.”*



**Chapter 7 Tracking**

**C**iara tore off chunks of meat to toss at the hungry raptors in the game Sheridan created to hone the raptors catching skills and everyone’s timing and depth perception. Her babies needed practice she could not afford at the moment. She fed them perched on low branches.

The birds found the bloody whankers holding Sheridan and watched them torture him with canes and whips before Ciara arrived. She had to perform the Breaths of Tranquility to keep from rushing through the woods as a berserker would. Aye, as her best friend would. She and Michael crept through the woods searching for the bloody clearing. She choked on her next question for Michael and swallowed her surprised laughter when she saw the dog’s Talked images. They’d have the chance to kill some bloody whankers

“The dogs are on the trail of six men rushing this way like they own the forest. The sentries probably spotted our huge wagon.”

“Or they concluded we are searching for Sheridan. If one of the abductors recognized my brother, they’d expect to find me at least. We do have a reputation for traveling together that goes back eleven years.

Michael handtalked instructions to hide and wait in ambush for the fools. She’d shoot three before they ran away for help. She must shoot three if they want him freed. Nay, the dogs, Talked her images of them taking men down. Aye, the fools would beg for an arrow once his fighting dogs had them. Ciara Talked her idea to the birds and dogs, and they responded with enthusiasm. She asked the Kestrels and Sparrowhawks to swoop in close to keep watch on Sheridan and warn her if the situation changed.

The idiots ran along the path two abreast and didn’t bother to scan the woods for danger. The eagles and hawks dove down screeching, slicing flesh with sharp talons, and flapping wings in their face to frighten and distract. Ciara rose, drew and fired, killing her targets on the left. Michael struck the first two on the right. The Wolfhounds, Dobermans, and mastiffs finished off the pair unlucky to run at the back. The two men the dogs killed might have died faster, and they never had a chance to cry out.

One target remained alive long enough to tell her six men waited in a clearing with the boss, and the magician who opened a bloody portal should be off searching for their army. The dark gods told the magician where Ranger Scar would be, and he sent men to capture him. The dying soldier knew Ranger Scar by reputation. She stabbed the fool for using the foul monicker. Máistir’s scars were, well, she must admit the scars on his chest were down-right sexy. She’d never repeat her opinion aloud, for damn sure. Michael helped her drag the bodies into the bushes and cover them with brush and snow. The men claimed they knew Michael would be searching for Máistir.

“The whole world knows you and Sheridan are blood brothers and inseparable for years, so why aren’t you mentioned in all the Bard’s tales of our lovely Ranger’s exploits?”

Michael stumbled, caught himself before he fell and laughed for some damn reason.

“Hah. You might get away with it, Ciara, but I would never call Sheridan lovely to his face.”

Oh, yeah, they were both smart asses. Ciara spat razzberries at her future marriage brother and turned her head to hide the heat in her cheeks. Bloody hells, she must rebuild the wall hiding her affections for the man. Each time he found himself in danger, the walls crumbled and Ciara struggled to hide her true feelings. Michael cleared his throat. He switched from his normal jovial self to deadly serious.

“All the tales are true, Ciara.”

Michael declared he followed Sheridan since his seventh year, for instruction and protection at first, but it didn’t take long for Sheridan to choose their path or plan of attack. He laughed without explaining why, but Michael continued the tale.

“In most cases, by the time my brain decided I should move, the culprits were dead, and I found him wiping his hatchet blades clean on their shirts. I merely witnessed most of his heroics because he moved too fast for me to help. The man never hesitates or worries about any personal injury when faced with a task.”

“Aye, I lived it all too well. Máistir’s speedy actions have saved my hide from arrows, fire, Orc’s claws, and a sword more than a few times. Why did he wield hatchets instead of swords?”

“At his age, the swords Athair had for him were too large. Sheridan believed hatchets would aid him in learning the sword when he grew. He wielded the hatchets like they were natural extensions to his hands. You should ask him to teach you.”

“Sheridan has taught me some to familiarize me with the weapons, but I will ask for more detailed instruction for bloody sure when I return to him for good. There has always been one juicy tale that intrigued me. Will you two ever confess why you were seen swimming naked in the frigid lake up north by the ice wall?”

“You won’t hear it from me, Ciara. It is Sheridan’s tale to tell. Simply stated, I joined him on the mission because we accepted a challenge.”

Michael confessed they weren’t seen swimming, though. The blood brothers were spotted leaving the body-numbing waters to run for their clothes and a fire to thaw their frozen bodies. The hunters called out for them to stop, but they were too damn cold to care they were spotted. He laughed again over something he wouldn’t share and finished his tale.

“I don’t ever want to experience that bone aching cold again. Aye, before you ask, swimming in the lake proved the better bad option for our survival.”

Ciara understood choosing the better bad plan. Sheridan taught her the hard way. He once slipped up cracking a joke about frozen lakes doing strange things to a body like shriveling male genitals. Perhaps he’d have a second episode of forgetfulness and confess what in Arawn’s nine halls they did up north. Oh, what the hells, the mystery of the frigid adventure might be as grand as one of his tales.

“Did your little frozen escapade include a damsel in distress?”

Michael’s shoulders quaked, and a deep rumble like a summer storm coursed through his chest, but he zipped his lips and tossed the imaginary key over a shoulder. Nay, Sheridan turned twelve at the time and hadn’t learned the fantastic erotic magic he used during their fantastic two nights of bliss. Not even her Máistir could have done much with, or for a female at twelve. Aye, she won’t think about him and what he did for her in bed at fifteen. She would give her eye teeth to learn how he devised the magic he used making love. Ciara wouldn’t ask to learn it because she didn’t desire any other man and she’d never make love to Sheridan again. Damn, she missed another statement with her head stuck in the gutter. She dodged another tree and gasped from a revelation.

“Wait. What instruction and protection did you provide that Sheridan needed at the age of seven?”

“Aye, your calculating mind is improving daily for sure.”

He made a promise to Máthair the day Sheridan arrived on Earth to instruct Sheridan on an ancient rite, and show him how to appreciate nature, but Sheridan had an affinity for nature Michael could never surpass. As far as protection, only Sheridan could provide the answer.

“I doubt he ever will, but you can try. Nobody in his life that knows the tale of his first few years here will betray his trust. You, if anyone, might convince him to confess one day, Ciara. I’m sure you heard him say he was never young, only smaller in stature. Sheridan at seven was him today only about five feet tall.”

“Five feet tall at seven?”

“Aye, Ciara, damn close, and he grew steadily since then. He always ranked above average in growth rate from any other human his age. It fueled many a bullies’ taunts until Sheridan reached his breaking point and the instigators learned he could fight better than they regardless of his youth. It didn’t take long for other squires to walk a wide path around Sheridan. He had no friends in Somerset and needed me for more than protection and instruction.”

Ciara nodded for his answer without having a logical or unemotional response. She could walk and talk at the same time. Sheridan lived a lonely life. She knew he was always large for his age, but five feet at seven? They ran farther than she hoped before Michael tapped her arm and turned south. The bloody bastards had plenty of time to harm him more. Aye, Michael yanked her thoughts back to the present. Boot prints were plain as day in the snow. The prints led to the clearing she saw from the bird’s view. She spotted the weasels tracks and smiled. The little suckers could run fast when they had a mission.

She brushed the snow-ladened bough aside and cursed at the empty clearing. She rushed through the grove of young spruce trees with the dogs on her tail. The brood fanned out, investigating every bush, tree, and footprint for signs. Michael grumbled a few choice curses of his own and ran after her mumbling about his brother in trouble. He ran straight to a body in the snow she didn’t spot at first. The corpses upset Michael, but he sighed, relieved it wasn’t Sheridan. Ciara could tell with a glance it wasn’t him. She ran for his clothes instead. Ciara picked up his jacket, shirt, and beret, shook the snow off, and held them to her chest, fighting the urge to bury her nose in the shirt. Why couldn’t she sense his presence, damn it? She folded his clothes, stuffed them in a pouch, and scanned the area. The scorched trees made no sense. The blackened ground was bloody worse.

“What in the fiery halls of nine hells happened here?”

She nocked an arrow and held her bow half drawn circling her way around to a second body and sucked a hiss. Ciara did her best not to retch at the sight of the ruined eyes.

“He did this tied up, Michael. Damn, the man doesn’t quit, huh? Tied, hooded, and whipped, and he managed to kill one with his fingers. Oh, bloody hells, I don’t sympathize with the whanker, but what a horrible way to die.” She sliced the man’s throat to ensure he stayed dead.

Ciara didn’t have much chance to imagine how he found the target because Pete, the beagle, told her at least one of the men besides the dead ones carried narcotics. The dog smelled a cloud of it lingering in the air. Just bloody great—they smoked dope to get high and had fun beating her friend in their drugged stupor. Wait, why did Pete run with them? The small dogs…oh, the Beagle Talked he wanted to help too, and he was a fine hunter. Ciara couldn’t or wouldn’t place blame for his actions. She spotted two small bodies blasted apart.

“Oh, bloody hells. Our weasels look like a boulder fell on them.”

She turned her eyes away from their destroyed bodies. Damn, Sheridan would claim responsibility for their deaths, but she should’ve placed armor on the critters, damn it. Michael rubbed her shoulder, but nothing would take the pain of her mistake away.

“I should have armored them.”

Michael assured her the armor wouldn’t have saved the weasels. The poor critters were in the path of the blast, and it crushed them against a tree. A flash of light and a shriek like steel ripping from the gates of nine hells deafened Ciara. It propelled her back with force and slammed her into a tree. She screamed, fell, and crumpled on her side, struggling for her next breath. She lost her battle and passed out grateful at least her best friend survived.



**Chapter 8 Magic in Lucerne**

**G**wydion scrubbed a hand through his hair and slapped his thigh in disgust. His slaves were idiots. He wasn’t gone long, and the slackers invaded his office. If he discovered who left the door to his office open, he’d kill them with his bare hands. He stormed inside, searching for a slave and snapped his jaw shut. Balor stood beside his desk, rifling through his inbox. Gwydion closed the door to his mind and smiled at his benefactor.

“Balor, what a pleasant surprise to see you again so soon. How may I serve?”

“Forget your false salutations. I came with knowledge and an answer to your predicament. I am disgusted with your lack of initiative. Don’t repeat what I tell you to any other living soul, boy, or you will pay. In the town called Lucerne, a meteor fell to earth. The large rock contains the essence of magic from the stars. Collect the stone and remain near it until your powers are restored. You must retrieve it yourself. Your men wouldn’t know a magical rock from a snowball on the ground.”

“Lucerne? Balor, there is a contingent of the blasted female warriors in Lucerne. We were headed to raid another town.”

“I don’t want to hear your pathetic excuses. Get on a damn horse and go to the large crater north of Lucerne. The damned rock didn’t fall to earth by accident, fool. I am more than tired of all your reasons for not doing what you promised to do. If any of the women warriors possess magic, they will sense what the rock is and steal it from you. Leave now, Gwydion, or lose my help forever. You have some time to fulfill your promise. Your enemy has been dealt a devastating blow, and you have no equals in magical talents on Earth once your strength returns.”

Gwydion reached for the cord and pulled the call bell for a servant to assist him with armor, and when he turned back, Balor no longer graced him with his presence. He’d call himself lucky Balor didn’t leave him writhing in pain again. He sent the slave to inform Crunch and his soldiers to pack for a four-day journey, and they would leave as soon as their master was dressed in armor.



**C**runch and the five green Orcs escorted Gwydion down into the crater to recover the magical rock pulsing with magical power. Balor might be right for once. The size of the rock surprised him considering how huge of a crater it blasted out of the ground. Gwydion halted and stared at the woman blocking his path who appeared out of nowhere. She was no mere woman. He sensed the power in her stronger than the damn rock. A dark-haired goddess with a spear and a raven on her shoulder. He did not recognize her. She couldn’t be a goddess of chaos. Another meddling bright goddess to interfere in his life.

“Who are you to stand in my way, woman? Balor sent me to recover the meteor. It will restore my magical strength.”

“I am Fea, Lost Child, and blocking your path is where I’ll remain. You are a fool for admitting Balor sent you. He will be chastised and repay you in kind. The bit of stardust is not yours to claim. We are not what Balor told you. The rules of engagement clearly state he may not lend direct aid to you. I am here to ensure you do not cheat. Your mentor is desperate because you are a failure, and your nemesis is a superior warrior. There are many similar stones on this planet you may use, but not the one your masters sent for you because you are too lazy to search for one already here. Besides, Faithless Child, you have a more pressing situation than digging up a stone. The women warriors are coming. It would be a shame to lose the battle for Earth by dying in a crater, playing in the dirt. I’d prefer to witness your sword fight with An Deorái.”

“I am not lazy, damn you, and An Deorái will never face me because I am too powerful with my magic restored. I don’t know the first place to search for a magical rock to use. What will you do with the stone? Surely it’s possible for you to leave this place and forget it landed here. I must recover my magic or all is lost for Chaos.”

“Chaos would not suffer in the least, Misguided Child. The order of the multiverse requires his work to achieve balance. Only you would lose what you dream of when defeated. The stone should return to the heavens where it belongs until a random event sends it somewhere else—not the foolhardy hand of Balor wishing to manipulate the outcome by delivering aid to you. Unless you are eager to face the Na Siúracha, I suggest you depart immediately.”

“They’re just a few women, and easily defeated. I have sufficient strength to crush their feeble feminine minds. I bet you don’t watch what Máthair does to help the boy.” Gwydion stepped closer. The goddess would make a mistake, and he would attack. Why bother with a rock when killing her and stealing her power would work?

“It’s obvious why you disgust my sisters. The Na Siúracha have among their ranks…no; I will not warn you. Please stay and fight. I might enjoy watching you die at the hands of just a few women warriors. We watch by the All Father’s decree. Máthair is scrutinized as well but has never stooped to cheating like your masters. Her champion doesn’t require, nor does he request her assistance. He works for what gifts he will receive at his awakening. He doesn’t hide underground like a blind mole scratching for tidbits in the dirt.”

Fea sneered at him, glanced away and he dove for her. Gwydion swung his arms like a windmill trying to keep his balance. He fell and smacked a rock with his face. How did she move so fast? The damn goddess played him. She baited him to attack and made him appear the fool to his men. He rushed to his feet and searched for Fea to strike her. The goddess and the rock were gone. Crunch grunted and pointed up the embankment where Fea stood. The goddess of war shook her head, and the expression of disgust she wore would wilt a lesser man. Gwydion ignored her—one more on his list to kill when he transcended to godhood.

“How am I supposed to recover my magic if you don’t give me the blasted rock? What am I to do now, damn it? There is no way for me to win this damn world without my magic. What the hell am I to do?”

“I don’t care what you do. You are not permitted to cheat, mistrusted coward. Your attack on me will be noted. Now, you should run away like the frightened craven fool you are. The women are here to kill you. Because of your deceit, I have informed them who stands in the pit, and their blades are eager to make your acquaintance and taste your blood.”

A dozen bolts struck the ground in a deafening roar. Out of the light stepped the gods of chaos. It’s about damn time they came on his behalf.

“Give him the rock, Fea.”

“Or what, Elric? How many times have I thwarted your schemes?”

“Or we kill the women riding here to do him harm. We will take our pleasure with them and our time killing them.”

Fea scowled at Elric. Gwydion noticed the smirks on Balor and Scrios. They had a hand in this—about damn time. Fea glared at Gwydion and tossed the rock into the pit.

“Done. Bargain agreed upon and met. Fetch, foul slave — you smelly hog. Your masters will witness how you grovel and dig in the mud for your prize. Go, Elric. Your swine has his toy. Leave or face me here to learn a hard lesson. I don’t fear any of you and will face all of you cowards threatening human women. Balor and Scrios would run for the hills, so don’t count them as allies. Stabbing a man with his back turned is how Scrios fights.”

Elric glanced over his shoulder. Scrios actually flinched at the sight of the Na Siúracha. The gods backed up into the rays of light and departed with a second crack of lightning. Gwydion seized the rock and hefted it.

“This rock has little magical strength. What happened?”

“Oh, my, your master must have chosen the wrong stone from the heavens. Have fun with the Na Siúracha—if you can scurry from your sty, piggy.”

Gwydion screamed orders as he struggled up the hill to exit the crater and mounted his horse. The soldiers with him faced south radiating fear thick enough to smell. It sickened him to see the fear in his slaves captured for the sole purpose of protecting him. Gwydion warned them the first to flee would die by his hand. They moved out in a hurry, and he rode in the center for protection from the arrows zipping by in increasing numbers and frequency. Two soldiers on his right fell to arrows, and he had to scream for others to take their place as his shields. Damn cowards. He must find better warriors. He must locate men more willing to die to preserve his life. Only his life was vital for success. Everyone else he’d use as fodder to achieve his victory.

“Crunch, we’ll take our time going home. We’ll destroy the towns we passed on the way here. You’ll have all the sweetmeats you can eat and carry home. There must be a few babies for you to enjoy as a snack.”

“Crunch no wants sweetmeats, masser. Dem womens com’n. Crunch wants to get back to Bad Ragaz and inside mountain. Safe from womens inside mountain hive.”

Bright gods be damned, he was doomed to have cowards surrounding him. An arrow thudded against his armor. The blasted arrow had to come from a Talker’s bow. He screamed, whipping his horse for more speed. The Na Siúracha wouldn’t chase them the whole way back to the mountain home. Fea claimed there were more rocks to use already on earth. Gwydion would send his children searching for the rocks to restore his magic. Yes, they were capable of recognizing the magical aura of a stone and were expendable. He’d rape more Maura slaves to make new children to replace them. Where the hell could the Maura from earth hide for so long?



**F**ea brushed the dirt aside, revealing the stone. The ignorant pig took the first stone offered. She would place the bit of stardust back where it came from. Fea would prefer delivering it to the Sister Warriors, but it would be construed as manipulating the outcome. Máthair forbade interference. She considered it cheating. Hah, so did Sheridan. Fea would not be the one to disappoint either.



**Chapter 9 The Chase**

**C**iara woke to Maud and Cormac licking her face and sent a prayer of gratitude to Máthair for the opportunity to return to life and save her friend. She sat up and scanned the area. Michael moaned where he laid, and she crawled to him, but he waved her off, rose to dust his clothes and helped her stand. Judging by the location of the sun barely visible behind clouds, they slept a good half hour. Aye, more time for them to escape with her friend.

“What in the name of all that’s holy laid us out?”

The dogs howled their frustration, and Michael declared nothing holy created the explosion. They lucked out being farther away. Ciara cleaned the ash from her face and searched for the dogs to take a headcount and perform an examination. Thank the shining gods, none of them were injured more than bruises and ringing ears. The main force shot up instead of out as Michael claimed. She healed the worst bruises on the dogs as her eyes scanned the area for clues. There were plenty of signs people had inhabited the camp, but all but two had left with her friend. A dark sooty mess covered the ground and trees, and she would not investigate what it might have once been—or who. Was it the person who exploded? She turned away from the mess to spit out the bile in her mouth.

“Sheridan killed this one with magic for sure, Ciara.”

Ciara stumbled to him and examined the body Michael leaned over. Holy shit, the man’s face hung from strings. He resembled Sheridan too bloody closely, but the likeness stopped at his face. The body lacked his muscle and size to be identical. Hells, the brown eyes didn’t match either. Burning hands ripped the throat out for sure. Hah, the Ranger would not give up.

“Michael, this almost twin to our Máistir is dressed in a similar fashion to the whack job mage he killed. I’d wager this idiot had a slave number instead of a name as well. Good gods, the fool’s face makes it hard not to picture Máistir dead.”

Máthair grant her speed and strength. The man would not die this day. Ciara would not permit him to die.

Ciara squatted beside the body and threw the cloak open. “Well, the gods love me for sure. I’m claiming the hatchets. You can have the rest. I’ll have a pair when Sheridan teaches me how to master them. I’ll claim the ring for the lovely Ranger as well. It appears to hold magic. Sheridan might discern its purpose, and give us an edge over Gydion, huh?”

Michael knelt to help strip the body of weapons and valuables in response, mumbling about lovely being a strange word to describe Sheridan. Ciara could argue for days, but wouldn’t.

Michael confiscated the man’s tobacco pouch and hummed with his nose stuck in the bag. Ciara would never understand the habit. She enjoyed sharing a pipe full of cannabis with Sheridan on occasion but smoking tobacco each night as Michael did, made no sense. Ciara tucked the ring into her pocket with the other one taken from Five and dumped the gold and silver coins into her purse. This man and Five both carried a small fortune on them. She chuckled at the memory of Sheridan, saying the best way to travel was with someone else’s money.

Ciara spotted blood at the bottom of a tree and asked the bloodhound, Harriette, to smell and identify it. She thought, nay hoped they found weasel blood. Aye, bloody hells, of course, it had to be Sheridan’s blood. Bruster, a young male Plott told her he smelled Sheridan’s magic on the tree and the dead man. Aye, he burned his hands-free and burned his mirror twin dead. Max or Minnie must have removed the hood as planned, and Máistir attacked the magician. He’d be the second arrogant dead man to fall to him. Oh, poor Max and Minnie. Ciara hated having to tell him they died, but he might be aware of their demise since they died in the strange blast when attempting to rescue him.

She asked the raptors to search for Máistir in their practiced expanding and overlapping circuits. She tasked her raptors to follow and learn. They would need to fly at tree-top level to survey the ground through the snowfall. The small hunters would fly among the trees searching. Hurry, please, the man bled, and the white shit covered more tracks each minute they wasted. Why weren’t his wounds closing with his magical healing? Hells fire, it may be a blessing for the man. Ciara would close them with magic before they healed and scarred—if they were lucky and found her friend before he bled to death.

Ciara tossed cleansing fire on the body, a few more on the poor weasels and the black splotch of nastiness before they all ran from the stench of flesh burning. Visibility worsened from the warm sun shining on all the snow, creating a fog that lingered in the woods. The dogs spread out and put their noses to the ground sniffing for his spore—a scent vital to her happiness. Tuffy Talked the image of the trail he found. It led to a corral with six unsaddled mounts belonging to the men they killed. The departing trail showed six horses and a wagon headed south for the Cumberland Road. She sucked in air to holler orders when every raptor screeched. Hadley reported six men with a cart carrying a coffin heading west on the Cumberland Road. It couldn’t be a mere circumstance.

A tree lurched in her view. Ciara dodged it narrowly avoiding a face-first embrace, worse than any bloody door, and asked her Shai to swoop in for a closer view. She checked her path for more obstacles and watched through the falcon’s eyes as she dove. Aye, Ciara spotted the nasty whip hanging over a man’s shoulder. The raptors found her Máistir and his torturers. Ciara ran on for a while picturing herself whipping the skanky beasts for what they did to him.

“Michael, the bloody bastards put him in a box. It’s shaped like a coffin, only smaller. He must be folded up and in pain with the wood scraping his tortured skin. Oh, hells, a child’s coffin is the perfect disguise. Nobody would open it for inspection. They head west in a hurry, probably for a ship in Glasgow.”

They would need to run like only Elves could and to all nine hells what people thought if they were spotted. Aye, they’d give any spectator a grand tale to tell around the fires of Elves floating above the snow on whispered feet leaving hardly a trace of their passing.

Michael sped off south through the woods for the Cumberland Road, and Ciara ran after, a bit slower to watch what the birds did. Aye, Braelyn wasn’t far to the west. She asked the birds to stay hidden but keep an eye on the cart by playing leap-frog in the branches heading east. Ciara shook her head clear and tore off after Michael with Cormac, Maud, Sabra, Meg, Brigit, and Rosie keeping pace at her side. The dogs growled mirroring her sentiments exactly.

Ciara Talked to Braelyn telling her what they faced and asked her to move the team with speed. She and Michael raced west faster than prudent but damn necessary to catch her friend’s captors. Running with magic wasn’t banned from use, but jealous humans caused trouble with the King. Máistir ran as fast and always flaunted his talent to drive other folks crazy, and the Elves loved him for his displays of protest. It added fuel to the argument of people who mistrusted magic and gave strength to the Hand of Máthair’s idiotic disciples.

Her Máistir didn’t care since he declared the Swords and the Hand would be wiped from existence eventually. Sheridan said, and she agreed, once they dealt with the threat of Gwydion and the gods of chaos, the world would return to normalcy. Ciara’s first one-hundred-ninety-five years of life were wonderful and the last five, difficult and deadly. Well, sometimes delightful because she lived and fought in the right place and with the right man to help achieve the peace he promised.

The snow softened the clop-clop of Percherons hoofs, harness jingles, and heavy breaths that invaded the quietness of the snowfall. Braelyn and the wagon arrived the same time they reached the place people called Horseshoe Barn. It seemed the blacksmith only possessed the talent to make horseshoes—something any good apprentice could accomplish. People claim even his nails curved like horseshoes, so his failures left him to fend for himself in a ramshackle barn and tiny forge to make horseshoes and aid travelers. The tracks showed the cart they tracked pulled into the stable yard and left, but they must determine if it left with their Teacher.

A young boy opened the stable door to step through, but a meaty hand covered in soot grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back. The door slammed shut, and sounds of slaps seeped through the wood and stucco. Ciara wasn’t about to let it slide. Child abuse would not be ignored or tolerated—not after her friend declared war on abusers. He never admitted his anger or claimed to suffer the same experiences. She kicked the door open and blocked the next attack on the boy who stood still, grinning back at the man and taking the abuse in silence like another stubborn male she loved.

“Back off, lady. I got papers proving I own the boy and can do what I want with him.”

“You own the boy and can do what you want with him? Like bloody hells you do, smelly, fat, filthy, whanker. Nobody in our world is a possession. Good gods, twice in one day we find demented whack-jobs who don’t bathe. The boy is a Cainteoir, and you believe you can punish him for possessing Máthair’s gifts? You have no problem using his talents to heat your forge, and yet, you skanky people call the magic evil? You and all like you abusing innocent Cainteoirs are evil, perverted, bastards. We will take your papers of ownership, and the authorities will pay the seller a visit for damn sure. You’re lucky my best friend isn’t here because he would stick your sorry ass somewhere you’d never find the light of day again. Aye, his favorite is feeding whack jobs like you to the sharks—alive.”

Ciara pulled her Ranger beret out of her pocket and placed it on her head. Michael sure didn’t hide his chuckling at her remarks or his scowl for the idiot’s comment. He stepped up to stand beside her, placed his beret on, and hugged his chest as he always did. People mistook his stance to imply the Ranger stood at ease. Michael never rested at ease. His hands held knives tucked in his jacket, and they would fly in a blink if necessary. Ciara must admit, with Michael’s height, muscles, tattoos, and jewelry, he made an imposing figure.

Braelyn kicked the door open and rushed in with her spear ready. The dogs swarmed inside, ringing the foul man staring with wide-eyed fear at the pack of huge dogs. The boy reached down and scratched Regal’s head standing waist hight. The mastiff moved closer to say hello, knocking the boy over in his efforts. Regal slobbered all over the boy’s face in apology, and he accepted it with laughter — time to get down to business and back on the trail.

“You are under arrest for the crimes of enslaving a free citizen, forced labor, child endangerment, child abuse, assault on a minor, assault on my sense of smell, and sensibilities, and whatever else I can think of besides you’re too ugly and stupid to appear in public before the deputies arrive for you. Keep pushing me, and the sheriff will retrieve your frozen solid, fat, smelly carcass tied up outside in the white shit. Haven’t you ever learned personal hygiene?”

Ciara tousled the boy’s hair and smiled at his astonished face. Michael grabbed the man, spun him around, and forced the brute to the floor to tie up. Two dogs placed their jaws on the man’s fat neck, and he soiled himself — gods, what a typical bully. Ciara pulled out her notepad and wrote instructions for the sheriff she’d tie to a falcon’s leg. She eyed the boy staring at her with innocent curiosity. He probably never met an Elf, and now three at once show up at his door.

“Why did you come outside when we arrived? You saw something you want to share. Aye”

“Yes, m…Ma…my…ma’am.

“Aye, let’s put an end to that silly nonsense right now. Please call me Ranger Ciara or just Ranger if you prefer. Ma’am is for old ladies like my sister here. What’s your name?”

Ciara pointed to Braelyn who glared back at her with surprise, and her mouth dropped open in shocked disbelief. The visage would never be called flattering on Braelyn. She should try blinking. Michael suffered a coughing fit in his failed attempt to suppress his laughter, and Braelyn made him sorry for his efforts. He gave up holding back to fill the barn with his hysterical outburst. He called for anyone to help him against the mean old lady. Aye, for certain Braelyn would make him pay later. Talk about old, Michael had a good four hundred years on her sister.

“I’m Pedro, Ranger. I brought a pry bar out for the men arguing about leaving tools behind, and they had nothing to open a box. There was a man inside with bleeding whip marks on his back and a hood over his head. The six men argued about him able to return to human form or something. I don’t know what they meant, but it was a man inside the box. I sensed something coming from the man like a…I don’t know. I’d swear he seemed familiar. But they tied his hands, and nailed the lid shut to ride off before I could speak to him.”

“Aye, Pedro, it’s because he is the man your magical heart searched for after your parents kicked you out and before this scumbag ruined your life. It’s his heart, his loving care calling for you. Ranger Sheridan is the patriarch of our large and loving Talker family.”

“There are more kids here, Ranger. You need to look out back.”

Ciara whistled, putting an end to her sister’s play. Pedro ferreted through the Smith’s pockets and came up with a key. They followed the boy to a dilapidated shack that once might’ve housed pigs or chickens. It reeked of blood and feces. Pedro unfastened the lock and chain securing the door and threw it open. Ciara covered her nose and mouth, swallowed the bile in her throat, stepped inside and groaned her disgust for the pig blacksmith. Four children pressed themselves against the back wall. Their emaciated arms raised shaking hands with broken and bleeding nails to block the bright light of day from red, swollen eyes. The two boys pushed the smaller girls behind them and glared at her with determination to protect their friends.

“We are not here to harm you, love. Your days of foul treatment are over. There is food and drinks on the wagon, and we will take you to a place where you can clean up in safety and comfort.”

The four needed assistance to walk to the road. Ciara dug out four blankets to wrap them in and led them to the cab.

“We can’t sit in there covered in filth.”

“Aye, you can, love. The seats can be cleaned. Ranger Sheridan would not care about a little dirt for your comfort.”

Ciara tossed fire on the soapstones, passed two canteens to the boys and rummaged through the coolers for cold meats, cheeses, and bread. She faced a grinning Pedro, happy for his freedom.

“Will you drive the wagon for us? We must run to Glasgow to save our Teacher. Just head for the docks, and we’ll find you.”

Pedro declared he had driven wagons all his life, and he Talked to the horses to prove he could. Ciara tied the note to Hadley’s leg sending her to Somerset, and the falcon promised to arrive in Glasgow before she did. Pedro promised he would follow them with the dogs inside staying warm and dry, so the three ran west to catch the cart with her best friend nailed down in a box. The new snow on the road accumulated to ankle-deep already, but with them running with Elven magic, they barely left a print. Ciara raised her head to the clouds reminding her of cotton balls bunched up on a sheet of glass.

“Máthair, thank you for leading us to the children, Grant your son strength, please. He couldn’t be in a worse place for his fear of bondage—or for his battered body. If they reach a ship before I arrive, please prevent them from leaving.”



**Chapter 10 Field Test**

**M**uirenn Talked a small ball of fire to her palm and stared at it. She wanted to toss it on the wood igniting the nightly fire, but the words from her Ranger reverberated in her skull. He told her not to rely on magic for survival because it made her lazy and she could, one day, lose her magical talents, and she would be out in the cold—literally. She smothered the flame and used her flint and steel instead to light the dried moss which created fire to catch the wood piled strategically to provide coals for cooking.

“Well done, My Lady. Did you remember yourself or hear ghosts in your thoughts again?”

“Aye, it’s a lesson from my only man drilling into my head for sure. I’ll use the fancy fire starter he gave to both of us on the morning fire and magnifying glass on the third if needed. I do hate it when he is right and more so when he isn’t here to instruct and steal a kiss when I succeed. I will finish this damn test and graduate. I will not repeat this test again. We can search for my man in Esak to join him forever. Aye?”

“We will find him after graduation. It won’t be difficult, and you know he is a good man. If for some damn reason, we can’t find him, we will move on to the other plan of touring the continent and search for your father at the same time. It shouldn’t be too hard to find a black haired mage with your eyes.”

Muirenn hushed her bodyguard when she heard the tinkling of bells, and she shouted with joy at the sound of her trap springing. With luck, it would be something bigger than the quail she killed for dinner. She called her two wolfhounds and bounded off into the woods to collect her day’s work. Aye, she’d pass the field trials in fine form for sure. She shivered laughter from the silly words and smacked Caitlin’s palm on the way by.

A big fat grouse struggled to free itself from under the rock of her trap. A quick snap of its neck made it the main course for dinner. Hells, she’d become damn proficient in the woods. Her Ranger would be proud of how far she’d come from the little girl scared in the dark with noises everywhere assuring her monsters lurked in wait. Here she was traipsing through the dark woods— with two huge dogs, OK, but still, she wasn’t scared witless.

She returned triumphantly dancing around the campfire swinging the grouse like the head of her worst enemy. Aye, bloody Gwydion would do for sure. Thoughts of the eejit ruined her mood, and she sat to pluck her trophy, pretending the feathers were his hair.

The smoke from the fire hung low to the ground around them in the still night air. She plucked feathers as she scanned the cloudless sky and the unmoving treetops. No breeze meant a change of weather coming. The low pressure would invite wind and clouds. Caitlin snorted from smoke billowing in her face and cursed as she moved her rock for the gazillionth time.

“Aye, they say smoke follows beauty, Lady Knight.”

“Nay, My Lady, it follows the wind, and I must be full of it tonight. The damn smokeless fire doesn’t work if the wind is always changing or dies. Anyway, your shelter is strong and appears waterproof. It will most likely rain before morning, but we shouldn’t wake soaked and freezing tomorrow as we have in the past. One more morning to catch breakfast, and we head down the mountain dry and successful.”

Muirenn gave Caitlin a ppppttthhhht and shook her head at her friend’s reminder of how poor she did in the past. She stuffed some rosemary sprigs in the cavity and hung the grouse on the rack. Nightbirds called out on occasion and bushes did make noises as they shook from the passage of some animal, but she did not frighten. Aye, the fact Caitlin stayed with her did help for sure.

Finn and Fionn loped into the light and dropped down to her side. The wolfhounds licked their paws and rubbed their muzzles on their feet several times to clean themselves. They found something to eat on their own, and she’d be dumb to ask. Not before she ate for damn sure.

Rabbit for breakfast, and she would complete her assignment. Aye, successfully for the first time. She gathered some sticks and constructed a snare with the wire from her pocket and added the bell for good luck. Caitlin took command of the spit as she became too engrossed in her work. Burning the food would not be good for scores or her stomach.

“Sheridan did promise to come for my graduation and to present the swords gifted by the gods. They were a blessing to wield. But, if the family is fighting daily, I can’t see him coming, damn it. I wouldn’t want him to worry about a bloody graduation ceremony if he is in constant danger.”

“I honestly believe his is busier than a one-armed rower trying to keep the boat in line. There is plenty to keep him busy for sure. Our world needs our swords and at his side is the best action.”

Aye, Caitlin may have the right of it for sure. They would soon learn, damn it. Finished with the trap, she stood, stretched, and gazed out at the woods around them. The best place for the trap had to be down by the creek they found earlier. She’d set it in the gorse where rabbits were bound to live or at least hide among while visiting the creek.

“I’ll be right back Caitlin. With a wee bit of luck, I’m setting the trap to catch our last breakfast tomorrow, and our ticket out of here. Roasted rabbit and wild carrots will be a grand last meal on the bloody mountain.”

“Take your bow please My Lady. I’d feel better if you do. You might find breakfast to shoot and to the fiery hells with the trap.”

Caitlin stabbed a quail to check and squinted up at her with her lips in the don’t argue with her grin. Aye, she’d take the bloody bow. She smiled her innocent best and picked up the damn bow and quiver to throw over her shoulder. There’s nothing in the woods to worry them. Hells, the land belonged to Kylemore Academy. Nobody in their feck’n right mind would trespass.

The wolfhounds leaped up all excited and bounded away to scout ahead of her. She sent them the image of the creek, and they turned downhill like they knew it by heart. Oh hells, she couldn’t shoot a rabbit if the dogs scared it away. Muirenn Talked them her plan, and they ran back to stay at her heels as she practiced silent walking. She recalled walking beside Sheridan as he taught her to walk so quiet she didn’t disturb the crickets in their passing. Where was her Ranger?

Muirenn unbuttoned two of the top buttons on her leather jacket fit snug because her body filled out since she purchased the outfit. She wouldn’t want anyone to see her cleavage exposed, but she didn’t need the jacket bunching up when she shot.

She hooked the snare to her belt, unslung the bow and nocked an arrow to string. She slowed more when she heard rustling in the grasses. Six more steps showed nothing but more grass, trees and dark. Twelve more and she could see the grasses moving. The wind picked up, and she smelled wet fur and blood. She opened her mind to search in hopes for an animal who could Talk with her. An onslaught of pain and terror forced her to knees, and she moaned with empathy. Gods, the pitiful creature felt more frightened of discovery than the pain it bore.

Muirenn Talked mental images to console and soothe the creature’s worry she might be a predator. One step off the path presented her patient. A fox, with an arrow in his hip, glared at her with unblinking fear. His lips curled up to snarl, and she sent more images of her healing and a fox she once saw bounding across a field in pursuit of game. The fox settled down but didn’t cease his scrutiny of her. Hells, she couldn’t blame him. He didn’t trust the human examining him because another bloody idiot shot the little guy, and as far as the fox knew, it could’ve been her.

Quick reflexes stopped Finn from completing the archer's work. Aye, it’d be her luck; she tried to save a fox, and her dogs killed him. The two wolfhounds moved apart, sat on haunches, and looked around, keeping guard for her. She Talked her love and thanks to the two large dogs, and the sounds of tails slapping the ground provided her answer.

One hand on the fox’s chest to hold him still, she grasped the arrow shaft and pulled hard and fast. The only response from the fox produced a couple of whimpers and shudders of his tired body. He proved tougher than she for damn sure. Her hands laid over the wound, she Talked her magic in first to inspect the damage and then to connect the artery torn, fused tissues, connected the stringy lengths of the muscles lacerated, and finally, she patched the skin together. She rubbed a finger in circles to erase the wound and sat back on her heels. He looked up at her with surprise and disbelief like she simply clipped his nails or something. She laughed and patted his side.

“Go on with you, lazy bones. You're all fixed up. Aye, boyo, go off and stay away from whankers with arrows. Not me, other uh, arrows.”

She shooed him away, and he leaped up and over a log to disappear in the underbrush. A good stretch of her back and neck released the tension the little escapade caused, and she shivered. Aye, set the trap and get back to the fire. The rain clouds were coming in, and the temperature dropped dramatically in the forest. Caitlin would be having a cow by now for sure. Stay away from whankers with arrows? Oh, gods no, not Caitlin. She told the dogs her fears, and they took off ahead of her hectic pace. She dug out an arrow and strung it as she ran. She’d Talk the arrows straight to the black hearts of anyone harming her friend. Oh, bloody hells, if Caitlin were harmed, she would kill them all.

Muirenn sent a soft mental touch to her eagles. Just enough to tickle them awake, but she found Alani already alert and watching the camp. Through the raptor’s eyes, she saw four men eating her meal, and Caitlin tied up and gagged. How the hells did they sneak up on her?

Muirenn’s mistake came when she followed the rules and didn’t allow the eagles to scout or guard them. The bastard’s first mistake came with attacking her friend. Their second sitting Caitlin at the edge of the brush. If she could reach her from the south side, she could cut her free. Nay, shoot the bastards. There were only four…leave one to talk. Aye, he would sing like a canary when she had her hands on the gimp.

She choked down her squeal and jumped back, grabbing her chest to seize her pounding heart when something rubbed her legs. She scrunched her eyes to block out the stars she saw in the air around the fox. He could have told her he wanted to come. She blew away her fright with a blast of air and asked the fox as politely as she could, why in blue blazes he scared her knickers off and left them flapping in the wind. If she weren't already angry enough to chew rocks, his head tilting back and forth would be cute. His damn reply of wishing to help sounded grand. How could he help? Oh.

She Talked him images of biting through the ropes holding Caitlin, and he leaped straight up and spun around like a top with excitement. Sly as a fox? Silly as a fox, more like it. The fox disappeared into the brush, hopefully understanding his job. How to distract the gimps now, so they don’t see her little friend.

The eejits built up the fire destroying their night vision and allowing her to sneak up close. Bloody men with their arrogance—they believed she would skip into camp and thank them for attacking her friend. She hid behind a tree in the perfect line of sight. Caitlin’s arms jerked as the fox chewed, and she smiled. It shouldn’t take long to free her.

Muirenn shook her head. Her vision turned weird. A red haze covered everything she saw, and her heart couldn’t pound harder without busting free. Her hand tightened on the bow, and her plan came clear as she stared hate at the four. The eagles screeched, the men looked up with eyes as wide as a boy caught with the cream in his mouth, and she walked to them determined and shooting. She drew another arrow and shot, another and shot, the last flew away, and she raced in to grab her sword and faced the whanker with an arrow in his shoulder.

“If it’s not you cutting at my bonds, who the hells, is freeing me?” Muirenn breathed deep gusts to calm. What’s going on with her? She turned her head to her friend, and Caitlin jerked back with fear in her eyes.

“What is wrong, My Lady? Your eyes are…Like diamond hard and angry.”

Muirenn blew out her hate and sucked in peace and stillness with a few breaths. “I’m a wee bit pissed off these whankers attacked my friend.” She kicked the wounded man, and he groaned.

“A friend is chewing through the ropes, Caitlin. I didn’t name him for I figured he would take off after I healed him y’know. These eejits shot him.” She kicked the man another time, and he rose to his knees.

“My new friend is a fox. He says he is almost finished.” She set the point of her sword against the man’s neck and pushed to prick the skin and bleed.

“Me and ugly here are after having a nice chat, y’know. This pig will tell me all I wish to know, or he dies slow and painful. Do you understand me, ugly man?”

The wolfhounds closed in on him and growled in his ears. That couldn’t be a pleasant experience for anyone. His eyes rolled up, and he shuddered as his body tried to fold, but Muirenn smacked him on the face with the blade, and he woke up from his attack of scared shitless.

“Not so tough on the other side of a blade, are you, boyo?”

Caitlin smacked her butt walking by to gather weapons and Muirenn snickered. The fox joined the dogs snarling at the man. Aye, he probably knew the smell of the scum who shot him.

“My Lady. You shot three in the eye and this one in the shoulder. I assume you did for a reason.”

“Aye, I want answers my friend, and I’m after a wee bit of revenge for hurting you.” Caitlin chuckled, walked to the man on his knees sweating and shivering at the same time, and punched him.

“I witnessed some mighty fine shooting, My Lady. Your Ranger hero taught you right, and you listened for sure. The arrows came faster than I thought possible for you. I looked for three rescuers, considering I assumed you were behind me, cutting my bonds with a butter knife for how long it took.”

“Are there only the four?” Muirenn saw the man jerk and turn away. Nay more lurked out there somewhere. Gods above, why wouldn’t they leave her in peace?

“Only four now My Lady. I believe there to be more though for these were talking about others waiting at the pass. The numbers of whankers is what we need to know and alert the school.”

Muirenn placed her blade against his face below his eye and dug in to leave him a scar. “Tell us ugly. How many more little boys play in the woods with their little sticks.”

His eyes squinted in anger for a moment, and he stared his hate at her. She laughed at his face and dug in another scar. He could scowl until the cows came home for all she cared. “Talk boyo. Talk or die.”

“We came with two companies for one damn girl. Our informant told us you were up here, so four teams of four search for you. We built up the fire to signal them as planned. You two are caught in a trap you can’t escape. If you give yourselves up to me, I’ll see the captain doesn’t kill you for taking out his boy.” He nodded to one of the dead. Blonde hair and an arrow sticking out from where a blue eye used to be.

“A trap not sprung can be avoided boyo. We aren’t in your net yet. Who is your informant? Don’t try to be cute now; you’re way behind in the race, y’know.”

“He wears clothes like she but his head ain’t shaved like no barbarian either.” Caitlin laughed all the way over from the fire to punch him good. The damn Hand again. They…Aunt Fiona knew where she lived. She sent the Swords to kill her?

“One day soon, my aunt Fiona and I will have a nice chat with swords, but I won’t let her do any talking, y’know.”

“That’s the name of one of them. General Fiona is what she called herself.”

“Where do you call home? You speak with no familiar accent.”

“We came through a door to your world…soon to be our world. The master promised we can live here if we kill the people he wants dead and capture you.”

Damn, why not? He had no reason to lie. They came through a door from another world?

She slugged him with the hilt of her sword against his temple, tensed with a scream begging for release. She chased the scream away with shudders and looked around.

“Let’s smother the fire, Caitlin.”

They both scattered the logs sending red sparks flying like a million angry lightning bugs. Muirenn shoveled dirt to bury the coals and darkness descended on her like hiding under her bed covers as a child. Fear gripped her heart with a cold hand. Nay, damn it, the dark would not defeat her again. Caitlin must have noticed her panic and rubbed her tight neck until she shrugged and smiled at her friend.

“I’ll be fine, Caitlin. I must face my fear to conquer it as he said. We head straight down, slow and quiet. The eagles can’t see much, but they can spot a torch from above as Finn and Fionn scout ahead for us.” The fox barked at her, and she laughed for real. “The dogs and fox will scout. He claims to have grand vision at night.”

“We’ll make it My Lady, they will head for the fire they saw, and most are this high up or higher if they searched all day.”

Aye, it followed her thinking as well. They packed up what they required to move. Cooking utensils and such could stay. The four men were enough evidence they were there. She heard the birds’ wings flap as they moved through the trees and she led the way downhill as fast as they could move in the dark. Night hunters would be mighty grand to have, y’know.

Hells, she had to try and call for an owl as Sheridan taught her. She closed her eyes and sought for other minds out there, awake in the night. Minds to Talk with her. One tickled her mind, but in a language, she didn’t understand. Images of a bear flitted across her awareness. Did bears speak a different language? Ah, she had one…Two answered her.

“Hold up Caitlin. I’m Talking for a night hunter. Protect me while I imprint it if one does come. I recall how he taught me at my Healer graduation and what Ciara did with the Harriers. Aye, I’ll give it a go anyway.”

Caitlin nodded. No complaints or questions. She shivered from a chill breeze through her jacket, buttoned up, closed her eyes, and called for the two owls to come. She sent her promise to love and care for them, keep them safe and healthy all year long winter and summer. She squealed and slapped a hand over her mouth. The question in Caitlin’s eyes made her laugh.

Muirenn held her arms out for a perch, and Caitlin laughed with her. “Two, My Lady?”

“Aye, they both answered. Owls are coming to join us, Caitlin. We have night hunters to watch over our camp or find a safe path in the dark.”

If they accepted her and imprinted with her, it is—they could still say no. The owls landed in opposite trees from her and screeched at each other.

“Oh great, I find a male and female who know each other and each doesn't like the other. The female says he is pushy, and a lousy hunter and he says she is…stuck on herself. Wow, who’d have thought the birds fight like we do.”

She Talked to both and sent more promises of friendship, trust, and love. They could hurry, please. The rain would come soon.

The female dropped from the tree first…of course, but the male followed quickly. He didn’t wish to be outdone by the girl. Geez, even in the animal kingdom. She imprinted with the female and discovered her anger for the male more than justified. Nay, not really, he was young and like most young males, stupid when it comes to women. She set Oda on her shoulder to free up a hand to reach into her pocket for well-done leftover quail. The owl didn’t fuss over the meal. She ate every bit handed to her with gratitude.

Imprinting the male taught her his reasons for Oda’s dislike, and she chuckled at his version. Females didn’t always think any male the best male. She fed Oakley another burnt quail, and he did fuss over the charred meat, and she laughed again when Oda stated the obvious.

Hells, Oakley could learn if he weren’t a twit. She stroked his ego like a memory instructed and asked both to watch the sky around them for men and alert them when they came in sight. She sent them images of what the men they killed dressed in, and the birds took off in different directions. She could’ve bet the day’s catch on that bit of news.

“Aye, I find two who hate each other for damn good reasons. The male courted her, and she didn’t care for him, and when the female starved, he laughed at her request for help. The harsh beginning of a life together.”

“Maybe they will work harder to outdo each other and keep us safe. If we keep them fed, they should work harder.”

Caitlin declared with twisted lips hiding her mirth. Muirenn smacked her palm in agreement and pointed for her to lead now so she could keep her mind on the owls instead of the path.

The soldier she knocked out woke way behind them, and they could hear his obscene and violent threats for her when he caught them. She would’ve shouted back if she hadn’t already proven she could be smart once tonight.

“What is your plan, My Lady?” Great question and Muirenn still worked on the answer.

“Well, I suppose we tell Mother there is an enemy encampment in Kylemore pass come to capture me, bring me to Gwydion, and conquer the locals and take the land for their own. We should kill them for what they did to you, will try to do to me, and for the sake of our world.” Aye, it made a grand beginning to her plea for help.

“Can you call your Ranger, like you called the owls?”

Muirenn caught a branch to stop her slide. The descent sure as hells was steep, damn it, but Caitlin’s grand question caught her off guard.

“Nay, I don’t know his mind well enough to barge into his brain. It might be too far to call him for sure. Hells, he probably wouldn’t recognize my voice if he could hear. The big man is unaware I exist because of the bloody oath, y’know. We are on our own in this. Well, us and a few hundred Na Siúracha warriors for sure. Mother Veronica must allow me to use them to kill the bloody whankers. Our priority is food for my brood and a hot breakfast for us. I’d hate to see the owls abandon me on the first night due to a lack of food.”



**Chapter 11 Battle at Kylemore**

**M**uirenn smiled at the two hundred Sisters huddled against the boulders. They covered their heads each time the bloody men shot the cannon. The brain-dead enemy were taking shots at a house in the hills for fun. The cannon had to go before they could launch an attack and Muirenn had no idea how to stop it. She spied on the camp through the owl’s eyes between explosions when the bird would duck for cover. The balls were piled in a pyramid beside the cannon. Aye, a good-sized fireball on the pile. What would happen if they all exploded?

“Mother, while they watch the next ball fly and hit, like a home run or something, I will run up and toss fire on the pile of balls they load in the cannon. We will wait until the fun is over and charge the bloody eejits.”

“Are you certain your fire will destroy them? How do you know the name of the forbidden weapon?”

“Aye, I know from my Ranger hero’s lessons. The cannons are outlawed on Earth by the World Council so the eejits are foreigners to our world for sure. Sheridan and his family must know the enemy’s weapons in order to have the knowledge to defeat them, Mother. I will Talk the fire to burn metal, and it will set the pile to burning like kindling. I can only hope since this applying knowledge to the real world, y’know. The gimps don’t have sentries, and they watch the mountain like boys watch the neighbor girl bathe in the creek.”

Muirenn and Caitlin crouched low and snuck as close to the perimeter as one of the tent poles. The canon shot a cloud of smoke with the ball, and she ran to the tent closest to the pyramid of bombs, Talked fire to her hands and churned it hotter with air and a wee bit of earth to increase the size. She threw the ball right on the top of the pile, and they ran back zig-zagging to avoid an arrow in the back. She climbed up the boulder and slid down the other side, laughing at making it back alive. Muirenn opened her mouth to tell the Sisters to duck behind the boulders when the blast blew them off their feet. Pieces of metal flew over their heads, and she thanked the gods the blast knocked them on their asses.

Her ears rang like the alarm bell at school, and she sought the owls terrified of not hearing from them and sighed a grateful thank you when both answered her. Damn, the images the birds Talked were incredible. A huge hole in the ground burned where the cannon used to sit and no sign of it or the balls. Men ran around like fools with nowhere to go and no brains to find cover. It came time for the fun part, fighting the foul gits with swords.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t killed in the past. Her heart raced, and her body pulsed like a guitar string plucked and vibrating without creating a pleasant sound. Muirenn could believe the blast punched a hole in the cloud cover to release the torrent of freezing rain falling on them. The sudden storm either blew out or the rain quenched the torches and fires in the camp leaving the area pitch with rain blurring the dark edges of tents she knew were there. Muirenn called fire and threw it at the tent to burn material, and the light created exposed them and the one-hundred plus men clustered in the center of camp.

Muirenn drew her sword and hollered a challenge to the frightened soldiers. She threw more flames at the gathered force, splitting them up, putting a backbone in some and sending the yellow-bellied fools running. She faced an officer with skill and stronger than she. His relentless attack forced her back with powerful sword strokes. When they reached the tent burning brightly in her eyes, he stopped his swing and screamed for more men. Eight showed up at his side, and he pointed a crooked finger at her.

“It’s her, damn it. The lady with the tri-colored eyes. Grab her and run. The rest can rot, but if we want to make a home here, we need to get her away.”

Caitlin ran over and slammed into the group trying to reach Murienn. Two soldiers beat her friend with their swords, and Muirenn lost all her fears. A red curtain smothered her common sense and obliterated all external concerns. She howled her anger at the sky and commenced killing with the forms she studied for years.

Muirenn felt each drop of rainfall strike her skin, she was aware the owls floated by on silent wings above her, and her heart beat a staccato to pump blood to muscles needed to swing her weapons. She smelled the rain, the churned earth, the burnt remnants of the explosion and the fear dripping from the men like the sweat from her brow. She fought at peace with death and took it for a whirl around the field, killing the fools who faced her.

The screams of her victims were a mile off. Their blood splattered with each stroke was more beautiful to her eyes than rain droplets on a rose in the sunshine. The dead, piling up around her as she protected her friend, grew as the foe dwindled to none. Muirenn searched the field for another to fight but found not one standing. She dropped at Caitlin’s side to check her injuries. Muirenn lashed out at the movement to her left, but she stopped the swing in time at the sight of the Sister.

“We are honored to stand guard and protect you as you heal, Sister.”

“Amber?”

“Aye, cousin, but I am known as Brigid Moone here. Please don’t speak a word of my presence to anyone. I am hiding in plain sight, Aye?”

“Aye, love, nobody will hear it from me. Stay safe, Brigid. The leaders of the Heroes of Ireland are grand friends. They live and train in Leith. If you are discovered or fear for your safety, head for my home and ask Old Billie to take you to Leith by boat. Tell them Ranger Sheridan and me sent you. Countess Grainne will back you with a few hundred Heroes and a house full of Talkers for sure. Nobody would find you among his family.”

She nodded at Brigid’s smile and returned her focus on Caitlin’s head injuries with determination. All the times Caitlin berated her for not wearing a helmet, and the enemy caught Caitlin bare-headed. It will be a topic of conversation for a long time if she could help it. Muirenn sent magic healing into her friend’s head to seal the crack and eased the swelling down, or Caitlin would wind up with a horrible headache. She closed the gash and rubbed the wound until it disappeared. She shaved her temples with magic just because she needed it and sat back on her heels to wait.

A hand touched her shoulder lightly, and she wiped the rain from her face to glance up at Mother Veronica.

“We can carry her back to a shelter. There is no need to sit in the rain, Your Highness.”

The Sisters guarding her gasped at Mother’s statement. They didn’t know Murienn was a princess. Aye, one of them did. Caitlin had remarked in the past how the Healer school knew her but nobody in the warrior school acknowledged her as princess. The two schools never spoke to each other. Oh, the word would spread like chum in the ocean now. Muirenn had to admit the plan made sense. With mother exposing her as the rumored Princess now at graduation, she would hide Brigid deeper in the ranks of Sisters.”

“Nay, Mother, her eyes are fluttering. It’s a head wound, so I can’t move her yet. She will wake soon. I want to see how she responds before she is moved.”

“After what I witnessed here tonight, Your Highness, I declare you have met all requirements for advancement. We cannot teach you any more of sword work you don’t already master. After this display, a bloody contest in a sparring yard would be an insult to your skills. The Master classes might challenge you, but the next opening isn’t until early spring.”

“Caitlin and I will take a wee trip across the great pond to search for my Ranger hero. Aye, I’m glad to be heading out into the world as an adult, Mother. We’ll return before spring for sure.”

Caitlin shook with laughter. Muirenn watched her eyes open, and she grinned a big smile.

“I declare taking a hit on my exposed head worth the trouble, My Lady. Thank you for the healing. May I rise?”

“Aye, Caitlin, you may rise slowly, and you will tell me if you are dizzy, Aye? I didn’t find any other damage but you let me know if your vision is blurry, or your head hurts.”

The Knight rose on steady feet and nodded. “I’m fine, My Lady. Let’s head home.”

“We can head home for a shower and a fire with a glass of wine. I have a nasty headache and wine is the cure.”

Caitlin laughed louder and her eyes widened to egg size when she scanned the battlefield.

“Who killed all these?”

“Princess Muirenn did, Lady Caitlin.”

Mother’s face twisted into a grin promising trouble.

“I became angry when they hurt you. I lost track of the normal world and couldn’t tell you if I did or not. My vision turned red, and the world slowed to give me more time to kill the stooks.”

“That’s why you have a headache, My Lady. You are a berserker like your Ranger. Remember what Patience said? He slept after his berserker episode to dispel a headache. I once saw how his friends cared for him after a battle and believed their actions a wee bit extreme, but I understand now. If you killed these fifty or more to protect me, I will rub your head as you drink wine, or sleep. It is the least I can do to thank you for my life.”



**Chapter 12 Glasgow**

**S**heridan pushed against the lid each time the wagon hit a bump. The new nails squealed backing out, and he stopped to listen each time. None of his captors cried out, so he pushed again. He had the lid lose, and he prepared to attempt an escape. The wagon made a sharp turn sliding his box into the side rail. The wagon came to an abrupt halt. Footsteps told him the men would haul the box out, and he was too late. He smelled the sea, and the gulls made more noise than a room full of crying babies. Nay, babies’ voices were sweeter. Gulls were ignorant scavengers—flying rats who enjoyed making noise. He had tried to Talk with gulls, but they exhibited the intelligence of a postage stamp.

The box bounced with the rhythm of the men’s hurried steps. He heard the thud of an arrow striking a body, choking sounds, and men’ sharp curses. The gravelly voice of the captain ordered his men to move faster before another took an arrow. Hah, his friends had arrived. He would not board a ship to Gwydion.

A second man fell screaming in pain. A third followed shortly. Boots pounding on wood declared they reached the docks. He heard the man groan when the next arrow struck, and the box took a nosedive. Sheridan braced for the impact that didn’t come. Damn, he knew what it implied. He pushed up on the lid scraping his wounds raw. The nails squealed The box struck the water slamming his head against the bottom. His coffin sunk quickly, and the sea entered with force filling the box, burning his new wounds. Sheridan took a deep breath and pushed harder against the lid. The damn box flipped and struck the bottom upside down. So much for luck.

He squirmed to turn over with effort and pain, pushed with all his might, and for a damn reward, the water rushed in faster. If he had a brain in his head, he’d ask his mother for help. Sheridan cursed himself for stubborn stupidity. He struggled to work his hands up to his head to rip the hood off and burn his restraints. His lungs ached like they were filled with fire. He would not breathe. He would not suck in water, damn it. Stars sparkled in his vision from the effort to escape, and blackness overwhelmed his consciousness. Images of Aoife and Ciara flashed by, and he apologized for his failure to both. He yanked the hood free and Talked fire to burn the ropes. He braced his hands on the lid and shoved with all he had prying the box off the nails. His coffin lifted with his final frantic effort. Sheridan pushed off and lost the battle to survive. The frigid darkness of the void welcomed him.



**C**iara took the first right and raced down a street headed for the docks. The clop of hooves, wagon wheels squeaking, and harness of the cart horse jingling created the only sounds on the snow muffled streets. It appeared the residents of Glasgow opted to stay warm and dry inside their homes and ignored commerce for a day.

The wagon took the main streets, and she searched for a shortcut. Ciara slid, slammed into a brick wall and ran to the right through an alley hollering directions for Michael and Braelyn.

She smelled the sea before she spotted it over the warehouse buildings and heard the cart stop with men bellowing instructions. She slid past a cargo container, and the bastards came in sight. Ciara drew and shot striking the whanker with the whip. Two arrows flew by her, and two more men fell. She aimed and shot one holding the rear of the box. It tipped, but the bloody men held on, damn it. Two more arrows zipped by her head to strike the two in front. They dropped the blessed box. Oh, bloody hells, it missed the edge of the dock and went over to disappear from view. Ciara screamed and began a mental count. Time could be her worst enemy.

“Shoot them. I need to strip for a swim. I will not let him drown in a bloody box.”

Braelyn screeched a reply, and two more arrows whizzed by Ciara’s ears. They shot the last two bloody kidnappers. Thirty seconds. Ciara reached whip man, kicked the arrow through his neck. She’d have a nice chat with him later. He gurgled, choked and coughed up blood. Nay, he’d be dead too bloody soon to speak. Dying quickly was too bloody good for him. Ciara ran on, yanked her cloak off and dropped it. Sixty seconds.

Ciara raced for the sea, pulling off her hoody and she let it fall. She reached the docks and removed her boots. Ninety seconds. If Sheridan wasn’t aware he’d land in water, he’d not be prepared to breathe in gulps to survive. Her weapons belt struck the dock followed by her bandoliers. She ripped off the gauntlets, chest plate and leather tunic. Ciara cursed herself for wearing the too damn tight pants. Oh, bloody hells; she’d have to swim with them on. One-hundred-twenty seconds. Ciara asked her dogs to stay on the pier, grabbed a knife, and dove into the Midland Sea. Hold on, dear man.

The warmth of the water shocked her. Aye, the arctic storm was wrong, and the air too cold, not the sea. The bloody storm churned up the water making it hard to see. She reached the bottom and searched with her hands crawling like a crab. The shining gods blessed her with a shaft of sunlight to lighten the water. Thank you, Máthair. She spotted a burst of bubbles straight ahead. Aye, the bloody box didn’t sink straight down. One-hundred-eighty seconds. She swam towards the bubbles. A muffled scream pierced the gurgling waters and she spotted more bubbles. Ciara swam faster and found him unconscious and rising slowly. She grabbed him under the arms, chest to chest, so she didn’t disturb the ruined skin on his back, pushed off the bottom, and kicked like a madwoman to haul his huge body upward. Bloody hells, they might both drown if she—Ciara broke the surface gulping chilly air searching for the shore. Braelyn screamed for her to turn around.

“He’s unconscious. Find a bloody rope to haul him out.”

Ciara hooked an arm under his and cradled his chin in her hand to pull back to the docks. She’d prefer any position other than sideways, but she would not cause him more pain by tearing at his wounds. Ciara felt a tingle of relief because Sheridan’s body still held warmth. “Hang on, my stubborn man.” She scissor kicked hard to tow him to the dock. “Patience, come here quickly.”

The blue beauty blinked in sight right at his head. She placed both shaking hands on his cheeks.

“He lives, love. Hurry. Airmid declares he did not suck in water. He passed out before he gave in to the urge. Sheridan needs your breath to wake him, Ciara.”

“He has my life in exchange to save him.”

Ciara reached the ladder. A rope struck her head, and she grabbed for the end. Why in the bloody hells did she wait? Time was her enemy. She wrapped a loop under his arms and around his chest.

“Michael. Hold him up out of the water. He’s not breathing, and I have no time to wait. I’m doing CPR right here.”

She tied the knot, and Sheridan’s body lifted until his chest rose out of the water. Ciara stood on a rung, pinched his nose and blew in air through his lips that once thrilled her to kiss. Bloody mushy fool. Save the man. She blew five times and switched to pushing his chest against the ladder for ten beats and hated each one that tortured his wounds. She alternated between pushes and breaths for too bloody long. His heart needed a fresh start. Ciara blew in his mouth one more time, and she reached back to build momentum and punched his chest. Sheridan jerked, coughed, gasped in a blessed breath and Braelyn squealed with delight. Ciara grabbed him around the neck in a hug. Her body racked with sobs, and the floodgate of tears burst. Sheridan’s arms wrapped around her in return and he rubbed her back like it was she who almost died. She would’ve followed him with a broken heart if he perished.

Ciara’s sissy outburst ended. Michael called down for permission, and she nodded, unable to speak. She turned him around to prevent more damage to his back. Sheridan rose in soft jerks as his blood brother hauled him out of the sea. Sheridan’s hands grabbed the rungs to assist Michael’s efforts half-way up, and he placed his feet on the rungs. He lived. Thank you, shining gods. She could not lose him. Tiny hands caressed her face. She blinked blurry eyes at Patience’s smile.

“Well done, love, and thank you for saving my Sheridan.”

“All day, each and every blessed day if he would only permit me to stay, Patience. Tell his mother I give my thanks for aiding our timely arrival. The man freed himself but blacked out because he ran out of air, huh? He lectured once covering this scenario. He told us to clamp our air passage shut to blackout, and our body would rise to the surface without drowning. Another blessed lesson proved accurate by his example.”

“Call if you need me, love. I’ll always appear for you.” Patience kissed her and disappeared.

Ciara climbed the ladder with shaky legs and wasted arms. Sheridan grabbed her three rungs down and lifted her like she weighed no more than a child. He held her at arm’s length, and she locked her gaze onto his emerald eyes. Sheridan smiled both dimples worth.

“Well met, my friend. Thank you for tracking me and saving my life. Ciara, the salt water ruined my favorite silk shirt and leathers. Oh, well, the shirt anyway. Don’t you think it’s a wee bit cold for swimming today? Aha, the water is warmer than the air, for sure. Aye?”

Michael crossed his arms and nodded with the smile he wore when Sheridan did something crazy. Michael would stand by and observe his whacky brother without ever interrupting unless asked. Braelyn raised her arms to the sky and howled her display of appreciation that he remained with the living. Ciara hadn’t moved. His eyes roamed up and down her body. His gaze was never covetous or lewd. It warmed her to the core. The wind rustled her silk shirt reminding her how little she wore. If the man kept staring, she’d heat enough to dry her clothes without magic.



**S**heridan had to quit ogling her body, but Ciara’s toned thighs shown prominently through the wet leather. Aye, it’d be safer to admire her legs. Nay, he should quit gawking.

Ciara screamed into her hands and laughed. She mumbled many remarks he’d be better off not understanding. She ordered him to turn around. The salt water had to hurt his wounds like the nine hells burned him, and aye, it would not aid in the healing. She poured a few canteens of clean water across his back.

“Put your clothes on, dear man. Leave the boots off until the wagon arrives and you can use your old boots while these dry. Aye, cover your chest, damn it. You certainly don’t need to catch a cold. I will take a walk to dry my ruined blouse and retrieve my cloak and hoody to dress. Gods above, you are a splendid imp.”

Sheridan slipped out of his sloshing boots. He heated his body and dried his pants and socks steaming in the frigid air. Aye, the pair of boots he wore would ruin if he heated them quickly. Ciara returned donning her cloak and mumbling some nonsense about stubborn men. Not him? It must be another man in her life. Oh, yeah, she would deliver a lecture. He slipped his arms into the sleeves of his iron laced vest, and Braelyn stopped him. She wanted to heal his back first. Well, Ciara could yell at her sister for leaving his chest uncovered. Braelyn moaned and hissed a few times while giving him chills from her soft touch. Ciara smiled wickedly, opened her cloak, and unzipped her hoody. Oh, hells, he would try not to stare. Well, must she thrust a hip out, exaggerating the curves of her body? He might be better off jumping back into the sea.

“We chased you for four bloody hours across Kentucky. You pop out of the water bobbing like a cork, dead to the world, and all you can say when you wake is well met?”

“Well, Ciara. I wouldn’t—some things are best not spoken in public. Wow, your hair and eye color against the background of white—oh, you are all a grand sight for my sore eyes. I’m mighty thirsty. Did you happen to bring wine?”

What an idiot. He turned away and gazed at the sights of snow falling over the seaport town. Ciara screamed at the sky, and the dogs and birds joined her ruining the silence of a wondrous winter scene. The seaport housed many boring buildings, but the residents painted murals to brighten up the area and the contradiction of snow falling before a beachscape thrilled his artistic eye.

Michael shook his head over something and laughed a breath of relief. Braelyn tsked and berated her man for ruining the quiet morning. After Ciara’s screaming? Ciara kissed his cheek and rubbed a soft hand on his face. A white diamond sparkled in the corner of each eye she would swear the cold caused it because she never suffered from mushy girl signs of emotions. She retrieved her canteen, unscrewed the lid, and handed it over, shaking her head slowly and smiling her best effort. She stepped close and whispered.

“Well, you bloody romantic brat—you must accept water for now. Our new brothers and sisters are bringing the wagon and your wine. I don’t fill my canteen with wine in the morning like some others, huh?” Ciara wrapped his neck in a hug and whispered in his ear. “Why did you stop yourself from telling me what you admire about my eyes?”

He smiled at her innocent question that would drop him in the boiling pot if he told the truth. Ciara’s eyes tightened, and she shivered. Aye, she knew his answer would be contrived. He told the truth.

“I had to stop. My outburst was improper, but I won’t repeat the blunder.”

“Aye, but it’s too late and doesn’t help. Oh, bloody hells. You’d never understand. Hah! It doesn’t matter, my naïve Máistir. You’re sending me and my lovelies home. Hah, caught you again, dear man. Should I zip up?”

He moaned by mistake, but she didn’t push.

“I’m having a blast teasing you and will continue for our last six days together, Sheridan.   
You know damn well it won’t go beyond teasing, and I won’t point out the obvious in public to embarrass you to tears.”

Ciara kissed the same spot on his neck, she always kissed, stepped back, changed her tone of voice, and ordered him to explain how anybody could capture him and where in the bloody hells was his shield. She pointed out how he survived a mental attack, fire, and lightning earlier, but now he’s covered in blood from a whipping that should not be possible. She declared his answers would determine the punishment he’d receive for being caught unaware.

“A day terror stole my awareness at the wrong time, and they knocked me out and placed an iron laced hood on me. I had no magic to create a shield to protect me from the whip.”

Aye, he deserved punishment for his lack of attention. Maura’s words had him confounded and distressed. He confessed what led up to his capture to his best friend, and her head never stopped shaking while her hands clenched into fists and relaxed repeatedly. He could only hope it wasn’t him she wished to punch. Ciara laid his jacket across his shoulders to cover his chest for a bit of protection from the snow, stepped around him, hissed at his wounds and began cleaning them with a soft hand.

“Who killed the man with the whip? Please tell me Spoons died painfully.”

“I didn’t know the whanker’s name, but rest assured he died slowly and painfully struggling to breathe. The arrow struck his throat, and he choked until I reached him. I kicked the arrow out the other side so he could breathe. I hoped to question him later, but I’m sure he turned purple choking to death on the blood. I shot him first, Sheridan. I witnessed the beating through Astor’s vision and knew which bastard I wanted to kill first.”

Sheridan’s Fae companion requested permission to appear, and he granted it willingly. Patience probably witnessed his torture and wished to check on his health.

Patience flashed sapphire sparks brilliant against the white snow and showered the four with magic kisses. She hovered before him, clenching her little hands to her chest. The beauty cried, and her sapphire tears sparkled down her cheeks. Ciara and Braelyn laid soft hands on his back fluttering like bird’s wings as they healed his many wounds.

“Máthair will ask Airmid to assist Ciara and Braelyn if you wish. She witnessed the beating with me and cried as I do for your pain. You, my stubborn love, won’t cry, so your mother weeps in your stead.”

“Thank you, Patience, but I am confident the sisters have the skill to heal my wounds. I would not trouble a goddess to appear on my behalf. Please thank Airmid for me, but I have faith in the sister’s magic.”

Ciara leaned around his arm and squinted at him. Oh, she watched his face for a reaction.

“Sheridan, three of the oldest wounds—the first of the whip marks attempted to close with your innate magic and will scar. All three are puckered and nasty. Dark gods be damned, I wish we found you with the hood on to prevent your magic from healing. I would bet they will fester with infection as well from the sea water. We can’t do a thing with them now except bandage over Bald’s elixir and keep an eye on them. Sinéad will fix you up, but you will bear scars to commemorate this beating. If you say what’s a few more scars, I’ll...just don’t say it.”

“Aye, Ciara, I will only say thank you both for healing me. Your fingers tickle like butterfly kisses.”

Ciara tsked and Braelyn kissed his back several times, prickling his skin in the chill air. The snowflakes didn’t tickle nearly as much as her lips.

“Sheridan, Máthair also wishes to know where you hide in your mind. Neither she nor Airmid could find your thoughts. She asks you to go there and allow me to hold your hand so we can follow in your mind. Aye?”

Sheridan held Patience’s hand, found the dark place in the back of his mind, and opened the door to the brightly lit room of peace. He stepped through and looked around. Whitewashed shapes of trees and hills that appeared to exist within a thick white fog were barely visible. Sheridan closed his eyes and absorbed the tranquility of the room. He heard Ciara calling him from far away. He backed out and closed the door. When he opened his eyes, the Fairy before him looked back in wide-eyed wonder. How did he surprise his friend? She released his hand and grabbed his chin like she’d lecture a child. Patience smiled at him, but his mother replied in his mind.

*“Yes, Sheridan, I am as surprised as Patience and Airmid. How did you find the room? Who taught you to retreat to the safe place?”*

*“The torture and pain I suffered as a child led me there. Somebody showed me the room as a boy looking for a place to hide from the torment. I don’t know or care who led me to the room. I use it when times are rough, and the pain is unbearable. I have not entered the space often as an adult.”*

*“No, you should not care how you learned. It is the hall of the All Father. He would never permit harm to any being in His hall. The All Father recognizes you and welcomes you into His home. You are truly blessed to have His care, love. Do not waste or abuse His gift. You visited the Dagda for a while this time, and your sisters have finished healing what they could. Your body is in excellent condition and probably saved your life. Your fanaticism has paid off, son.”*

Patience held his chin and turned his head each way, pouting her lips to keep from smiling. What did she examine? She wore a smile like Ciara’s before he received a sarcastic lecture.

“Sheridan spoke with his mother while you ladies worked. She agrees with your opinion, Ciara. Sheridan’s green eyes are gorgeous, and his hair is perfect for yanking when he acts the fool. Máthair wishes to know why you don’t travel with Sinéad.”

Sheridan chuckled at Ciara’s gasp of surprise and embarrassment, and she slapped his arm to repay his laughter. He had no clue they would require Sinéad’s level of healing skill. Sheridan called for Patience to sit on his shoulder. She sat and immediately attacked his hair with her delicate fingers.

“Aye, well, Sinéad is hard at work performing experiments and building a laboratory and production facility for Bald’s elixir. It’s not just for our use. What she produces will be vital to all injured warriors in the battles ahead. Máthair is not the first to reprimand me for leaving her behind, and we haven’t been gone a day.”

“Máthair requests you learn to heed the wisdom of the ladies in your family. Soon is what she hopes, love. Don’t pout at me, your mother laughs at your expression, and I’m trying my best not to as well. Oh, Máthair says she must visit another plane too far to Talk with you. Stop that Sheridan. I can’t hold it back any longer. Máthair will be gone for a while, and she asks you to behave yourself. Stop, Sheridan. I will leave you now, so I don’t laugh in your face.”

Patience blinked away. The echo of her laughter rang in his empty head. He nodded at Michael, and his brother took Braelyn’s arm to lead her away. Sheridan would prefer to receive the lecture from his best friend in private.

“Aye, you always forget I can sense your mood and read your expressions like an open book. It won’t be a lecture this time, Sheridan. Stand up straight and push your shoulders back. You cannot shrivel up and disappear, dear man. You are too large to hide behind your discomfort.

Ciara stated emphatically she never spoke the fact his eyes were gorgeous aloud to anyone. Máthair cheated by pulling that mushy nonsense out of her mind. And, damn it, She’s not always sufficiently angry with him to pull his hair.

“Wipe that smirk off your lips.” Her smile turned deadly serious, and she stomped her foot for emphasis. She’d never let him off the hook.

“How do you not cry? That bastard shredded your back, and the other left broken ribs, bleeding welts, and deep bruises we will need to watch for thrombosis. Still, with all the brutality, not once did you cry out.”

“It wasn’t my first whipping or caning, Ciara, and I learned at a young age to ignore pain.”

Sheridan delivered a lecture instead of listening to one. He knew what pain a whip could inflict, and knew from an eagle’s call they were coming to the rescue. The pain wouldn’t last forever and not giving the men the satisfaction of crying out frustrated them. He took pleasure in aggravating the enemy. A torturer loses control if he can’t squeeze out a confession or elicit a scream. Well, in his opinion, they do. He hid in the room until he heard the birds overhead. Hells, he could take any pain for a short while, if he knew it would end.

“How does a person learn to accept suffering without uttering a sound?”

“Well, one way is you find one of the dark gods of Chaos and have him implant the essence of an ancient being in your head to instruct and torture you for eight years as Balor did to me.”

The voice of An Deorái who tormented him never allowed Sheridan to cry out regardless of the level of pain inflicted. He taught the squires the same but in a gentler lesson today because the cries of pain would draw the enemy to the wounded person’s location.

“I have heard it said—no brain, no pain; no sense, no feelings.”

“Aye, silly man, if it didn’t pain me to look at your injuries, I’d laugh. You have impressed me again, dear Teacher. Your Ranger marks must be redone—if you care.”

“I will instruct you on how to find the safe room I built as a child. I send my mind there and don’t experience the pain inflicted. I will teach you, and I hope you never need to hide there.”

“Aye, Sheridan, but it’s best if I learn how to hide from pain because I will not give the enemy your location or identity if tortured. I’d rather die first than betray you.”

Ciara was in the mood for talking. She claimed the worst part of the day was Gwydion closed in on his location. Nay, it’s obvious Gwydion still hadn’t connected Ranger Sheridan, or the other name bloody fools use, with An Deorái, but the enemy searched on the right continent. She promised she’d never let them have Sheridan for any reason. Nobody would take her prize target for sarcasm.

“Please assign dogs and birds to be a permanent guard. This day would not have occurred if you had dogs to warn you or fight the men off. You could’ve daydreamed about my breasts and legs to your heart’s content, and the dogs would wake you when trouble came. I’ll stay at your side even without your permission if you reject my suggestion.”

“You and Sabra think alike. I hope—well, not about breasts and legs. Sabra, being our Chéad Deirfiúr, has chosen a group to do what you suggest. The brood is as embarrassed as I for the blunder today.”

Sheridan explained his mind didn’t stay in his surroundings, The woman’s words confounded him, and his thoughts blocked his instincts.

“I will have an assortment of eight dogs and four birds with me around the clock. What should we name the guards?”

“Shadows is what I called them when I considered the idea. I hope they stay as close as shadows to prevent this from occurring a second time. The closer you are to the awakening, the harder the enemy will search for you, and the world can’t afford to lose you, dear man. Hells bells, I’d be hard-pressed to find another man like you to torture and tease as well. It’s not often a male and female form a bond as we have. Even more so with the fact, you’re human, and I’m Elf. We are a rare occurrence, so don’t screw it up by dying on me. Wait. What woman confounded you?” Me?”

Oh yeah, Ciara didn’t miss his slip of the tongue. He told her about the woman named Maura, who stopped him on the way to the barn. She claimed she’s Muirenn’s mirror twin, but much older. Maura told him Muirenn would betray and abandon him. She told him her history and problems delivered like she auditioned for a part in a stage play. She claimed to be An Deorái’s destined mate and yet she betrayed him to be with Gwydion. She learned the truth about the maniac and ran from his violence and brutal treatment. Maura swears Gwydion’s mental magic could easily ensnare and enslave Muirenn. The loss of his trophy mate pushed Gwydion over the brink into full-fledged insanity. Gwydion didn’t have far to fall. He blamed Máthair for taking his mate when, in truth, the lady ran.

“Well, for damn sure I'm not the one who will betray you, Sheridan. I’m the perfect partner for you. Well, Ranger partner, not the other kind with sex involved. Bel’s shining balls, pull your mind out of the gutter. Wipe that boyish grin off your face, or I’ll do it for you with a shovel. I can sense your silly emotions, Ranger. I will zipper up—Wait a damn minute. What would you hope? You tried to hide something else that our bond is clanging loudly to warn me.”

“A dream not worthy of expressing, Ciara, or you’d bite my head off.”

“Oh, Oh? OK, I’ll ignore it for now only because you’re weak from torture and drowning. See what a sweetheart I am?”

She ordered two more days of healing the bruises twice each day and cleaning three times daily, and he would rest or pay the piper. If he messed up and got an infection in the wounds, she’d bite his head off for sure. Two days at least of wagon rest and he would obey, or she’d…think of something. They would find and follow the squire’s tracks, and he would drive the wagon slowly. Oh, maybe she could convince Pedro to join them. Who was Pedro?

Ciara hung on the verge of mushy sentiments. He’d be a fool to point it out to her. Nay, he laid an arm on her shoulders instead. She wrapped an arm around his waist, and they walked west talking about what love should be and other such nonsense until they heard the wagon approach. Poor Michael walked ahead with Braelyn shaking his head or grunting and snorting his opinion of their conversation. Ciara did bring up one interesting point. Did the woman, Maura, deliver a rehearsed speech she learned from Gwydion to instill doubt about Muirenn? Sheridan didn’t have an answer and wasn’t certain why she named Muirenn as his mate in her story. He didn’t want a mate.

“Give me your wisdom for the day, Máistir. I need something to take my mind off your suffering.”

“Oh, hmmm? OK, the wise man is grateful for his dear friends and counts them as treasures to keep safe and one day repay their friendship with all the love he accrued in interest over the years.”

“Oh, gods, it is perfect timing. Here comes Pedro with our new family members—and your wine. You deserve a treat for that one for sure. I will write your enchanting thought down and keep it in my heart as well, dear friend. You are a treasure. Oh, I need to zip up now with the young boy present. Too bad, you lecherous brat. You won’t have my breasts to stare at any longer. Tomorrow, I’m wearing another favorite of yours. So, you’ll have to wait for another peek. Lovelies is a strange name to call breasts. You are mighty silly sometimes, Ranger.”

“Actually, I didn’t…forget it. It’s a battle of wits I will always lose.”

Ciara smacked his chest and left her hand in place. He grasped it and stared at her delicate hand. Ciara never painted her nails. She claimed it mushy girl stuff she would never try. She didn’t need painted nails to showcase her slim, long fingers. They were the fingers of an artist. She might try to play tough, but he saw through the façade. He kissed her hand, and she bowed her head as a lady would acknowledge the compliment. She knew, damn it.

“You have potential, Ranger, and I hope I’m there to witness when you learn the truth.”

Aye, but he was the biggest fool. He must send her home and try to forget his affections for her. Ciara’s safety was paramount.

“We will spend the night here at Sáb Háilte with our family and introduce our five new members. I could use a rest.”

“Aye, you could, and I’m heartened to see you’re not brain dead from the beatings.”



**Chapter 13 Tenders**

**S**heridan waved goodbye to his family in Glasgow. He turned the wagon east and climbed out on the running board to wave to the young children until losing sight of the home around the corner. Pedro couldn’t be more delighted staying in Glasgow with the family of Cainteoirs. He had wished to become a fisherman all his young life and his dreams would come to fruition with the family. The four found in the pig sty, required weeks of rest and care. He would check in with them on his way back before heading west. The family would inform them of the homes available for them to live if Sáb Háilte didn’t suit their needs.

He climbed back in, closed the wagon’s door and heated the soapstones in the basket. The snowstorm vanished and the morning sun sparkled off the snow. It would melt by afternoon and with luck the roads would remain passable. A flash flood would ruin anyone’s day.

“Pass me the jug please, and don’t tell me it’s too early for bourbon. It’s five o’clock somewhere, and I’d appreciate a numb body without the narcotics Ciara wanted to administer for breakfast.”

Sheridan jerked the reins startling the horses. They stopped, and he apologized, but he reacted with emotion when he spotted three trees moving—and it should not be possible. The trees ambled closer, and he waited for the rest of the day terror. Michael questioned his actions, and he pointed at the trees for an answer. Michael chuckled and leaped out of the cab to string his bow. Sheridan called for Patience, and she flashed into sight, laughing at his expression.

“They are Tenders, love. I believe you’ll want to speak to them. Tenders are in the troll family, but they are intelligent pacifists, and their passion is caring for the forests. We haven’t met a Tender in a few of your lifetimes.”

An oak, an elm, and a maple tree stepped onto the road. Oh, hells, it sounded like the beginning of a joke. As long as the punch line wasn’t they stomped him into mulch, he’d be pleased to speak with the magical creatures. Tenders could speak? Sheridan stepped out of the cab and stroked the necks of the three port side Percherons. He strolled toward the three huge tree creatures with Patience sitting on his shoulder. Well, she bounced on his shoulder and clapped her hands, excited to meet a Tender. Oh, he spotted their eyes blended into the bark first and then the mouth. He wasn’t familiar with Tender’s expressions, but he’d name it sadness or anger. Ciara’s hand slipped into his belt and tugged.

“Patience calls them Tenders. She declares they are the friendly and peaceful cousins of the Trolls. Close your mouth and wipe the drool from your chin.”

Ciara smacked him and wiped her chin with a sleeve laughing at herself. A sound like boulders grinding and tree barks rubbing reached his ears, but their voice went straight to his brain. Oh, they used mental speech. He glanced at Ciara with hopes she heard, and her smile supplied ample assurance.

*“Well met, An Deorái, Elven Princesses and honored Cennaire. We wish to beg a favor of assistance in rescuing our young Ash.”*

Oak introduced himself, Maple and Elm. He detailed young Ash’s predicament, and Sheridan stopped him with a hand raised. Ciara elbowed his ribs, but he ignored her as usual.

“There is no need for begging favors friend Oak. It is our duty to protect the innocent creatures of Earth and to destroy Gwydion’s foul minions. I must ask how you know each of us and especially my role in life because if you are aware, are not the Rock Trolls also aware?”

Leaves rustling, branches clacking and groans like roots uplifting preceded Oak’s Talked answer. He declared the Rock Trolls had no more brains than a grain of sand. He bowed and stated with sincerity the Tenders were Máthair Danu’s creation, and they knew him by the association with his mother. Oh. Aye, he forgot about Patience. He nudged his head in Oak’s direction, and the Fairy flittered to the Tender and curtsied before the giant oak. The ground vibrated with his pleasurable laughter. Patience kissed Oak, Maple, and Elm before zipping back to her place on his shoulder.

Sheridan turned to his companions to make introductions when Oak stopped him in mid-sentence. Ciara snickered and yanked on his belt. Aye, one point for Oak. The Tender admitted they knew Ciara, Braelyn, and Michael for years. He declared the trees in the Eastern and Northern forests validated the Tender’s opinion with many fine tales of their respect for nature. Oak said the forests were accustomed to and welcomed the footsteps of Elves and Rangers in their home.

After the pleasantries were set aside, Oak explained in great detail what they required from them. Tenders were not violent by nature, but they would assist in freeing Ash from the clutches of Gwydion’s soldiers. The Tenders could be used against the populace if the enemy chained their trunks with iron. Iron drove them mad, and the chain controlled them in their fury. Gwydion had captured and tormented many Tenders to fight for him. Sheridan scanned the faces of his companions for their reaction, and the anger apparent in their visage spoke volumes.

Sheridan found a side road into the forest and led the team of Percherons far enough to remain hidden from the road. The four filled buckets with water from the cisterns on the wagon for the team. They fitted nose bags with oats on the draught horses and let the four riding horses roam free with instructions not to return to the road or stray far. Aye, it was time to fight.

He asked Oak to lead the way, and the Tenders headed due north straight into the trees with Patience sitting among Maple’s branches. Sheridan and his companions stopped and gaped at the Tenders reshaping their bodies to pass silently through the dense forest without disturbing a leaf. Sheridan shared wide-eyed amazement with his companions, and they chased after the Tenders pointing and laughing at each other’s silly smiles.

Oak changed course northwest at a swath of snow-laden saplings planted after the loggers harvested the varied hardwood trees a few years back. Not one young tree suffered damage with their passing. Sheridan grunted a curse for Gwydion and his kind who declared magic evil. The magic of the Tenders, along with the Fae creatures, was crucial to the health and survival of the forests—of the entire Earth.

The Tenders altered their course and slowed among the wood fern bending with the weight of snow on the delicate fonds. Ciara tapped his chin closed, and he chuckled. Aye, but the way the Tenders traversed the crowded undergrowth without afflicting damage stunned his senses. Ciara could make fun all she wanted, and he’d continue staring. The three Tenders stopped where the ferns ceased to grow, and field grasses swayed in the wind.

Sheridan crouched behind a fern with eight dogs and peaked through the fonds to scan the small army camped about one hundred paces farther north. Ciara growled at his side, and he nodded agreement. A small Ash tree confined in a cage huddled to prevent a branch from touching the iron bars. The poor creature couldn’t sleep without fear of leaning against the burning metal. He counted heads and smiled at the total. Ciara nudged his ribs, and he glanced over to read her hand-talked message. Aye, she too noticed the slow and lazy movements of the drugged soldiers. They must’ve arrived right after the soldiers received their noon dosage of heroin. Gwydion had to realize sending addicted men out into the world conveyed a death sentence for the filthy and foul-smelling soldiers. It would be more of a slaughter than a battle, but Sheridan didn’t care. Each one of Gwydion’s soldiers must die.

Patience landed on his shoulder and whispered for him to look at the creature in the second cage. He assumed many dogs or wolves huddled in the second cage—not one creature. His Fae shook her head. Nay, an Amorok, a beast created by Balor to hunt An Deorái, slept in the cage. Hells, they were lucky the breeze carried his scent east. Oh. A plan solidified in his head, and he couldn’t wait to spring it on Ciara.



**C**iara obeyed his bloody orders and strung her bow watching the stubborn man slink through the underbrush with twenty dogs. Patience described the beast he would draw to him so she, Braelyn, Michael, and the Tenders would have fewer soldiers to deal with. If it weren’t for the pledge burning in her brain, it’d be one bloody order she would refuse and follow the pig-headed man. Ciara used handtalk to question why Michael didn’t follow the mulish brute. Michael’s shoulders shuddered, and his head shook. Sheridan promised he was capable of doing exactly as he claimed and his blood brother took him at his word. Aye, but even if he did draw soldiers and the Amorok away, who would help him kill a creature large enough to fill the whole floor of a cage? Ciara knelt and sat back with her butt between her feet to rest and wait for the foolish man’s plan to work.

She watched his movements through her Kestrels’ vision, blinking her eyes closed each time the tiny raptors moved, or her brain would fuzz from its rapid flight among the branches. Ciara switched to viewing through Astor’s eyes flying high above the trees and spotted him and the dogs due west of the camp. The low, angry grumble forced her attention to the camp. The beast rose, and its head nearly touched the bloody roof. Ciara shot a glance at Michael who continued to smile, damn it. Aye, Sheridan might be the finest warrior alive, but the monster in the cage could swallow him in three bites. Bloody Balor and his bloody Amorok. How many times could Sheridan run straight at death with a bloody smile before her heart burst? Aye, the sooner she killed what soldiers remained, the sooner she could run to help the handsome brute.

The Amorok caught Sheridan’s scent. It howled a skull piercing challenge and rammed the bars of its cage, setting the soldiers into a fury. Twenty men lined up and grabbed a chain leading under the door of the cage and attached to the Amorok’s collar. Twenty feck’n men to hold the beast and her Máistir would face the bloody monster alone. Braelyn rose with Ciara and reminded her of the plan. Aye, she’d bloody well obey like a good girl, but she’d tear off after the beast and help Sheridan when the last man dropped. The creature, part wolf and part bear, but three times the size of either, lunged and the twenty men barely contained its movements. They dug their heels into the sodden ground, attempting to hold the beast. When the Amorok reached the road, it doubled its efforts, and the men gave up pulling and ran with it.

Ciara brushed past the ferns with her Dogos and a few dozen other dogs. The man holding the keys went down first so she wouldn’t need to search for the keys later. Braelyn and Michael joined her shooting drugged whankers like moving target practice. Over sixty of them grabbed swords and charged, believing there were only three archers and a pack of dogs to kill. When the unorganized gang closed in the Tenders left the shelter of the forest and attacked. Oak, Maple, and Elm, moved past her faster than she thought possible on tree legs. The three each swept more than a dozen men off their feet and stomped them into the ground. Thank the bright gods the Tenders fought on her side.



**S**heridan gazed at the canopy above him displaying a marvelous contrast of nature. Snow filtering through green leaves created an uncanny sight but one he would treasure for a lifetime. The roar of the beast yanked him from his reverie, and he spotted the Amorok at the main road turning into the path he found. He’d bet the Farm fisherman used the path to gain access to a great spot on the Midland Sea. Aye, he’d rather be sitting on a dock fishing with Ciara than facing the Amorok. Hells, he should forget his past and learn to enjoy fishing— Ciara’s favorite pastime. Oh, yeah, and why should he if he sent her home?

The last of the dogs received his magical shield and joined the others hiding in the brush on either side of him. Sheridan’s plan depended on the Amorok leaping for him at the last moment and if it didn’t…well, he’d soon develop a plan B when it happened.

He drew one sword and watched the Amorok grow in size for each beat of his heart. Sabra Talked her idea of his foolish plan, and he shrugged. If he could slice its belly as it passed over him, the beast had to slow, and he and the dogs could kill it. It remained his plan A, and he’d not deviate. Please.

Sheridan spotted the chain flapping behind the snarling nightmare with fur, and plan B came to mind. Or an amendment to plan A, depending on the Amorok’s first move. Hells, if the soldiers had a brain, they would’ve released the beast without the cumbersome chain. Sheridan would have a drink and propose a toast to stupid soldiers if he survived. Laughter rumbled in his chest with the thought he’d better survive, or Ciara would kill him twice for his foolish actions.

His dogs growled with anticipation. They were ready to pounce when the beast hit the ground. Sheridan gripped the hilt with both hands and waited. The Amorok lowered its head, and he cursed. Nay, it merely bent to launch at his throat as he hoped. Sheridan ran two steps, dropped to his knees and slid, stabbing his sword into the beast’s chest and held on tight. The Amorok’s momentum propelled its body across his blade slicing a gash from chest to groin. It landed in a heap and whined. His dogs attacked from all sides tearing ligaments in its legs to prevent it from rising.

Sheridan grabbed the chain and wrapped it around the closest tree to peg the beast in one spot if it tried to rise. The Amorok did rise and pulled against its restraints on wobbly legs. Sheridan ran around the tree with the beast on his heels. It ran out of chain and jerked to a stop. He drove his sword deep into its chest, and the Amorok howled once, flopped on its side and expelled its last breath.

He dropped to the ground and laid on his back, breathing the clean, crisp air of life. The dogs piled on him, spreading the blood on their muzzles over his body. He closed his eyes to enjoy the moment when his heart lurched and warmed with a familiar caress. He opened his eyes to her brown orbs shiny from emotion but don’t mention it to Ciara. Sheridan smiled and sat up fast recalling the men holding the chain.

“Did you kill the twenty men with the Amorok?”

“Aye, so now you recall them. They could’ve snuck up and killed you a dozen times while you laid here all cozy and brain dead staring at the pretty leaves and soaking up nature’s beauty. Of course, the foul gimps are dead, Máistir. Get up so I can inspect your stubborn hide for injuries.” Ciara assumed her go-to stance of annoyance and scanned the scene. She whistled a long note studying the Amorok wrapped in the chain. “You’re lucky they left the bloody chain connected, huh?”

The men didn’t have much of a choice when the Amorok tore away from them. Sheridan was damn lucky the dogs fought with him. He climbed to his feet, and Ciara’s jaw dropped at the sight of all the blood. He assured her he incurred no injury and the blood came from the dogs’ muzzles transferred when they rubbed against him. Ciara clicked her mouth shut, blinked a few times and smiled straight out of the devious chapter. Oh, yeah. Well, it wasn’t his fault women’s devious expressions would encompass the majority of his book.

The adult Tenders surrounded a worn-out Ash and thanked them profusely for assisting with the young female’s release. Ash kept turning to look back at them until the four disappeared into the woods. Everybody collected bodies into a pile, and he Traveled them to the ocean off the coast of South Africa to feed the sharks. When he returned Braelyn and Ciara insisted he stripped so they could change the bandages on his back and Ciara cursed him for his foolish actions causing the new wounds to reopen. Sheridan shrugged it off as another day with Ciara.

Sheridan climbed into the cab, pushed his side of the windshield open, and locked it in place. He had to defend his sanity when Ciara asked if he lost his mind. Nay. Not yet. He stuck his feet out to rest on the cab’s nose and snuggled against the seat. A little fire added to the soapstone and he relaxed, anxious for a nap. Without a nightmare, please.



**Chapter 14 Hate**

**S**heridan’s eyes opened sore, scratchy, burning and tearing from the smoky stench. He woke in the rancid cave where the maniac housed his Orc. Gwydion pulled him into another dream-walk, and the mad man would find him in no mood for more torture. He rose angry enough to kill all the Orc gathered in the thousands on the floor. Was the maniac gearing up for an attack? Sheridan attempted to measure the depth and breadth of the space holding all the Orc. How many fireballs would he need to kill so many?

“What are you doing here, boy? I didn’t call you into a dream. How did you find me awake? I know you are here in your sleep, or I would have struck you down at first sight. How did you manage to come here?”

“My unfettered contempt found you in your hole old man. It is close to the anniversary of the day your vile bastards murdered my baby girl. My loathing for you must have brought me here. My sword, driven by hate, will be your last sight.”

“Idle threats from behind a dream image, boy. Tell me who you are in this life. You can’t hide forever. Once you’re dead, my plan to consume this planet will face no opposition.”

Gwydion couldn’t identify him? How did he appear to the maniac? Oh, he could pull his essence into a dream but had no idea of his facial features. Did Gwydion appear in his original guise? A lesson learned. Sheridan scanned his arms and found no scars. Wow. He could alter his appearance in a dream. Not now, damn it.

“You are a fool, Gwydion. I will find you once I survive my awakening, and I’ll enjoy killing you for what you did to my baby.”

“Yeah, yeah, brave talk from a man asleep somewhere. If your brat had magic, I’ll kill the blasted idiots. I want all the young Talkers to steal their magic. I need two with exceptional talents for my personal use. It is Máthair’s fault you lost her. If Máthair didn’t butt in where she’s not wanted, the skanky whore you had for a mate would be alive too.”

Sheridan’s fists crackled with tension, and his arms ached to punch. Knowing it would do no good to strike the dream vision stayed his hand and not wanting to stoop to Gwydion’s level calmed him to speak.

“Was it Máthair who brought you and your perverted schemes to my world? Did Máthair deliver the beasts and soldiers who torment the innocents on earth? Was it Máthair who showed you the way to our home forbidden to you? You place blame rather than admit your faults. You are a pathetic, insane monster. You smell like the Orc you live with and are worse than the skanks you call soldiers. You are a filthy, ignorant beast no better than the scum in this cave.”

“Oh, the boy has a backbone. I bet you cower like the worm you are when I face you in person.”

The bastard strutted over like a drunk rooster. Was it a handicap or the dream world?

“So, now, you are angry. See how it feels to lose the one you love? Máthair did it to me, and I will destroy her for taking my mate. I will stand among the gods as an equal and return to burn this world to cinders.”

“Know this, foul demented freak—I will deliver my revenge on you before you ever attempt to battle Máthair. Your master’s plans to take Earth as a playground for his beasts will not come to fruition. I abhor you and everything you stand for, the gods you slave for, and everyone who associates with you. I am in this war for good, and I plan to fight until you are dead. You are no more than a foul, insane, bastard. Your men will die horribly, and I will continue killing them until they flee to leave my world with your corpse. If I must, I will face your masters to win our freedom, and I will claim victory.”

“You are naïve or a fool. I will assist the gods of Chaos for a price. They will rule this world and claim a higher seat in the All Father’s Hall. But once they achieve their goal, they will repay me for claiming this rock for Chaos.”

Gwydion declared he and Balor would rival Máthair in power and prestige where they belonged. He would stand among them as a brother. He told him to forget the world. Earth belonged to Lucifer, the god of Chaos before the humans did their best to destroy it, and will again when chaos wins. Lucifer’s devils already infiltrated the weak to control their emotions. Sheridan would lose because he wasted his time dreaming of a utopia. Gwydion claimed the beings on Earth weren’t worth his efforts to confront Chaos. The people he intended to defend would turn their backs on him for the freedom he and chaos offered by ruling them. Humans couldn’t self-govern, and the Elves would eventually conquer them if chaos didn’t eradicate the foul creatures. Gwydion’s forces would deliver stability to the people by conquering and ruling them.

“It is our destiny, boy.”

Sheridan rushed the maniac, swung a fist at his head but passed through a screaming madman’s image with arms raised in defense. Sheridan slammed into the chair. How could the furniture and walls be solid but not Gwydion? Sheridan must reconsider Gwydion’s words when capable of rational thoughts — granting freedom by enslaving the world? What a ridiculous, evil, and egotistical concept. If Gwydion’s philosophy stemmed from his association with the gods of chaos, they were an evil, demented group. Aye, he loathed them for what they allowed the men to do with his daughter.

He faced Gwydion intent on attacking him. His vision blurred, his heart raced, and his brain chilled worse than when he fell through the ice as a child. Sheridan rushed Gwydion, tripped and fell to smack his face on a wooden floor.



**S**heridan swung and woke when his fist struck the door. Damn. So much for rational behavior. It wasn’t a nightmare but still ugly as nine hells. He’d like to know how he found Gwydion to do it again more prepared. The soapstone no longer gave off heat. Aha, he had a decent nap and he would keep the fact from his best friend. If she knew he slept again after a full night’s rest, she’d insist on a long rest once they returned to Somerset.

He Talked to Ciara, and she about fell off her horse from the shock. She turned Rust around and galloped back with her two Dogos following. Well, she didn’t appear angry at least. Sheridan pulled his frozen feet in and shut the windshield, tossed fire on the stones and rolled his window down.

How a woman could put her hand on a hip seated in a saddle and still assume the posture of impatience amazed him, but she accomplished it with flair.

“Uh, would you care to accompany me to the gravesite?”

“Oh, I thought you’d ask me to fetch you a drink or something as ridiculous. Aye. I’ll tie Rust with Dax and be ready in a jiffy. Thank you for including me, Sheridan.”

“I need—promised to take you with me.”

“Aye, you brat, you do need me, and not just for my spears. I’m delighted to hear your mental slip speak the real truth. I have hope your heart will follow your brain, Sheridan. Muirenn, Ena, and me will protect you, and love you, if you’d only let us in. We’ll tease you relentlessly and embarrass you to tears for fun, but we love you. Your mother has assured you it is not wrong, so give up the fight.”



**Chapter 16 Galway**

**M**uirenn regretted her decision to take a short cut. After leaving through the postern gate, they rode east through the wooded and rocky pass where she called her birds to join them. The eagles were day hunters, so the two must roost on her travel case until dawn. Oakley and Oda took over in the skies to scout for them. They rode on into the hills and looked back at each rise until Kylemore hid behind a hill. Finn, Fionn, and her silly fox scouted ahead for them, and they made excellent time in the dark. Aye, traveling with a brood was the only sensible and wise way to travel. She had no fear of what lay ahead.

She spoke too fast damn it. The ride through the pass was frustrating and dangerous. Even after slowing their pace, the horses stumbled several times on the boulder-strewn ground. Muirenn’s head throbbed and she tired of averting her gaze from shadows. She pulled her mare to a stop and screamed at the sky with all of her fears and resentments pouring out. She waved away the need for Caitlin’s spear she held up to throw at anything which caused her frantic outburst.

“Caitlin, please agree we can ride out of the hills and travel the road from here on. This terrain could cripple or kill our horses, and I do not wish to lose my horse to a broken leg if I can help it. The eagles can’t sleep with all the dipping and twisting. The owls show no one around for miles. This is no bloody short cut if we cripple the horses.”

The Knight nodded, planted the spear butt back on her boot, and turned her mount without a word. She headed south towards the well-lit road Muirenn had stared at for the last hour. The winged helmet of the Templar reflected the waning moon’s light and appeared to glow with an ethereal light. Muirenn concentrated all of her attention on the helmet through the darkness in the rough country.

Once on Old Abbey Road, they rode southeast through Kylemore Pass between the upper and lower lakes and on through the night to join up with the trade road at Garroman Lough and on to Maam Cross where they stopped for breakfast at the Peacock Inn. Pleasantly full and half rested, the birds switched places, and they rode on to Galway and her future. She held the fox on her lap so the poor thing could rest. He gave it the grand effort, but his little legs couldn’t keep up with the wolfhounds. Máthair, please guide her future. It could only be better than her recent past had been. Her eagles soared above in a scouting pattern to watch their path for trouble. Muirenn rolled her shoulders and blew out a blast of tension. Relax, damn it, the birds kept an eye out for them, and the road was clear. Her wolfhounds could take down anything short of a horse if needed. Relax damn it, girl.

Morning light tinted the pastures and farm fields in golden warmth. Her mood brightened like the sun did over the fertile hills dotted with small farmhouses. Children, supposed to be herding the sheep to pasture, ran for the road to wave at them. Caitlin’s white surcoat, shining armor and Templar banner streaming from her spear, attracted them and the two waved back, which excited the young ones to whoop and holler. Aye, many of the children waving today would aspire to be Templars themselves from this day’s encounter. She knew they would hold sword fights at play for days on end…terminating the dreams of the less inspired and cementing the desire in the strongest. It was what Caitlin told her happened when she was young and why she became a Templar herself. Her uncle tried to hide them from her, but she saw and knew it was what she wanted. To add to the excitement, Caitlin screamed out the name Templar as she waved her banner to the children. The tallest of the girls didn’t jump around with the others. She saluted the Knight before screaming the salute back, fists raised with pride.

The short breaks they took did little to alleviate the soreness she had in her back, legs, and mostly her ass. Gods, who knew sitting so long could be such a pain in the ass? They arrived tired, dusty, and sore at the port city of Galway at mid-day. Well, she was sore like she carried the horse. Caitlin smiled at her when she queried her condition. Of course, she wasn’t in pain. She was born on horseback with a blade in her hand, and she teethed on spurs if Muirenn could believe all Caitlin’s bravado. Muirenn’s ass couldn’t hurt worse if she was beaten with an oar all day. One day she’d own a fine horse to ride in comfort.

Riding through Galway was a delight for Muirenn. The city was spectacular. Many old-world structures still stood, and the citizens had refurbished them for today’s purposes while maintaining the old style. The temple across the ancient stone bridge they passed was a place she would like to visit when her life wasn’t as crazy as today. If such a day ever came. She would love to know what was under the green dome on the roof. Caitlin’s presence drew more spectators as the horses clopped through town. The horse’s clip-clopping on cobbles always put a smile on Muirenn’s face, for it reminded her of good days riding with Mamaí.

A few more young girls stared at the Templar with dreams of themselves riding on a large stallion draped in Templar blue on white. Caitlin stopped by an older girl who stood in the street. The girl appeared to live a tough life. Her hair was a tangled mess. She was dirty and ill-clothed. Muirenn couldn’t hear what they said to each other, but Caitlin took money from her purse and handed it to the wide-eyed girl. The Templar nodded her head, and the girl saluted in return. Aye, she was one girl who would run away to Calais and pledge to the Templar Knights.

They didn’t move far when Muirenn heard a commotion from behind. Muirenn turned to see two boys attacking the girl Caitlin spoke with. The bastards would rob her of the money she had received. She turned the horse around to see one boy had her wrapped up from behind while the other stood in front with fists raised. The girl kicked the boy in front between the legs and stomped on the foot of the one holding her. He released her with a yelp, and she turned, drove her fist in his face, and he fell, out for the count. The girl returned to the boy, holding himself and crying out as he bounced on his toes. She punched the boy right in the nose, and he stopped his wailing when he dropped beside his accomplice. Aye, Caitlin sure could pick a fighter. The victor screamed with arms raised high, and Caitlin screamed with her.

“Go get her Caitlin. The street boys won’t leave her be until they have her money or more since she beat those two. We will take her to safety…somewhere along our journey. If we can’t find her a home, we can make her a squire if she agrees.”

Muirenn stayed back while Caitlin rode to the girl and as she watched, an owl flew down to land on the girl’s outstretched arm. Caitlin’s head spun around to see if she was watching, but Muirenn was already on the move. Aye, they’d take the girl to Sheridan’s estate in Wexford.

Brenda rode behind Caitlin and held the spear with the Templar banner streaming from it in the breeze lifting the cloth and Muirenn’s spirits higher. The young girl had lived on the streets for over a year after her parents kicked her out for talking to the owl who napped on her shoulder. Muirenn didn’t know what she would do with Brenda, but she appeared in her life for a reason, so the girl would travel with them until the reason became clear. They would find a way to get her to Calais and the Templar order, which was where Brenda wished to go…and she would be glad for it. Brenda was a tough girl for sure and would make a fine Knight.

There was only one ocean liner moored when they arrived at the docks. Muirenn’s stomach knotted and her mouth dried to where she couldn’t spit if she had to. Dread chilled her heart like she dropped it in a frozen lake. They advanced toward the ship, and when she saw the name, she shrieked at the sky and pumped her arm in the air. The Star of Atlantis waited in port. She released her breath and rolled her shoulders loose before dropping her chin on her chest to rest a wee bit. Muirenn took a sip from her canteen in celebration, swished it around her mouth and spat at a gull picking through trash to prove she still could.

All they needed was for the Star to have an available cabin for them and stalls for the horses. At this point, Muirenn didn’t care how much it would cost her. For fun, she asked her eagles to swoop down and screech at the flying rats, and when they did, every gull took wing and headed offshore. Muirenn’s mood shot up to the level of mighty damn happy.

Galway’s pier was old-world ghost town quiet. Carts, tools, and crates stood abandoned. Aye, it’s lunchtime. Everything halted when the dock workers went to eat, or drink their mid-day meal. She had witnessed the same at the ports near her childhood home often enough in the past. Her and Mamaí would often laugh at the speed in which dock workers left their work behind unfinished when the lunch horn sounded. Aye Mamaí, please watch over her and help her find…find her man, please.

The day turned gray and chilly with an ocean breeze adding its brand of cold to the sodden clouds bunched up like unmade bed sheets above, but even with all the cold, she smiled. Muirenn missed the smells and sounds of the sea…except for the gulls. They could disappear forever for all she cared. The sounds of the sea reminded her of Mamaí. She shivered with the memories and moved on to leave those thoughts behind before the emotions took command.

They guided the horses between and around the crates deserted in the road, talking about the dock workers and their habits. The hooves struck wooden planks like thunder in the distance and rattled the chains hanging from crates. They all laughed as wagons arrived to discharge the burly workers who returned to what they left earlier as if time alone kept them from their work. Rowdy and raucous greetings were thrown at them when the stevedores spotted the three ladies weaving through the gauntlet of boxes.

Caitlin tossed back their taunts with her flavor of insults, and the men laughed with ruddy faces and wave them on. Aye, Lady Knight didn’t imply timid and soft-spoken. The dock workers wouldn’t be making fun of the bumps on a Knights breastplate again anytime soon. Brenda waved the banner at them and yelled her curses until Caitlin nudged her to hush up. Fun could turn to fighting with too many harsh words. They reached the pier holding the Star of Atlantis with three ropes as thick as her arm, tied off on huge steel eyelets. The Star had three large Venturi wind turbine towers standing tall and bright white against the dark sky. The ship had ample power to crank its propellers and light it up to cross the Atlantic.

Muirenn closed her eyes against the glare. The after-image of the wind sails took a moment to fade away. Caitlin laughed at the curses she spouted for the foolish act blinding her. A grand bit of good, she would be if her sword were needed for sure. Aye, remember the simple things damn it, or they were dead. Maybe they had sunglasses in the shop onboard.

At the passenger gate to the ship, an old man sat on a folding chair, feet propped on a barrel under a green and white canopy. He whistled to himself in between drinks from an earthen jug, and by the looks of the old coot, he’d been at it a while.

His feet flopped off, and he caught himself when he slipped off the chair, but somehow, he didn’t miss a step. He shuffled a crooked line to the edge of the canopy to blink, shake his head and speak.

“Who be ye ladies and what have ye with this here grand seafar’n vessel?”

The old man barked his question at them as he squinted and pouted. He wore the uniform of a captain, so why so bloody gruff when he greeted potential passengers? Muirenn sucked a deep breath and blew it out in sputters. She would engage the man polite as could be and see where it took her.

“A Grand fine day to you, kind sir. I am Sister Muirenn Na Siúracha, and this fine lady is Templar Knight Caitlin Finnegan with our good friend Brenda. We wish to purchase passage on your ship to the Eastern American Kingdom.” Brenda waved to the man, and he chortled wiggling fingers back.

“Aye, we might be hav’n room for ye missy.”

Missy was it? Muirenn moaned but kept her tongue under control while the man walked a wavy circuit around them as he inspected each with a critical eye and an impish smirk. The grin for certain was courtesy of the jug he held like a lover in his arms. At the end of his scrutiny, he ambled back in front of Muirenn and smiled with a face much kinder than when he first spoke. Hells, even his caterpillar eyebrows wiggled on his bald head.

"Can ye play the guitar strapped to yer beast?” He hiccupped.

By all the gods above, she had the guitar wiggling above him, and he took the bait.

“Aye, my dear captain. I can play the guitar, and we sing like Selkies as well… to enchant you and your crew y’know.”

The old fella laughed. He knew he swallowed her hook. All they needed was to put him in their net.

Muirenn and Caitlin dismounted to snag the good captain. Brenda held the reins as they approached the old sea dog to reel him in.

“So, tell me mate, what does yer grand seafar’n vessel have to offer us?”

They both stomped their feet to get blood back down there and wake numb toes. The old guy bounced with each stomp, showing it was past time to replace some of the rough grayed deck. Muirenn and Caitlin removed their gloves before they shook hands and got his name.

"Aye Cap’n Jack, let's be after haggling. It’s a long voyage ahead without music and song to lighten our load or spin the wind-sail turbines. Aye?”

The poor man laughed once more, but his head shook as much as his shoulders, and she would take it as a sign of defeat for sure. They landed this fish.

The old sea dog jerked to a halt and stared at her chest. That wasn’t a grand way to bargain, old fella.

“The knot on yer chain. Where did yeh find it?”

“I didn’t find it, Captain. My only man gifted this knot on my twelfth birthday. He brought my uncle and me to his home in Spain to celebrate the occasion, and the knot was a gift I will keep close to my heart forever, y’know.”

“And, yeh be tell’n me the name of this here friend? Yer only man?”

“He is Ranger Sheridan Kingston, Duke of Edinburgh, Duke of Wexford. He is also our Knight Exemplar of Ireland, and my promised partner and my husband one day is what I’m hoping, y’know. Why do you ask?”

“There will be no bartering for passage, My Lady. The ship is yours to command. Welcome aboard your flagship, The Star of Atlantis. She is the first ship our Master purchased, and I believe the finest in the fleet. You will stay in his—your suite of rooms on the second deck where you’ll never feel a swell outside a storm. The boys will have your beasts loaded real quick. Oh, we must head for Calais first to drop off two hundred of the beasts. Where did you say you wished to go?”

“Aye, you have me all studdled, Captain. Oh, I wish to find my man. I would love to go to Esak first and see Tranquility in Liberty, the home I have heard so much about.”

“Aye, My Lady, we are heading for your home in Liberty City after Calais. Welcome aboard, Lady Muirenn and friends. Jimmie will show you to your quarters. Please inform us what you would like for dinner. We have a freshly stocked pantry and cooler and can prepare almost anything from the land or sea. There are a scant eighty other passengers on board with a wee bit more boarding in Calais. You’ll enjoy your privacy on deck two.”

“Aye, I’m dreaming green days on my feet, Captain Jack. We could use a shower and a glass of wine before my brain works again, y’know. Well, no wine for Brenda, but she must be thirsty as well. I have used the knot to purchase items before, but what did me having the knot do to change your mood, language, and sober you up?”

“I like to play with the passengers. No harm was done nor malice intended. Master Sheridan doesn’t gift his knot to many, My Lady. His brother Michael and the Ladies Ciara and Grainne are the only ones I know who possess a knot.The knot will open doors shut in the face of others regardless of titles or position. It can’t be forged because it is magical. Aye, you will learn how it works soon if you head for Esak. For the next twelve days, this ship is yours to command, Lady Muirenn.”

“Could we stop in Wexford to deliver Brenda to the home for Cainteoirs? She desires to be a Templar and is in need of training.”

“Aye, My Lady, Wexford it is. Do you wish to depart with the evening tide or sooner?”

“I’d prefer to leave Galway behind immediately if it won’t jeopardize your ship.”

“Galway is a deep water harbor. We will depart within the hour, My Lady. Loading the beasts will take some time, but we will depart when they are stowed away.”

“Captain, I will Talk the horses up the ramp. You won’t need to use the boom to haul them. I will also play and sing for you and the crew regardless of our new relationship. I enjoy entertaining people with song and music. If any customers tip, I will give the money to Brenda for what she needs onboard. Are you certain the Ranger would permit this special treatment?”

“Aye, if he didn’t want you treated as you deserve, he wouldn’t gift you the knot, My Lady. We will appreciate any songs you sing for us. You and your guests have no need for money on board your ship. If you require funds when we reach Liberty City, the combination to the safe is the female’s name followed by the male’s name of his oldest birds.”

Muirenn was too damn numb to question. His two oldest birds? He must mean the two golden eagles. Their names would not come to her. Aye, now she’d go stir crazy trying to recall their names.

Two adults holding the hand of a young child each approached the ticket booth and walked away too fast and dejected.

“Captain, please send someone to inquire where that couple wishes to go and why? They don’t carry luggage a family would, heading out on vacation. If they run to protect their children, I will pay their passage. If they run because one child is a Talker, and they seek refuge, it is my duty to protect them.”

“Aye, My Lady.”

Two boys hauled butts to reach the couple. They held an animated conversation, and the boys held their hands up asking the couple to remain and ran back. The boys pounded feet to a stop and huffed to catch their breath. She was correct. The younger child, the boy is a Talker, and their neighbors informed the Swords in town, so they ran. The parents believe magic is a gift from the gods and not evil like the Swords declare. The couple hoped to reach Lexington in Esak to join the mother’s family but they don’t have enough money.

“Aye, Captain, allow them to board on my coin and take them to Esak. Provide them with sufficient funds to reach Lexington in comfort and inform them the help comes from Ranger Sheridan Kingston. The patriarch of their Cainteoir family. Aye?”

“It will be as you wish, My Lady. It is a grand gesture and my heart warms with your actions. Just don’t tell the crew. Aye?”

“Aye, you old sea dog. I’ll keep your secret safe.”

Caitlin pounded her shoulder as they followed Jimmie up the ramp and one flight higher to a set of tall steel doors an army couldn’t break down without engineers. Jimmie turned to her with raised brows in question. Oh, hells, Ciara did promise it would work. Could her voice be in the ship’s magical memory?”

“Open.”

The door pins clanked, bolts slammed back into the jambs and the seals released with a shush. The steel doors swung open, exposing exquisitely carved wooden doors, and Jimmie clapped his hands now certain of her claim of relations. Four women appeared from the stairwell and rushed inside ahead of them.

“The ladies will clean the suite and change the bedding, My Lady. The rooms have not seen a guest in months. The magic keeps dust out, but we wish to freshen-up the rooms for you.”

“Aye, all is fine, Jimmie. Point us to a shower please and while my friends clean up, I’ll load the horses. Wait, did Sheridan sleep in the bed alone the last time he was aboard?”

“Aye, My Lady.”

“Don’t change the sheets. I wish to smell my man on the sheets. Aye, I know it sounds corny as a bowl of flakes, but I wish to sleep on the same sheets he did. I haven’t seen him in a donkey’s age and wish to enjoy his scent, y’know.”

“Aye, My Lady, I don’t consider your request corny. It is rather romantic, and the ladies will gush with pride as they remake the bed. There are twelve double rooms plus a lounge and the Master’s suite, My Lady. Choose a room. Each has its own shower and tub. Please inform the ladies which rooms your friends wish to occupy. They will clean the master suite for you first, of course.”

Caitlin’s eyes couldn’t roll any faster if they were spun on wire springs. Aye, Caitlin had remarked how the Heroes spoiled her when they traveled with them. The cruise to Esak would test her best friends patience and resolve. After nine years at Kylemore, Muirenn wouldn’t mind a wee bit of refined treatment for sure.



**Chapter 17 A Reversal of Roles**

**G**wydion squinted to focus on his image in the mirror. He spat a few curses about his predicament and moved closer, shoving his slaves aside. Damn it, he was behind schedule and here he stood trying to focus on his hair. It wasn’t fair, damn it. Even his blasted eyesight weakened from aging without magic. Earth didn’t contain sufficient magic to maintain his youthfulness. Gray hair, poor eyesight—what else would he lose to the ravages of time and lack of magic? The damn shining gods worked to thwart his efforts. They had to because he was too damn brilliant and powerful for the troubles he experienced. The gods of chaos should grant him the powers he needed since he would be one of them when he conquered the world and destroyed Máthair’s slave; she called An Deorái. Yes, he deserved their help and shouldn’t need to ask. The dark gods held back assistance because they were jealous of Gwydion’s genius.

His slaves completed buckling him into armor and stood back, awaiting his approval. At least the armor fit. He hadn’t developed the middle-aged bulge as so many other men had. He flicked his hand, dismissing them, and the slaves scurried away into the dark hallway like a pack of rats seeking the safety of the sewers. They damn well better be at the portal with all his belongings when he arrived. He wouldn’t suffer without slaves in the world he headed for to gain magical strength. Where was Crunch? If the brute forced him to wait, he would find another to take his place and use Crunch as entertainment for the other Orcs.

“Your Majesty, will you bring a Maura twin to serve you on your quest for magic?”

The moron didn’t knock and beg permission to enter, but he asked a valid question and finally recognized what the women were after a few beatings for calling the slaves his prisoners. Gwydion hadn’t given taking a Maura a thought. He would need release and sport for the time away. If he brought only one sex toy, he’d need to treat her better than most so she’d last. They couldn’t depend on finding a Maura in the world he’d stay in until his magical essence recuperated. Once he had his strength back, he’d punish the Elves on earth for what their species did to him. “Prepare three twin slaves for my trip. I don’t care which ones. No, bring the human types. I won’t dirty myself by touching an Elf.”

“We don’t have the Elf variety any longer, Your Majesty. The Orcs killed the one Elf in stock. I will have the women prepped and delivered to the portal immediately.”

The damn fool didn’t wait for dismissal. The old mayor might find himself dead in the morning. Oh, the man didn’t care about his comforts. He created a situation to give his people time to move Gwydion’s luggage to the portal. Where in all nine hells was Crunch? Ah, the stomping of Orc footsteps in the hall answered for him. The brute scraped the door jams entering his rooms without asking permission first. Why couldn’t he find slaves with intelligence? Gwydion waved him out and followed the Orc. He stopped at the door and faced the woman chained to his bed. She should be impregnated after all the times he used her, but he enjoyed her screams and her fighting spirit. No, it would take too long to clean her and heal her wounds. Gwydion turned away, forgetting the girl and strolled down the hall Crunch cleared of all life. His slaves ran from the Orc, searching for a safe place to hide until he passed. They feared the Orc more than he. When Gwydion returned he’d have them all staked, and he would flog each sorry fool to teach them who they should fear. He should return with ample power to flog them with magic.



**G**wydion stepped through the frigid gray into a new world and inhaled. It gave him an instant thrill that shuddered through his body. He breathed deeply sucking in all the magic-rich air. Yes, it would suit his needs. His men performed well finding the world, but he would not tell them. It was better for everyone in the long run if they feared him, and there was no chance in all nine hells he would show weakness by thanking or praising them. Gwydion tried being kind to people once, and it got him nowhere. Ruling the weaker with an iron hand proved the better approach and alotted him a more refined lifestyle as he deserved. He should’ve had slaves his whole life, but the blasted Máthair didn’t approve of slavery. He’d show the bitch one day by making her his slave.

King Gwydion stood on a hill overlooking a forested valley—his valley backed by snow-capped purple mountains far away with a lake in the near distance reflecting the towering clouds in an darker blue sky than Earth. The contrast gave the illusion the blinding-white clouds were in reach. Gwydion spotted a tendril of smoke and allowed a smile to cross his lips. His slaves found the perfect world for him. He ordered the slaves to set up camp. They’d reach the home in a day. He had time in his favor. The world had magic in the air to replenish his strength. Gwydion would search for the boy in the dreamworld to torment him.

In the morning, after a quick meal, he waved on his Orcs, body servants, Mauras, slaves, and soldiers driving wagons, and headed down the hill to his temporary home. It better be a fine home, or somebody would die. Seclusion did not necessitate he should lack luxuries.

When the large group entered the forest, Gwydion caught the scent of caramel that tugged at his memory. When had he smelled caramel outdoors? The deeper into the woods they marched, the more the sweet aroma thickened. The trees produced the scent so strong and thick it coated his tongue. Damn it, where had he smelled caramel scented trees in his past? He led the group around a left bend, and he spotted the spacious house. The smoke rose from an outdoor fire pit. Six men lounged while served by men wearing his livery. The cheeky bastards used his slaves. Gwydion opened his mouth to order an attack when two of the men stood and faced them. Elves? Gods no, not the blasted pointy-eared freaks. Gwydion hollered an order for the Orcs to kill the Elves. Crunch roared a challenge and charged ahead with the other five.

The Orcs reached the sunlit clearing where the two Elves waited, and the other four still sat unconcerned six Orcs attacked them. Gwydion learned why when Elves dropped from the trees like long-legged apes. Gwydion called down lightning and struck the glowing skinned monkeys. He blasted them as quickly as they appeared, but there were too many. Gwydion yelled for the Mauras and his slaves to surround him and fight. None of them stood to protect him. Instead, they fled back in the direction of the portal without one bloody glance at him. Gwydion yelled for them to stop and make a stand. The blasted slaves ignored him and kept running. He ran after them, raced past his slaves, not caring if anyone faltered and fell. The Elves could kill or enslave the people who fell behind. They could capture all the slaves they wanted if they permitted him to escape.

He shouted for help from the three Mauras running ahead of him. The two plains savages assisted Maura’s mirror twin between them and all three sprinted up the long incline leaving him to follow in the dust cloud their churning feet created. Gwydion yelled for their help again and cursed them when they failed to stop. The blasted bitches didn’t slow for their master. He snuck a glance behind and saw his death in the guise of freakish Elves running for him and drawing nearer with each ragged beat of his heart. He sucked in big gulps of air, hoping to fill his essence with magic. Gwydion concentrated on the magic of the Elves. It was a talent with the least effect on magical strength. He ran faster and gained on the three soon to be dead sex slaves. He damn well better run fast enough. The Elves couldn’t catch him to take everything away from him again. Máthair must have placed the long-eared monkeys to kill him. She cheated, damn it. He’d tell Balor the next time they spoke, and the dark god must oblige by granting him power.

Gwydion stepped up his pace. The slower running slaves behind him screamed in pain, dropped with a thud and their footsteps halted as he put everything he had into reaching the portal before the three damn mirror twins. He would enjoy slicing their skin, killing them slowly and right before they expired, he’d have an Orc bite them so they’d comprehend what would come. Damn selfish bitches. His life was the only life vital to success. Gwydion must survive to win earth. They were slaves whose sole existence revolved around his pleasure. Gwydion would be a god of chaos when he won the earth for Balor, and the Mauras would die while An Deorái watched unable to help them.

Damn it to hell, he forgot about the time disparity between earth and where he now ran for his life. The women would have too long to hide or escape before he crossed the portal. If the plains savages found a blade to cut the helmets off, they would call a storm and attack with lightning. The three disappeared through the mist of the portal. Gwydion pushed harder, counting each second they gained as more than two minutes to run on the other side.

An arrow swished by his right ear. Gwydion dodged right as an arrow zipped by on his left. He ignored the magic of speed and called for the magical shield. He kept pumping his legs harder. The buzzing whine of arrows approaching warned him. Three arrows plunked off his shield. The Elves barked a curse in their foul language. He gambled they would forget shooting and try catching him instead. Gwydion called for lightning, and one bolt slammed to the ground behind him. He chanced another quick glance back and cursed. The lightning hit two Elves, but three continued to chase. Gwydion recalled the magic of speed and raced up the last incline and struck the portal. An arrow slammed into his back. Gwydion fell forward, took four jagged steps to the right, and dove left for the curtain to earth. He slid to a halt against a boulder and screamed for the Orc guards to save him. The blasted Elves would not know which direction to head in the frigid gray between. He hoped they roamed the halls of nothing forever. No, they should enter the portal straight ahead from where they entered. That world abhorred and abused Elves. It would be fitting justice for trying to kill him.

Gwydion dropped to his knees and to all fours sucking in the sweet air of the pine forest. He crawled around the boulder, slid his arms forward, and he laid out against the cool grass, and closed his eyes. Damn Balor must give him magical strength. How could he find a world with substantial magic and conquer earth at the same time? Gwydion might add Balor to his list of enemies when he became a god. The hideous crippled fool deserved it for not helping.

The crack of lightning and the rumble of thunder reverberated through the woods followed by the guttural bellows of an Orc. The damn beasts should’ve remained on guard at the gate. Oh, they probably chased the three women who escaped. Damn it to nine hells—he lost all his slaves without the satisfaction of killing one of them.

A rough hand forced him on his side, yanked the arrow from his back and lifted him with ease. Gwydion opened his eyes. Crunch ran with him in his arms. The leather armor might have saved his life. “Yeh lost all dem sweetmeats, and worms, masser. Crunch fetch fixer. Yeh live. Hole ain’t deep in yeh back.”

With all the human slaves he owned, an Orc rushed him to his healers. He would enjoy making the human slaves pay for their lack of attention. “Did the Elves follow us?”

“Dem elves go wrong way. Dey be lost in halls. Orc finds em, sweetmeats.”

“You and all the Orcs can take the humans in the castle. Tell your clan it is a reward for what you did today. Ensure they understand you were a hero. The human slaves are not worthy of serving me. Take all of them for your cook pots and make them suffer before they die. Find the idiot soldiers who declared that world safe to visit. I want them to suffer. Tomorrow we hunt for new and better slaves to fill the ranks. I absorbed sufficient magic to attack and manipulate King Alderic’s mind in his throne room full of his lackeys. If we can find a way into his throne room, we begin our conquest of Europe soon, Crunch. Find me more creatures of Chaos, dark mages, conjurers, and the priests of Chaos to burn this world.”



**Chapter 18 Artio’s Gift**

**S**heridan offered his hand for Ciara to hold while they slid down the embankment from the road. Ciara tsked, shook her head and stated she was an Elf and a Ranger, damn it. She could walk down a bloody snowy hill without falling on her ass. Two steps down, she slipped on loose flint and grabbed his arm in a vise grip swearing profanity and promising him bodily harm if he made a silly comment. The burned-out glade struggled to make a comeback from when he set fire to the trees and blasted the earth with lightning a year back. The one obvious addition to the scene came as a gift from his mother. The ground lay blanketed in dainty white flowers across the entire expanse. The damn snow might kill the plants.

“I’ll release you now if you can walk.”

“You are a brat. I can stand on my own. One stupid slip doesn’t make me a bumbling fool. Do what you must, Sheridan. I’ll speak to Aoife’s spirit in my own fashion.”

He dug a hole in the mounded plot, placed the diamond in and patted the ground flat, burned the soil to glass and smoothed it out to match the surrounding area.

“I wish to stay a moment longer to speak with Aoife while I’m here. If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all, Sheridan. Did you plant the beautiful white flowers? They appear to be asters, but I’ve never seen a white aster. I hope the white shit doesn’t kill them.”

“Nay, they are a new species and a gift from my mother. I discovered the flowers the last time I visited here. I have come many times trying to understand why… Oh hells, it doesn’t matter why she rode here. I named the flowers Aoife’s Kisses. They only exist here on the grave. Máthair suggested we take some for study by herbalists because they have healing properties. I haven’t yet. I’ll take a few whole plants with us to Liberty. I believe we should collect seeds and propagate them around the world. Oh, smell a flower.”

Ciara bent to pluck a flower and held it to her nose. Her eyes closed, and she hummed in pleasure. “Oh, dear shining gods. It smells just how I remember Aoife holding her close and snuggling her neck. Aye, your blessed mother created a grand gift for all of us.”

Ciara tucked the flower in her hair and shivered with a thought.

“Sheridan, Rihanna is buried here with your daughter. Do you not speak of her in my presence because I didn’t appreciate how she treated you? Any animosity I had for your mate blew away with the smoke from the fires you burned here in grief. Rihanna should have loved you better, and treated you kinder, but I would not carry my dislike beyond a grave. Especially not with how Rihanna suffered before she died.”

He patted the earth beside him, and Ciara sat, grabbed his arm, and leaned into him, rocking gently. He laid back with her on his shoulder to sulk and drifted off to sleep on the grass beside the grave for his spirit weighed him down, too worn and weary of moving. Too solemn to speak. His Shadows crowded around them for warmth and comradery.

Sheridan woke and rose to his feet in a hurry. Something touched his face while he slept. Something wet and warm like a Fairy’s kiss. Definitely not a snowflake. The dogs remained asleep around him. Why didn’t they rise when he did? Ciara remained sound asleep as well after he rose so quickly. The temperature dropped to frigid. His breath pushed clouds of vapor into the branches. Every nerve in his body fired, his skin crawled on his scalp, and a chill snaked down the back of his neck. He turned slowly and found her watching him. Well, Rihanna’s spirit smiled at him. She tilted her head and pouted as she often did alive.

“What did you bring to bury on our grave, Ranger?”

Rihanna was aware she and Aoife were dead. Her voice froze his spine, but his knees turned to jelly, and Sheridan dropped unable to prevent the fall. His mate’s spirit did wait to speak to him. The haze enveloped Rihanna dressed in what she wore the day they met in Spain. She slipped from behind the tree where Sheridan found her body and drifted over to him with frosty mist trailing her and rising to evaporate in warmer air.

“I buried a diamond ring I hoped to offer with my proposal of marriage. I have no need for the ring and wish to put it to rest with you. It is a burden on my heart to see daily.”

“Oh, Sheridan, you are such a fool. Why would you saddle yourself with me as your wife when it is Ciara you desired all along? You did fall for my ploy because I resembled that princess and I don’t care, because I had your oath and your baby. My regret is my plans never came to fruition. I wanted a boy to hand over, saving Aoife from her fate. I know you must hate me for how I treated you—how I mistreated you.”

“I’d never hate you, Rihanna.”

“You might once you learn my secret.”

“Why do you remain here?”

“Because I know where I will go, damn it. Whatever the blasted kiss did to alter my mind, thankfully ended with my death. I recall my past life and will haunt this place instead of waking in the fiery halls of the nine hells. I will not pay for my transgressions simply because I died.”

“My mother would care for you—”

“Mother? Don’t sing the same song about your mother, the goddess. What I don’t need is that bitch capturing my soul. It would be more torture than Arawn’s hells. She’d want to recondition me—force me to confess and make reparations for centuries of deeds, not my fault.”

*“Mother, take this woman away, please?”*

*“Máthair is not within the realms to hear you, son. I will answer in her stead. The woman, you knew as Rihanna, made the mistake of showing herself to Cailleach. The Gatekeeper’s Herald will collect her soul. I am sorry you had to see her and hear her scornful words. Ignore her pleas, son. She will face her judgment. I see her soul, and she has many issues for which she must make reparations.”*

“Your mother cannot touch…NO! What are you doing? No, No, Please, Sheridan? Please stop her? I’ll be good. I love you, Sheridan. I promise I will learn to love you. No! Gods damn it let me go. I’ll be good daddy. Please don’t touch me there? No. Please, don’t do that to me. I’ll be a good girl, daddy.”

Rihanna’s spirit fought unseen hands and screamed for help as someone pulled her away. The smell of sulfur assaulted his nose, and a wave of heat blasted him. He buried his face in his hands and turned away, fell over, curled up, and attempted to forget what happened by imagining Aoife’s smiling face. What transgressions had she committed to deserve the fires of hells?

*“I cannot disclose her past, but I am certain you could make an educated guess. Máthair will strive to correct her faults to give her a decent future. We will do our best to reform her soul. You will never see her again in any life. Forget Rihanna and concentrate on the three ladies in your life today.”*



**S**heridan woke to thunder fading in the distance. Grunts and growls emanated from the woods—an all too familiar sound. A bear approached, but still, the dogs slept. Ciara did not budge. Sheridan reached back for a sword to find nothing. Aye, he meant to be gone a moment to bury the ring and did not require weapons. He did have a shovel and his knives. He had killed a bear with far less in the past.

The bear shuffled into the burned-out area. Steam rose from its coat, and its nostrils snorted clouds of vapor rising up to fog the trees and blur his vision. Could the bear be another specter? It ambled over the mound he destroyed with his anger. It didn’t charge, roar or a cough a challenge at him, so he waited. The creature had deep sky blue eyes. Bears don’t have blue eyes. Ten paces away the bear reared on two legs. Sheridan remained still, keeping one eye on Ciara as the bear stalked closer. If it intended to harm, he would be lucky to survive. The bear’s form shifted to a blurry cloud of smoke and from the cloud emerged what must be a goddess.

“Are you prepared for the upcoming battle, Chosen One?”

“We are as prepared as possible today, My Lady. We defend our home and fight the beasts when they appear. The last battle? Well, I suppose I will learn more when I reach the age of twenty-one.”

“The man who thinks too much has not discovered the enemy cheats? Someone is sending the beasts wherever you are. They have not yet informed Gwydion of your location, but the gods of Chaos will cheat. Pay closer attention to your sightings and battles, love. Your mother warned you he would cheat, and he has in many ways. We suggest you build your army around you for strength, love, and stay mobile or else draw them to your home. We don’t wish to see you overwhelmed, nor do we suggest in the thousands, but a large force to face the armies Gwydion has found to put on the field in a short time. Your people need experience fighting his beasts and men before the battle to define your future.”

“Is this your aid, My Lady? I have not been right in my mind for too long, and not blessed with clarity of thought for the duration of my madness. I believe I am sane today. At the least, I am alive and clear-minded to return to the battle. The man who thinks too much is a false appellation. My mind never ceases, regardless of my efforts to find peace.”

“All my family and I are heartened you are here in our world today. We have the lady sleeping at your feet to thank. Don’t give up your research or your hope for an oath, love.”

“I do have hope, and will continue to love Ciara, but she does not love me and would be safer without me.”

“If you say so, love. But don’t cease considering the possibility. That is all I ask concerning Ciara. My children wish to join the battle but are frightened to help you. You are an instrument of death in their memories. You killed the grandfather and the young mother with such ferocity and hate. They worry you will kill them as well.”

She stepped right up to Sheridan, grabbed his face, tugged his ears chuckling at his obvious confusion, and kissed his lips. He saw all she spoke of with the kiss, a most pleasant kiss. Her lips were honey-sweet and butter-soft, and he could remain in place for eternity. It was a finer way of conveying knowledge than burning him to death for sure. Her lips buzzed against his with her laughter, and she released his lips to hold him tight and laughed against his chest.

“You do smell of the wilderness, and it is pleasant. Your Muirenn is correct in her description. The green eyes are gorgeous as Ciara declared. Two such special ladies can’t be wrong. The third lady you have met and her heart touched yours. You will meet her soon. She has you in her dreams and wishes to find you again. Enapay is full of spirit and a joy to watch her work the storms. You are a lucky man to have three talented warriors who love you. I believe your mother gave you the purpose of the burning, but I do agree. Our kiss is pleasant to me as well. May I have another since you interrupted the first?”

“I am not the most intelligent man alive, but I am no fool either My Lady. Please, we should never leave a Fae kiss unfinished.”

She laughed in a voice more suitable for a goddess, and they kissed again. He saw the killing of the grandfather she spoke of, the bear he killed to save Malcolm. She broke the kiss and smiled. Aye, his brain numbed, scrambled, and he gaped at her. He shook his head clear and scrubbed his face. Bears…

“The grandfather would have killed my friend if I did not kill him first. I have attempted to communicate with the bears in the past but have never had success. The mother attacked a family with children. I know her reason, and am sorry for her death. I would have aided her if I could without the killing of children. In my youth, I proved myself more reckless than intelligent. I sincerely regret her death.”

“Do all the humans on the earth speak the same language? Could you understand me if I spoke in my native tongue? It is not so much you or they are more intelligent than the other. It is a failure to communicate love. I gifted you with the language of the bear in our last kiss. The bears are my children Sheridan. Please be kind to them. They do not kill for sport as humans do. They defend their young or their home as stalwart as you do, handsome man.”

He would remove the rug from his bedroom. It would not be fitting to keep it there.

Artio took his hand and led him to the woods where many animals waited for her. He would be a fool to forget her name. Badgers, fox, wolves, weasels, mink, bobcats, a cougar, and a bear waited for her. She greeted them with the same love he held for his brood.

“Do not worry for the grandfather’s hide on your floor, Sheridan. All things return to the earth in their time, but our spirits are not confined to the shell we wear in life. Grandfather’s spirit is home inside another body, and he is happy. Remember him when you look at his fur in a different light. It is not a trophy. It is a gift from the grandfather. He preferred to die a warrior’s death, and you gave him his wish.”

His head drooped, and his eyes closed. Aye, because a creature’s life diverged from his did not bespeak ignorance or evil. He didn’t know the man killed her babies at the time. He had experienced the same desire for revenge as the mother. Artio came to him and rubbed his face. He opened his eyes to see her sky-blue orbs gazing back.

“Your children may play on his back and laugh when his hair tickles them. Ah, I understand the sadness in your heart. Yes, you have suffered the pain of a lost loved one as well. You do understand the mother’s revenge and have the need to repent. The humans would have killed her if you did not. Life is sad and troubled by our ignorance. Have faith, Sheridan. The evil infesting the world is why my children want a place in the war. They witness the deaths and wanton destruction throughout the world brought on by the foul beasts and are angered by it. My children wish to help. They deserve a place on the battlefield beside you when you face the evil.”

Aye, he’d use all the help she offered, but at what cost?

“Another human frailty as well, Sheridan. If you require a bargain, I offer this…promise me you will learn to live with my children in peace is a fair price to ask. Learn to stay away from the mothers when the young are guarded, or the mother is teaching them. Keep your distance when the mating season comes. Make loud noises as you travel through the woods when not hunting food so they may hide from you. Is this too high a price for their aid?”

He pictured Aoife riding on the back of a large brown bear with her arms raised, laughing at the sky, and Artio laughed with her. The goddess wiped the tear from his cheek.

“Nay, Artio, it is a price I call more than fair. I will spread the word. I will ask the good beings to keep peace with our new brothers and sisters. You have my word I will work for peace.”

“What about the peace once resided inside you, Sheridan? Can’t you find such peace again? The lady sleeping on the grave and the others you love are all warriors. They will work together, so you live to see the last battle and longer. The ladies can defend themselves where your departed mate could not. We, the other loves you have known in the past, will help when we can. You do confuse a woman with your…how did Ciara describe you?…your fine self.”

“Ciara spoke in jest, but I thank you anyway.” Artio squinted her eyes, and her lips twisted like she smelled something rotten.

“Ciara is correct. You are a brat. My children and I admire the way you treat your animal family members. They are excited to join you as their brother and sister did. The spirits of Max and Minnie rejoice for the time they had with you. You will find more willing to join you on your travels. The weasels are a jealous creature, where the minks are loyal and loving. The fox is a grand choice for how you travel. They will hunt to please you and entertain you with their silliness. I will ask a favor in the future to meet with the Wild Child. If you wait for them to make contact instead of initiating one yourself*,* the next bear you see approach will be a friend. He won’t come soon because we must speak with our large family, but he will find you if he doesn’t find the Wild Child first.”

He thanked Artio, and she disappeared faster than thought. Sheridan turned over and moved closer to Ciara. He smiled when he caught her scent and closed his eyes, fighting the urge to hold her.



**R**ihanna stood at the edge of the weathered dock. She had one hand shading her eyes, and the other held Aoife’s little hand. Aoife twisted with a gentle rhythm swishing her pretty pale green dress. She rocked on her feet, staring with delight at her shiny new shoes and socks to match her dress. His daughter appeared older. Her hair long, and shimmering in a million suns reflecting off the water rippled by a warm summer wind. The same breeze ruffled Rihanna’s long summer dress and her black tresses that shone blue highlights from the brilliant sky.

Sheridan’s foot forced a groan from the weathered dock, and both of his ladies glanced back over a shoulder. He smiled, but they turned their attention back to the study of what occurred on the lake. He hit the spot where the angle of the sun destroyed his vision. His head jerked away by reflex. He pulled his hat down and looked to his ladies. Rihanna handed a bundle to Aoife, and the act confused him. Why would she burden his daughter with such a large parcel?

Rihanna shot him a burning glare he had become accustomed to receiving. Aye, when had she ever graced him with a favorable smile? She placed both hands on Aoife’s shoulders and pushed. His baby fell into the water, and he raced to the edge and dove in hearing the ear-splitting, and evil cackle coming from Rihanna. Her laughter followed him for many feet down until the bubbles and his movements creating a disturbance in the silent depths overcame her derision. They were at the docks. The water should not be so damn deep. A splash of green caught his eye. His baby had fallen far. His arms stroked, and his feet kicked with fury to close the gap and save Aoife.

Sunbeams of gold speared the water and lit Aoife’s falling form. He kicked harder, stroked faster, and gained maybe half the distance. His chest burned. He didn’t have sufficient air in his lungs to reach his baby. He peered at her form, hair swaying in the water like auburn kelp. He spotted the object in her arms and screamed for her to let it go. Aoife held a cement block with Pa written on it in Rihanna’s flowery script. Aoife descended into the murky depths. He closed his eyes to the torment and sucked in water to drown with his baby.



**C**iara shook him hard and stepped back. He flailed like a wildman as she expected. His fists struck only air, his eyes opened, spotted her and the poor man blushed, embarrassed at his behavior.

“It was a nightmare and nothing for you to feel shame about, Sheridan. The dark gods inflict you with visions of terror, and you never cower. Nay, you strike out at them as only my favorite Ranger would.”

She unscrewed the top of her canteen and passed it to him. He nodded his thanks; he sipped, his brows crawled up his forehead in surprise, and he smiled wiping wine from his chin with a sleeve.

“Aye, it’s filled with wine just for you, brat. Where do we go from here?”

“Somerset for Sinéad to take a look at my back. My body and mind could use a rest.”

“Aha, you are a good boy sometimes.”

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**Chapter 18 A False Priest**

**S**heridan’s guess at where the wagon and their family would be was damn close if anyone asked him. The Traveld not one hundred paces from the wagon. The dogs ran to greet them. Ciara’s lips twisted and she locked them tight to prevent a smile, but her eyes betrayed her. They must’ve napped a while, because they were damn close to Somerset.

The warning horns on the Farm blared, the birds in the trees took flight and his raptors flew east and north to learn why.

His eagles Talked images of an army marching south on North Road.

“Sheridan. My eagles Talked me images of many wagons leaving Somerset. We must stop the Teamsters before they reach North Road and face Gwydion’s soldiers.”

“Patience, come here please.”

The blue beauty flashed into view and flittered before him wearing a smirk he had seen many times in many lives.

“Ciara, do you have the ring you took from the Blade?”

“Oh, Oh? So, the almost twin was a Blade. Wow. Aye, it’s in my pouch.”

“Give it to Sheridan, love. It is a portal ring. Sheridan, can you recall portals?”

Sheridan closed his eyes and called up his memories searching for knowledge. Aha, he had used portal rings in past lives. “I recall how to use a portal ring, love.”

He accepted the ring from a sceptical lady, slipped it on his finger and Talked a portal to open on Cumberland road ahead of the Teamsters and facing west. Ciara laughed and ran to the wagon to Talk the team through the portal. Their appearance was met with whoops and hollers, whistles and surprised shouts. He flagged the train of wagons down and informed the lead Teamster what approached. They moved the wagons to the side, gathered together and waited for trouble. They wouldn’t need to wait long.

He smacked her butt, and Ciara jumped like he goosed her. He did a commendable job of pretending nothing happened and pointed at the company of soldiers riding toward them ahead of a carriage. The vile soldiers were the recipients of many foul greetings from the Teamsters. He had to point ahead three times before Ciara turned instead of glaring at him with indignation. It wasn’t the first time he smacked her butt. She pulled out a notebook and looked around, scribbled notes and glared again. He leaned in to see what she wrote, and he spotted a few of the curses the men used before she slammed it shut to glare at him again.

“Why would you smack my butt with all these people watching? Good gods, by the time the tale reaches Mrs. Baker, it will be my butt rubbed by your stainless steel balls. Aye, don’t give me that look. Mrs. Baker could still dress you down and make you whimper. To her you’re a son she paddled as a boy—not the best Ranger ever, huh?”

“Mrs. Baker paddled me only once when I was caught stealing pastries from her kitchen.”

“See, you’re an incorrigible hooligan.”

“She never caught me a second time.”

“Good gods, you’re making my point for me, brat. Oh, bloody hells—are you fit for a battle?”

“Aye. I might need new bandages after, but I am well rested and ready for this. The Guardians are on their way and will exit the west gate. The Rangers Athair gathered will exit behind the enemy from the hidden gate. They might outnumber us, but we will win the day.”

Her eyes sparkled, and her smile would burn brightly in his memory forever. Aye, he didn’t answer her first question. Well, he had no reply for why he smacked her butt, and he’d be smart and not invent one for her. Oh, hells, the Teamster’s wagons couldn’t leave if they wanted. The escort of enemy soldiers spread out and rode eight abreast blocking traffic without concern like they owned Cumberland Road. Two Knights wearing the Templar tabard who no longer shaved their temples rode as guards beside the handsome coach. A company of enemy soldiers sent by Gwydion parading on a public road with an arrogance only their drugged minds could induce. He’d never admit saying it to Ciara, but they had brass balls for sure, and mush for brains if they thought to succeed.

Sheridan Talked to his Percherons and asked them to move the wagon closer to him and in the middle of the road to block the idiot’s path. The horses laughed and moved quickly to comply. It was obvious—equine humor was as sarcastic as his dogs and birds. He had more comedians in his brood than the Comedy Club in town—and most of his were animals performing daily for any who would listen to jokes about him.

The soldiers leading the parade, brandishing their lances like drunken drum majors, hollered for everyone to make way for his Excellency the Bishop of Máthair’s Faithful. Sheridan rubbed his forehead, sputtered his lips and cursed, proving himself a liar about his sleepy brain. Ciara made up for it and voiced her favored insults from the list she made of the Teamsters taunts and directed them at false priests for him. He added another point on the smart list and shut up relinquishing the floor to the expert. The slave soldier’s accent validated his theory of their origin. Good gods, the man heralded the arrival of Bishop of Máthair’s Faithful? The crowd laughed at the fool when the Thrashers in the trees mimicked the idiot’s words.

Only an imbecile would claim the position of bishop. Máthair’s house of worship needed no bishops. Each temple operated independent and distinct from all others because the services they provided for the people varied from town to town. The churches declined to organize into a collaboration of religious dominance, preventing a repeat of the wars that occurred in the old world. All wars were a sad business, but wars over religion were absurd.

Máthair didn’t rule her children, and her temples would not either. The shining gods promoted free-thinking and independence, and the Temples provided a place for meditation, contemplation, guidance, and social services. Aye, what would the fool bishop bring to the faithful? The lead soldier hollered to what he called the morons standing on the road. Oh, he pointed a finger at Sheridan. Ciara harrumphed and dared the guy to stick the finger in his face. Aye, Sheridan had an issue with fingers in his face. He was trying to improve.

“Move your flaming wagon, or we’ll kill your blasted horses, boy.” The sergeant spoke with the telltale accent of off-world soldiers—and their consummate lack of common sense.

“Aye, you’re the idiot,” Sheridan repeated his insult for the Thrashers in the trees to pick up, and he stood with his arms folded, head tilted, listening until the birds tired of calling the man an idiot. The crowd held captive on the road did their best not to laugh, so the birds’ mimicked insults could be heard. Aha, where did he leave off?

“The birds speak the truth, ugly. If you kill the horses on the road, how would you move your carriage with six carcasses blocking your path? Here’s another truth for you. The enemies of the Eastern American Kingdom have no business here nor are you welcomed in Somerset. Turn around and return to your demented master with the traitorous Knights immediately, or you will die on the road today. If you harm the horses, I’ll have to kill you twice.”

Wow. Not an hour past sunrise and already Sheridan lied to the enemy. He would kill the soldiers regardless if they turned around or danced the Kentucky two-step on the road. Nay, they should keep a few to interrogate. Aye, strike up the band and let the dancing commence to determine how many idiots didn’t want to die. Snow fell and he glanced up at another damn storm cloud. Aye, it had to be Talked into existence. The enemy had a mage with them and probably in the carriage.

Ciara arrived at his side with her spear and a jab to his ribs for fun. Braelyn and Michael joined her a moment after he grunted and before the guards from the gate arrived. Mat and Matty strung their bows and limbered up before setting an arrow on the string.

The foreign soldier’s attitude changed from cocky bravado to wet their pants get me out of here fear. Their faces blanched as white as the snow when facing over one hundred, and they constantly begged the Swords for help. Aye, three hundred slave soldiers afraid to face a company of Guardians. Just wait until the Rangers exited the gate behind them. He laughed when the Knights spoke to someone in the carriage instead of nudging their steeds forward. Aw, they obeyed the order to stay like good little slaves. If Sheridan wasn’t ready to kill some foul soldiers, the scene on the road with the snow falling, horses steaming and Knights resplendent in their armor might be worth painting. Aye, his mind should concentrate on killing if he wanted to survive the day.

A white-haired, ruddy-faced man with a bad haircut and too portly to be a priest of Máthair, dressed in opulent robes rocked the carriage with his girth each step to the ground. He huffed and grunted from the exertion, shifted his gold-trimmed cloak and raged at Sheridan for holding up the carriage of a holy bishop. The man’s jowls shook like one of his mastiffs with his gesturing. Well, without the spittle. He allowed the rotund reprobate to blather on about his self-importance until the crowd’s snickers became distracting. He took one step toward the man and held his hand up. Tada. It’s magic. The fat man in ugly robes shut up. He’d be a fool to turn and look. She stepped up beside him and squinted her best, but he wouldn’t take the bait. Ciara’s lips were a thin tight line of sarcasm.

“I know your mind, dear man. It’s written in your eyes, and over the years, I have learned to read the devious script. We’ll talk about the raised hand later. Turn around and pay attention. Wake up before they stick a sword in your ass while you stare at mine.”

“You’re wearing a cloak.”

Ciara raised her face to laugh at the storm clouds emphasizing her elegant neck. He had to quit.

“Hah. See, it proves you aren’t so brain dead after all.”

His lips puckered up in sour defeat, and he squished the image from his eyes. Aye, he’d never win a verbal challenge with Ciara. Nope, not on his best day. He opened his mouth to speak, knowing it was foolish to point out he couldn’t stare when she wore a long cloak and clicked his jaw shut. Instead, he faced the false bishop as ordered to find him glaring. Aye, go ahead and scowl all day, fat man. If it didn’t work for Ciara, it’d never work for the ugly enemy. Nay, the portly pale-faced priest, would be dead before noon. The time arrived to play Sheridan’s word game and agitate the fool for fun.

“Who appointed you a bishop of Máthair’s priests? There’s no need for bishops in the service of Máthair. You’re no true member of the Mother’s meditation temples.”

“The blessed and benevolent order of Knights affiliated with the Hand of Máthair has illuminated the path before me, and graciously appointed me bishop over the temples in southern Esak.”

The fake priest droned on in true politico form he had Máthair’s work to attend to in Somerset and of the need to eradicate the foul Talkers—what some blasphemous people called Cainteoirs in the Mother’s language. He claimed the Hand of Máthair ordained him a Crook and tasked him with gathering the righteous to his flock and shepherding the faithful to the path of truth. The truth that magic was evil.

“Aye, you certainly have a talent for spreading your ostentatious manure well enough, but it remains an offensive odor to all good people. You’re as blind and gullible as your soldier slaves and have saved us a trial with your public confession.”

Every kingdom, nation, and country in the world, from the Ice Queen’s fortress to the famed horse soldiers on the plains of the Australian Kingdom had declared war on the falsely named Hand of Máthair and all its leaders, cronies, and slave soldiers—the befouled Swords, Crooks, Scepters, and Crowns of the traitorous gang of perverted idiots.

The group from the Teamsters Guild applauded his remarks. Sheridan chuckled, took a bow and a punch to the ribs for fooling around. The clean version of Ciara’s tirade declared his ego outsized his brain. Aye, where did he leave off before she scorched his ears and he inserted his boot in his mouth? Aha.

“So, false, foul, fat and flatulent bishop, you found yourself disgruntled, bored perhaps and unsatisfied with your duties as a priest, and the unfaithful Knights bribed you with a bit of glitter.”

Sheridan drew his swords. The soldiers shuffled nervously in their saddles. Many glanced at the motionless Swords. It would suit him just fine if the Knights sat on their horses all day. The obese and sweating in the chilly air priest produced a parchment from inside the many folds of his cloak.

“I have official documents signed by King Alphonsus Messier himself. In his judicious and magnanimous declaration, he authorized our access to Somerset and rule over the temple. We traveled straight from Albany anxious to embark upon our holy work. You stand in the path of a holy…” Sheridan stuck his hand up and slashed it down hard to stop the fool. Ciara chuckled at his side. Aye, it worked twice.

“Our good King and the royal family took up residence in Somerset the beginning of last week to celebrate the equinox with us this year. Your papers are as much a forgery as you, and you’ve slipped the noose around your neck.”

Well, the hangman should find a neck somewhere under all the folds of fat. The King didn’t rule the temples. He would never proclaim such odious rubbish. What else would the man confess to and implicate himself further?

“You’ve broken ground on your plot and dug down a few feet so far.”

A young boy in one of the waiting wagons hollered for him and pointed to the rear of the carriage. Sheridan stepped to the right to scan the road beyond the mounted Sword and spotted six people tied together by hoops around their necks and to the carriage like a team of spare horses. Why didn’t he see them from the bird’s vision? Damn, he must pay closer attention.

The brainwashed priest claimed the people committed sacrilege by protecting the abominations of nature. The children of the captives proved to be Cainteoirs, and the parents didn’t turn them over to the priests as declared proper contrition for their sins by him, the Bishop of Máthair’s temples. Sheridan asked the Guardians to free the poor souls, and the priest’s flaccid jowls quaked with his rage.

“The lost souls are my property granted by the benevolent Crown ruling the Hand of Máthair. I require servants to clean and cook for me. I am an honored leader in the clergy of the faithful.”

“Your property? Wow, talk about senseless dolts, perverted morons, demented idiots—aye, that’s you fool.”

Fat man continued to call the Hand benevolent, but they certainly didn’t distribute food to the hungry, nor house the poor souls forced from homes by Gwydion’s armies. Well, that’s a chore for the Rangers to end by killing the members of the Hand.

“Now, dimwitted roly-poly, you massive moron, we have you on charges of enslaving a fellow being. What violence did you perpetrate on their children?”

“We sacrificed their lives to drive out the evil magic contaminating their bodies. I prayed for their souls as they perished by fire.”

“Oh, good gods above us, you have dug your grave plenty deep. Would you care to add a little width to accommodate your corpulent girth? Your fat ass, idiot.”

The charges were accumulating like the snow. They’d add enslaving free citizens, the murder of innocent children and polluting the world with false accusations and demented beliefs. The judge would laugh reading the charges and send the man to the gallows before she sat on the bench.

“Our master also tasked us with finding you, Ranger Scar. He wishes to hire you to hunt down and kill a foul and evil Talker called An Deorái. It shouldn’t be difficult. Master claims the mage is still young and not powerful.”

Damn, the man hadn’t the sense to shut his mouth. On top of the aforementioned charges, he admitted to working for the enemy with many witnesses to testify against him. The perverted Hand hoped to bribe a Ranger? Wow, his hanging would occur before the sun sets.

“Now we have you on collusion with the enemy and attempting to suborn a Ranger. I’m sure a special hell stands reserved and ready for you on a running track you can’t escape with a cupcake dangling just out of reach.” Sheridan wasted his time and words. The dull man failed to recognize an insult.

“You are sadly mistaken, Ranger. Please go meet the master. When you stand in the radiance of Gwydion, you will warrant his actions and perfect reasons.”

Fat and freakish raised his arms and preached to the public.

“We must wipe out magic before the foul Talkers overrun the Earth. Magic is evil, and those who wield magic plan to conquer the world. I am blessed to have basked in Gwydion’s grandeur. Our glorious Master will transcend this life and rule the worlds at the side of the gods. We must heed his warnings and eradicate those who possess magic.”

“You are the misguided, mentally manipulated moron. Your master has magical talents, including the one ruining your mind under his evil grip. Oh, I have an idea. What do you say—shouldn’t the genocide of magicians commence with the death of Gwydion? As much as I hate lines, I’d stand in one all day to witness his execution. Hells, I’d tie the rope around his neck and pull the lever.”

The soldier slaves shifted in their saddles, obviously unsettled by his remark, but the phony priest didn’t skip a beat. Maura warned him of Gwydion’s mind control, and here the priest stood as a perfect example to study.

“No, our Master’s talents are blessed by the goddess Máthair to wield against the filthy Talkers on Earth.”

“Of course, and I’m sure you speak with Máthair daily over tea and scones. Cainteoirs have identical talents as Gwydion, why are his good and the Cainteoir’s talents evil?”

“Because Master Gwydion declared they were.”

“By all the shining gods, you, in truth, are far worse off than I first thought. Gwydion is a demented lunatic who draws weak-minded followers.”

So, if Sheridan understood the man, Gwydion would create a world where he would be declared an outcast because of his magical talents, but Gwydion’s slaves would still obey his commands. Hmm? Talk about the blind faith of fools.

“Oh, in case I change my mind, where would I travel to find your master and bask in his glory?”

“Master’s kingdom…”

The Swords shouted an order silencing the idiot. Hah, the dogs could bark when provoked. The portly soon-to-be hung prisoner spilled enough to satisfy, and Sheridan wouldn’t engage his twisted mind in a debate.

“Remember what he said, Ciara. My inflated ego might prevent me from retaining the information.”

“Aye, it would be my pleasure, Máistir. I’ll carve it on your swelled head for you to recall each time you face yourself in a mirror to braid your too-long hair.”

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**Chapter 19 Five and Thants**

**S**heridan’s head drooped. His chin rested on his chest, and he shook his head in recognition of absolute failure, in unmitigated defeat at the hands of a master. Oh yeah, why did he bother trying to win their game? Ciara spent the last two-hundred years honing her sarcastic wit. Hells, he didn’t braid his hair. Aye, it might be too long, but other issues claimed priority. Oh, maybe he should braid it simply to entice a reaction from her. He’d need to learn how to braid hair first. It’s not a skill Rangers acquired during their training years.

He asked the Guardians to question the priest in private about the location of the master. Oh, yeah, the clothing. He suggested the Guardians strip the man of his silks. Máthair’s true priests could sell the material and use the money for their charitable efforts. The men laughed and hurried to obey. Finally, the Swords acted.

The two charged ahead, scattering the soldier slaves.

“Form number seventy-three, Ciara.”

“What? Oh. Oh? Aye, now I understand the silly leap and twist in the forms. So, I grab his arm and yank him out of the saddle.”

“Aye, but stab him in the back below the plate as you drag him down. The pain will break his concentration and force his feet free from the stirrups.”

Sheridan side-stepped away from the horse’s path, forcing the Sword to adjust. He stepped again, and the Sword followed. One more slide to the left and the idiot locked in his intentions. Sheridan dodged the charging horse and attacked from the Sword’s left. He leaped and grasped an arm, pulling the man down and turning his body to thrust his blade through the backplate and chest. With the momentum of the falling body, when it struck the ground, Sheridan's sword penetrated the breastplate and he twisted it to tear the Sword’s heart.

He glanced over to see how Ciara faired, and she stood with a foot planted on the knight. She had lowered her mask to display a grin to tease a smile from the worst grouch.

“I killed my freaky fella first, Sheridan.”

How could he argue with such a cute expression? Sheridan nodded defeat in a game he didn’t know he played. Sheridan Talked to the warhorses instead and calmed them down. He coaxed them to return where two Guardians grabbed reins and promised to deliver them to his stables. Aha, the spoils of war. He’d find a good home for the two after providing proper instruction for the horses. They were handsome beasts. Teamsters gathered horses, abandoned by the soldiers, roaming the road or grazing frosty snacks along the edge and stood at the tree line out of harm’s way.

Pounding hooves turned his gaze east to witness the arrival of three Na Siúracha on old mounts. Aye, Mother Veronica didn’t approve of the price he offered for fine horses. The three Sisters dismounted and saluted. The tallest lady with long sable hair nodded.

“Could you use three more swords, Ranger?”

“Aye, we welcome your assistance, Sisters.”

Six arrows thudded against Sheridan’s chest in a staccato of wood and steel. The six arrows dropped with a clatter unable to pierce his magical shield. The six fools died with arrows shot by Michael and his companions before they could set a second arrow to string. Ciara hollered a few extremely foul curses at the eejits and rushed past the fallen Swords to cut down three men with similar intentions of shooting him. And, let the battle commence.

The enemy soldiers attacked without orders and in a disorganized rush. He met them with his swords, stabbed hard and fast to drop them, and the dogs finished the smelly idiots sending their souls back to the world they came from. Ciara rushed to his left, and they fought the foe in practiced style. The familiar rhythm to the clash of steel and the order of grunts from dying men on his right confirmed in his mind his father arrived to fight at his side. Sheridan dispatched the last man in line and stepped back for a breather. Athair’s two Border Collies, Jessie, and Josey, sat at his father’s heels waiting for the fighting to resume.

“Are you bored this morning, Athair.”

“Nay. I realized I must assist instead of observing since it appears you are not fully awake. You haven’t lost your morning voice, or have you caught a cold?”

Sheridan chuckled over his father’s comments, and It didn’t matter what words Athair spoke. With his tone of voice, he could be commanding an army to attack or ordering up breakfast, and Sheridan always jumped to obey.

“I am fit, considering. You are not the first to comment on the apparently altered tenor of my voice, for which I have no clue as to the cause. My ears cannot detect a change.”

“Considering what? Do you have wounds still festering from the last quest?”

“Aye, a few—alright, I have a few wounds on my back inflicted by a whip I received yesterday. It is a bit annoying, but manageable. Aye? I’m fit to travel and fight.”

Athair didn’t respond. He closed his eyes in thought and swung his twin blades to maintain warm muscles in the frosty morning. His adoptive fought with the Elven blades he taught Sheridan to master. The soldiers regrouped to attack. He, Ciara, and Athair covered the road while the three Na Siúracha. Braelyn and Michael shot arrows from their right covering the Teamsters. The Guardians lined the road to protect the citizens in the wagons. The Rangers faced what remained of a three companies of smelly soldiers, and he’d bet none worried about the outcome. The enemy advanced—the fools.

The Rangers exited the hidden gate and attacked the soldiers from the rear of the lousy formation. He should pay closer attention to the enemy at hand or join them in the halls of nine hells.

Ciara attacked with the speed, accuracy, and deadliness, of a viper. Her spear made quick work of the men who faced her. The soldiers were better than any they had faced previously. It wasn’t good news Gwydion located highly skilled warriors. Their experience mattered little when Ciara faced them. Her spear outreached their swords, and her skill stunned the macho fools taunting her.

The three Sisters demonstrated remarkable skills with their blades. Hah, the misogynist idiots learned too late girlies could fight better than they could on their best days.

Athair eliminated, with the precision of a master, the many soldiers he fought. There were no duels, no fancy feints or ripostes, just plain-old-everyday killing. Athair taught him only braggarts dueled, and a man meant to wield a blade should kill quickly and move to the next. Swords were forged to kill, not put on a show to impress.

Braelyn picked off men attempting to sneak behind them and others attempting to escape into the woods.

The Guardians cut down many cowardly fools trying to reach a wagon waiting in line to steal it and escape. Michael shot many more archers attempting to draw aim on Ciara, and the Sisters. The enemy’s numbers dwindled down to six smelly fools before they dropped weapons and surrendered. The universe where Gwydion found his soldiers must not have water or soap. The whole world called them smelly, vile, or worse names he didn’t use, but all were fitting. How could they not understand cleanliness prevented diseases? Damn, if the remaining smelly soldiers died, the Guardians wouldn’t have prisoners to question. He hollered for the Guardians to tie up the remaining fools for interrogation and Talked to Ted and Scotty who should not be anywhere near the battle, but he spotted them sneaking peeks around the large pine pillars on the porch of the inn. He asked them to gather the best nine horses meandering down Cumberland Road. He’d give three to the Na Siúracha for their help. The two boys whooped and leaped every other step chasing horses down.

The faithless priest protested the harsh treatment of Máthair’s righteous Swords and the master’s honored soldiers. Why wasn’s the man in jail? He commenced delivering an uninspiring sermon against the evil of magic and all Cainteoirs who wish to take over the world by force. He claimed Máthair instructed him in a vision to defy the wielders of magic and preach her word of disdain for Cainteoirs who should be eradicated from the face of the Earth. The citizens—or his captive audience simply because they couldn’t move, laughed at the vainglorious fool. The team on the wagon carting apples to the cider press threw a few over-ripe specimens at the fat man spoiling his rich clothing. Aye, so much for selling the silks for charity.

A few wagoneers yelled for Sheridan. He dug two spirals in the dirt spinning to learn what upset them and spotted a man stepping down from the carriage. The newcomer took his time drawing two swords one at a time and tossing the scabbards aside. The man stretched and twisted to limber muscles ignoring the Guardians around him. He wore a permanent scowl amplified by his glaring challenge at Sheridan. Ciara returned, pushed his cloak open, and stuck her hand in his belt to shake. He sensed her presence at all times without the need to rattle his brains. Her tone of voice made up for it. Ciara spoke on the verge of laughter, and her melodious voice sang in his ears.

“This ugly whanker is all yours, Máistir. Bloody hells, he must have fought against hatchets with his face and lost. I’d bet when the creator asked if the whanker wanted a clear complexion, he said nay because he heard the creator ask if he feared rejection. What’s with all the white shit falling in September? I thought you said eight more weeks of warm fall weather.”

Ciara gripped her spear with white knuckle tension and shook it stabbing the point dangerously close to his chest. How did she arrive at the snowstorm from her previous statement?

“Aye, please don’t spear the messenger. The weatherman promised me through his pearly whites there’d be an extended Summer Harvest. In truth, I believe someone summoned the storm with magic.”

She gazed at the spear point, rolled her eyes and mumbled nonsense, but she pulled the spear away. Thank you. Ciara assumed the position of impatience and smiled her second deadliest.

“Oh yeah, the storm reeks of power. I figured some whanker Talked into existence way before the first flake tickled your nose, sleepyhead.”

Sheridan sent Ciara staggering away with a hip thrust before she could continue with her nonsense. She laughed at his foolishness, and he swung his swords in circles forcing blood to his muscles and setting his armor right. A tingle of magic struck his brain before a strong charge tried to crush his mind. The familiar mental assault didn’t have a chance to stick, and it rolled right off his magical shield like fried eggs from a well-oiled pan. His opponent’s expression crumpled in surprise and squinted in concern for a heartbeat. The man turned his gaze and his magic on the bystanders. Sheridan placed a hand on Athair’s brow and created a shield to protect his father.

He had no time to protect the wagon crews from the initial onslaught of the magical attack. The Teamsters doubled over clutching their heads. Four of them slammed to the ground with a few sickening cracks promising broken bones. The team of horses closest to the attack reared in panic, bucked and galloped off, and they didn’t stop running for all the yells commanding them. The men struck by the mental assault stayed down and deathly still. Sheridan threw fire at the magician to draw his attention away from the vulnerable people. He pointed at his companions and nodded to the downed men. The three ladies rushed to help the injured. Michael and Mat stood guard over them with an arrow nocked and aimed at the coward. Sheridan Talked a protective dome over him and the swordsman. He screamed at the spineless fop to pay attention.

“Try throwing another magical weapon at me—not them. Attacking unarmed men and boys is a gutless act. The pompous ass claiming to be a bishop despises magic, yet he rides with a man possessing the same hated skills. Aye, why am I not surprised by either of you?”

The man wearing a silk suit to fight in the snow glared a challenge. He stabbed his swords in the sand-packed layer of the road, spread his arms wide, flexed his muscles and squeezed like he held a large ball. Lightning crackled between his hands, and he pushed out. A bolt of energy struck Sheridan’s body shield and sparked like an arc welder. A shower of sparks floated to the ground and died out on the sand.

Sheridan used his mind’s eye to study what the man did. He recognized the magic he wielded and without the fancy arm movements unnecessary to create magic, sent a bolt of similar magic back at the man. With fantastic speed, the man grabbed his swords and blocked the bolt aimed at his chest. The swords absorbed the charge, glowing and sparking with power. The man advanced wielding two lightning covered swords. Sheridan retrieved his swords embedded in the ground and met the mage. The cocky fool glared hate with slits of steel blue.

“I have a quest to perform for my master, and should not indulge myself, but I must waste a moment to dispatch a stubborn fool who doesn’t appreciate the genius that is Gwydion.”

Sheridan stabbed a sword into the ground, Talked fire to his hand, and raised his arm to throw. The man sent a second bolt of energy at him. It struck and failed to penetrate his shield, but he felt a charge. His shield weakened from the first attack, and he had no time to create a new one. One more would probably penetrate, and he’d be a crispy critter.

“You can only use one magical talent at a time. How did you defy the laws of magic by deflecting my mental attack and fire, the bolt of power, and still call for a flame?”

“Well, it’s all based on the results of a hypothesis concerning a premise I discovered in a journal written by a Quantum physicist from the old world. Her theory, entitled Electron Repulsion, stated no two objects ever touch…”

“What the hell are you talking about?” The man gaped at him like he spoke a foreign language.

“Oh, so you’re a non-believer. OK, so to you, the world is flat, and the moon is a ball of cheese. I won’t waste my breath instructing Gwydion’s slaves on how to improve their skills with magic or a sword. Hells, just for you and since you asked politely—as your vision fades on our world and before your eyes open to the halls of hells, you’ll learn my secret in layman’s terms.”

His opponent continued winding his arms in a display the bystanders considered tedious. They booed the man.

“I am Five, the fifth of the master’s great assassins. Master named us his Blades and sent us out as extensions of his arms to strike down his enemies. I have traveled many worlds in his service and earned the blades of a master by defeating the man who dared claim them.”

“Well, Five…Five? You actually admit to people your name is a slave’s number? OK, the best part of the morning should blind you with my brilliant deduction. I will claim your fine swords when you die and put them to better use killing your brethren, and with luck, take Gwydion’s life and send his soul to a rightfully deserved eternal damnation.”

The crowd oohed and aahed. Ciara hollered for him to stop showing off. One man shouted out a wager initiating a betting frenzy. The man—Five, overconfident with his skill didn’t remove his suit jacket. He assumed the start position and Ciara chuckled, put a hand to her face, attempting to hold back her laughter. She gave up, spat razzberries, and stated if his stance indicated the best he had, her Máistir would kill him in four moves. Shouts rose, adding to the din created by all the Teamster’s wagering. Ciara waved at the impromptu bookie taking his bet, and he hollered for more suckers. Aye, Sheridan didn’t need the flush of heat on his face and neck either.

The man attacked, leading his left to block and raised his right to strike. Sheridan batted the left sword aside and stabbed his shoulder hard, forcing him back.

“One. Wipe the shock from your face. You left your shoulder exposed. What the hells did you expect? You have two swords, idiot. The purpose of wielding two swords is for attacking twice. I say you betray your arrogance by calling yourself a master of swords. You have depended on your magic far too long.”

The man took a second step back. His ugly face twisted, and well, simply put, he radiated pissed off. Perhaps he favored the ruined suit. Five reached for the buttons of his suit with the swords in his hand. Aye, not the sharpest tool in the shed.

“Remove your jacket. I’ll wait. The shining gods forbid you complain to Arawn in his fiery hells you lost because your jacket restricted movement. Hurry now, a warm cab awaits.”

Sheridan destroyed the dome. He’d run out of air fighting inside the bubble. Five stabbed the points into the sand, removed his jacket, and handed it to the flabby idiot in a stained robe to hold. He grasped the blades and limbered up before facing Sheridan. Five turned to bring his right sword to bear as he would in a duel with rapiers. Five lunged, right sword leading, left sword raised to block an attack from the sky again. Didn’t he ever use both swords in an offensive attack? If Sheridan taught the man, he’d tape the right arm immobile and force him to learn to use the left. Too late for Five. Sheridan smacked the right blade aside with his left, faked an attack with the right, slid the left blade past his sloppy defense and stabbed the lazy fighter’s right shoulder.

“Two. Your lack of skill should embarrass you and doing what I expect hands me the victory. You, in truth, never were a master swordsman.”

“I underestimated you, boy, but no longer. I’ll be the one who wins new swords this day. I know the stories and reputation of Elven blades. I will possess a set after your death and use them to kill the filthy Elf bitches.”

A quick glance at Ciara lifted his spirits. She danced in place, maintaining discipline by not charging the fool. She stabbed the air with her spears wishing they’d reach Five’s heart.

“Oh yeah, now you’ve done it. Damn, you sure aren’t endearing yourself to my friend’s good graces. You better hope I kill you. Facing Ciara’s wrath without her morning coffee might be deadly, but for damn sure it would be painful. You’re handicapped with the wounds, Five. How about we rename you three and a half? Three? I have two hits to your none, but who’s counting. Shall we continue?”

Sheridan’s opponent growled. Hah, the man didn’t enjoy the receiving end of taunting. Five switched his stance to an aggressive assault style and glared hate from steel blue slits. Ciara hissed and blurted out ingenious if a tad bizarre insults to the man. It wasn’t physically possible for him to perform the feats Ciara suggested.

Five attacked with a blur of steel shimmering rainbow reflections from his fancy blades. Sheridan kept pace with the onslaught, blocking, watching, and waiting for his moment. Aye, Athair would reprimand him later for playing with the fool. He and his opponent moved about, sending bystanders leaping away for safety. Sheridan played with the fool, searched for a mistake, an opening to strike home, a flaw in the defense and would attack with force to finish the duel. Five’s shoulder wounds bled profusely from the exertion, and the man would slow, he would err on the side of pain and laziness because he suffered—there. Sheridan feigned a block, turned into a jab with his right sword, and it struck to slice a long gash across Five’s neck above the garish tie. Five’s tired left arm lifted to block, but with its lack of strength, it flopped to his side, and the sword thudded to the ground. Five understood. He knew his death was imminent.

“Well, you’re not a rookie with a sword, and it took more than four moves, but I won, and you will die in about five minutes. Oh, looky, we’re back up to five again. I’m bright-eyed and bushy-tailed now, Ciara. Care to wager on how long it takes for him to fall on his face?”

Ciara spat a combination snicker-chuckle followed by what had to be a snort and covered it by declaring he was showing off for the Na Siúracha. She announced she won a second wager with Braelyn over the number of moves it would take to win. With the money she took from the Teamsters, Braelyn wagered it would take more than two dozen, and Ciara counted either twenty or twenty-one—either way, she won and wouldn’t have to cook for two turns on the road. Ciara pummeled his arm for his comment regarding the wager saved all of them from her cooking for two nights.

The enemy stabbed his right sword into the road and raised his hand. Sheridan shoved Ciara away and slammed a dome of protection over him and the whanker. The man jerked his arm down to point at his target—at Sheridan’s chest. A heartbeat later a lightning bolt, sparked from the ground, blasted him to his knees. Sheridan’s head rang like a thousand gongs in Bel’s temple of light with sadistic monks beating them enthusiastically with his head. Sparks and shooting stars filled his vision, and his ears might never be the same, but hells… he survived a lightning strike and thanked quantum physics. Sheridan rose wobbling on rubber legs and forced himself to stand still. Well, close enough. He shook the numbing sensation from his clogged and sizzling head. His brain felt like—hells, probably what water drops experienced in a hot frying pan.

A dozen Teamsters ran around calming horses spooked by the thunder, but they all kept wide eyes on him like they saw a ghost, or a freak of nature standing unharmed after a lightning strike. The magician stared in wide-eyed disbelief as well. Damn, maybe he was dead on his feet. Nay, he survived two grand tests of his magical shield in one day. Ciara squealed a mushy thank you to the shining gods her Máistir still lived. He stared with numb eyes at his best friend until she stomped an angry foot. Ciara wagged an irritated finger his way. Aye, quit gawking at her.

Ciara’s smirk implied she knew she won the verbal battle they played and waited for a sorry response from him. He’d not fall into her trap. She shook off her superiority and smiled with the genuine pleasure of success.

“Aye, I’m thrilled you survived. Now, finish the fool. I’d like to sit by a fire and drink a fresh cup of coffee.”

Did he speak aloud to her? A young boy whooped, punching fists and jumping in circles to show his approval of the outcome. Five didn’t appreciate the outburst and attacked with the right hand raised and lowered, aiming at the innocent boy. Sheridan Talked another shield to protect the boy. The bolt of energy struck the shield and rebounded. The Blade’s body shook violently, and he moaned in a vibrating voice from the charge coursing through his bones. Smoke rose from every orifice. Five’s eyes rolled up, leaving only the whites visible. Sheridan stabbed Five’s chest, and the man jerked. Five’s swords clanged to the ground, he spun and flopped like a discarded cloak. Aye, it did kill him quicker than he deserved, but dead was dead regardless of Sheridan’s personal desires.

The same boy yelled his name. Ciara moved to investigate for him, and she cursed at what she found.

“Bloody hells, how many clowns can fit in one carriage?”

A robed man, carrying a dark, gnarled staff, covered with runes, slithered toward them. He tossed his hood back, and Ciara spat out the sour taste of disgust.

“Look at the weirdo, Sheridan. He’s a bloody conjurer. I would bet the Farm the whanker conjured the storm over our heads.”

“Aye, it’s a sure bet I wouldn’t counter with your money.”

A black hole in spacial reality, appeared above the conjurer and a huge clawed foot set down on the road. The stench spooked the horses, and Teamsters had to repeat their efforts to hold them.

“Please pepper the conjurer with arrows to keep him occupied. I hope a small knife aimed at his eye in the midst of a flock of arrows slips through. Shoot before he completes the spell he’s chanting. We don’t want to know how tall his creature is or for damn sure experience what powers it possesses. Let’s send the demon back to the hells it crawled from.”

Michael’s arrow shot first at the man with tattoos of runes covering his face and neck. The conjurer ceased his words of command, waved his staff, and spoke gibberish. The arrow burst in flame and dropped at his feet, but Braelyn, and Michael sent a flock of arrows behind the first. The warlock managed to destroy each effort to kill him, but he did cease his chanting. The second foot didn’t enter their world, and the circle shrank in size. Sheridan pulled a black knife from his sleeve and threw. He Talked it to strike the conjurer’s eye and waited with Ciara poised to attack anything coming their way.

Ciara nudged him with her spear. Oh, hells, a second wouldn’t hurt. He threw two more knives for luck before the first struck. One of the Sisters threw four shiny star shaped blades. The man moved quickly, deflecting the first completely but the second and third embedded in his cheek. The stars struck his chest and neck. Tattoo man didn’t cry out, but his eyes closed, and he grimaced in pain. The warlock pointed his staff at the innocent bystanders, and Sheridan Talked a domed shield around the purple pest. The staff sparkled, shot a bolt of energy that ricocheted back, and the ugly conjurer danced to the rhythm of lightning sparking inside his body.

The monstrous demon on the other side of the hole in reality shrieked, and the bystanders covered their ears. A three-fingered hand reached through the portal and straight through his shield like it didn’t exist. Three claws clicked with the severity of a trap when it grabbed the conjurer before the man could react. The demon yanked its hand back into its world, and the foot retreated from the shrinking portal. The conjurer’s fearful screams iced Sheridan’s spine and the sweat on his scalp froze and tingled. The demon’s chalkboard scraping shrills of success drilled into his brain. Aye, it’s all he needed—another terror to add to his nightmares. He smiled and took a deep breath when the hole in the air blinked out of existence. And he had worried about the snowstorm ruining their day. His numb mind welcomed the silence on the road.

Sheridan glanced inside the carriage for more enemy to fight and thanked the gods for an empty carriage—unless Gwydion had a tortured and turned Spirit to use against him. He scanned the clouds hoping they’d dissipate with the man’s death. Aha. The storm gave up, the clouds lost their fury but continued to release snow. He could only hope the crops would survive after one morning of frost.

Something white floated in the sky hidden by the snow. Nay, two huge somethings soared above them. Her footsteps halted beside him, and her hand moved his cloak and fit inside his belt.

“Talk a large hot ball of fire to throw.”

He should’ve known better, damn it. Ciara argued over the need for fire. The shapes grew larger and more defined dropping from the sky. He shifted, slipping her hand free of his belt, whipped his swords from the scabbards and shoved Ciara on her ass and far away with his foot. His skin tingled with a warning the thing landed right behind him. His nose verified the smelly brute was close. The left sword led the attack spinning to his left. The blade struck flesh, and a hideous beast screamed through a leech’s mouth with hundreds of needle teeth. Its talons struck out at him, and his right sword following the first cut the arm off at the elbow. His left stabbed the chest a good two feet above his head. Sheridan’s right sword hacked at the beast’s left leg, and it crumbled to killing height grappling for him with its other hand. A Sister sliced its arm. The creature’s shoulders jerked, it screeched, and he fed the ugly brute’s open maw three feet of steel. Sheridan kicked the thing, freeing his sword and rotated with blades ready for the second. Two fireballs passed over his shoulders and struck the ugly bat-leech-man-thing. Thank the gods the fire consumed its flesh. Sheridan tossed fire on the dead brute at his feet and wiped his blade on its hide before stowing them.

Ciara returned to his side and slipped her hand in his belt.

“A small army, a false priest, Swords, a mage with fancy blades, a bloody demonic practitioner, and two ugly bat beasts. Gwydion is pulling out all the bloody stops to locate you, huh?”

He wouldn’t instruct her at the moment by revealing the titles of Gydion’s creatures. She could’ve described them as a Crook, Sword, Blade, and Conjurer. There were many more out there, and she would learn in time. Ciara’s hand remained calm. She didn’t tap her fingers, meaning she was content.

“Aye. Do you believe they came for me? Hells, finding me is nothing—imagine what they would’ve done if set loose in Somerset. We were fortunate this morning.”

“I should smack you, but won’t ever embarrass you in public. Gwydion cannot find you before you experience your awakening, Sheridan. Gods above, how many injuries have you incurred because you wouldn’t use magic more than fire and shields to give yourself away? You must survive two more years, dear man, and if you asked me to stay, my spears would ensure you live.”

Ciara yanked his belt, released him, and walked away. She shot him a glance he barely recognized over a shoulder.

“I caught you again. Go drink cold coffee and quit staring at my butt. Hey, where is Ardan with the bloody wagon?”

His mouth hung from the stupid swivel on his jaw, but he yanked it back in a burst of intelligence to click shut. The damn stars lingering in his vision prevented him from seeing anything with clarity. And she wore a cloak, damn it. “Uh, he’s coming, I’m sure.”

Ciara shrugged, strolled over to Five’s body and claimed the swords for her Máistir. Nobody in the crowd of spectators argued with her. She handed the pair to Athair, rifled through the dead man’s pockets and removed a ring from his right hand. She stuffed the coin purse in her cloak and opened a letter the man carried. She hollered words at the falling snow he would never repeat in public and certainly not in front of the young Teamster apprentices. Ciara stuck the letter in her jacket and joined Athair in his examination of the swords.

Sheridan blinked to dispel the remaining stars without success. Oh, he had no issue with his vision when he Talked the knife. Hmm? Could Talking dispel results of injuries? Something to investigate on his journey with help from his Fae companion. Oh. “Patience, come here, please.”

His Fae companion appeared with little fanfare and landed on his shoulder. She kissed his cheek and sat quietly while he watched the two Elves playing with the swords. Ciara’s brows shot up in twin wings of appreciation when his father handed her the blades and her lips twisted in disappointment they wouldn’t be her swords. Athair nodded his approval of a comment she made Sheridan missed over the roaring rapids in his ears. Ciara sauntered over to him with his prize. She should zip up her hoody and button up her cloak, or he should quit staring at her swaying hips and the contours of her silk shirt.

“Good morning, Patience. Did he call you to identify the ugly bat thingys?”

“He hadn’t asked me anything yet, love. He was too busy admiring your body walking over here.”

“Oh, I guess I should button up, huh? I didn’t wear the outfit to tease all of Somerset, y’know.”

He had better change the subject. “So tell us, Patience. What were those two things?”

“The dark god Thantos, in is sick, perverted mind created them, and with his overgrown ego, he named them Thants. Fire is the best weapon against them as you witnessed, huh?”

“You have adapted Ciara’s peculiar speech, love. The first one would’ve died by fire if a certain woman obeyed orders instead of complaining like a spoiled child.”

“Well, why didn’t you burn it, brat?”

“I just thought you might like to be the first on Earth to kill a Thant.”

“Oh. Oh? Oh, Sheridan, these blades came from a Dwarven forge fired with magic for bloody sure. I’d swear I’ve handled similar blades. Aye, I bloody well know it’s impossible, so maybe in a past life, huh?”

Ciara held the swords up to display. And she claimed he misdirected conversations? Hmmm? He could make a new chapter in his book. Sheridan missed half of what she said. The buzz in his head and the ringing in his ears proved hearing a wee bit of a problem. Nay, it was easy to listen but impossible to comprehend. He had to read lips to follow along. Athair agreed the swords were a bit longer and wider than what he used, but the weight and balance were perfect the whole bloody length. Aye, he got that. She admired the swirling colors of the steel. Oh, did the lightning create the swirls? He smiled at her to prove he did pay attention. Well, he tried, damn it.

“Yeah, yeah, wipe the silly smirk from your face. You put on one fine show and won a grand prize, brat. Will you please teach the lightning to Braelyn and me before you discard us like yesterday’s news? I can picture sparking a pack of green Orcs, setting them aflame in a glorious light show, huh. My mother would be pleased to giggles over that.”

“Your mother giggles?”

“Oh, yeah. Like a drunken ninny. I’m the only female in the family who isn’t a mushy girl.”

Wow. He had another opportunity to prove his intelligence by keeping his thoughts of mushy girls to himself.

“I could bestow the magic of lightning and shields with the Fae kiss.”

“Oh. Oh? Oh, you imp. Aye, but not here in view of a hundred people to witness your lustful panting. You can kiss me when we are on the road and alone for you to ogle my outfit, huh? Oh, check out your silly expression. It declares Braelyn will receive the Fae kiss too. OK, be that way. She can go first, and don’t you dare ask why.”

Sheridan nodded compliance, proving his resourcefulness in the presence of a superior force, accepted his prize, and inspected the blades. He couldn’t stare at the swirls for hours as she suggested. He would once the sparks in his vision cleared. Ciara brushed the snow from his cloak. He raised his eyes from his study of swords to her nameless expression. Hells fury, he’d need to start a new chapter in the secret book to include her mannerism. Was she proud of him?

Ciara’s head tilted, and her lips pursed trying hard not to smile while she studied him right back. Her eyes did all the smiling required. She closed her eyes, reading his mind again, damn it. She huffed and shook herself out of whatever thoughts she had. Instead, Ciara retrieved the letter she found in Five’s breast pocket, opened her mouth, and stopped to examine every inch of him and stuck on his eyes.

“Tell me what’s behind your eyes, dear man. It’s an emotion I have never seen, and I’m curious as a girl waiting for her first kiss. No lies, best friend, and nothing hidden between us, huh?”

“You are the cause, Ciara. Comfort. Contentment. Camaraderie. Closeness, but sentiments I shouldn’t experience.”

“Alright, you poor man. Thank you. I will recall the serene expression of comfort when next you are content in your best friend’s close company. Please don’t allow unwarranted guilt to disrupt your moments of peace. Breathe, damn it. You’re wound up tighter than an alarm clock set for the first day of a new job. Patience, do you sense his tension?”

“Aye, love, but he always sweats with tensed-up lust around you, huh?”

Ciara gave him a half-smile, ignoring Patience’s remarks, and read aloud the letter describing, in surprising and disturbing detail, the quest he must undertake in the mountains. It mentioned The Way, the Spiritual Path, and climbing a rock face to visit she who lived in the mountain. Somebody cheated, and he wouldn’t be wrong naming a dark god as the culprit. Gwydion sent Five to beat him to the prize because he had mountain climbing skills. They were blessed to meet Five today. Well, more so since he killed the whanker. Ciara squinted at him and her lips twisted in question mode.

“I can’t discuss any further details of the quest than what you know, Ciara.”

Her puckered lips and squinty eyes relaxed, and she nodded. A smile replaced her curious expression.

“Wow, I witnessed some mighty fine sword work this morning. You must be awake by now, huh?”

Sheridan couldn’t answer. Hells, he couldn’t read the letter she handed him with all the sparks still floating in his eyes. He tucked it in his jacket to study later and handed her the swords he wielded for years. Ciara, for once since he met her, stood speechless. He would prove he had another smart moment and not comment on her silence. Ciara sighed, brushed more snow from his cloak, and whispered a sultry breath. Aye, the cloak grooming acted as a cover. She hadn’t finished her lecture.

“Well, you don’t mess around creating shields either. When the lightning struck, I could’ve burned to death, unaware of my plight because of the pain in my heart. I’m delighted you are still breathing and not charred to a crisp. Don’t ever do that to my heart again, or you’ll wish he won the duel. Aye?”

“Um, aye… I think. I must agree on all accounts—well, except the crispy part, the burning to death part, and the doing again and for sure the paying dearly part. They are all a bit unsettling to consider. Good gods, with the charge in my body, I could power the lights and coolers on our wagon for a week, and my head will ring like the temple bells for as long.”

Ciara pulled his cloak closed and ordered him to button up, declaring some boys never learned to dress properly.

The shrill voice of a teenage girl carried over the noise on the road. It echoed back from the woods, and the Thrashers picked it up for a few rounds. He laughed, knowing what he would face. Ciara sashayed over, pushed his cloak open, stuck her hand in his belt and tugged, shaking him to the rhythm of her laughter, and his eyeballs kept time. He released Patience to blink away.

“The Princess is up and about bloody early today. She must be upset because her handsome hero didn’t stop to say farewell.”

“Weren’t you suppose to inspect the interior of the carriage?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss this for all the gold in the world, dear man. A thirteen-year-old princess will tear the famous Ranger a new one for failing to bid her adieu before leaving on his quest. Aye, it is the stuff of legends for sure. Stand up straight, and fix your jacket. Oh, just button up your cloak like I said earlier. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you slept in your clothes. If you were my man, I’d never allow you out the door in such a state. Just because you are roughed up and tumbled doesn’t mean your clothes should advertise the bloody fact.”

Ciara turned away faster than he could catch her at the game. Now, if he attempted to spin her around to catch the smile, she’d blame it on his silly actions and declare his hands tickled her. Oh, yeah, another no-win argument for him.

Princess Renee ran out onto the road, chased by a dozen of her Guardians not pleased with her actions. She slowed when she spotted him and brushed at her dress, smoothing non-existent wrinkles. Ciara nudged his ribs with an elbow for him to pay attention. Aye, he saw her. So the Princess knew how to care for her clothes. Rihanna told him to hire someone to iron his clothes or iron them himself. She enjoyed her comforts too much for such demeaning work. He did iron his clothing when he considered it necessary. He pulled Ciara’s arm, disengaging her hand from the belt and buttoned his cloak hiding the evidence she so kindly pointed out. He should have a belt sewn on his cloak.

Renee smiled. Hells, it might bode well for him. The citizens of Somerset leaped from wagons to line up and bowed to her. She waved and smiled like a true politician and stopped before him squinting up at his face. She had her lips clamped tight to prevent a smile for him. There must be a handbook women share to pass on secrets accumulated over the entire existence of women. The title could be how to kill a man with kindness, or hells, skip the last half.

“Good morning, Your Highness. Did the storm wake you?”

Renee rolled her eyes and shivered. Yeah, it had to come from an instructional manual. Ciara could repeat the gesture with practiced precision.

“You, Ranger, left earlier than you told me you would. You promised to leave after the streetlights went off.”

Oh, yeah, the princess berated him for leaving early, but the storm kept the streetlights lit. She had stood on the sidewalk, waiting to wave goodbye. She heard the clash of swords, the screams of battle and a lightning bolt and knew she’d find him at the center of the trouble, so here she stood, underdressed for the freakish chill and her feet soaked from splashing through a puddle she didn’t spot in time. Of course, it was all his fault. Renee mentioned a change in his voice like Ciara and Athair claimed.

Ciara barked a sweet laugh, and the two shared some secret female gaze. Damn, he had three expressions to include in one conversation. Hells, he should print—oh, and he’d be hunted down by the secret-look assassins if he ever wrote a book about female gestures, expressions—oh, Renee caught him brain dead. He shared the smile the two ladies used, and they hissed at him. Oh, yeah, he stumbled upon a conspiracy theory in the flesh.

Sheridan nudged his head in the direction of the wagon and Ciara understood his silent request. She displayed a page four smirk right after page one rolled eyes for damn sure. Hells, he could write a whole chapter on silent gestures. Sheridan squatted and heated Renee’s feet with magic until the steam ceased rising from her slippers and she giggled, betraying her true age. Ciara returned with a wool blanket and draped it over Renee’s shoulders, gathered it tight and kissed the girl’s cheek. Ciara mentioned too many times Renee could be Muirenn’s sister for the similarity in features. She declared they each shared the raven-black curls and haunting hazel eyes. He couldn’t agree. Nay, he didn’t recall the Irish princess behind an oath to forget her. He’d have to take Ciara’s word.

“All better, Your Highness? I do not have a cold, and you are the third to point out a change in my voice this morning.”

“Yes, well, keep the voice, Ranger. Thank you for the warm, dry feet. Ciara is he always so mulish and brilliant?”

“Aye, Your Highness. There is no man alive more stubborn than our favorite Ranger, and his brilliant brain never ceases to amaze me. He prides himself in his pig-headed demeanor. I agree with you about the voice. Regardless of how he found it, he should, sure as nine hells, keep it for life.”

Sheridan closed his eyes wishing to disappear, but it never worked. “Before I melt from embarrassment, we must speak to the three Na Siúracha and learn why they came to Somerset.”



**Chapter 20 New Companions**

**S**heridan would bet the three Na Siúracha arrived in Somerset for training. The brown-skinned woman wore her hair in his favorite style—an Afro if his memory served him. The three rode their mounts east a while and turned back in a heated and animated conversation. They all laughed so it wasn’t an argument between them. The horses must need the walk and chance to cool off spent muscles. He appreciated their care for the mounts. Hells, he’d seen finer specimens retired in the pastures around town. The horses, not the women. He’d keep the misspeak to himself. Hah, another smart moment.

The three nodded to his smile, stopped, and reined their horses in close. He rubbed the nose of the middle horse, delving her, and tsked. The old lady should retire.

“I must approach Kylemore a second time to offer an amended price for my horses. The three you ride should spend the rest of their days teaching children to ride and grazing in a cool pasture.”

“All the Sisters would appreciate anything you can do to change Mother’s penchant for purchasing the cheapest to suit our needs. Might I assume we speak with Ranger Sheridan Kingston?”

Ciara laughed behind him. Her hand pushed his cloak aside and slid into his belt.

“I leave you for two bloody minutes to return and find you flirting with three pretty ladies. What will you do when I leave you? Well? Will you introduce me to your new girlfriends?”

“I have yet to greet the Na Siúracha, Ciara. Shall we make acquaintance together? If you could remain quiet long enough.”

“Oh yeah, he’s flirting for damn sure. Well met, Ladies. I am Ciara, and this tall, cool glass of water is Ranger Sheridan Kingston.”

The tallest of the three wearing twin swords on her back dismounted and stepped closer. She tossed her sable hair over a shoulder and smiled at Ciara.

“Thank you for my cue, Lady Ciara. We are familiar with your esteemed reputation, as well. The first companion accepted by Ranger Sheridan, the first female Ranger ever, and from what we witnessed your wit and sarcasm is spot on and perfect according to the word on the street. I am Sister Charlemagne. I know it’s a male’s name, but my mother liked it, and it was too late to change once she learned the truth. Please call me Charlie. Well met, Ranger Sheridan. Meeting you is a distinct pleasure for me. We three are dear friends with Lady Sinéad O’Mear and have corresponded with her over the years since she left Kylemore. She speaks highly of her Máistir. Is Sinéad well?”

Ciara nudged him. Oh, now he had permission to speak. “Well met Charlie. Sinead is on her way. I Talked to her and informed her of your arrival. She is running from her work station. You’ll hear her long before you see her. Is it a visit with Sinéad that brings you to Somerset?”

The cute dark-skinned Sister to Charlie’s right nudged her away, and they both laughed. She sported the style of hair Sheridan hoped would never fade out. The Afro was his favorite and the ball of shiny black hair framed her smiling face and added to the woman’s beauty. Aye, he’d describe her skin tone as copper toned chocolate silk if forced.

“Charlie can’t do all the talking as usual. I am Sylviana. Please call me that or Syl, or even Sylvie, just not Sylly like some smart-ass women known to me. We are here to pledge to you, Ranger. We three have earned our cloaks as warrior Na Siúracha who wish to earn our Ranger beret, protect you for the world, and from what Sinéad told us, to be at the fore of our battle to free Earth. Would you accept three more Sisters?”

The third Sister, freckled and topped with wild red hair stepped in front of Syl and bumped her away with a smirk Ciara had to approve. Her ancestors hailed from northern Europe for sure.

“I am Margaret. You can use that or call me Maggie, or Mags. I’m not silly about names but don’t call me late for happy hour. We three grew up together in a town north of Liberty City. Hagerstown is known for dairy products, eggs, and chickens—and ignorant buffoons who believe they can take what they want from a woman regardless of her age. We had no desire for any of what the animals of Hagerstown had to offer a woman, so we ran away and joined the Na Siúracha at twelve. We graduated three weeks back after thirteen long years and Mother permitted us to search you out and pledge if you’d accept. Mother declared protecting your life for our three year obligation would be the best spent years of our lives.”

Sinéad’s joyous squeals and commands for bloody ignorant people to get the hells out of her way reached the ears of everyone still on the road. Hells, her shouts could reach London. All six Na Siúracha brows rose, and their eyes bugged out. The three Sisters shared a secret-look and burst into hilarious laughter. Hearing Sinéad curse must be new to them. Sheridan’s companion slid onto the road and screamed when she spotted them. Sinéad ran, her legs churning her desire to reach them quickly. Sinéad’s luminescence glowed brightly to highlight her mood and her tri-colored silver hair flapped in a long pony tail. Maggie smacked a hand over her mouth, mumbled some curse, and dropped her hand with a sigh.

“Don’t that beat all? Lady Sinéad is cursing and running—running in leather pants and a shirt the men on the road have bloody well noticed. Damn, girls; our Lady Sinéad does have legs, and they’re toned to bloody perfection.”

Ciara buried her nose in his chest and beat him to the rhythm of her snorts and gasps. She sputtered and sucked in a breath to speak.

“Wait for the summer when our Sinéad wears a swimsuit. The lady commands the attention of every male on the beach. She is a stunning beauty who is learning to kill with bare hands as efficiently as she can heal. Sinéad has kept our Máistir alive if not behaving since she joined our little circle of crazy folks.”

The collision was spectacular and raucous with four women squealing and laughing, shouting to beat the next with a comment more lewd than the last. They calmed to almost normal, and Sinéad spun to face him and Ciara. She wrapped the three in a hug.

“My dear lovely Máistir; may I present the children of my heart. They were a wee bit stubborn in their younger years and would return to the dorms bruised and bloody and not all from weapon classes. The instructors of Kylemore are not known for patience, kindness or lenience with willful children. I healed them each night and tried my best to set their minds right. My girls here would meet in my rooms almost nightly with another Na Siúracha with whom you are intimately familiar. Do you recall Muirenn O’Kelly? Oh, don’t shake your head, you spoiled brat. Ciara knows her. My lovely children have graduated and are ready to face the world as adult ladies with wicked weapons to wield for your benefit. Have I arrived in time to witness?”

Charlie spoke up claiming the Ranger hadn’t accepted them.

“Bloody hells, don’t you fret. He’ll accept you. Aye, don’t be shocked. Even an old Elf can learn new things. I bloody well learned to curse from the best. Ciara and Braelyn are returning home, and he has me on a vital project. I’m not saying he requires a babysitter, but he is a bloody intelligent man. Máistir?”

Sheridan nodded, Sinéad closed her eyes, pleased. She sighed, and her smile came straight out of the minuscule chapter of his book titled innocence. She pointed at the ground for the Sisters to kneel. They spoke pledges he’d bet were practiced for years with the assistance of Sinéad. They requested similar talents as Sinéad and languages—with as much healing he’d provide to bolster Lady Sinéad’s lessons. Oh, yeah, she had them prepped. They rose, and he called for Patience to witness for his mother. The Fae kissed the teary ladies and sat on Sinéad’s shoulder for support. Sheridan bestowed the Fae kiss granting their wishes and sealing their bond. Sinéad held two, and Ciara grabbed Maggie before she slumped. Charlie stood on her own first. She raised her face to the snow falling in a steady flurry.

“What is the warmth in my heart, Lady Sinéad?”

“It is your Máistir’s magical essence warming your heart and sealing the bond you made. It will always be with you, and you will become accustomed to the warmth. It is quite pleasant and quit calling me Lady. We are companions. Aye?”

“Yes to both, Sinéad. What are your orders, Máistir?”

Sheridan faced west and whistled. The two boys spun around, and he held up three fingers and yelled the best they had. The boys waved, inspected their charges, and peeled off three horses for his new companions. He pivoted to face six smiling women and his blood brother, showing him an expression of pity. Aye, he was surrounded by women. It couldn’t be terribly bad. Well, he could hope for the best.

“The first item is to strip your saddles from the poor mounts and place it on one of the three led by our stable boys. Ciara, please pay the boys for me?”

“Silver or gold?”

“It’s not our money we’re spending. Aye?”

“Aye, you generous imp and the priest had a trunk full. The boys will flip out, and I hope they keep it quiet or the bigger boys will steal it. Oh, I can read your sneaky smile too, bully. I’ll tell them to bring the money to Mrs. Baker. She will break it for them?”

“Mrs. Baker will keep it safe for them and dole it out in amounts the older boys would ignore. She is the unofficial banker for the poor squires. They do work for her to earn a bit and save for clothes and the knife they will use to pledge.”

“Oh, never you mind, Sheridan. I met Ted and Scotty already. They protected my honor against a vulgar eejit at the cantina. They will have new clothes and knife to pledge as my gift to them.”

“Aye, Scotty and Ted are both orphans living in my squire dorms. They work strictly for the Master of Horse, so the older hostlers can’t bully them out of work. I’m hoping Odhran accepts both as his first squires.”

The Sisters accepted their new mounts, scuffed the boys’ heads and Ciara hollered out she would pay each boy a silver ten piece if they could swap the saddles on the horses. The boys’ eyes begged him for approval.

“Can you change a saddle, unaided?”

“Aye, Ranger Sheridan. Well, sort’a. We can both do it and faster than most. Please let us try to win a silver?”

The two attacked one horse together, undid the girth strap and cinches. Scotty knelt in the accumulating snow so Ted could stand on his back and lift the saddle off. A snow flake must have landed in Sheridan’s eye. He wiped it and coughed to clear his restricted throat. Maybe he did catch a cold. The boys stripped the three old horses and attacked the new mounts in the same fashion with each boy taking turns as a foot stool.

Ciara questioned the boys while they worked on knowledge a young squire must have before daring to pledge. She hugged her chest and glanced away, often blinking her eyes.

*“You could squire the boys, Ciara.”*

She spun to face him and smiled her best effort.

*“Aye, I could, but they’d be lost in our Forest. When I return, I will accept a squire. Am I that obvious?”*

Scotty and Ted asked Ciara where she wanted the foreign saddles. She shot him an eyebrow raised in question.

*“Tell them to sell the saddles and add it to their cache. Oh, wait.”*

“Boys.”

“Aye, Ranger Sheridan.” The two saluted with fists over hearts.

“Do you know Ranger Odhran? He was my First Squire.”

“Aye, Ranger Odhran helps us with math and science homework.”

“Gentlemen, when you next meet Ranger Odhran, request to pledge to him. Ask Mrs. Baker to provide what you lack when you bring her your gold. Aye?”

“Gold?” Their eyes couldn’t grow larger without falling out of their heads.

Ciara grabbed them in her arms and promised they’d have one gold each. She told them to throw the foreign saddles on the old horses and sell everything. If anybody bothered or bullied them, they would answer to her. She confessed she had spoken to Mrs. Baker and she knew what the boys required and what Ciara promised them for their help.

“May we Talk to the horses?”

Ciara almost giggled. But her glare promised death if he made a comment. She told the boys to do what they must to accomplish their duty. Magical talents were not prohibited. The three horses knelt on the ground, and they tossed the saddles on their backs with ease. The horses rose, and the boys looked around like they expected complaints. Sinéad applauded them, and the boys blushed scarlet. Sheridan joined her with his applause and appreciation. They Talked three unknown horses to their knees.

“Well done, gentlemen. Lead the horses and saddles straight to the Master of Horse to eliminate any confusion an older boy might hope to add in our deal.”

“Ranger Sheridan. Where is Ranger Odhran?”

“He and his cohorts are the rabbits, and we are the foxes trying to catch them before they reach Liberty City. He’ll return in two weeks. What’s the squire’s rule for cleanliness?”

“Weapons, horse, tackle, personal space, and self in that order when at peace. With hard travel or wartime, the horse moves to first place in food, water, and care, Sir. We can’t travel fast on a mistreated horse. Ted and I will be prepared for Ranger Odhran’s inspection. We don’t have a horse or saddle, Sir.”

“I believe you have three horses with saddles, Scotty. You don’t need to sell all three, but if you keep two, they must be glossy, shoed properly, and healthy for inspection. You may use my stables to house them for now. They are old, but old age doesn’t mean they deserve neglect. Even an old guy can look good. Take Ranger Michael for example— He’s older than the hills.”

Even Michael’s laughter echoed from the woods, and he agreed he was older than some hills in Esak. The boys gaped in red-faced disbelief. Sheridan ruffled their hair and sent them off.

“What did we witness here, Máistir? There is a magic or like a secret shared my heart felt.”

Sinéad wrapped her arm across Charlie’s shoulder and winked.

“You witnessed your Máistir’s generous concern for the young Talkers in our world. He is not as rough and hard on the inside, ladies. Scotty and Ted are orphaned Talkers, tossed from their homes because they possess magic. The boys want to be Rangers when grown so Máistir took them in and set them to work in the stables to build strength of body and character. Some boys living in Barntown are sons of the wealthy citizens of Somerset and should be penned up with the hogs and have their tongues scraped daily. Today you witnessed the boys achieved both what Sheridan hoped, and they will be squires when Odhran returns. We witnessed hard work and dedication, paying off for the two boys. Now, you can’t dawdle here on the road, and I am not dressed for this bloody weather. I work in a warm building out of the elements. My work cannot be abandoned today, but you come get me in two weeks, Máistir. I’m ready for a road trip with my girls. I’ll teach them the herbs growing wild until they dream of plants or kill me in my sleep.”

“Aye. The Sisters and I will return with the three male Rangers after we deliver Ciara and Braelyn safely to their ship. You might need to heal Ardan after a week on the road with three new women.”

“I’ll leave him bruised for a few days first. If he tries anything with Maggie, she’ll castrate the arrogant whanker.”

Maggie’s face scrunched in confusion staring at Sinéad and him. Sheridan had to explain before she did kill Ardan when they met.

“My youngest squire, who is a marked Ranger now, is sixteen. He has found trouble in the past flirting with women. He is…

“He is an egomaniac who believes he is the gods gift to women.”

Sheridan hoped he succeeded in hiding his smile at Ciara’s opinionated statement. He would’ve said the same in much kinder words.

“Why would he choose me for his unwanted advances, Máistir?”

“Ardan, as his name implies, is also a redhead.”

The three Na Siúracha laughed with sarcasm. Charlie and Syl patted Maggie’s shoulder in mock sympathy. Maggie promised she wouldn’t kill the boy younger than her little brother. Ciara had an arm around Sinéad and the two whispered. He knew for damn sure it was a conspiracy.

“We will rest in Somerset a day and head north tomorrow morning. Today, we’ll give you a tour of our town, my barns and home. We’ll have steaks for dinner and sit around a fire drinking and talking to get acquainted.”

“First, you are coming with me to the infirmary, Máistir. Ciara tells me your back is shredded like hamburger.”



**Chapter 21 Steaks and a Story**

**S**heridan accepted the last plate, Syl washed after Maggie scraped it clean. He dried it and put it away, which they declared made the most sense since he knew where the dishes belonged. The ladies told him it would be a waste of time placing the dirty dishes in the dishwasher when there were three of them to help. They did clean up after dinner and finish the dishes faster than the dishwasher would cycle and he’d still need to put the dishes away. He marked another fact women in his life proved—begrudgingly, but he wasn’t stupid.

Charlie complimented him on all the kitchen devices, and cookware. His hands were full so he nodded in Ciara’s direction. “Ciara and Alannah dragged me shopping to purchase everything a man who lived alone would require for large dinner parties and scheduled many to ensure I would utilize each item purchased. I usually ate at the Ranger’s kitchen or in town. I didn’t like cooking for myself.”

Each lady carried a bottle of wine and a glass to the back patio, found a seat near where Michael and Braelyn reclined. Aha, he knew how to get his brother on his feet.

“Michael, why don’t you tell us a story?”

Braelyn, Ciara, Alannah, and the Na Siúracha applauded his request. Michael rose and bowed like a true Bard. He asked what the ladies wished to hear. Alannah stated since it was the Sister’s first story, he should start at the beginning. Sheridan should not have asked, damn it. Michael took up his guitar and strummed the introduction to the tale of the day Sheridan arrived on Earth.

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**M**ichael would give his right nut for the magic of the Fae. Well, that might be a bit drastic, and a whole lot painful, but he sure as nine hells would appreciate the ability to reach his destination in a blink of an eye like the Fairies could. But no, not him, hells no, instead, he stood in the woods with the horses waiting for his sister to dig roots.

After the last four weeks of hurry up Michael, we need to get there, and Alannah demanding they left the last campground at zero dark thirty in a fog he’d call riding in milk, she just had to stop now, so damn close, to dig in the dirt. Michael could be sitting—nay; he should be seated by a fire in their winter home with a drink in his hand. Well, if Michael had his way, and they did ride for another hour to Somerset, he’d be missing the marvelous sunrise. Aye, some would declare it a bit early to drink anyway. But, what the hells did they know?

Yep, he’d be a good little brother, shut his mouth and enjoy the moment, and what a fantastic sight to behold. If the shining gods struck a match to light the sun in the misty gray predawn when all the critters wanted a bit more sleep, it would describe what he witnessed. The flames of the match, first struck, exploded in a blast of phosphorous sending shafts of fiery light through the canopy of oak, maple, ash, and birch, tinting the rays in reds, yellows, and oranges to highlight the myriad of fall colors carpeting the ground.

The wind of dawn chased the fog west, rattled the branches, and rubbed the trunks like bones of old Giants creaking when they walked. The commotion woke all the inhabitants of the woods. By the time the flame of the celestial orb caught and burned steadily above the rim of the earth in its golden glory, the day had broken, and Michael sighed, damn glad to be alive to witness it. Alannah had a grand idea for once. He closed his eyes in reverence and listened to the heartbeat and breath of his world. It affected him like a special, almost religious moment. Nay, he never had such devotion, but he could pretend.

The packhorse farted, startling the birds and setting the other two mounts shivering and stomping hooves, wide-eyed in panic. Aye, that sure ruined Michael’s revelry of the magnificent dawn damn quick. The bird’s chittering sounded like they laughed at the creature’s flatulence—especially the crows flying south cawing like fools. Aye, he lucked out by standing on the east end of the westward-blowing wind tossing the colorful leaves in a dance across the meadow. Why the hells, did they stop here?

Alannah laughed at the animal’s disregard for a reverent moment. Michael chuckled, turned to remark to his sister that the sound didn’t emanate from his body when the world came to a silent halt like nature sucked in a breath from shock. All the trees that moments ago moaned with the wind pushing them awake stood deathly still. No bird chirped, the crickets ceased their serenades, and every leaf laid fixed on the ground. The woods hushed in anticipation of what? A twig snapped. Leaves rustled and crunched from footsteps, disturbing the eerie silence. A frigid wave of air chilled his spine, more from nerves than the breeze, and Michael called out for his sister to return from her damn foraging. He scanned the woods for the source of the noise, and a bright flash blinded him. Michael cursed and yelled for Alannah a second time as he rubbed his useless orbs.

“Put a cork in it, Michael. I’m doing this for you. There are many dandelion and burdock plants here. I wish to harvest the roots to make the cordial you’re so fond of consuming by the gallons.”

Another snapping twig sent him to retrieve his bow from Shadow’s saddle by touch and strung it blind from years of habit. Michael hissed for his sister to return, and blinked rapidly to dispel the purple ghosts of trees floating in his field of view. The sounds of approach were strange; staggered as with a group, but not hefty enough for people.

Michael hung the quiver on his belt, drew an arrow, and walked toward the source of the noise. Alannah’s quick steps and heavy breathing marked her arrival at his side as he hoped. Aye, the seriousness of his voice convinced her. Alannah gasped, huffed, sputtered her lips and smacked his arm a dozen times like he couldn’t feel the first eleven.

“What are we hunting? Oh, there...They’re dogs walking with a… Oh, shining gods above, Michael, look at the poor baby.”

Alannah dropped her bow and dashed off before he could grab her. He’d like to be able to look and see anything at the moment damn it. Michael spat a few of his favorite curses aimed at foolish women and chased after her blurry form. Look at the poor baby? Hells, he would like to see anything without a shadow. His bow held an arrow drawn to shoot at the first thing he could see past the images burned in his eyes. He followed his sister’s moans warbling with each running step, and if it were not such a mournful sound; it would be funny. If Michael wanted to play stupid first thing in the morning, he’d laugh.

Michael chased after his foolish sister. Each misstep jarred his head and cleared his vision a bit at a time. With a few more ragged steps, dogs came into view with the reason for his sister abandoning all sense of safety. The trio of dogs walked in a protective triangle around a boy covered in blood, both dried black splotches caked up on his neck, face, and good gods, bright red still ran down his arms and chest. The tattered shirt he wore barely covered his small frame, and only the collar retained its original color. He had bled for a while already to reach the sickly pallor of his skin. A puppy that Michael would call brown under all the blood squirmed in the boy’s arms. The child couldn’t be more than six, seven-years-old at best. Michael shook his head and clucked his tongue a few times, scanning the boy’s cuts. He would moan too if his sister didn’t do it for both. Damn, the boy had cuts crisscrossed all over his face, neck…

“Look at his chest, Alannah. Damn, the boy should be dead with as much blood he lost from his wounds.”

Two birds above him screeched warnings that drilled through eardrums, and Michael ducked by instinct. The little guy raised his head and spotted Alannah running to him, dropped to knees for a moment before he crumpled to the ground releasing the puppy. The three dogs watched her approach with hackles raised, teeth bared, and rear legs bent to spring at any wrong move on her part.

But Alannah ignored the dogs like they didn’t exist, kneeled and settled in beside the boy. She moaned louder shaking her head. One hand stifled her sobs, while the other delved for vitals with trembling fingers. The three dogs guarding the boy relaxed their stance, backed away to give her room when she sighed. Alannah spoke a prayer of thanks to the shining gods above.

“He will live. His pulse is strong even with all the blood loss, and his body temperature is normal, which makes no sense to me for his shivers tell me different. This must be recent, and the poor child is in shock. He will need more than my magical healing can do in one sitting. You need to help me stitch him up.” Alannah behaved more agitated than he had ever seen.

“Aye, calm down, sister. What do you require from me right now?”

Alannah’s head nodded woodpecker fast, and she sighed aloud, spooking the dogs.

“Water to clean him, and my trunk with the Healer supplies on the back of that nasty horse.”

Alannah sucked in oppressive sobbing breaths trying to calm herself. She reset the silver circlet of her station on her head and pulled her silvery-white hair back to tie up out of her way. All set, she busied herself with healing work.

That’s better. Crying wouldn’t heal the boy. Michael turned back and ran through the piles of dead leaves to where the horses still drank from Cripple Creek. The swish and crunch of red, russet and gold leaves would please him any other day. Today, the large mounds of leaves only hindered his speed. It wouldn’t help if he twisted an ankle or broke a foot on hidden dangers. Aye, the latest misfortune declared the greatest misfortune, and the boy’s troubles outweighed the chance of a broken leg. The Ranger picked up speed.

Elongated and disturbing blueish shadows of large birds, raced by on the ground to beat him to the horses. The birds perched in a tree to keep an eye on him. No worries; he wouldn’t harm the boy. Michael untied Alannah’s healer case, lifted it off the rack, and jogged back with his avian escorts to place it where Alannah laid the boy down. Aye, they should move to the creek. The boy had walked a distance already. How far had he walked? Hells, Michael had covered the distance between the boy and creek three times already.

Nay, Alannah wasn’t thinking of moving him anywhere. She already cut his shirt off to expose three, long, and gruesome slashes across his chest that explained all the blood, and his sickly corpse-gray color. Aye, she didn’t think of anything other than the boy’s injuries, and which to attack first with magical healing.

Aye. Michael would bet the Home Tree a bear’s claws made the gashes. A bear that missed with one claw and the boy had the bright gods on his side. The fourth would have torn out his throat. The small boy survived a bear attack and walked away to speak of it. Damn. The young lad jerked and shivered as Alannah worked but voiced no complaint. No cries, or whimpers expected from a young child. Hells, he liked the tough little guy already. Michael rubbed the back of his neck, chewed on his lip, and lost count twice in his attempt to tally up the scars on the boy. Where did the boy come from? To all the hells with that. The real question hung in the air like annoying gnats—where did the damn bear go?

“Michael quit your gawking and help me.”

Aye, damn it, she caught him flat-footed and staring brain dead. Michael bent over, opened the case, and removed the large bowls to fill with water. Alannah used her sleeve to wipe away the tears that streaked her face. She had always had a soft spot for children; especially male children and the golden-haired boy bearing wounds on every part of his torso would steal her heart for sure. The scars on his body proved the bloody claw marks were not the first he received. Who could the boy be, and where, in all seven hells, had he come from? It should not be possible for a child to have so many scars or to walk alone in the world. Bel’s shiny balls, the scars were there on his body, and he was alone, idiot. Michael’s idea didn’t count for squat, but what sad and sorry life had the boy led?

Damn, the deathly silence in the woods would destroy what remaining nerves he had before any bear attacked from the trees. Why were the woods so bloody still?

Michael scanned the forest of tall and wide red maple, white ash, and oak, pruned up to man height by elk and deer, and all were mortuary silent. No leaf fluttered to the ground to add to the blanket of color. He half expected the bear to show itself, and twice that wishing it didn’t. No birdsong. No bugs buzzed, or crickets trilled. Hells, the bullfrogs he heard when they arrived no longer called out for reluctant mates. Not even the pesky flies gathered on the open cuts.

He snatched his bow and set an arrow on the string. It wouldn’t hurt being overcautious. Logic dictates the boy came through a portal from another world. The light, blast of frost and dead silence proved his theory. The boy traveled through a door with raptors and dogs? He must have magical talents. The boy must be a Talker. Aye, he shouldn’t keep it to himself.

“The boy is a Talker, who found his way through a portal from another world, Alannah.”

Michael leaned his bow against a tree, poured out the dirty water, and refilled the bowl from their supply. He took up his bow and walked a wide circuit around the two, surveying the woods…please, no bear. An arrow would not stop the bear from finishing off the boy.

“I don’t care where he came from or what talents Máthair blessed him with. I say this child will not perish today.”

They should move him to the creek since she would need much more clean water, and it’s farther from the trees…and the bear. Nay, look at her, she won’t move him. She scooted closer and sighed again as she cleaned his many wounds. Alannah’s hands glowed with the power of her healing. Her eyes were closed tight in concentration while tears dripped from her cheeks to splash on magic glowing fingers placed over a wound while the boy slept.

Aye, him arriving through a tear in the fabric of reality had to be the answer, and scary as all the nine hells if true. What world did he come from if he stepped through a portal? Sure, now Michael could worry about something bigger than a bear could have clawed the boy. Alannah’s idea of bringing warriors to protect them this trip may prove him an idiot for refusing.

Alannah moved the puppy away from the boy to have it crawl right back to lick his face. She chuckled as the pup did it two more times. Good, grief over the boy’s condition didn’t consume her emotions.

She moved the pup away and laughed harder at its stubborn will to stay at the boy’s head. His sister pointed at the blood-soaked puppy laughing at its antics. She straightened up to re-tie her hair back out of her face as she chuckled. She must have his injuries in-hand for how calm she appeared.

“Please take the puppy and bathe him as well. He is soaked with the boy’s blood. I believe the pup is a pretty brown color under all that mess—same as the adult male. The little thing has a broken tail as well, but it is not as urgent as the cuts on this child.”

“Those deep gashes on his chest are from a bear’s claws. This child is tougher than you think if he still walks after receiving…”

“May I be of assistance, dear Alannah?”

Michael spun, bow lifted, and arrow aimed at…at a goddess? Aye, her voice didn’t pass through his ears. She must be a goddess. Why would she appear to Alannah? Hells, a lady, who radiated power, knowledge, and love like a candle shed light in a dark room stood beside Alannah wearing similar clothing with pouches and bandoliers as his sister wore bulging with what must be herbs and medicines. Who arrived to assist?

“Go on, Ceannaire. Do your sister’s bidding. Alannah knows who I am and the purpose of my presence. We will care for the child without your persistent worry and bickering.”

“Aye, My Lady. Alannah?”

“Go, brother, we are in the finest hands now. The child will survive his injuries.”

Michael slung the bow over his shoulder, picked up the puppy, and headed for the creek, grabbing a towel from their luggage on the way. A goddess came to help? Who was the boy? He also picked up the three dogs as an escort on the trek. Not by his choice, but they followed him, spending more time looking up at him than where they walked.

“I will not harm the little guy. I mean to bathe him as she ordered and return him to your master.”

The dog at his heel sneezed and reversed course. Michael stopped, turned back, and gawked when it dropped down beside the boy to lay its head on his leg. Damn, the dog understood his spoken words? They were as intriguing as the boy’s appearance, and the boy himself. Who could he be? The boy had more magic than Talking to animals. The world stopping to take a breath demonstrated his powers. Aye, like the goddess bending over with a hand on Alannah’s shoulder, wasn’t sufficient evidence of the boy’s significance. The glow of magic emanating from his sister’s hands shone brighter than he ever saw. Damn, what did they find in the woods? Aye, wash the puppy.

He whipped around. The other two dogs loped off toward the creek ignoring him. Michael recognized the Doberman, but what breed the other could be, he had no idea. The pup he carried looked like a pint-sized version of the unknown dog jumping into the creek with the Dobie.

The dogs still drank with zealous intent when he arrived to plop down on the cold flint-covered bank with a grunt. The group must have traveled far and hard to be so thirsty. Michael squinted, staring beyond the creek toward the west—the road they should be riding south to Somerset. Why did they have to stop here?

Where the hells, could the bear that attacked the boy be hiding, and how did the boy survive? Aye, forget about that. He and Alannah were alive. The boy, birds, and the dogs were alive, and what a glorious way to greet the day. Death defined the unlucky man’s healer, and the boy’s luck proved mighty grand today with finding Alannah. Forget his idiocy, the goddess arriving cemented the fact the boy had more than luck.

Michael surveyed the woods where the boy came from. He squinted hard and laughed at himself. Like squinting would help him spot a rift from far off. Perhaps chance did not lead them to the boy. They were meant to be here when the boy arrived—Alannah for certain. If Máthair willed it—a goddess arriving to help prove it. He would protect the youth from any bear after him. Aye, he couldn’t do that sitting on his ass along the bank.

He grabbed the little pup by the scruff, dunked him in the flow, and swished it around as it yipped and squirmed in his hands. Aye, Cripple Creek always had ice flowing freely in every month. It came straight from the ice flow runoff and never warmed until it reached the mountains to the south where it filled a huge lake. He snorted in memory of the times he jumped in the lake on a dare. The frigid water could wake a man up real fast.

A stupid tune stuck in his head, and he whistled it like it would erase it from his thoughts. He flipped the pup around, examining it while he scrubbed, and whistled. Aye, “Waltzing with a Bear,” replayed in his mind non-stop, and it might have helped if he could whistle better. He lifted the pup, wrapped it in a towel to dry it—him, and walked back to his sister busy with the healing. The goddess must be satisfied since she left Alannah to the healing.

“Alannah, who graced us wither her presence? What goddess provided aid?”

“Airmid, silly, what other goddess would assist in healing? The boy bled internally, and I didn’t detect it. The goddess showed me the tear in his heart and how to search for internal injuries and heal the organs. I am blessed to be here today, brother. Aye, more people will survive with my new knowledge to pass on to all healers. Who is this child to garner respect and love from the gods to willingly offer such aid?”

“I’ve only asked myself that question a thousand times already. What did Blessed Airmid say?”

“That the boy cannot die. Máthair Danu wills it, and Airmid would comply.”

“Aye, how stupid of me to question. If you wish to remain here, I could build a fire by the creek and set my bedroll out for the boy—godling, or whoever, whatever he is.”

Gods can’t be injured. Could gods sustain injuries? Who or what could the boy be? A blast of iced air hit his face. Michael proved he could learn from mistakes. His eyes closed in time to retain his sight from the flash of light. His eyes opened to discover two Elf males at Alannah’s side. One had his sister held down as she struggled to reach the boy. The other had the lad’s arms and drug him back to the distortion of reality visible with the mist swirling around it.

Michael grasped his bow, dropped the puppy, nocked an arrow to let fly before the pup hit the ground with a yelp. A second arrow flew a heartbeat after the first had struck the man holding his sister. It struck close to the first. His sister’s attacker fell back screaming, scrambled to his feet, and stumbled for the portal. A third arrow flew as the two dogs from the creek raced past Michael.

The second man jerked when the arrow hit his shoulder from behind. The injured man released one of the boy’s arms and yanked harder on the other. The dog attacked the arm holding the boy. Michael’s next arrow struck the kidnapper in the other shoulder. Twice now he had missed a kill with the man moving about.

The man pulling the boy fell back, looked at something dark in his grip, kicked the dog away, and ran from the other two dogs racing toward him. He wasn’t fast enough. The dogs reached him, tore into his legs, and jumped for arms to pull him down, but he kicked and punched the dogs, fighting them off the whole way to the curtain of displacement. Michael yelled for the dogs to stop and let him go before they reached the portal. He coughed a laugh and shook his head in amazement when the dogs obeyed.

A third flash of light announced the arrival of another. The man who stepped through raised his arms to the sky, and Michael yelled a warning running for cover. He hollered at the dogs to hide. The new arrival either miscalculated or was just a plain lousy mage because the bolt of lightning he called, struck at his feet to throw him back through the door to another universe. When the shower of blasted dirt and leaf litter settled, the portal disappeared. Aye, the bolt caused enough disturbance to distort the rift in the layers of reality. The three dogs rose unhurt from the blast and headed for the boy. They were damn lucky to stop when he said.

Alannah climbed to her feet, dusted herself off, and waved with a smile to indicate her wellness. The boy bolted up to sit. Eyes, silver ten-piece wide, looked from him to Alannah and around at the woods. The boy appeared curious, wary, but not frightened one bit. He shivered, tremored hard, and held himself up with shaking arms, but no whimpers or cries from the pain he must suffer from the damage done to his body. Hells, the gashes were closed. She had healed the wounds on his chest already. Aye, how could he forget the help she had?

Michael stopped dead. Something happened. He listened and scanned the woods. Aye, the mesmerizing sounds of nature had returned when the boy woke. The birds took up their song on the wing, the wind picked up to swirl the leaves along the ground, and his eagles screeched as if they welcomed him when he woke. The boy had more magic than Talking for damn certain. How did he halt nature’s voice? Gods above, what had he and Alannah stumbled into? Who were the Elves, and why did they want the boy?

“Look at his eyes, Michael. They’re like sparkling green jewels.”

Aye, leave it to a woman to regard his eye color instead of nature returning to normal when he woke or ignoring the two men with the failed kidnapping. Hells, what about the lightning strike? Forget the bolt of lightning, what about the goddess? Nay, look at the color of his eyes.

“You’re beautiful.”

Alannah gushed with embarrassment and buried her red face in her hands. Her long silvery-white ponytail swished across her back with her shaking head. Michael chuckled, and planted hands to waist to observe the uncanny spectacle. A little boy torn to shreds complimented her, and she blushed. Hells, she never flustered for other reasons. Many warriors in their clan, complimented her beauty without fuss or bother. The young boy already captured Alannah’s heart.

Gravel dumped in a bucket made softer sounds than the boy’s voice. Perhaps he had a wound in his mouth to cause the speech problem, or his tongue swelled. Aye, that’s it. His tongue must be dried up. Michael walked over and leaned down to hand him a canteen. The boy nodded his thanks, drained it empty in big gulps without a breath, and Michael laughed. Another damn trip to the creek.

“Can you walk, little man?”

The boy didn’t have the chance to answer. The bright flash preceded a hideous screech. Michael faced the direction of the portal and saw a horrid creature step out of the mist. He set an arrow and pulled the string to his chin. The boy ran to him, pulled the knife from his boot, and ran at the beast, yelling orders. The child ran at the beast. He hollered over his shoulder.

“It wants me. I’ll be the bait and give it a surprise. When it tries to bite me, shoot it in the mouth. Your arrows won’t penetrate its thick hide.”

Michael stared at the boy. His scalp felt like it lifted off his skull. What child would run at the monster? The boy had to be special. He had to be, or he had lost his young mind. When it tries to bite him? Damn. Michael drew the string to his ear, aimed for the thing’s mouth and waited for his chance.

The boy howled and growled, along with his dogs charging the beast. The eagles dove and raked its face and flew off before it could swat them out of the air. When it went after the birds, the dogs rushed in to bite its legs and backed off quickly, avoiding a strike from its nasty claws. The boy reached the beast and stabbed its groin when it turned for the dogs. It twisted back and roared. Michael shot, nocked, and shot the second one to join the other arrow in its mouth. The beast choked on the steel and wood. The boy stabbed the monster in the groin again while its hands gripped the arrows. He sawed the knife down its leg, cutting a wide gash that bled a black putrid-smelling liquid. The beast staggered, two more of Michael’s arrows struck the eyes, it tripped up and fell forward with the boy leaping out of the way faster than Michael thought possible for a child. Alannah rushed past Michael gaping like a fool at the boy who staggered himself. Alannah reached him and yelled for her supplies. Damn, who or what…oh, forget it. Get the supplies.

Alannah sang prayers as she worked her magical healing on the fantastic child. Child? Forget that nonsense. He’d call the boy a hero in a child’s body. Damn!

Alannah sat back, stretching her neck and rolling her shoulders.

“Michael, this child’s smaller wounds are closing—healing faster than I can work. It is a magic I have never witnessed in my life. We have a marvel in a child’s body here. Did we find a young godling?”

“Well, they were my thoughts exactly, Alannah. But can a god be injured? I am honestly flustered about what or who we found. Forget that nonsense; the boy found us.”

The boy should sleep a while after his exertion and blood loss. Hells, no, the boy sat up and smiled at Alannah eliciting another damn blush and almost a giggle from his sister. The boy looked over her shoulder to smile at Michael.

“Who are you?” The Common speech couldn’t be the boy’s first language with the heavy accent he laid on his words. Michael would guess German his native tongue. He knew more than one language at his age? Damn. Aye, answer his question before angering a god.

“I, young sir, am Michael McHugh, and the lady healing you is my sister, Alannah. We are Elves from the Eastern Forest on our way to Somerset for the winter. Who are you, young man, and from where do you hail? You showed incredible courage attacking the beast. More than I’d expect from a child your age.”

“Nay, I do it every day. That is my job. I must kill the bears, or my young friends die.”

Bear? That beast looked like no bear he knew. The boy’s stomach gurgled from all the water he drank, and his face blushed beet red. Aye, like every other Talker Michael knew. They all blushed under the most innocent circumstances. His dogs arrived back and laid down all around him, and his shivers ceased. The boy could be either someone special, half-animal…or both. Perhaps they gathered in the presence of a young god? Nay, Michael’s ideas teetered on the brink of ridiculous. One more idiotic guess and he’d be a goner.

“I took the name Sheridan and will be An Deorái at the time of my awakening. I don’t know where I am or the name of the world I came from, but I won’t miss a thing about that place. Someone spoke in my mind and told me to find a portal. A Dwarf pointed us in the right direction, we found the portal, and the dogs said we should escape. I'm glad I didn’t argue.” He shivered hard and shook his head even harder like they agitated him.

He took the name for himself? He had no parents to give him a name? Aye, a god could take a name to use. What have they found? The boy’s hair showered water on Alannah as he slung his head around, but she gushed and rubbed his cheek to soothe him. Aye, Michael understood Sheridan the first time he said his name. What he said surprised him. The name Sheridan sure fit his description of old names. A name he had not heard spoken by a human before. Was the boy human? The name didn’t sound as peculiar as his speech. Sheridan must be older than he appeared for how mature he talked. What did he mean by he will be An Deorái?

“How old are you, Sheridan? You seem a bit young to be on your own out here.”

“I believe I am five-years…agghh! TThere is a vvoice in mmy hhead sscreaming at mmeee. PPPaishenche, cm’ere ppwease? GGods, wwhat hhappened tto mmy mmouth?” Sheridan wilted to his knees and grabbed his head.

Michael’s brows bunched in concern and lifted to stretch his eyes wide open when a Fairy appeared above the lad. Sheridan had a Fairy companion with him? Aye, she arrived from wherever Fairies live in a blink. Michael clicked his jaw shut and swiped the silly grin from his face to relax his gaze. Who could have a Fae partner? Hells, he’s more than a Talker to have the beauty at his call.

The Blue Fairy flitted from Alannah to Michael and stared at each for a while before flying to Sheridan. She sat on his shoulder and brushed his cleaned wet hair back over his ear. The blue beauty scanned all his injuries, and looked back at them with tears, like trails of sapphire dust, glistening her cheeks.

“I am Patience, my lord, and lady. I am Sheridan Kingston’s Fae companion. I live to serve him and love him more than life and need him more than my next breath. I would do anything for my Sheridan, but even with my magic, there are some things beyond my abilities.”

Patience hovered over Sheridan and drizzled blue magic on him that soaked in his skin and settled his agitation. The boy’s face lost its mask of disgust, and his eyes closed. The Fae shook her head slowly and tsked. She faced Alannah and attempted to smile, but her heart wasn’t in it.

“I cannot explain his speech problem. Sheridan has never stuttered before. It is troubling but must stay a puzzle for another day. He must reach Somerset today. Will you please lend aid to him on his journey?”

“Patience, I am familiar with An Deorái…or his role in another world and another time. The Elven records have many documents of his storied history and heroic deeds. I witnessed the victory celebration when the Wanderer saved the world we left behind for Earth almost a millennium gone by. He must be a special child to have the goddess appear to help. Is Sheridan here to serve the same purpose? Is he the Eternal Hero? Are we headed for war?”

“I am not permitted to disclose the purpose of his presence or his future. Please do not ask, and I will beg you to forget ever hearing the name An Deorái. Aye, there is trouble afoot for certain. He should not… Máthair Danu provides us with what we need when we need it most, and you two arrived here to aid him in his need. Please help my Sheridan?”

“The Mother provides for us, and we are blessed with her gifts.” Michael and Alannah spoke the response to the aubade at the same time, and his sister smiled at the Fae.

“Of course, we will help, Patience. I questioned only because the name I have already forgotten surprised me. Máthair led us here for sure, and we will help without further questions. Aye, I would assist even if we headed north, for the gift I received from Airmid. Must Sheridan go to Somerset today? I can heal all his wounds here if I have time to rest. We will deliver him there tomorrow.”

“Nay, My Lady, he must arrive today. Today is a day of significance for him. It is his birthday on Earth, and his father waits to greet him. His father, in this life, Lady. My Sheridan will heal quickly. All the small wounds will close and heal within an hour. He may have many scars to commemorate his ordeal, but he will heal in a brief time. It is a magical blessing from Máthair.”

Aye, the Fairy might not disclose his purpose, but she as much confirmed Alannah’s suspicions. Sheridan messed up when he disclosed more than the Fae would have him admit. Aye, An Deorái’s title, Michael knew, but not well enough. All he could recall from fireside stories told him An Deorái arrived when a world required a hero-warrior, but Sheridan couldn’t fill the role. He gave his age as five, but five today, or did he turn six today? More questions for the young man. Aye, he couldn’t be called a mere boy.

“You heard Patience, Michael. Move it.” Alannah rose and ordered like a ruler. “Give him one of my tee-shirts to wear. We must hurry to meet Sheridan’s father. This is good. I will have Bronagh’s magical healing to help care for his wounds there.”

Michael laughed at the trees and moved as his big sister commanded. He had learned to obey when she wielded that voice. He may be the leader of the Elves, but his big sister demanded obedience when she spoke in her Healer's voice. They should leave the boy here in the woods. Nay, too late now, Alannah rubbed Sheridan’s cheeks and tousled his hair. She would take the boy regardless of her brother’s logical protests. What had they found in the woods?

“I will put my Sheridan to sleep for the journey. I empathize with my love, and he is suffering, but he doesn’t ever complain. The Fae sleep will ease his torment.”

Michael reached their packs and watched as the Fairy kissed Sheridan and rubbed his face until his eyes closed. He sat with head tilted, wearing a silly grin like he drank one cup too many of bourbon. Aye, another reason Michael loved traveling to Old Kentucky. Michael’s head tilted in the same manner as the boy dozing sitting up. He had done the same often in his life. He smiled at the sight and the memory.

“Are you saying, Sheridan feels the pain but does not complain by sheer will alone? At his tender age?”

Alannah’s words betrayed her concern for the boy. Nay, Michael would not name him a boy again. She packed up her case and stood grasping handles, holding it against her legs, waiting for her answer. His sister’s voice revealed she’d shed more tears. Sheridan had a firm hold on her heart. Oh, he better hurry up with the shirt.

“Aye, he will never admit his pain, regardless of how severe, but the anguish shows in his eyes. His eyes reveal everything about him if you wish to know him.”

Patience rubbed Sheridan’s cheek, kissed him on both eyes, and his body slumped into restful numbness. He handed the shirt to his sister lost in her thoughts. “Aye Patience, I wish to know everything there is about him. Go, Michael, you can stare at my Sheridan later. We must hurry. Didn’t I say to put the shirt on him?”

He grabbed the shirt back and bent over to obey — no sense in arguing the obvious. Alannah hauled her case to the rack on top of the packhorse and strapped it down. She mounted up on Stardust, and Michael lifted the young man into the sobbing Healer’s arms. Aye, she loved her Sheridan for certain.

Michael climbed in his saddle, and they headed off across the field now splendid in its display of fall foliage against the lush green of pine and bright blue sky. He lost the chance to admire the scenery. Alannah desired to move fast again. The sand covering the packed clay road soaked up the dew which would aid in the speed of the horses. He must admit—It proved a good thing for Healers to forage for herbs. Never again would he complain about her taking the time to hunt for weeds. If Máthair sent Alannah off on some wild goose chases, Michael would follow. Bel’s shining balls, she didn’t collect the roots to make his cordial.



**Chapter 22 Pancakes and Battle**

**S**heridan raised his overheated face to the sky and pulled at his choking collar for air. Ciara singling him out for insults confused him to no end. Hells bells, Michael refused the avocado facial too, damn it. Aye, she did it for the benefit of the Na Siúracha who appeared to enjoy his discomfort. They reached Irvine later than he hoped because they couldn’t pass the damn wagon load of lumber on the narrow country road. Driving behind a load of cut pine did provide a more pleasant aroma than six horses, and it afforded him the opportunity to stop and investigate an abandoned property the eagles discovered.

The long vacated vegetable garden provided hours of work and a bounty of harvest. The seven of them laughed often hauling a plethora of squash, Brussel sprouts, yams, potatoes, red cabbage, cauliflower, carrots, zuccini, and turnips. Aye, all the fall’s finest and he had healthy and hardy food he could eat for weeks. They harvested half of what the garden produced and would direct the first person they met on the road to the location. How it lasted, nay, thrived for so many years unattended astounded him. It couldn’t be an old world property but it stood abandoned for many years.

Ciara found the herb garden and they harvested many roots and plants from Angelica to Valerian roots. He plucked a zinnia from an adjacent garden just to cover the entire alphabet. The original grower should rest in peace and pride in what she created. They had more garlic than they could use in a year even with feeding a clove to each dog daily to ward off fleas and ticks. They covered the crops with mulch found mounded in a cement bin and continued their exploration of the property once occupied by an organized farmer. The location, the scents, and his imagination provided a vision of a wonderful home. He made the mistake of asking to camp there for the night.

“Bel’s shiny balls, Sheridan. There is a soft warm bed ahead in Irvine. Why would we ever want to sleep on the cold ground with a bed in reach?”

Ciara’s outburst was well received and agreed upon by Michael and Braelyn. The Sisters shrugged and declared they would do as he asked. Aye, they mounted up their rested horses and he climbed in the wagon chuckling to himself. Ciara claimed to be a tough warrior but damn sure appreciated her amenities.

The snowstorm was left far behind and the stars appeared in all their glory twinkling in the velvet firmament of night by the time they tucked the horses in stalls and his dogs in the wagon except for his eight Shadows and the six mastiffs guarding the horses. The owls flew out for their nightly vigil as the day hunters returned to perch in the aviary for a well-deserved slumber. His last chore was to feed each raptor a piece of meat to fill stomachs and provide an easy route to restful sleep.

He hoped for a night of dancing, but nay, it was not included in Ciara’s plans. The ladies sashayed arm-in-arm into the Main Street Salon and Spa to waste a few hours. Maggie waved to him before the door closed. He and Michael strutted manly into the dining hall at the Inn situated between Main Street and the Kentucky River. Hells bells, if the ladies preferred to spend hours covered in green slime instead of eating and drinking it’s fine with him but there’s no call for teasing. His face did not need moisturizing with avocado, damn it. And, why in nine hells should he pay for a manicure when biting his nails did the trick all his life? There’s not a damn thing wrong with his cuticles and his hands were not dry and gnarly like an old baseball glove. Sheridan could do with a haircut, but he’d be damned if he followed Ciara. She’d claim victory and harass him into more frilly treatments. Nay, he’d spend the enemy’s confiscated coin on the ancient jukebox in the comfortable saloon and listen to old-world music on records over a thousand years old while he and Michael relaxed with a bourbon or six. There weren’t many places in Esak that could brag of owning a collection of old-world records as the Inn and he’d enjoy the opportunity to listen to rare tunes. The majority of his coin would play the Motown, and Capital selections while the live band rested between sets.



**S**heridan closed the door to his room like a successful thief and tip-toed past Ciara’s room. He didn’t take ten steps when her door flew open and she laughed at his back. OK, he wasn’t able to escape after all. She must’ve read his mind again. “You can’t sneak away, Máistir. Our bond allows me to sense where you are, huh? I’ve only waited an hour for you to wake and shower lazy bones. Are we finally heading down for breakfast?”

Three more doors opened and his new companions joined them and agreed with Ciara about his late rising.

He wasn’t about to tell a lie Ciara would see through, so he offered his arm and escorted her down the stairs with his mouth shut tight. Ciara chuckled patting his arm like she read each thought in his frazzled head and that was scary as the fiery halls of nine hells.

There were only a few couples ahead of them at the hostess’ desk and according to Ciara, she saved time by ordering the Inn’s standard breakfast fare for seven from the hostess and extra sausage for the growing boy beside her, and aye, he was easily distracted, so he’d take the crayons and placemat he could color to occupy his mind and keep him out of trouble. The lady winked with the devious smile of a co-conspirator and led them through a crowded dining room to a huge booth by the restroom doors. He wanted smiley-face pancakes, damn it. The women blocked the benches preventing him from sitting without the use of physical violence and attacked with sarcasm.

Nay, he didn’t require a booster seat. Thank you, and he could manage to drink his juice without a sippy cup, and aye, he could use a knife and fork and did not need a bib. A glass of ice water to dump over his heated face might be useful. He should’ve thrown a tantrum fit.

He wanted the smiley-face pancakes from the children’s menu, but nay, he had to eat what she ordered. Ciara pointed to the booth for him to sit way in the back and he slid in a subdued and obedient idiot. As if on cue, an order of pancakes with a strawberry nose, chocolate eyes, and a whipped-cream smile, eyebrows, and hair wafted past in the arms of a waitress and he hid his eyes from the delectable and depressing sight. Stomping his feet would probably not do him any good at the moment.

Sheridan used the awkward silence to study the eclectic items lining the walls. Many were ancient artifacts from the old world and each fascinating. Some he had no clue to their function but hoped not what his imagination concluded. They could be torture devices. Aye, of course, the silence never lasted long with Ciara around.

“Did you have nightmares last night?” Wow, it’s not what he imagined occupied her mind, and it was a polite inquiry he couldn’t ignore by pouting and looking away without demonstrating his immature objection to an adult breakfast. Sometimes a guy just wanted pancakes with a happy face and a tall glass of milk. There was no rule book declaring adults couldn’t order from the children’s menu.

“Aye. It was not the worst I‘ve had. I did not loose much sleep.”

Her glass was in danger of shattering under her white-knuckle grip. Ciara took a sip of water and set it down softly, blew out her anger, slouched in the seat and smiled her best. A male Elf approached the table and performed his best effort at flattery and flirting. Ciara drew a knife and pretended to clean her manicured nails ignoring the man’s presence until he departed with a dark look for Sheridan. Why shoot him dirty looks? Ciara was not his lady, damn it. She never allowed other men to speak with her and refused all offers of courtship. He would never understand her.

“Where was I before the whanker interrupted us? Oh, so will you accept drugs to sleep a whole night uninterrupted?”

“Why do you ignore men’s attempts to court you? Hells, even men who pay you a compliment leave in fear for their life.”

“Why am I sitting beside you? Why is it you are the only man from whom I accept compliments? Well, not for long, huh? You will desert me in Liberty City. Speak all the sweet words you desire. Pay me all the compliments you wish so I can store them up to recall when I am alone at home.”

Michael and Braelyn arriving saved him from responding, or lying to Ciara. Hells, if he answered with what rattled in his head, she might stab him with the knife. He complimented her new nail polish design thingy or whatever it’s called and she shook her head, confused, doubtful, or just plain exasperated.

Michael’s laughter demonstrated how much he enjoyed Sheridan’s embarrassing moment when the hostess placed cloth mats before the six and a paper mat for him with three crayons. Oh, hells, his day tumbled downhill without a glimmer of normalcy for damn sure. Sheridan flipped the paper over to the blank side and drew a quick crayon portrait of the hostess instead of coloring in pictures of birds with the wrong color crayons. He’d never spotted a green, blue or purple cardinal or robin in the woods. Ciara snatched it from his fingers when he flipped it back and dashed off to present it to the hostess.

It was his fault for sitting on the inside by command when he ate with Ciara. Why do females need to visit the restroom two or three times during a meal? Where was the damn food? The blessed coffee and toast arrived with a waitress to ask how they preferred their omelets and Sheridan wiggled back to sit up straight like an adult. If he couldn’t have a smiley pancake, special omelets would do for sure. Ciara returned with the drawing, sat beside him and slapped it on the table ordering him to sign the page and gave her choice of a western omelet to the waitress. She elbowed his ribs when he hesitated. It was either the beginning of a prank or Ciara was serious and why would the hostess want his signature?.

“The lady is crying over the bloody picture and requests your signature so she can hang it in a frame for bragging rights of owning a bloody original masterpiece by the famous Ranger—in her words. Well, she didn’t say bloody. That was my brilliantly sarcastic addition. I’m not surprised she recognized you, but I’m amazed by what you can create with just a bloody crayon. I told her you wouldn’t accept payment for such a trivial drawing. Aye, just sign your name to the bloody portrait and you get all the extra helpings of sausage you can eat, brat. Don’t stuff yourself or you’ll puke after our morning exercises.”

He signed the paper like a good boy. Charlie laughed, acknowledging his defeat at the hands of a master.

Ciara laughed in a most un-ladylike fashion when he pushed his plate away and reached for his coffee. Hells, he didn’t overeat. Half of the sausage disappeared from his plate each time the server placed it before him. His smart-ass food snatching friends would be the ones to bemoan their overindulgence during exercises.

An old man with an interesting accent yelled something he didn’t understand. The customers and staff did and ran to the front window gaping, gasping, and whispering about some event he couldn’t see. He shrugged at her question uncaring what caught their attention, but Ciara scurried over to find out what intrigued them. She returned quickly spouting the curses she learned from the Teamsters and he buried his face on the table to hide. Ciara pulled coins from her purse to leave on the table for a tip and smiled like a kid in a kennel full of puppies.

“It’s time to play, Máistir, and we can get our morning exercise in at the same time. About a hundred smelly pukes march down River Road with a carriage and a canvas covered wagon. There aren’t any Swords to kill and we all know who might ride in the carriage and what beasties might hide under the bloody canvas, huh?”

Ciara led the rush to the stables for weapons locked in the wagon. They agreed there was no time for armor so Sheridan created a magical shield on his friends and himself. Ciara smirked at him with devious intent standing patiently waiting for her shield. It was probably a damn good thing he couldn’t read her mind. He placed a hand on her head and Talked a shield over her body memorized from years of practice creating a shield to protect his best friend. Aha, he’d bet the Farm it was why she grinned at him like the boy with a cream mustache. For him to learn her body, he had to rub every—aye, he needed to quit. Ciara kindly whispered for once, but she still flushed his face to boiling point.

“I won’t speak a word of reproach, dear man, but I know the reason for your blush and I thank you for the lewd thoughts of me. Hurry, we have whankers to kill, huh.”

He nodded hard to signify he finished with the shield and he would not reply to her query. She laughed and punched his arm in her persistent and painful way of saying thanks. Why couldn’t she smack his butt instead? Why couldn’t she keep her hands to herself?

Sheridan and his companions hustled out of the stables with the fighting dogs and the day hunters. The small army of enemy soldiers marched onto Main Street with people lining each side like they came for a damn parade. He set an arrow to the string and shot the first soldier in line. The Sisters followed his example and three more dropped.

His eagles dove at the formation and screeched forcing many men to raise their heads and expose their necks making for easy targets. The wolfhounds and deerhounds reached the army first forcing the cowards to hide behind their compatriots. Aye, the sight of fifty huge dogs baring teeth and growling must be scary, if on the wrong end of their attack.

The men squealed like little boys when the dogs knocked them over to rend throats. The braver fools drew swords to fight the dogs, but the raptors dropped from the sky, slammed their twelve to fourteen pounds into the enemies’ heads and laid the men out for the dogs to finish. Hells, with twenty-five raptors and fifty huge dogs, the task would be over in no time—and answer the question too many people asked of why they traveled with so many animals. Hells, he could stand on the sidelines to observe his brood wiping out the smelly brutes.

Movement caught his eye and turned his head. Over fifty citizens armed with bows lined up across the road and shot at the confused and dying by the score soldiers. It was his first experience with the populace lending a hand and he was damn proud of their actions.

The one hundred dwindled to a few and then none with arrows killing the last man peeing his pants when he realized his death was at hand. Sheridan threw a fireball at the canvas covering hoping the Orcs inside were of the green variety. Instead of Orcs roaring in surprise, women screaming in fear responded to the fire. Damn him for not looking first. He raced for the wagon, stabbed the soldier who jumped out and threw the tarp aside to aid the women. He froze for too long, damn it. The women tied to their benches screamed for help. The shocking sight to freeze him in place was the two were identical twins of the lady Maura, or of Muirenn? Ciara hissed a snide remark and pushed him aside. She climbed into the bed and cut them free shooting sly glances at him and laughing at his foolishness. She apologized for him telling the ladies the brave Ranger froze in his socks by the sight of their beauty.

Sheridan cursed his weakened moment, grabbed each lady, devouring him with their eyes. He lifted each over the tailgate and lowered them to the ground. Sheridan he held his arms out for Ciara. Her devilish expression proved his idiocy and yanked him from his stupor. Aye, she could jump down herself. Nay, he’d never offered before so why the hells now. He offered a hand and she snatched it with a polite thank you and dropped. He pivoted to face the mirror twins and opened his mouth to speak. A lightning bolt struck, shut his mouth and drove him to the ground. Oh, hells, he should’ve checked to see if there was an assassin in the carriage long before attacking the soldiers.

It was a chore to rise on useless legs. He grabbed the wagon’s tailgate for support and faced the fool gawking at him like he rose from the dead. Aye, another magician surprised as Five was when the lightning didn’t kill as expected. The man raised his hand to direct more lighting and blasted Sheridan a second time. Sheridan shook and roared his anger, rose to face the startled man he could see between flashes of light repeating in his vision like sunlight between trees struck him riding fast on Dax. If his head was underwater he’d hear clearer. The magician’s hesitation killed him in a heartbeat. When he called fire to his hand, Michael’s arrow found its mark in the wide opened and unshielded mouth and he fell choking to death. Aye, one magical talent at a time. Ciara tsked, declaring her disappointed he wouldn’t fight the man. He laughed and shook himself like a dog shedding water and it didn’t help his hearing or vision. He’d never tell a soul, but he might have heard his brain sloshing around in his skull.

Ciara strode over and stripped the soon-to-be corpse of all its valuables and weapons laughing and swatting at his hands pleading for help. She held up two bladed maces and howled at the long slashes of white rain-fattened clouds striping the bright blue sky.

He returned his attention to the ladies gaping at him worse than the assassin. One twin spoke but the ringing in his ears prevented him from understanding a blessed word. His vision held too many damn stars to read her lips. He waved to Braelyn and pointed at his ears. She nodded and took over the investigation of the women. A few deep breaths and shakes of his head cleared the vertigo and he walked away a bit drunkenly but he improved with each step.

His squished lips produced a squeak when he pinched his nose to blow and force air through his sinuses. His ears popped and blessed hearing returned with his balance. Twice now he survived lightning and twice he regretted and hated the experience. Ciara left the body and opened the carriage door. She huffed a phony laugh and motioned for him to join her. Sure, like it was easy for him to walk. Ciara held him tight and glanced over his shoulder.

“I wanted you far away from the ladies’ apparent influence on you to talk. They can’t peel their eyes off you and appear ready to strip and jump you if you so much as smile at them. I can sense the lustful appreciation of their affections in you, dear man. Pay attention to detail, and wake up. The coach is empty. No traitorous priest to face today, and this crappy coach isn’t worth keeping. We can donate it to the Inn, huh. Why is Gwydion capturing Muirenn’s mirror twins?”

“I am not certain if I can answer you properly, Ciara. The emotion you sense is not lustful. I’d call it confusion because I did recall a lady I assume is Muirenn when I saw the two twins here who resemble the face in memory. I find it, in its simplest term, disturbing.”

His Fae had declared Muirenn was his destined wife and Gwydion claimed he would destroy all the twins to anger him and break his heart. He’d be content if Gwydion left Ciara alone.

“I don’t care what the gods have planned or what destiny has delivered. Patience, come here please.”

His Fae companion flashed into view splashing sapphire magic around zipping to Michael, Braelyn, the Sisters, and the two unknown women to kiss and she kissed Ciara before she settled on his shoulder to rip his beret off and kiss his head. Ciara caught the beret in mid-air and stuffed it in his belt with a knowing smile. She asked Patience the same question she posed to him heating him from head to toe when Patience answered.

“No matter what his stubborn heart claims, Muirenn is one of his soul mates, his destined wives, Ciara. It’s not fate’s problem he ignores you and the others, huh?”

“Patience, I didn’t call for you to deliver a ridiculous discourse on an impossible future. I called to ask if you would escort the ladies to their rightful homes. I will not place them in danger by finding homes for them here on Earth. Gwydion’s slaves would locate them eventually and return the ladies to the maniac.”

“Aye, my poor pouting love. Your mother agrees with you. My brothers and sisters are coming to take them away. Máthair asked me to inform you she has to travel soon to a universe too far to Talk with you, love. Your mother begs you to stay alive and out of trouble until she returns. Máthair is aware trouble always finds you, but she asks you to be careful.”

Ciara laughed, he merely nodded, lacking an intelligent response. The splash of colors from over twenty Fae announced the arrival of her family. The Fairies surrounded the women staring at him like he was the blue medal winning stud at the fair and they in heat. The women blinked away. He released a pent-up breath of tension caused by the weird draw or tug at his heart he sensed from them. Nay, the lightning bolt must have affected him worse than he first thought.

“Patience, why does Gwydion capture mirror twins from other worlds with ease when he has difficulty locating Muirenn on our homeworld? I know for a fact it’s not impossible for someone to locate her and am thrilled he hasn’t but it is a strange situation.”

“Oh, your mind is sharp this morning, Ciara. Sheridan kissed you, Ena, and Muirenn sealing the bond with magic. I know he doesn’t recall Muirenn’s kiss, but he did and the magical bond sealed their heart’s desire. Gwydion’s slaves have troubles locating her because she, like you, is attuned to Sheridan’s spirit—bonded to his heart, and not broadcasting her emotions like the other ladies. Aye?”

Ciara’s lips tightened to invisible and her brows rose in twin brown wings of challenge he would not permit to surface.

“I…well, that is, Ciara and I experienced a magical bonding when we first kissed—

Ciara’s sputtering lips and Patience’s laughter shut him up quick.

“Aye, and here you are, breaking Ciara’s heart by sending her home. You will mope about the continent missing her while on your quest simply because you are the most stubborn man ever to breathe.”

Ciara’s visage was the strangest he had ever witnessed. She faced Patience with inquisitive determination. He would create a new chapter in his book for one expression.

“Patience. A whanker appeared to me in a spectral form. He declared he hunted the magical bond between me and Sheridan. It contradicts what you stated.”

“Very observant, Ciara. I believe you might be smarter than our Ranger in the morning. If Sheridan is close to the person with the bond, a mage can pick up the scent with ease. The farther away you are from the bully, the less chance of them finding the mate. But, with that said, he now has your scent, Ciara. Sheridan, I’d find and kill him if I were you to protect your best friend.”

“Ah.” Sheridan walked away ignoring the glare from his best friend. He still heard their conversation and wished he didn’t.

“Aye, dear Patience, that’s the last we’ll hear from Sheridan for a few hours while he ponders your statement. Thank you for what you said to the mulish man. I must return home, but I will not stay away three years because at his side, fighting to protect him, is where I belong with or without my love reciprocated. I will not speak the oath of indifference to forget him. I would rather carry him in my heart even if we can never be mates.”

“I will take your concerns to Máthair when she returns, Ciara. Our Mother will know what you can do to ease the burden in your heart. I did speak the truth about the mage’s abilities to sense his bond and Gwydion has creatures he calls Hounds who once were normal mages, but now they are attuned to the Eternal Hero’s scent and of his mates. You will be safer at home until he kills the mage. Aye, I will speak of bonds and love when Máthair returns. He has had multiple wives in other lives. Perhaps you and he are meant to be, love. I enjoy my Sheridan more when you are around.”



**C**iara glared at the storm roiling overhead. The sodden clouds wouldn’t dump the white shit on them but rain would sure as bloody hells spoil their party. Patience’s statement echoed in her mind and she smiled. Magic was a wonder. Oh. Oh? Oh, hells, ask the man. She rode to the wagon and called to him in the cab. Sheridan scooted over and rolled the window down.

“Sheridan, have you ever contemplated a shield to keep us and our horses dry? Something like the one you use to deflect Five’s weapons? A big umbrella? Look, the day hunters are flying into the safety of the aviary. They bloody well know it will rain any moment. And we are in for a doozy of a storm.”

His eyes squinted and his lips squished in thought the way they always did before he spoke. She lied. He called Patience and she appeared in the cab with him lighting the interior with sapphire brilliance for a blink. They conversed for a while with his Fae pacing the air with a delicate finger poking her cheek in silent contemplation. Another Fairy arrived and he and Sheridan spoke for a while with animated gestures and many hearty laughs thrown in like males of any species who find humor in the most serious and sensitive topics. The male Fae blinked away and Patience shot her a wink and the OK sign. Oh, it was grand news. Máistir scooted to the door closest to her, exited the cab and she asked Rust to stop allowing the wagon to continue on without them. Sheridan smiled her favorite and thanked her for asking. He grasped her thigh and rubbed in the same way he created a body shield, but his touch still thrilled her all the same and her reaction wasn’t good for either of them.

“I learned a new shield thanks to your vivid imagination. Aye, it uses the wind or air elements with spirit and earth and creates a force repelling the rain. Shield and I had a grand conversation about destroying items testing the shield, but Patience put an end to our fun by reminding me of your question. The shield is anchored to your body and covers you and Rust. I’m not playing with your thigh, Ciara.”

“Aye, Sheridan. Play with my leg to your heart’s content if it will keep the bloody rain from soaking us to the skin. I can feel it in my bones, this will be one of the rain storms where an oiled cloak won’t suffice. You should shield the others or my jealous sister will claim you spoil your best friend too damn much again. But, in my opinion, you can pamper me all you want without a care in the world for her complaints, huh.”

He blushed his dimpled cheeks, patted her leg and walked away. Aye, she won’t make him blush for much longer. Why the hells did she refuse him when he professed his love? Ciara loved him more than the breaths of life and the portent of the magical kiss they shared was a blessing and did not escape her attention. Her heart found its home with his. Aye, but they weren’t back from the quest in Huber’s world long when Rihanna appeared on his doorstep with a baby. What would he have done with Rihanna if Ciara did accept his proposal? Bloody hells, it made no difference. She told him she would never agree to a relationship because of the disparity in life spans and she’d pay for her decision each aching heartbeat they were apart. Her heartache only bubbled up in her mind now, damn it, because she was leaving him.

Ciara watched him Talking with the raptors. He showed them the thin silvery transparent shield covering the aviary and informed them how to exit and enter without striking the shield. Aye, he had no clue how the force field would react to a bird flying into it. She whistled and motioned for Braelyn and Michael to ride back. The Sisters glanced back and she waved for them to return. Braelyn cantored back with her skeptical expression darker than the storm. Gods above, she was doing her a bloody favor.

“Máistir learned a new tool to play with. He will create a shield over you and your horses to block the rain starting to fall in fat drops as we speak. It’s his first attempt, so keep an eye on it and note how it reacts to wind and rain. He’ll improve it to perfection eventually, huh. We have an hour or more of riding in the rain before we reach Carter Caves.”

Sheridan created shields for them, the team of Percherons and Dax, tied to the rear of the wagon. Hells bells, she understood the concept and could duplicate the barrier. Aye, tomorrow she would attempt to create an air shield. The dogs retreated up the wagon’s ramp and through the door flap just as the sky opened up and dropped a deluge on them. Michael’s delighted laugh spoke for all of them. Ciara clicked her gaping jaw shut and stared in awe at the rain striking an invisible barrier over her head. Rust whinnied her approval and Ciara nudged her horse on. They’d never reach the caves standing on the road. Oh, shit she was such a fool.

Ciara used her magical eyes to inspect the shield, unpinned it from where he anchored the handles to her shoulders and slid from the horse. She attached the two magical rods on the saddle and released her work. She smacked her hands hard and Talked to Rust, telling her to walk beside Dax without her. Ciara climbed inside the cab to sit with Sheridan.

“I want to stay close to you for the short time we have left together. We don’t even need to speak. Do you mind?”

“Nay, I am always delighted to have you near. You picked up the concept of the shield quickly.”

“Good gods, Sheridan. What’s up with your smoky voice? My damn skin is one big goosebump for two bloody days. Oh, you spoke words I can add to my list to recall on lonely nights.”

“I have considered yours and Athair’s comments in regards to my voice. I have concluded it is my mature voice emerging. Sorry, but I believe it will remain as is until I die. Your skin and ears won’t suffer long, Ciara. Because you will return home, not that I plan to die soon.”

“Aye, you better not die on me before I return. I’ll be home training our warriors and you’ll be in the Rockies on a quest in the worst months possible to climb mountains. There’ll be snow up to your handsome chin and cold to frost the Ice Queen’s knockers. I wish we could Talk that far. I will miss you terribly dear friend, but I will return. You and I have a unique relationship and I will not enjoy living without you. Hells, your companions showed up at the perfect time or you would be all alone, huh.”

“I will find new squires and more warriors will seek me out. I might not be alone, but I will be lonely.”

“I understand. I wish we could take a detour—like around the world. The sooner we reach Liberty, the sooner I must leave you. Aye, so bloody much for my promise not to cry. May I use your leg as a pillow to hide my damn mushy emotions? I promise to behave.”

Sheridan patted his thigh for an invitation. Ciara removed her beret, tossed it on the dashboard, and laid on his rock hard thigh. She tucked in her left arm and held his leg with the right hand patting him in thanks. He rubbed her scalp with gentle strokes that calmed her and sent her straight to dreamland.

Her nap was short-lived. Patience splashed into view and announced a Na Siúracha was captured from the beach in Liberty City and Ciara should know who took her and where she’d be held. Aye. Bloody Reynolds needed to die, damn it. So, much for sleeping next to Sheridan.



**Chapter 23 Reynolds’ Compound**

**S**heridan spied on the compound through his vulture’s eyes circling overhead without causing alarm among the many soldiers inside the walls. The vulture's actions were as normal an event seen by the enemy as their drunken soldiers falling over the wall. He only recently imprinted the birds to spy on Reynolds’ activities and had to find new birds daily. The vulture’s attention span lasted to their next meal, and they didn’t much like taking it from his hand.

Reynolds never moved into the governor’s mansion in Pittsburgh when elected to the office. He remained in his estate west of Liberty City, and there must be a criminal reason. The man enjoyed his comforts and notoriety. Staying in Liberty made no sense. It no longer mattered. Reynolds abused his relations with the Queen for far too long. His days of special treatment and protection had reached the end, and Sheridan would take great pleasure in seeing him off, one way or another.

Sheridan, his companions, and Michael leading a Fist of Elves crouched in the scrub pin on the cliff behind the compound with a grand view of the gates and the parade grounds where soldiers ambled about in a drugged stupor. None of them appeared to do anything constructive. Well, unless pissing in a bucket from the second floor counted. The plan included the platoon of Paladins who traveled to Liberty with the intent of escorting the Sister to Albany. They would arrive at the gate with George Grace and his Guardians accompanied by his squires and three Talkers from Suaimhneas. While they kept the soldiers occupied at the gate, Sheridan and his crew would attack from the rear and surprise the vile soldiers. And then the real fun would commence. Sheridan scanned all the buildings below him and made a mental note of the layout, and distance, and his mind wandered over all the ground. It didn’t remain a secret long. Nothing remained a secret with Ciara to study his expressions.

“I’m watching your eyes search, and your silly expression, dear man. You will buy the property once the whanker is dead, huh? There must be barracks under the cliff as in Suaimhneas to hide all the soldiers in the compound. We’d have two places to house our troops and protect our actions from prying eyes. Aye, I’ve been landscaping the place for you since we arrived here. It needs a lot of trees and plants for sure, and throw in a few greenhouses, huh?”

Sheridan dropped his chin and shook his head. The hairs on his neck caught the breeze and chilled him to shivers. Why did she bother? Ciara might know him too well. Braelyn winked when he regarded the group waiting to attack. What was going on with the sisters? Hells, he better answer the lady before she leaked some embarrassing nonsense.

“Aye, Ciara, three greenhouses and many trees to shade the buildings, a meditation grotto where he has an ugly fountain and a line of fruit trees for screening the western sun instead of the ghastly block wall. Apples, pears, and peaches are what I’d plant. I’d tear down three of the ugly structures he uses for day buildings. I don’t believe we could clean them sufficiently to remove the stink of the soldiers. I am anxious to discover what is below ground. The underground set up will decide whether I purchase it or not. I have a hunch about what he seeks below ground. Other than landscape design, I am also considering hiring a cooking crew to travel with the growing army. That’s what spins in my mind. What are your thoughts?”

Her eyes widened like she was shocked he asked her opinion. She shuddered hard and smiled, guaranteeing sarcasm.

“I’ll ignore your droll school teacher voice and pretend you aren’t considering a cook because of my wonderful talents at the fire you gifted me. Hells bells, I agree with you for once. A cooking crew would hunt and forage daily and prepare meals accordingly instead of us figuring out how to cook what we find or Traveling for food. Bel’s balls, bestow the cooking skills with magic, and we’d eat well on the road. Oh, do you recall the cooking wagon we saw at the show in Springfield? Aye, you had a grand idea, brat. Mark the blessed day on the calendar. It might never occur again in our lifetimes.”

Aye, it was time to start the fiasco or run for the hills. Ciara was on a roll, and she might take him down or push him off the cliff. Sheridan ignored the quiet chuckles. Ciara wasn’t doing it for laughs.

He created a slide with the magical shield from the top of the wall to the ground behind an outbuilding and slid down first to show the rest the results to expect. He waited at the bottom to assist those skeptical about stopping before they slid on their butts across the ground. Ciara came second with a smile a child riding down would be proud to wear. Charlie didn’t shriek but her facial expressin was clear the slide frightened her. Syl and Maggie enjoyed the slide. Braelyn’s smile was as bright and happy sliding in the air on an invisible ramp.

Braelyn hit the ground and grabbed his arm, begging to learn the magic. He smiled back and promised she would learn what he constructed. The Fist didn’t hesitate, but they didn’t look happy until the end and smacked his arm for the fun ride. Michael slid down on his feet, which instigated a challenge to the remaining Elves. Ciara and Braelyn had to repair one broken arm out of fifty. He’d call it a good day. It wouldn’t have been that bad if the guy didn’t attempt a flip at the end. He flipped just a wee bit too soon.

Sheridan created a second ramp with less of an angle to the flat roof of a building and ran up first followed by everyone with more confidence in the magic. Sheridan created a shield wall with arrow slits he marked with tape for the archers to shoot through and take cover when receiving return fire.

The soldiers lining the walls above the gate intent on the approaching Knights and Guardians fell to their arrows shot from behind. A few turned to discover the new threat they were under and abandoned the wall to charge at the archers leaving the gate unguarded as he hoped. Well, he planned on them leaving so if asked, aye, it was genius.

“Just open the bloody gate and return, Máistir. Don’t you stay down there and engage the whankers without me. Aye? You aren’t in top form, dear man.”

“I’ll return shortly, Ciara. It was my plan, and I will stick to the script until I can’t.”

Aye, just play along for a few more days. She’d be gone and no longer torture his heart. When he appeared at the twenty-foot tall wooden structure, he heard her screams of dismay. What did she expect—a kiss goodbye? He tossed the brace up and pushed the gate open. The soldiers outside howled in delight and charged through attacking the enemy soldiers facing Ciara. Facing the wrong direction—again, as planned. Sheridan Traveled back to the roof and witnessed Ciara punching where she assumed he’d return.

“Predictability is the death of a warrior, Ciara.” More laughter followed his remarks not intended to elicit humor.

The main door to Reynolds interior compound slammed against the stone wall, and soldiers rushed out to help fight the invaders. It was what they waited for. He spotted George Grace anticipating the next move, and he gave Sheridan the signal. The Guardians were confident they would contain or defeat the numbers they faced.

“OK, it is our time to enter the devil’s lair. Everybody gather in a square and touch as we practiced.”

Storm’s eyes showed him a clear courtyard. Sheridan Traveled them to the ground, and they ran for the large wooden doors ahead. Ciara and Braelyn threw fire at the banded oak panels, and they were renedered to hot ash when they reached the portico. Boots trampled cinders sending sparks high to catch the wind. Nay, he would not worry about a fire in the scrub pine now. The group of sixty split with Michael and Braelyn leading one half to clean out the main floor, and find Reynolds. Sheridan lead his warriors down the stairs to the cells where Ciara spent one day before Reynolds loaded up eight women for delivery to his master. Gwydion used and abused women like others used tissues. He wouldn’t receive any more female victims from Reynolds if Sheridan had a say. The fop couldn’t hide behind the queen’s skirts anymore.

Ciara led them down three flights of carved granite and stopped at a door Ciara claimed was locked. Sheridan peered through the window and tried the door only to hear Ciara’s breath hissed through her teeth for not believing her word. He didn’t check to see if her claws were extened. Instead, he Traveled to the other side of the door and unlocked it, pulled it open, and she punched his chest.

“Don’t go off like that without telling me what you plan, damn it. How was I supposed to know you wouldn’t take on the bloody army alone because of one bloody locked door?”

Aye, he had a handful with whatever game Ciara played. Well, she made a valid complaint. It wouldn’t have been the first time he ran off as she claimed. Sheridan gestured at the open door and the hallway beyound, and told her the door was open now so why hang around arguing. The others laughed, and it’s not what he intended. He was serious. Ciara stared at him for a moment before she laughed with them.

“Aye, you will pay, dear man. When you least expect it, you will pay. Move your fine self out of my way, brat. We have women to save, and here you stand grinning like you won a kiss from the May Queen on Beltaine.”

He didn’t want a kiss from anyone on any day. He ran ahead, listening for footsteps. Eight doors lined the the hall to hold the eight women waiting for shipment to Gwydion. The first three rooms stood vacant, but the last five held a woman in each. The Na Siúracha occupied the first of the five rooms he searched, and the Elven lady spun around when the door opened with fists raised to fight.

“I am heartened you maintain a fighting spirit, Sister. I am Ranger Sheridan, with my companions, and we are here to set you free and deliver you safely to the King. Well met, My Lady.”

“Well met, Rangers, and honored Sister Warriors. It’s Patrice. My rescuers need not use propriety with me. I am more than delighted to meet you. Oh, Princess Ciara? I did not recognize you at first glance, Your Highness.”

Patrice attempted to curtsy but was stopped halfway by a laughing princess.

“I am the Ranger’s companion and have foresworn my royal station until the bully releases me as a Master Ranger. Well met, Patrice, call me Ciara, or Ranger Ciara if you require a title to use.”

Patrice studied each in turn for a long moment and nodded with a diplomat’s smile.

“Yes, Ranger Ciara, the title and role suit you, and you appear to be in your element and comfortable—dare I say at home at the Ranger’s side. I am thrilled to see Sisters with you Ranger. Sisters you couldn’t be in a better place to assist the Ranger and our world. Shall we open more doors? I have heard ladies crying day and night and not all coming from this hall of horrors. Oh, what of Reynolds? Please tell me I will have the opportunity, or nay, the pleasure to witness him squirm and scream in his nasaly whine when arrested?”

“My sister, Braelyn, is up there with the second half of our group to scour his home. She’ll coax a scream or two out of the whanker.”

Patrice gasped, and the look on her face was pure shock and joy for Sheridan to witness.

“Our heir apparent is running through the woods and crawling in the mud? I would pay to see Braelyn dirty or work up a sweat. We have known each other since childhood, and she was never the adventurous type. She was always the prim and proper lady putting on tea parties in the palace and dressing all her friends in lace and silk.”

“Aye, she loves to wallow in mud or Orc blood today, Patrice. We both pledged to Sheridan until we earned six Marks. We are heading home successful in our mission. Braelyn has killed her share of Orc and Goblins, and foul smelly soldiers. We even downed a Troll together for our warriors to kill. She is not so prissy, and these days, she prefers coffee over tea.”

As if on cue, Braelyn’s curses drifted down from the stairwell, and Patrice’s eyes widened in shocked awareness. Ciara told her she hadn’t heard Braelyn’s best. She must be behaving herself for some reason. It sounded like they couldn’t locate Reynolds and Braelyn was not happy—if it was Reynolds Braelyn referred to in colorful vulgar terms.

The other four cells opened to sad, depressed women not sure if they should believe in a rescue. Patrice took over their convincing, and the ladies brightened with encouragement after speaking with the diplomat for a while. Braelyn entered the room, and upon spotting each other, the two old friends howled at the ceiling and rushed for hugs.

“See, Sheridan, that’s how friends greet each other after a long absence.”

“Well, if you wait two hundred years, I won’t be much of a man to hug. You could always look for Doc. He’ll be alive.”

“Oh. Oh, good gods above. It’s not what I meant, brat. Just when I think there is hope for you, you ruin everything by saying something ridiculous like that. It happened last year damn it and still you bring him up. There is no bloody Doc in my life—there never was. I don’t think the whanker was real. But you won’t listen to me, huh? I’ll be outside healing soldiers when, or if you care to search for me to return home. I can find my way back to Suaimhneas if you don’t.”

“Máistir?”

He pointed at Ciara. Charlie grabbed Syl and Maggie’s arms. “Máistir wants us to protect the woman he loves, but will never admit. There is nothing in this empty building to harm him.”

Sheridan turned away when Ciara disappeared up the stairs with the three Na Siúracha. He marched off in the opposite direction down deeper into the underground facility. The hallway opened into a large gallery filled with bundles stacked neatly against the walls. He used a knife to slice the canvas, and a brownish powder poured out. Heroin, damn it. Tons of heroin waiting for distribution. He asked the Guardians to pile all the bundles to save him multiple trips, and he Traveled the drugs to the caldera in Yellowstone and dropped them in to burn away in the lava. The thick door inset on one of the walls led to a stash of gold coins.

He Traveled one third of the gold to the King’s private rooms in Albany. He left a note informing Alphonsus the gold was curtesy of Gwydion through his slave Reynolds. The Guardians worked in the gallery filling purses with gold to share with all the Guardians. Hah. The spoils of war. Captain Grace hurried them on, and he Traveled one third to the Temple in Somerset and the rest to his cellars. When he returned, they headed deeper underground where they heard hammering and the deep grunts of Orc.

He turned a corner and stopped everyone from advancing. Ahead was a crew of brown Orc clearing rubble from where a second crew chipped away at the pumus deposited by a volcano in the last millennia. Damn the Orc would discover the train if they dug farther. Railroad tracks ran under the rock the Orc worked hard to remove and extended to the east toward Liberty City. If the Orc broke through, they’d find the train he discovered years back and had Dwarves refurbish to use. Reynolds’ compound would be a staging area for enemy soldiers who’d board the flatbed rail cars and reach Lexington in a day. There must be a large shipment of Orc and soldiers expected. Nay, they would not infiltrate Esak, damn it. Sheridan drew his swords. George nodded, understanding the action and Sheridan called the red veil to cover his common sense and released the berserker.

The first Orc fell to his swords before the rest were under attack. One hundred Guardians, a handful of Elves and the squires joined in the battle. Orc roared in anger and fear when faced by a dozen men with blades. One roar too many cost their life because the Elves filled the mouth with arrows. His squires threw fire to confuse, and the Guardians responded quickly to take advantage. Sheridan released the berserker before a headache set in. They didn’t need his swords to kill the Orc. He screamed for George when an Orc they mistook for dead rose behind him. George spun around, and the beast swiped claws across his chest, sending him flying. A dozen men ran to kill the brute, and Sheridan ran for his friend. He slid in beside him and cut away his jacket and shirt, exposing four gruesome slashes. His intestines drooped, and one gash made a sucking sound when he breathed. He hadn’t much time to heal his friend. George could drown in his own blood.

“George, do you trust me?”

The man tried to laugh and wound up coughing and spraying blood straight up. He nodded instead of speaking. Sheridan laid his left hand on George’s head and his right on the chest wound. He tapped the Colonel’s forehead, and George relaxed into the deep restorative sleep of the Fae. Sheridan pictured the organs, muscles, bones, and skin tissue as it should be in a healthy body and poured his magic into George. His hands lit brighter than the noonday sun, and many gasps rang out in the silent crowd, and moans echoed in the tunnel. Sheridan sent health and strength into his friend and when done sat back on his heels wiping sweat from his brow. He leaned over and rubbed the four pink strips until they faded to normal healthy skin. Sheridan climbed to his feet, wobbled a bit, smiled at his stunned squires, and fell forward.



**C**iara ran down the tunnel pushing people aside and ignoring calls from the Fist. The boots of the three Na Siúracha slapped the cement behind her. She turned a corner and slid to a stop short of smashing into the wall. Charlied bumped into her and apologized. A crowd stood around a body she spotted between the legs. It was him on the floor. His essence disappeared when she was in the courtyard, and she prayed all the way he wasn’t dead. She pushed her way through and knelt at his side to search for a pulse. Thank the shining gods, a pulse existed, but too bloody faint to keep him alive for long. Ciara searched the faces for an answer, a reason why he laid here close to death without a wound.

“Somebody better bloody well tell me what happened to my best friend.” George pushed through his men to kneel at his side. Charlie squatted beside her and rubbed her neck. She’d thank the lady after.

“An Orc caught me by surprise, Lady Ciara. It struck my chest full on with four claws and ripped me apart. Sheridan knelt beside me and asked if I trusted him. I suppose he asked my permission to heal. When I answered, he released a power from the gods, and I am alive, healed, and hale, with no sign of ever being injured. My men said he stood and took a few steps before falling forward. Odhran caught him before his face kissed the ground, and here he lays.”

Here he laid. Oh, George needed instruction.

“Aye, even with magical healing, your body will react like it was injured, George. Prepare for bed rest at least three days. I’d make it six if I was your healer. It is the price we pay for magic. He sleeps exhausted because he was not in the best health, and you will ache like the wounds still exist. Beware of fever and call for a healer if you do develop one or experience pain. Patience, come here, please.”

The blue beauty blinked in sitting on his chest like she waited for the call. Patience placed a dainty hand on his head, chest, and removed the hand on his chest to rub his cheek.

“Airmid and Máthair declare he merely sleeps, love. His intact soul remains here in his body, and he will recover. He Talked all his magical essence to save George. Rest is the cure and plenty of it. Please take him to bed. He should not sleep underground with the stench of dead Orc.”

Ciara stood, searched the faces, and asked the young Rangers to lift him carefully. She ordered two Guardians to find a carriage on the grounds and hitch up a horse or two. Ciara told two more to find something to use as a litter. The last two checked with George first, but he nodded, and they ran off to obey. Ciara paced at Deaglan’s side who carried him by the arms with Odhran. Ardan held his legs and led the way.

“Lady Ciara, we have used our cloaks as a litter before.”

“Nay, Charlie but thanks for the offer. You’d have nine hells of a time taking him away from his squires.”

The young men chuckled, but they didn’t disagree.

“Deaglan, did you witness what Colonel Grace described?”

“Aye, Lady Ciara. It is as he stated, except when I saw the colonel, he was dead for sure. His chest bubbled from torn lungs, and intestines hung out gray and pink and slimy. Máistir placed his hands on him, and we were blinded by the light of his magic. When it faded, Colonel Grace was healed. Máistir rubbed the wounds away and stood for a moment before passing out. Máistir performed a miracle, Lady Ciara.”

“Nay, he certainly did something special, but it wasn’t a miracle or Patience would have declared it to the crowd, huh? He has learned a new magical skill only he has the power to perform. That is my guess, but we won’t know until the man wakes. How long will he sleep, Patience?”

“I have seen him in the same state, and he slept a week before opening his eyes. He needs to rest, love. His body was not at full strength when he healed this way again.”

“Oh. Oh? He possessed the same magic in previous lives?”

“Aye, my Sheridan would be the greatest healer alive if he didn’t need to be the greatest killer today as well. He relearned the skill this week while resting in bed. He tried too much too strong for too long, love. He will improve his skill as always. Aye?”

“Aye, as always, for damn sure, love. What is going on with him, Patience? Why did this skill manifest today? When did he learn the slides and ramps with air?”

“He is maturing, love. His magical powers are only limited to imagination, and our man who thinks too much has figured a way to increase his skills through research, meditation, and his sheer stubborn will. Our man recalls many skills from previous lives. Sheridan will be a fierce mage with awesome powers when fully grown.”

“Aye, it’s two years now until his awakening. Well, two years and six days, huh. I hope he doesn’t spend his birthday unconscious.”

Yeah, like he’d care if she attended his birthday celebration. Ciara tripped on the tracks and stopped to scan the area for the first time. She called for a halt. Reynolds searched for the bloody train. She hollered for Colonel Grace, and the man ran to her. Aye, she should bottle the voice for emergencies.

“Colonel, we must stop Reynolds from finishing his work. Would you care to guess what lies on the other side of the rubble?”

Colonel Grace studied the tunnel filled with pumus, and he studied the tracks heading west into the tunnel and east toward the ocean, and he smiled.

“We stopped them from completing a staging area for the beasts and soldiers to disperse in our kingdom by train. I would bet the tracks end at the water and Reynolds had slaves building a dock. I will inform the King that Reynolds was not at home and we couldn’t arrest him and Sheridan wants the home under surveillance. The telepath should have an answer by tonight. I will do what must be done. I owe him my life, Lady Ciara.”

“Aye, join the club, George. Everybody close to him does as well, and me many times over. He won’t remember it that way. He did what he does daily, without concern for his safety or life. You will need to live with the knowledge he’d do the same tomorrow if he had to. The way we can repay his actions is to ensure the man lives to old age with the many grandchildren he desires.”

George saluted with Mo Comhluadar Mo Neart and ran back to his men. Odhran stared out to space with blank eyes. Oh, he mimicked Sheridan’s look when he Talked with someone. Aye, they would contact An Chéad Scuibhéir for any message they couldn’t deliver to Sheridan since the Chéad Deirfiúr was a dog. Odhran showed her a sad smile.

“We will go to Somerset and follow orders, My Lady, but our Máistir will not send you home. He loves you too much to let you go.”

“Oh, Odhran; if only he weren’t so bloody proud and stubborn. Nay, I’m going home for sure. Sheridan will not ask me to stay.”



**C**iara watched him stir with a worried eye. Braelyn called it a lover’s eye, damn it. He moaned and sniffed. Aye, he smiled with recognition of her scent, and she’d never complain. Sheridan woke five days later and sat up like he slept a normal night’s rest.Thank you, shining gods. He woke in time for his birthday celebration. Sheridan removed the IV tube, amd catheter, rose from the bed in his boxers and traipsed on past Ciara without a bloody howdy do, stopped, backed up and bent to kiss the top of her head before continuing to the bathroom. What did the man dream of for five days? What did the kiss imply?

Braelyn was ecstatic to hear her Talked request for a glass of milk and a cup of coffee with breakfast for the Máistir. He dreaded the taste of coffee after brushing his teeth, so he drank milk first thing each morning. He should drink water after the milk, but she wouldn’t bring it up. The home erupted with joyous shrieks from inside, barks and screeches from outside all welcoming the silly man back to the land of the living. He returned from the bathroom wearing house pants and a tee shirt with a Ranger slogan. It read Rangers perform best in the dark. Ciara turned her heated face. Damn bully. Where did he find all the silly shirts? Each time she threw one away, it seemed like he showed up with two more. Sheridan returned to the patio door to scan the sky and ocean. His favored form of meditation.

“We welcome the sun that provides warmth and light to a new day Máthair blessed us to wake. We are grateful to rise and offer the work we do today for her and our family. Help us perceive the world with an open mind and loving heart so we may treat all as we wish they’d treat us. May we earn what we need, treasure what we have, and teach those less fortunate how to achieve both.”

“Thank you for the prayer, and good morning, Máistir. Breakfast is on its way up, and so is everyone else to say hello.”

He sniffed the air in the room, and a smile curled his lips for a blink before he sucked it back. The man didn’t miss a trick.

“You slept here with me?”

“Aye, as always like I told you. I left the room only to conduct business for you and returned to keep an eye on my best friend. I slept with you, but I behaved myself.”

“Aha, it explains my—never mind. Thank you, Ciara.”

“Never mind what? What were you going to say?”

He ignored her long enough for her to give in and fill him in on all the happenings while he slept instead. Reynolds’ estate was under surveillance, and the hole he dug, into the property, not his, was filled in by their Dwarf and Giant friends. It would take them a year to clear out the rubble, and they’d catch them. He was right about the tunnel. The Dwarves cleared the lava away and were a mere two feet short of discovering the train. The eastbound tracks ended at the sea with a dock for small ships. No worries, an ocean liner couldn’t dock in such shallow water. Reynolds returned and made no complaint to the authorities his home was invaded, his foreign soldiers killed, the Orcs eradicated. Go figure, huh?

“It appears you must wait a wee bit to purchase his land. Reynolds will screw up again for sure. Um, let’s see…Oh, Patrice reached Albany and said to offer you a welcome any time you wish to visit. She owes you a fine dinner and free womanly advice, whatever that implies. The four other ladies were returned to their homes happy as larks to be alive and free and excited as little girls over the Fairies’ appearance. Well, other than our normal daily routine, that sums up my time waiting for you to wake.”

The stubborn man stood at his patio door, staring at the ocean like his first time ever. The Shadows sprawling on the deck didn’t rise to greet him. There was something he wasn’t saying, damn it, and she wanted him to speak. His head drooped, and he shook a sigh from his lips.

“I wish to visit the area around his estate to investigate another idea I had while sleeping. I discovered some interesting facts about what buildings existed in the old world around his compound, and the information returned while I rested. The Shadows say I slept five days, and all of my wounds are healed. I must assume I healed myself while healing George. I do need more practice and learn to use less magic to accomplish what I wish. How is he?”

“George is fine. He rested for three days like a good boy, unlike a man I know intimately.”

Sheridan sniffed and continued meditating on the waves.

“Oh, you are in a sour mood. I‘ll answer all your questions first, dear man. You slept five whole days, and not all your wounds are healed, but you used all of your magical essence in the process of healing George. Your mother said, don’t do it again. Airmid said, don’t do it again, and I say don’t bloody well even think of doing it again—ever. Your thrombosis is better but not gone. Please take care of yourself.”

Nothing.

“Our three Rangers with Karl and Justin from here left for Somerset as you predicted.”

Oh, yeah, he would speak to her in teacher mode.

“Oh, yeah, I apologize for my immature outburst and deserting you when you went below to fight—I’m sorry, but you singed my sensibilities when you pointed out our disparity in life spans when I merely hoped to make a joke. I should never leave your side simply because you piss me off, huh? The closer I get to going home, the testier I am. I am truly sorry.”

“You have no reason to apologize. What I said was insensitive and uncalled for. I am sorry for offending you. I will dress after breakfast and investigate the land around Reynolds’ compound. When I return, I will remove your bonds and leave you in peace.”

“Nay, damn it. I refuse to have the pledge removed, and you won’t force a kiss on me. Good gods, Sheridan. We have been the best of friends. Why would you treat me so cruelly?”

“My intention is not to be cruel. I have a quest to face, and you are returning home where you belong. Your sister reminded me you have a betrothed at home waiting for your return. Life will continue on until it ends for us—much sooner for me. I will face each day one at a time and hope to achieve my goals. Once Gwydion is defeated, I can leave this world for good.”

“You wouldn’t kill yourself. Don’t even talk like that. I will face each day with you if you’d only give me a chance.”

“I would not commit suicide. I will leave Earth and find a quiet place to live out my solitary days painting or turning clay.”

The bloody breakfast arrived, and she left in a hurry before anyone noticed her tears.



**S**heridan led his two companions across the crust of an ancient mud flow. Ciara insisted they accompany him for safety reasons and he relented instead of arguing. She’d be gone soon, and he’d be alone so what’s the point? The surface creaked like thin ice on a pond, and the Rangers froze.

“Hmm? You ladies must be gaining back your baby fat.”

“I’ll show you baby fat, smart ass. Your big body weakened the surface. Move it, fatso. We don’t want to fall into the halls of hells.”

“Sorry. It was a poor attempt to make a joke.”

Ciara opened her mouth to respond, and he held a hand up forstalling any sarcastic reply.

He stomped on the surface and heard the hollow sound as he expected. He asked Ciara, and Braelyn politely to wait for him on the rock jutting out of the hardened clay for their safety. Braelyn moved off immediately, and Ciara did move, but not without a scowl and a warning of pain if he did something hair-brained as always. Sheridan Traveled to a spot ten feet above and fell, hoping to crack the surface. He cracked it too well and fell through the hole to the screams of the sisters. The light from the hole illumintated a floor far below. He Traveled to the floor instead of falling and Talked a bright fire to his hands, lobbed it to float overhead, and he whistled and gaped at the items in the massive room. He stood in an old world warehouse full of huge reams of some material. Sheridan drew a knife and attempted to cut a piece off to examine above in daylight. The knife wouldn’t slice it, stab through it, or harm it in any way. He Talked the fire-knife to a finger, and it sliced through like a breeze through a screen. Sheridan held it tight and Traveled to the spot where the sisters waited.

After Ciara’s overdramatic (as expected) outburst softened to normal toned curses, he handed her the swath.

“Cut it, Ciara. Stab it, poke a hole in it. Do your best or worst to destroy it with a blade. And then imagine sandwiching it between hardened leather panels.”

She glared at him like he lost the last screw, and his brain took a holiday when the lid lifted. Ciara attacked his request with evil intent. She would destroy the bloody cloth, damn it, and when she couldn’t, the two sisters laughed in curious defeat.

“How much of this miraculous material is down there, my crazy daredevil?”

“Well, if we made armor for every person in the world,—maybe enough to provide a new set of armor yearly for a long, long time. We have struck a gold mine but much softer and no need to dig and get dirty and hot, crawl around under…”

“Oh, hush, Sheridan. What a whack job crazy way to test the thickness of the crust. Can you imagine what we experienced when you fell through? Do you have any clue how distraught we were? Damn it; we thought you fell into the halls of Arawn’s hells. OK, I got that out of my system. Gods, you are impossible. I’m so glad I’m not your mother.”

“Well…forget it.”

“Nay damn it. Well what?”

“I almost said with Braelyn and the bright gods above as my witnesses, I am also delighted you are not my mother, Ciara.”

Braelyn laughed, punched Ciara’s arm, and gave him thumbs up. Ciara blushed and turned away with a hand over her smile. He gazed at the steel blue sky of October with the typical thin haze and the brassy sun losing its battle with the wobbling rotation of the Earth. The scrub pines and golden grasses swayed with the chilly breeze that tickled his skin, drying the sweat. He should be in bed. He might be healthy, but he was still worn out. Oh, hells, a bright moment struck like lightning, and he decided what to call the material.

“I believe I will call it Dragonscale. We need to rent a warehouse and speak to Billie. My cutting fire will work the material, and I bet it can melt into plates. Aye, I have the suit of armor in mind for this material. Oh, yeah, we could cover it in fancy worked leather. We…”

“Sheridan. Braelyn and I want to accompany you to the mountains and wait for your return with food waiting for you. Máthair declared you must live alone but not your whole life. I don’t understand her complaint either. You had lived alone long before we pledged to you. What is your problem with loneliness? Oh, I can sense your emotions, dear man. It’s abandonment and betrayal you fear, and I’m your latest abuser according to you. Please let me explain what happened in Phoenix?”

“It doesn’t matter. You are better suited for an Elf mate, and I will live alone. It’s time to return to Tranquility. I must meet with Billie and rent warehouses.”

Braelyn pushed Ciara aside and smiled, but it wasn’t in her heart.

“How long will you be gone, Máistir?”

“Six months should be sufficient, Braelyn. I’m not permitted to take the brood with me so they will stay home in Somerset. We shall learn how long it takes for my mule-headed stubbornness to learn a lesson.”

“You will have your six months. Today is your birthday, and we have prepared a party for you. We will celebrate your birthday tonight, and the next few days you can conclude all your business for the Dragonscale and quest. Ciara and I will take the next ship home. Please consider your decision and what Ciara said while you search in the mountains? I know you can live alone, and it wouldn’t take six months to satisfy Máthair, but you take the time you need. Complete the quest and prove it to yourself you can live alone. Succeed and come for the woman you love. Quit being so bloody stubborn and open your heart.”

He turned into the wind and pulled at the collar of his shirt. He would not return for Ciara.

“What about your promise to rest until you return to full strength, dear man?”

His head drooped, and he sighed. She wouldn’t quit pretending.

“Aye, I recall the promise and will hold to it, Ciara. I can live alone, eat, and exercise alone before I attempt to scale a mountain.”

“Well, damn it. Forget it. You will never be in the mood to hear me out anytime soon. I hope you succeed and pray you will return for me. The blessed truth is you can’t live without me. You need me and not just for my spears. You need Muirenn, Ena, and me in your life. And I need you as much, dear man. Ponder that wandering the Rockies on your quest.”

“Bloody promises will be the death of me.” Sheridan touched them, Traveled to the foyer, and left them there with Ciara shouting questions about what promise would kill him. He ran to his room, locked and sealed the door with magic.



**Chapter 24 Heading Home**

**C**iara grabbed the rails with white-knuckled tension to stop at the bottom of the gang-plank. It was like a magical force prevented her from advancing. Aye, if love was such a force, she had her reason. Her sister climbed toward the main deck ahead of her with Michael. Damn. She had to say more than what she shared with Sheridan. All the teases and innuendos weren’t sufficient. Ciara glanced over her shoulder and found him in the same spot. What if her ship sank, or it was hijacked on the open seas by Gwydion’s forces? She would never see Sheridan again, and he wouldn’t know the truth. Even if she survived the trip, could she live with herself if she didn’t confess?

For years she trained under his expert tutelage. She bled with him, killed enemy soldiers, Orcs, and Goblins with him. She mourned with him over Aoife’s murder. Aye, she shared his tent and his body heat in the frigid months while they hunted the enemy and the rifts in reality, the beasts, and soldiers used to attack the innocents of the American Kingdoms. Damn it, Sheridan held up to his promise. Ciara and Braelyn were headed home as Rangers, and she was damn proud of her accomplishments. But she’d lose the opportunity if she climbed the bloody stairs. Her best friend deserved the truth.

Sheridan’s brows rose in question. Aye, damn it, she stared at him for too long, and now he’d worry. Ciara tore her gaze from him and called for her sister. Braelyn glanced back at her immobilized at the bottom. Her big sister tsked and shook her head like she was bloody well disappointed.

“I have to tell him, Braelyn. I can’t leave with him believing I was unfaithful. I know he loves me, but he won’t admit it because of what happened in Phoenix. I can’t leave with him believing the lie when I rejected his marriage proposal either. I can’t marry him, but he must hear from me that I love him.”

Ciara had to reject his proposal. He’s a human, and she’s an Elf. She’d live thousands of years longer after he died and if she spoke the oath of marriage, she’d be broken hearted until she passed on. But Ciara yelled at him when she told him no because if she didn’t, she would’ve cried.

Braelyn sighed, glanced at the dark gray clouds trimmed in white in a cool October sky, and blew out her cheeks to sputter in frustration. “Aye, Ciara. You’d be miserable to live with if you don’t. Just don’t cry, sister. Save your tears for later. We’ll meet you in Sheridan’s suite with a glass of wine.”

Aye, Sheridan’s suite aboard the good ship Star of Atlantis—the first ship he purchased. Oh, bloody hells. It felt like her feet were nailed to the bloody dock. She shot a look over her shoulder and found the strength to move. Sheridan walked towards her, brows bent in concern. Ciara tugged her Ranger beret tight and spun to face him with a smile. Sheridan shook his head. He knew it was forced.

“Have you forgotten something, Ciara? I could Travel to your forests with whatever you left behind, or send it on the next ship if you don’t want me to visit.”

“Like I wouldn’t cherish a visit from you. Oh, that’s just it, you stubborn imp. It is you I’m leaving behind, and it burns my heart to cinders. You won’t hear my reasons, nor ever forgive me for Phoenix, but I swear I was not in the bloody restaurant by choice. I do owe you an apology for something else, Sheridan. I lied to you, and I can’t leave with the lie in my heart.”

Sheridan squinted his emerald green jewels and gazed at the sky as was his penchant when he considered every angle of a problem before he responded. He didn’t really notice the clouds scurrying by to bunch up over the Atlantic in an omen of bad weather for her voyage. He nodded hard concluding his study and smiled.

“Tell me, Ciara. I can’t recall you ever lying to me. I will forgive you regardless of the transgression. How many blunders have I made and you forgave?”

“Aye, my dear naïve best friend. The truth is I love you and have loved you since the winter trials when we shared our histories and our heart’s desires. When we kissed on the mountain pass in Huber’s world the following spring, a magical power filled my heart and bonded us like we belong together—just like when you kissed Ena and Muirenn. You know you felt it as well. My best friend knew what the kiss implied better than me. The proposal wasn’t a spur of the moment decision for you. The bond declaring us destined mates is why you asked me to marry you. I lied when I rejected your offer of marriage. I yelled at you because I was afraid, Sheridan. My dear stubborn man. Find me an oath to fade when you die, and I will marry you. Even if you can’t; complete your quest and come for me. Please? I can be your partner in life and the Rangers and ignore the mate pledge. Muirenn and Enapay will be your wives.”

Sheridan closed his eyes and rocked on his feet. The sure sign he was into heavy thinking. Was he concentrating on the past? What he did when they returned from Huber’s world? Ciara knew he found Rihanna soon after returning because Ciara broke his heart and right after her refusal, Muirenn stomped on his heart while it burned with Ciara’s rejection.

Rihanna was almost the spitting image of Muirenn. Well, except her nasty attitude and wickedness robbed the girl of any refined features. But, Rihanna gave him a baby girl to love. Rihanna swore she drank the teas, but when she showed up on Sheridan’s door step pregnant with his baby, he pledged to her for the baby’s sake when Aoife was born. He should’ve paid the skank to leave and kept his baby. Sheridan didn’t love Rihanna. That bitch didn’t deserve his love. Aye, she shouldn’t talk bad about the departed, but Rihanna relished the moments she could torture Sheridan with her acerbic taunts and blatant derisive behavior just to embarrass him in public. They’d never know what scheme Rihanna played when she and poor Aoife were murdered by Gwydion’s soldiers. The woman had no business taking his baby to meet the bloody enemy.

“If you seek the truth, I also lied to everyone. I didn’t love Rihanna. I carried the guilt for her death, but I never loved her. Your mirror twin, Célia, and Deoirenn helped me uncover the truth and admit I loved my baby girl and you. You constantly reminded me I love a princess from Ireland but swore the oath of indifference to forget her because she broke my heart. Ena is the third destined wife, and I love her. Here we are. I love three women and will not admit that in public for anyone. I might die on this quest—why bother when there is no future? Why would you ever love me? Why would you associate with a lecherous fool?”

Ciara would not cry, damn it. “This is not the place to hold this conversation, Sheridan. We could’ve spoken all night if you answered my knock. Bloody hells, Captain Jack will blow the bloody horn any second. I must return home to train our clan for your army, and you have a quest to walk the Path of Resurrection. My dear Sheridan. I have never been and will never be unfaithful to you. You were my first lover and will always be my only man. I know your mother spoke to you about bloody Doc being a setup from the dark gods.”

“It makes no difference. I am a lecherous fool in love with three women. I should live alone as punishment for my unnatural desires.”

“Nay, you are not lecherous. The whole truth is you can love three women. Enapay probably cries herself to sleep, wondering where you are and if she’ll ever see you again. Speak to your mother. Our goddess must have an answer for you. The Lakota people have multiple wives in their marriages because of the disparity between the sexes, so it proves it can work. I’ll marry you with my sister wives. Put your great mind to the problem and find me in six months. Aye? Oh, bloody hells. You bloody well better rest up to recoup your strength. You promised me you would rest before embarking on the quest.”

The feck’n ship’s horn blared, and the captain yelled down to her to get on board. Now. Oh, bloody hells. Sheridan didn’t smile.

“I’ll rest as promised. I don’t have an answer for you now. I don’t know how I could love three women with a clear conscience when their lives are at stake for associating with me. I will speak with Patience and my mother before I enter the mountain and if I learn to love guilt-free, I will find you in your dreams, and we will discuss our future.”

“Done. A promise is made, and the bargain gratefully accepted. I must leave, Sheridan. I had to tell you I love you before I boarded or I’d mope about for years like some mushy girl. Good luck on your deadly quest that scares me witless, and stay alive you stubborn imp. We’re still best friends?”

“Aye. Forever and always as we promised and because it is what we desire. Good luck with teaching your warriors how to fight on horseback. I do love you, Ciara.”

She squinted at his face and studied his eyes for the lie, but all she saw and felt was his love and sincerity.

“Aw, Sheridan, I can sense the truth in our bond. You do love me. OK, no mushy girl crying nonsense on a bloody public dock, damn it. Aye, I still hear your words echoing in my head. It is fine music for my pointy ears. Think of me—think of us, love. Oh, yeah, it will be a grand fine voyage for me. I do apologize for my nasty attitude. I dreaded this day coming without telling you the truth. Oh, look at your smile. I was not that bad, brat. Get on with you now. I will not stand at the rails and watch you fade in the distance because I will not cry after hearing you confess you love me. Nay, instead, I will celebrate in your suite, thank you very much. I might even sleep on your bed. The magic recognizes my voice, huh? There’s no lock or magic that can bar my way on your ships.”

“There is nothing in the multiverse to bar your way to me, Ciara.”

“Aye, wasn’t that grand. But it’s your stubborn will I’m fighting, imp. There is no greater barrier Muirenn, Ena and I face. Open up and let your heart free, dear man. I’ll see you in the dream world in six months because I know you will succeed.”

Ciara grabbed two fists of hair and pulled his lips down for a kiss. She planted a second and ran up the gangplank laughing and joking with the captain about her delay. She blamed it all on Sheridan insisting she gave him another kiss. Sheridan owned the bloody ship so the good captain couldn’t say boo to her. The old man just shook his head, but he wore a grin to cheer up the nastiest grouch.

Sheridan admitted he loved her.

She knew for damn sure he did, just by the way he looked at her and his actions over the years, but to hear him finally admit it and speak the three little words thrilled her to tingly chills. Yeah, don’t get too excited. He loved three women, and he had to come to grips with the truth. If he couldn’t, he’d forget all three and live alone.

Ciara would share his heart with Ena and Muirenn. She could sense through their magical bond he’s quite capable of loving three women. Well, the stubborn Ranger would need to kiss Muirenn to dispel the bloody oath he spoke in haste. And Ena and Muirenn would have to agree. Enapay must learn what he said. Aye, Ciara would send Enapay a telegraph to inform her their fine man traveled in the Lakota Nation. Ciara would bet the Home Tree Ena’s seven thousand warriors could find one handsome Ranger walking alone in the mountains. Stay alive mulish man. Ciara would beat him silly if he came to harm after his admission of love.

She stepped around the corner and plastered herself against the wall. She peeked out and her damn face heated up like a girl stealing her first kiss behind the barn. The lovely man hadn’t moved. Ciara stepped into view, blew him a kiss and waved. Sheridan waved back and did an about face. Aye, come on now, dear man—One more time. Oh, his birds were in the air. She found his eagle Ice directly overhead and waved to her. The eagle screeched a greeting in return. Ciara looked back at the pier, and there he stood smiling right back at her. She blew him a second kiss, and she spotted his shoulders shaking. Aye, he’s stubborn as a mountain. Oh, bloody hells, he caved in and blew her a kiss. Ciara pumped her fists, waved and ran up the stairs to the suite on the second level.

Braelyn had the inner doors open with the screen doors shut to let the air circulate. Aye, they shouldn’t need the coolers for a voyage in October. The wind turbines whirred to life, and the vibration of the shaft spinning the propellers was a welcomed sensation. She’d be back, damn it. She’d hunt the stubborn man down if he didn’t come for her in six months. Hells, she learned how to track from the finest Ranger ever to earn his marks.

The breeze caught the light screen door when she released it, and it shut with a metallic bang. Braelyn peeked out from her room, and her eyes widened. She caught her big sister painting her nails. It was one girly habit Ciara never adapted. Well, it wouldn’t kill her to try it once if Braelyn had the right color. Braelyn’s eyes squished into two blue shards of doubt. “You’re not crying.”

Ciara laughed with blessed relief. “Of course, I’m not—I have no bloody reason to cry. Sheridan admitted he loves me, and I confessed my love for him. I’m moving my stuff into his big-ass bedroom and sleeping on his huge bed under silk sheets. We can sit on the balcony, pull bottles of wine from the bar, listen to his collection of albums, and watch the whales breach and the dolphins play the whole blessed way across the ocean, huh?”

“I don’t mean to spoil your mood or dim the luminescence of your skin, but what will you do about Aedan when you arrive home? Mother’s last letter claimed he'd be waiting for your signature on the betrothal documents.”

“I’m not signing any bloody contract to marry Aedan. I didn’t sign it before we left and I haven’t changed my mind. Just because he is the commander of the warriors in our forest doesn’t give him a foot into the palace of the Queen. I’ll not be his bloody stepping stone to more power. I never loved the man and now I never will. My heart is Sheridan’s for life, dear sister.”

Braelyn shocked Ciara out of her socks by hugging her and taking her arm to walk to the big doors of his personal suite. The second deck boasted twelve exquisitely appointed double occupancy rooms for his squires, companions, and guests to use, but Sheridan’s personal rooms were bloody fabulous. Ciara didn’t miss the smirk on her big sister’s face. She expected Ciara to fail when she spoke the command for the doors to unlock. Ciara held the magical knot depicting Sheridan’s design of a stylized dog, cat, eagle, and horse head attached to a winding dragon body encircling his initials in gold. He gifted her the knot after their first year together to use when she shopped, or signed them into inns and hotels, or pay for meals. Sheridan assured her she could never spend too much. She never tried, damn it. Ciara wouldn’t break the trust he offered.

“Open.”

The locks clunked, the seals released with a whoosh and the right-hand door swung open with a soft whisper. Thank you, Sheridan. Ciara pushed the solid mahogany monster open all the way. She faced her sister to wave in first. Braelyn’s expression was the epitome of surprise. Her big sister was even shocked to silence. Braelyn didn’t receive a knot because she always traveled and roomed with Michael, her promised husband, and Sheridan’s blood brother. Michael was also Sheridan’s business partner, so he also possessed a Kingston knot. Braelyn sputtered her lips and shivered.

“Michael just told me his knot wouldn’t open the doors to Sheridan’s bedroom. Why does yours?”

“Because one day I will be his wife and First Sister of the Kingston Family. Sheridan gifted me this knot when he had hoped I would marry him. He never asked for its return, love, and aren’t I bloody thrilled he didn’t because I will be his wife one day. I joked with him on the pier about sleeping in his bed and my magic able to open his door. Sheridan replied nothing in the multiverse will bar my way to him.”

“What about the oath? Will you pledge as it stands today?”

“Nay. My future husband—he doesn’t know one yet, but the man who thinks too much will find me an oath I can pledge.”

“Well, bloody hells, Ciara. I am thrilled to giggles for you. Good. I’ll fetch Michael to join us in a drink to celebrate and watch the waves from your balcony.”

“Aye, just prevent me from getting drunk and jumping overboard to swim back to him. Let me see what color nail polishes you have.”

“You’re serious?”

“Aye, if it’s a color Sheridan would approve.”



**Chapter 25 Templar in Trouble**

**S**heridan promised all the young brothers and sisters he’d be fine. He had climbed the stairs beside the cascading seven tier water fall many times. He’d finish the climb straight up the bluff in the middle of Liberty City while his family took the long way on the winding road in the carriage. The small children couldn’t attempt the steps. They would never reach the top without help, and he asked the older Talkers to ride the carriage because he needed time to process Ciara’s declaration and her warnings. How could she beat him silly if he died? He sure wouldn’t feel it.

Before Ashling climbed in, she faced him all pink from a blush and smiled her best effort. She was nervous about speaking with him. He pulled the girl into his arms and hugged her tight.

“Don’t ever fear to speak to me, Ashling. I am your big brother and sisters love to yell at their brothers for acting the fool.”

The young lady backed away and blew out a breath of nerves. “I just wanted to ask if you told Lady Ciara you loved her. We can all see you do, Máistir.”

“Aha. Well, your answer is aye, and she admitted her love for me, although I don’t understand why she would after I confessed I loved Ena and Muirenn. Ciara was adamant—like I need to explain that bit of news. She insists I will marry three women. I have much to consider on my quest in the Lakota and Wesak lands.”

Ashling clasped her hands and held them tight against her chest. She closed her eyes and raised her face to the sky as she prayed her thanks to the shining gods above. The young Talker curtsied and sighed a deep breath of relief.

“It will work out, Máistir. We see no obstacle to your happiness other than you, Sir. Please love the three ladies. We would have three First Sisters ruling our family. Aye?”

“Aye, Ashling. Go on with you now. I’ll see you at dinner, love. Since I don’t have a battle to face, I need exercise to release the tension inside me, and climbing the stairs is a fine start.”

“You miss Lady Ciara already?”

“Aye. All the ladies in our family are smarter than me and can read me like a book.”

Sheridan kissed Ashling’s forehead and guided her to the coach. He headed for the long climb up beside the tiered waterfall splitting the city in two. He glanced up at his home, perched atop the cliff, facing the ocean and laughed. When was the last time he was fool enough to attempt the stairs? Well, he’d take his time and walk as he pondered the future. Ciara loved him. Aye, that should put a spring in his step. He did need to beat the carriage to the top, or the little ones would worry. Hells, bells, it was only a five hundred foot climb, and the carriage must traverse a two-mile-long winding road. OK. The race was on.

“Patience, come here, love.”

His Fae companion burst into view with sapphire sparkles of her joy. Another female who knew him well. She should. Patience had been his companion for eons. The Fae flew to his shoulder to sit as usual and ripped his beret off his head (as usual). She didn’t toss it away, which was strange. She handed it to him so she could concentrate on running her hands through his hair. He once questioned the Fairy about her peculiar habit, and she declared she had combed his hair for eons of reincarnated lives with him and she wasn’t about to stop now. There was not much he could use to argue.

“Have you considered our dear Ciara’s words?”

“You eaves dropped on our conversation?”

“Aye, of course. You were both clothed, and there was no serious kissing going on, so according to your rules, I was permitted to listen. Aye? I knew it all along the lady loved you. How many times did I tell you, huh?”

“You are picking up Ciara’s quirky speech habits, love. I haven’t had time to consider what she said. I called you to toss about some ideas, questions, and concerns before I speak to Máthair.”

“Máthair has not returned yet, but I know what your mother will say, love. This is not the first life where you had multiple wives or multiple husbands for that matter. Máthair and the All Father don’t count heads when you swear an oath. Love the ladies deeply and love them equally and for goodness sake, quit accusing yourself of lewd and lascivious behavior. Ciara already informed you the Lakota practice polygamy. There are three times as many females as males in their society. It is a logical progression which is accepted by the gods. On some worlds in the multiverse, where you once lived, people adopted polyandry.”

Her fingers snagged a few knots in his hair, and she attacked them with gusto. Aye, his hair wouldn’t be as long if he didn’t need to hide the scars on his scalp and the missing piece of his left ear. He received the wounds at the winter trials where Ciara stated she realized she loved him. Hmmm?

“I smell the smoke, Sheridan. What are you thinking?”

Sheridan assured his Fae he wasn’t thinking. He recalled memories. Aye, he had to relate the whole string of conscientious musings and Patience giggled.

“Ciara sure teased you good with her caramel lipstick on the bourbon cask. It’s a shame you two didn’t kiss then, huh? The magic of the first kiss told you she was your destined mate. Why be so mulish about fate?”

Oh yeah, Patience latched onto Ciara’s huh for good. Hells, what would’ve changed? Ciara would have rejected him a year earlier is all he could guess. He would not have had Aoife to brighten his life if Ciara accepted his proposal. Sheridan would not have lost his baby girl to vile murderers.

Hells, The Lakota society lost many males in battles. Aye, but they had created female warrior societies within the clans. They called the initiation rites marrying their weapons. The future would prove the logic of their decisions. Aye, if Sheridan continued to stay hidden from Gwydion and defeated the maniac after he survived his awakening at twenty-one, the practices might survive or societies using male and female warriors, could be eradicated in the battles ahead. Oh yeah, no pressure on him.

“Are you planning on walking the whole distance? Duh, you could Travel home, silly.”

“Aye, Patience. I could, but I’m having a wonderful conversation with my Fae companion and enjoying the cool breeze from the splashing waterfall. The sights are grand and the day is young. Ciara’s ship has not passed beyond the horizon either. You have often remarked how I do my best thinking when I run, and I assure you, this climb is no less taxing than running.”

Heavy panting and the slap and scuff of boots turned him around to scan the lower steps. A Lady Knight wearing her breastplate and chain struggled up the stairs.

“We will Travel to her, Patience. She will kill herself running in full armor.”

Sheridan Traveled as the Fae do to the steps above the Knight. She jerked to a halt gripping the hand rail for support. Her chest heaved with her valiant effort. She appeared to be in fine condition considering the weight she carried, but why would she run the stairs in armor?

“May I be of service, Lady Knight?”

She held a finger up and gulped in buckets of air to retrieve her voice. Her face was the color of salmon, and her skin gleamed with sweat. She leaned on the rail hyperventilating and spat a few times. Aye, she might puke up her lungs. He asked Patience to fetch him a canteen of cool water, and his Fae kissed his head and blinked away.

The Knight turned her head, resting it on the cool metal rail and squinted at him. Between deep gasps for breath, she spoke.

“Are you Ranger Sheridan?”

“Aye, and you, Lady Knight, are Caitlin Finnegan. I didn’t recognize you with a red face.”

Patience returned with the canteen and delivered it to the Lady, who bowed her head in thanks and nearly drained the contents. She groaned and spat into the cascading water and capped the canteen with a second nod to Patience.

“You have grown at least a foot, up and out at the shoulders, since we last met. Well, the last time you laid on a table in the infirmary. I am Knight Caitlin Finnegan, blood sworn protector to Princess Muirenn O’Kelly of Ireland. My Lady has been abducted from our bloody carriage on the way to the Greenwood Inn—right off the bloody docks. The men surrounded us and threatened to kill me if she did not go willingly. The stubborn woman ordered me to stand down, and they tossed her in a carriage and took her. I need your assistance in getting My Lady back, Sir.”

“Did they have a black carriage with gaudy brass trimmings?”

“Aye. You know it?”

“Aye. Governor Reynolds owns the carriage. He has abducted women several times, and we have thwarted his efforts in sending the poor souls to Gwydion. I will assist you, Lady Caitlin. I would assist you if I didn’t know Muirenn. We will Travel to my home when you catch your breath. The gray nothing between here and there has disturbed others in the past. Trust me, it will not last long, and it will not harm you.”

“It’s the way you just disappeared from Kylemore after you completed the oath of indifference. It’s the same magic the beautiful Fae used to bring me water. Aye, I will not scream like a girl with a spider on her knee, Sir.”

“Where is your carriage?”

“The bloody bastards stole that too. Lady Muirenn had just purchased the bloody thing not an hour before. If we didn’t dawdle in all the fancy shops around Market Square, we would be in our comfy little rooms at the inn deciding how to approach your home.”

“My home?”

“Lady Muirenn came prepared for the battle of her life to confront you about the bloody oath you spoke and ask for a kiss to erase it. She has not forgotten you for a single moment, Sir. Every obstacle, each roadblock, the field trials, archery tests, the sword forms—she recalled your words of advice, and it got her over the hurdle with a grand smile on her lips. She is always touting, my Ranger this and my Ranger that. She wants her Ranger back, Sir.”

“Patience?”

“Aw, I’m the only female left to ask advice, huh? You shouldn’t have sent the Sisters to Somerset with the Rangers. And—Ciara should be here to tell you what to do, you stubborn mule. You do love Murienn. Kiss her and end the lady’s torment.”

“Lady Ciara is gone?”

“Aye, she just departed on the ship I assume brought you to our shores. Ciara has earned her Ranger tab and returns home to train her clan in warfare against the beasts Gwydion dispatches to destroy our world.”

“Damn, My Lady hoped to enlist Lady Ciara in the war against you, Sir.”

“There will be no war, Lady Knight. We will free Her Highness. I must head west on an vital quest to achieve magical talents and learn the Way. You and she may travel with me, and we will see what fate decides. Aye?”

“You will walk the Spiritual Path?”

“I will attempt the path to resurrection, Lady Knight.”

“Aye, we will accompany you. It’s a damn sight better than the bugger off I expected, Sir. I have caught my breath and can stand on my own. Who in the nine hells built these bloody steps, and why did you build your home on the bloody top? I’m teasing. If not for my armor, I’d enjoy this little jaunt daily. I wasn’t about to strip the armor and leave it down the hill. Oh, her birds and dogs—and a wacky fox. Can you call them back before a bloody whanker shoots them?”

“My birds have already located the carriages and Lady Muirenn’s brood. Their mothers are returning to our home with their babies. It is Reynolds behind the abduction. The carriages turned into his compound. I must assume the soldiers placed a hood on your lady, or she would’ve burned the coach down once you were free.”

“Aye, it’s what I was hoping to witness, but when the carriages turned down a road out of view, I knew she was hooded. I asked a fella for the location of your home, and here we are.”

“You are fortunate. I planned to depart Liberty City within the hour. Patience?”

“Don’t look at me, silly. I didn’t tell you to walk the steps instead of riding in the carriage with our family and miss meeting Lady Caitlin. It’s fate, love and you fell in face first, huh?”

Sheridan would not reply and fall into her verbal trap. He touched the Knight’s arm and Traveled to the drive by the carriage house. The Knight did not scream as she promised, but her face betrayed her opinion of Traveling. She shivered and stomped her feet, smacked both sides of her head like dispelling water and sputtered her lips.

“You should warn the next person about the bloody horde of mosquitos buzzing in the ears. I wasn’t prepared for that nightmare, for sure. This humungous home is yours?”

He ushered her toward the front door, Talking to his birds flying over Reynolds’ compound. The man should be jailed if not dead for what he’s done. Kidnapping a princess should earn him a hefty prison term.

“Aye, and it is home to twenty six Cainteoirs, ages ranging from six to seventeen, a retired Ranger, a cook, three teachers, and three maintenance men. The wing on the left is a working Inn and restaurant, and the large yard crew lives above on the third floor. The hostlers live on the fourth floor. The center building is home for our family, and my personal space is this wing closest to the ocean where we will enter. My squires and companions reside in my section when they travel with me. I will show you to one of those rooms to rest while I gather Cainteoirs and warriors to storm Reynolds’ compound. It will take no longer than an hour.”

“Aye, a nap is mighty appealing. Thank you.”

“I will have a girl follow us up to take your clothes for cleaning and return them before you wake.”

“Good gods, you provide service like the ship. If we didn’t exercise daily, I’d never have made it up the bloody stairs as far as I did.”

“The Star of Atlantis is the flagship of our fleet and each pride themselves in their ability to provide excellent service. Captain Jack is a crusty old sea dog, but he knows how to pamper a customer.”

He led them through the heather to clean their boots, opened the door and gestured for her to enter first. The Knight took one glance inside and froze. “I can’t go in there. I’d be the bloody proverbial bull in a china shop in my armor. The home is too elegant—too exquisite to wear armor inside.”

“Nay. My family and I do wear armor when required. We need only traverse the foyer and climb the stairs to the bedrooms. There is nothing you can destroy on the way. Aha, the carriage arrives. We will have Ashling lead you up with Patsy to gather your laundry. I will head downstairs to speak with Colonel Grace of the Guardians after introductions. If they weren’t occupying the underground compound, I would’ve offered you a room there where our military leaders stay.”



**Chapter 26 Rescue Muirenn**

**C**aitlin knelt with the Ranger across from bloody Reynolds’ compound, and it matched its name. It was no mansion. Square squat buildings stacked like a kid left his blocks out was the best way to describe the ugly place. Reynolds’ had no taste, and after leaving the Ranger’s fine home, Reynolds’ place disgusted her.

Lady Muirenn would not be happy to hear Lady Ciara left for home. Hells, the Ranger did claim he would give her the opportunity to talk with him daily until he must leave them for his quest. Damn, The spiritual path of the warrior. Caitlin was bloody well impressed. She’d be more impressed if he returned. Many Knights failed in their attempt to walk the path to resurrection.

Ranger Sheridan proclaimed he sent a telegraph to Albany and Somerset to ascertain the location of King Alphonsus. He declared royalty must present themselves upon arrival in Esak. She had to ask what Esak was and learned it was the acronym for the Eastern American Kingdom. With a bit of time and her Lady free, she could’ve figured it out.

“How will you get to the main door through a few hundred smelly stooks, Ranger?”

“I’m waiting for the storm clouds overhead to form, and when they are ripe for lightning, I will shatter the gates and lead us in to kill all who stand in my way.”

“Save some for me, damn it. I have enough hatred inside to wind me up like a bloody clock. I could kill ten or twelve before I need a breather and a dozen more after. I’ll keep going until My Lady is freed.”

“You’ll kill more, Lady Knight. His soldiers stationed here are drug addicts with little skill. It will be a butchering, not a battle. Gwydion’s soldiers intimidate with numbers, and they pillage, rape, and murder the weak. Every off-world soldier slaves deserve to die.”

“Aye. I have no qualms culling the sick bastards for slaughter.”

“Stand and draw your weapon, Lady Knight. Please stay away from my blades. I will call the berserker to aid me in this battle.”

Caitlin rose and stretched her cramped legs. The damn climb affected her more than expected. She should run up the bloody stairs daily. Her Lady would love it. Hah, she could hear the curses and screams already. Aye, but she would run and thank Caitlin later.

“Lady Muirenn is a berserker. She fought off fifty damn good swordsmen standing over my body to defend me. She claimed a red film clouded her vision, and the world slowed down for her to kill with ease. I rubbed her head as your companions did after that fight I witnessed.”

Caitlin pulled her great sword over her shoulder and nodded her readiness. It was time to repay her Lady’s kindness. She jolted and took a step back when the first lightning bolt blasted away at the gate. The Ranger could bloody well warn a girl.

Splinters, chunks, long slivers of wood exploded with each new bolt to strike until the gates gave up and swung open. The lightning ceased as quickly as it started and the Ranger jogged across the road and through the gate. Caitlin stayed right on his tail with her sword at the ready.

He didn’t draw his swords. He picked up two from dead soldiers. She was one inhale from asking why when the bloody lightning struck the blades and remained. The steel sparked and dripped molted fire on the ground. Aye, why ruin his good blades with magical fire. The Ranger tore into the swarming men and Caitlin had to click her jaw shut and shake the stunned fog from her head. She had better start swinging her sword, or there would be none left to kill. The whankers gave her and the Guardians ample opportunity because they steered clear of the Ranger and his sparkling blades that cut through armor and men like an oar through the water. He mowed the field of smelly, vile bastards holding her Lady.

Many of Reynolds’ men ran into one of the ugly out buildings and slammed the door. The Ranger threw his right blade to stick in the wood, and Caitlin plugged her ears a heartbeat before the bolt of energy blew the door to fiery pieces. A dozen Guardians charged inside, and she returned to following the berserker headed for the large double-door entry to the largest block of cement.

The doors slammed open, and at least one hundred men flooded out, screaming a challenge. The Ranger bent over and claimed a new weapon he called lightning to spark. The eejits had a change of heart a wee bit too late. Aye, she wanted a piece of this. Caitlin ran after the crazy Ranger to enjoy some old-fashioned whooping.

She chopped a whanker in the side crushing his armor, ribs and a few of his organs. She rotated searching for her next victim and came up with none. The Ranger stood at the door facing inside, and his shoulders heaved with his deep breaths Caitlin tapped his shoulder, and he growled.

“We kick down each door and release prisoners until we locate your lady. Aye?”

Caitlin wouldn’t argue with his harsh voice if he asked her to darn his socks.

“Aye, Ranger. I’m itching to end this and bring My Lady back to your gorgeous home. She will giggle for days when she walks through the door.”

Caitlin sensed the presence of bodies and heard the heavy breathing of many trying to recapture their wind. She turned her head to discover all the Guardians lined up to join the party. She repeated what he told her and the word spread down the line quickly. The last man hollered ready. She tapped the berserker’s shoulder, and he took off inside. How would he kick the doors in?

She found out when they reached the first locked door. The Ranger just slammed his boot into the door shattering the lock, and it swung open on broken hinges. It was a store room for linens. He said grab some, they might need them and she entered without question to pass out sheets to the Guardians. The Ranger waited for her, and she nodded her thanks. His eyes returned to the shiny emerald, and he smiled back. “Do you have a headache?”

“Nay, the battle rage didn’t last long. I’m improving with each episode. Although, I did enjoy waking to Ciara’s voice and her fingers in my hair.”

“Aye, well, now you have a new lady who would jump at the chance, Ranger. Don’t discount her out of hand. Lady Ciara wouldn’t lie to you about the fact you loved her.”

“Let’s rescue Her Highness first.”

Oh, Bel’s balls, he was a bloody stubborn one for sure. Lady Muirenn had her work cut out for her.

He never tired of kicking in doors and Caitlin would give her right toe to know why. Hell, he might use magic to enhance his strength. They freed four women before he kicked the door open to the room where Lady Muirenn sat on the floor trussed up like a holiday turkey with the hood over her head.

“Free your lady. I’m finding Reynolds, and you won’t like how I deal with him.”

“Aye, but if you give me one minute, My Lady would appreciate helping you kill the whanker.”

“Not how I will kill Reynolds.”

He stalked down the corridor stopping at each door to sniff like he could smell past the thick wood. Oh, hells, she had to free Lady Muirenn.

Caitlin slid in beside her, yelling for her. Her Lady jerked at the bindings. It was a bloody fine sight for Caitlin’s eyes. She sliced through the ropes and cut the lock away on the hood and lifted it off. Lady Muirenn leaped at her and rocked with her arms squeezing to cut her air off.

“Oh, Caitlin. Where did you find help? I owe them big time.”

“Your Ranger did most of the damage, My Lady. His lightning took down the gate we stormed, and his blades killed more than I could count. He is searching the home for Reynolds now. He asked me not to permit you to follow because you won’t approve of how Reynolds dies.”

“To the bloody hells with that nonsense. I’ll help the big man. Show me, love.”

“Hah. You called him a big man for years, My Lady. Today it is the bloody truth. Aye, close your mouth. You must see him in person to believe me. Come , My Lady. I will take the heat for allowing you to follow.”

Another door crashed open, and her lady jumped. “What is that bloody pounding? I thought lightning struck inside.”

“Your Ranger is kicking these solid wood doors open with his foot, My Lady. When you are on speaking terms again, ask him how, please.”

“How long was I held here?”

“It’s the wee hours of the morning, My Lady, so, not a full day. The bright gods love you, for sure. The Ranger was packed to leave on a quest. He is cordial, polite as all hells and accommodating to boot. I was treated like a lost sister come home by his family. They all know of you from Lady Ciara. The girls in the home are rooting for you to succeed.”

They reached a tee in the hall, and Caitlin glared down each. The screams made up her mind. She grabbed Lady Muirenn’s hand and pulled her along.



**M**uirenn ran with Caitlin without complaint. At least she gave her legs a chance to fill with blood first before running. The scream repeated, and she recognized the nasal voice.

“He’s found, Reynolds. I swear if you pinched the fop’s nose no sound would escape when the whanker talked.”

Four naked women exited a door. Caitlin whistled to beat the band and hollered for sheets. Bootsteps pounded behind her, drawing closer. The women huddled in the hall unafraid—oh, Muirenn spotted the tracks on their arms. Bloody Reynolds kept his captives drugged. Aye, it was the only way a woman would draw near. Good gods, it’s why the Ranger was pissed, and she agreed. Muirenn ran for the open door. She wanted a hand in the whankers death.

She turned into the room at the moment Sheridan tossed the ugly peacock against the block wall. His head crushed with a sucking whump like a melon. She would not puke, nor look away, damn it. The body crumpled to the ugly purple and gold carpet, and blood pooled quickly in a black halo around the disgusting whanker. Her Ranger scooted off the bed to stand his full gorgeous height. Wow. Caitlin nudged her, and she closed her mouth. Muirenn held the pleats in her dress to keep from twisting her hands and stood tall for her first confrontation. He would not recall her, but she would be patient, kind, and persistant as Ciara suggested. Sheridan grunted at the dead man, raised his head and sniffed. She almost laughed but held it in check. Sheridan noticed her scent. He spun, and his glorious emerald eyes locked on her. He squinted, his head tilted, and he stared for a good long time. Caitlin cleared her throat, and Muirenn repaid the nudge. Muirenn would give him all the time he required. He sighed, and his eyes softened to melt her into her shoes.

“You are in my dreams nightly. You, Ena, and Ciara fight beside me against dark shadows of the enemy. You fight with twin swords as I do. Why do I feel comfortable in your presence? Why do I want more?”

“Well, big man, you’re certainly not shy around me anymore, that’s for sure. You have managed to raise my body temperature to boil. Comfortable, you say, and you want more. Hmmm? Why don’t we leave this charnel house and have a nice chat about me, Ciara and Ena? I have spoken with Ciara at length in a treatment room in Kylemore, the last time you showed up out of the blue for healing. You can’t scare me away, big man. Aye, and how in blue blazes did you grow so tall and wide at the shoulders in only three years?”

“My mother promised I’d be six foot six by nineteen.”

“Oh, well, I won’t question our goddess, big man. Aye, we just missed your birthday. I hope it was a pleasant day for you. I could use a meal, y’know.”

“Aye, the Guardians have control. I must find Colonel Grace and report Reynolds fell from his dresser.”

He fell from his dresser. Hmmm? Sheridan killed the man without a warrant or permission. Oh, blue blazes, the bloody groping whanker deserved to die.

“Well, lucky for you, we are two expert witnesses to back up your story, Sheridan. May I examine the body?”

He stepped aside, and she remained calm sliding by him in the crowded space. Caitlin didn’t do so well with hiding her snicker when she had to look way up at his eyes. Muirenn could kiss him easily. She picked up the bloody pillow and wiped the spots off the wall with a clean section. She dropped the pillow where she found it and returned to Caitlin’s side winking at the big man as she shimmied past him.

“There. That’s much better. To the naked eye, he struck the floor. I‘d hate to have your Colonel Grace raise doubts about my good word, y’know. Food, Sheridan. We were heading for food and a nice chat. Where is Ciara?”

“She returned home today—yesterday on the ship that brought you here…”

“Muirenn. My name is Muirenn, love. Can you say it for me? You wouldn’t use my name when you were younger. I can’t see how being a bloody princess could frighten you today. Ciara is just as much a princess, and you call her by name. Aye?”

“Well met, Muirenn.”

“Aye, all my dreams are coming true, and the walls are tumbling, one by one. Oh, we must find our trunks. I need a clean dress to change into for our meal and private conversation about three wives.”

“Would you…I mean, could you marry a man who loves three women?”

“If one of the lucky ladies is me and the other two Ciara and Ena, than aye. Are you proposing?”

His head drooped, and it shook slowly. Muirenn ached to hold him. “I don’t know what I’m doing for the first time in my life, Muirenn.

“Aye, that’s enough to stir my feet to keep pace with my heart. I’m going to wrap my arms around you—just to console you. I won’t cause you pain and never harm you, love.”

He didn’t flinch or try to stop her, so Muirenn held him, and he rocked just like Ciara said he would when he thought long and hard. Ciara returned home. That would not do. He needed Ciara.

“Why don’t we take a ship back across the ocean, and you can tell Ciara you love her, miss her, need her, and ask her to return. Aye?”

“My Lady, Ranger Sheridan is heading on a quest. A vital and critical quest for a warrior. He has six months to complete the quest or fail.”

“Oh. I should have spoken more with you, Caitlin. I will cease my senseless babbling now before I insert the second foot. I’m not letting you go yet, Sheridan. I’m just not going to talk about us. Good gods, you are one big man. How did you kick in all the doors and not break a foot? Did you break your foot?”

“I am a berserker and I don’t feel pain when in the red veil. My legs and feet are strong enough to kick a door in if I ignore the pain. I have no broken bones.”

“Aye, well, from what I heard, you kicked in a dozen. I must attempt the same the next time I experience the red veil smothering my common sense. You can call it at will?”

“Aye, you will with practice. I used to call for it and release it performing forms. The strength and lack of pain was an accidental discovery. I could eat.”

Caitlin didn’t bother trying to cover her booming laughter. Muirenn released the giant of a man and backed away. His lips smiled, and his eyes sparkled. She had hope for the first time in three years. Ciara would receive a big kiss for her advice on how to deal with the big man.

“I could eat as well, big man. We must locate our trunks before leaving this dive.”

“They are still in your carriage. The dogs found them. Oh, your birds and dogs are at my home reminiscing with their parents and a curious fox is exploring the grounds.”

An officer rushed in before she could reply. He spotted Reynolds, and a smile split his face. Muirenn spoke before Sheridan could commit to a lie.

“Dear, Sir. I am Princess Muirenn O’Kelly of Ireland. I was a captive here until the Ranger and your fine Guardians freed me. I was witness to the madman attempting to climb up his wardrobe to escape the good Ranger. The eejit fell off, and his head made a most distressing sound when it struck the ground. I will repeat my testimony for any court official.”

“Welcome to Esak, Your Highness. I am Colonel George Grace. A repeat of your testimony will not be necessary. Your report to me is sufficient, and we will have the walls cleaned and carpet removed in no time to prevent anyone from making further inquiry. Have you appeared before our good king?”

Caitlin cleared her throat, and Muirenn stepped aside and nodded for her to take over. She must know something Muirenn would bungle.

“Colonel. The Ranger sent telegraphs to Albany and Somerset in search of King Alphonsus. When we learn where he holds court, I will escort My Lady to pay her respects.”

The colonel bowed to Caitlin and placed his fist over his heart speaking Sheridan’s solemn pledge. “Mo Comhluadar Mo Neart. Thank you, Lady Knight. We found a carriage registered to you, Your Highness, but there are no horses on the grounds.”

Sheridan growled. “Find axes and spears, George. Our night is not over. We head for the cellars to hunt. Aye?”

“Aye, Ranger. I will round up my Guardians and inform them of what we face.”

The colonel exited in a hurry, and she spun to face Sheridan checking his weapons.

“What did missing horses tell you, Sheridan?”

“There are Orcs or Trolls here, or perhaps both. They eat horses when humans or Elves aren’t on the menu. Your carriage was stolen more for food than its contents. We will hunt. Lady Knight, you will protect your charge. Aye?”

Muirenn glared at the man. “Nay. I have swords and armor in my trunks. I will hunt with you. I’ll change in the bloody carriage. I’m no prissy little mot to hide when there is a battle at hand. Aye?”

“Hurry, please.”

Caitlin grabbed her arm, and this time, she didn’t need to pull. Just show her the way out of the stinking cesspool. Caitlin froze in her tracks. She did a smart about face and asked something Muirenn had no clue to its meaning.

“Travel us to the carriage, Ranger. My Lady, when he touches you, don’t close your eyes and don’t scream.”

Sheridan placed a hand on each of their shoulders, and suddenly Muirenn was nowhere. Her mouth opened to scream when they returned to reality in the carriage house. “You Travel as the Fae? It is how you disappeared…”

Caitlin drove her elbow into Muirenn’s ribs. OK, damn it. She got the message to shut up without the need for broken ribs.

“Aye, but Patience claims she doesn’t experience the frigid gray nothing between locations or the annoying static. I have researched the issue and have yet to find a solution.”

Muirenn turned for Caitlin to attack her buttons and she cherished the embarrassed expression on the Ranger. “I am not uncomfortable, big man. I will ask you to turn away when I get down to my scivvies, but you don’t need to leave right now. Would you mind removing the gray trunk from the rear deck? It is a heavy sucker, and it would save me valuable time.”

The dress fell from her shoulders to puddle on the straw. She rushed inside in her petticoat and drawers. She peeked out the window in time to watch him carry the trunk with no more effort than she carried a pair of boots.

“Thank you, love. I will be armored and armed in less than two minutes. You can stay and talk to me through the window. Caitlin will toss in items while you tell me about your parting with Ciara. Did you kiss her goodbye? Did you bare your heart and finally admit you love her? What did she say?”

“Ciara kissed me. Aye, and she asked me to find an oath she could pledge for marriage.”

“Wow. It is music to my heart, and I’m certain you will find her oath. We just arrive, you save me from a maniacal despot, and you will leave me for six months. Is that what I heard?”

“Nay, My Lady. The Ranger offered to escort us to visit the King, and he extended a polite invitation for us to accompany him as far west he is permitted before he leaves on his quest. When the Ranger draws near to his destination, he must travel on foot and is not permitted companions or the use of magic. He will be alone, and we can hope for him he chooses the correct location because he cannot retreat for additional supplies.”

“How are you so familiar with his quest, Caitlin?”

“Dress faster, My Lady. It is because he heads on a quest I have studied with interest. I cannot reveal more, My Lady. It’s a Templar secret.”

Oh, aye, she was aware and damn proud Sheridan won his Templar sword. Damn. She would love to hear more. Muirenn slipped the chest plate over her head and snugged it down. She opened the door and leaped to the ground for Caitlin to tighten belts and buckles. Sheridan stepped up to the opposite side and knelt to attack the straps on her greaves, buckle her boots, adjust the knee guard and thigh guard. He stood and worked on the upper body without speaking a word. Nay, he hummed instead, and Muirenn closed her eyes to absorb the sounds of her man at peace. Caitlin smacked her butt, she squealed and probably jumped six feet in the air to come down and glare at her bullyguard, smiling back like the boy with cheeks full of cream. Some day there would be paybacks. Sheridan held her sword straps out for her to slide up her arms and over her shoulders. Muirenn shook them in place, cinched the straps at her chest and tied the belt around her waist. She was ready to kill some bloody Orcs. She had no clue what an Orc was, but she’d kill her share, for sure.

“I have your new swords in Wexford. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

Muirenn lowered her head, but her smile had to be visible to the entire world.

“It’s fine, big man. Knowing you didn’t forget your promise to gift me the swords is the grandest news I could receive. Our trail forward together will lead us back to Wexford again, I’m sure.”



**Chapter 27 Orc in the Cellars**

**M**uirenn caught up to the long legged hunk. “Can you give us advice on what we can expect?”

“Aye. Imagine a ten to twelve foot tall ugly brute with shoulders half as wide. Its arms are long, thick as my thighs, and all muscle. Most of their skin is protected by magic, so the only place your blades will penetrate are the joints. The soft skin behind the knees, elbows, groin, arm pits, neck, mouth, and eyes are your targets. I usually slide between its legs stabbing up into its groin and nine out of ten times the Orc will bend over looking for me. I rise behind it to cut its neck. If it doesn’t bend, I stab its knees forcing it down to my size and attack its neck. Beware of the fetid claws. They can tear an armored warrior to shreds.”

“Wow. So, if I do the sliding and groin stabbing and Caitlin’s great sword waits to chop, it would be quicker. Aye?”

“You have the perfect attack in your mind. Two are better than one. Four on one Orc is ideal. An archer can put a few arrows in its mouth when it screams in pain. In place of archers, the Guardians will use spears to feed the brutes.”

“What about the Trolls?”

“Trolls are twice the size and more. Please leave the Trolls to me.”

Muirenn squinted and pursed her lips, trying to imagine how he would kill such a large beast. Her inexperience left her mind blank. Once she had seen a Troll in person, she’d find a way to help him. They padded down a set of stairs carved into the rock and ended on a hallway with eight doors, opened and stinky.

“What is this place, Sheridan?”

“This is where Reynolds holds women before sending them on to Gwydion. His penchant for waiting until he secured eight allowed us to free five ladies last week, One was a Na Siúracha diplomat heading for the King’s court. Aye, there were five Orcs down here too. One unlucky turn for us was Reynolds not at home. He must’ve had the drugged women with him, or we would’ve freed them last week. My guess is he went to collect more beasts. I believe the best course is to purchase this property and use it to our advantage against Gwydion. Reynolds’ foul deeds cost me more time I could spend elsewhere.”

Aye, Ciara mentioned Sheridan was wealthy when they spoke at Kylemore. How wealthy the lady couldn’t answer.

They entered a large domed area with steel doors along the perimeter and Sheridan headed directly for one in the middle. He ripped the steel door open and laughed in what she would name a surprised voice.

“It’s obvious, Reynolds left to receive more money as well. King Alphonsus, our Guardians, and Liberty City’s temples will be pleased with their portion. George, one crammed pouch to share with the entire company. Aye?”

“Aye, Ranger. I’ll disperse your generous bonus to all my Guardians.”

Muirenn was confused as a cross-eyed cat. “You have the authority to claim plunder and dispense it as you see fit in this kingdom?”

“Aye. Alphonsus trusts me. It is mine to share at his command. I have it in writing if you care to inspect the documents. Our good king always receives a third, the Temples and the local populace a third and the Guardians take their bonus from my third I use to fund my battles against Gwydion and his forces.”

“Oh, I apologize. I heard wrong is all, love. Where does Gwydion get his wealth to wage war against us?”

“The Hand of Máthair steals it from our citizens, he brings gold from other worlds and mints coins, and he sells drugs, which he brings in from other worlds.”

Sheridan opened the other doors to expose rooms filled with brown paper packages larger than a loaf of bread. He asked the Colonel to set the drugs in the middle of the domed room, and he almost laughed at her. Caitlin elbowed a warning her face was scrunched. Oh. “What will you do with the drugs? Burn them? You could burn them in the store rooms.”

“They will burn inside a volcano with no chance the fumes will harm us.”

“Oh. I hope you don’t mind all the questions. Wait. Gwydion will ruin our global economy flooding the markets with gold. Oh, bloody hells, it’s his plan. Damn whanker needs to die, Sheridan.”

“The kingdoms hold onto their gold and use Gwydion’s preventing a flood and a drop in the economy. It is my hope to see Gwydion die after my awakening. Three more years and our world should be rid of his foul forces, but the war against your aunt and the Hand will continue. Fionna will not give up her dreams of ruling just because Gwydion died.”

“Aye. I’ll help you with that bitch. My sword will take her down from her self perceived lofty station. Why is there blood on your back? Are you wounded? Strip, big man. I am a healer.”

“It’s old blood. Sinéad healed the wounds. I am suffering from the effects of beatings and healings. Magic and the rules of magic I don’t understand are in effect. I promised Ciara I would rest before attempting the quest, which is why we have the time to travel together.”

“Who could whip you?”

“I was caught unaware by three men who knocked me unconscious and placed a hood over me. They whipped me for not providing answers. Hah, I am worn out because I healed a friend with a grievous wound in my weakened state and used too much of myself. I slept for five days, and yet, I am still recovering.”

Colonel Grace approached with a smile, a guilty boy with a frog for his sister would cherish. “I am the friend he saved, Your Highness. An Orc sliced me from groin to heart and Sheridan healed me all at once before he passed out. I ached for a week believing I would die, but it was the price to pay for his magic, and I accept it gratefully.”

“Aye, and if I asked you if you were a healer, big man, you’d answer with a solitary aye. I will assume your mother gifted you the skills and leave it at that. I will ask why we are not hunting.”

“We are the bait. They will come to us once our smell reaches the lower levels. This is a lit room with space to maneuver instead of small dark tunnels. There is no Troll. This is the only room tall enough to fit a Troll. We lucked out today.”

Muirenn’s head must be in the clouds. She heard him plain as day state he received beatings for weeks and it flew right through her air head. She stood before the big man and placed her hands on his cheeks without complaint and delved him for injuries. Oh, good gods, she could weep. “You have deep vein thrombosis, a fever, and I don’t like how your heart is beating. It beats in rhythm with mine but it skips at random times. I must research the cause and treatment. I wish I could just make your heart new like you healed Colonel Grace. Must you fight the bloody Orcs? You did promise Ciara to rest, big man.”

“We’ll determine my involvement when we learn how many are here. I won’t sit on the sidelines with friends dying. You reminded me of an incident with Deoirenn. I will attempt to heal myself when I’m in bed.”

“Nay. Please do it where I can Talk to see what you do and to monitor your health. I couldn’t pass up watching somebody heal themselves, y’know.”

“Done.”

The Guardians tossed the last crate of drugs on the pile in the room and drew weapons to surround it and stand facing outward. Who were they protecting it from? Sheridan stepped between two who thanked him for the gold, and he patted their shoulders like it was a silver one piece tip. He placed his hands on a crate and disappeared. They bloody well stood guard to protect the spot until he returned. Damn, and he’s not a Guardian. Aye, he garners loyalty and affection from warriors like a mountain meadow draws bees.

“We are in the right place, Caitlin. I have hope.”

“Aye, I believe so, My Lady. I catch him studying you like a boy with a caterpillar on his palm. He hasn’t figured you out yet, but he isn’t ready to let you go or squash you. He’s considering the butterfly you might be one day and fears you could transform into an ugly old moth.”

“Aye, you brute. Remind me never to squash another poor caterpillar.”

The man reappeared, and the Guardians sheathed their weapons and formed in a square at the Colonel’s orders. How long must they wait and why were they so damn quiet? Stone scraping stone itched her ears. She had her answer. Muirenn surveyed the ceiling expecting to see dust falling from the vibration in her feet. The noise grew louder, and she knew bloody well; it came from the dark tunnel. Oh, gods, the stench would make her puke. Sheridan drew his swords, and everyone followed suit. He called out there were three and the Guardians split into three groups with axes at the fore and spears behind them. Guardians with bows laid arrows to string and drew half way. Muirenn stifled a squeal when the beasts emerged. How in blue blazes did he know there were three Orc approaching?

Sheridan warned three more approached behind the first, and the Guardians split up again in the same formation but twice the numbers. None of them appeared frightened to face the beast. The first three Orcs charged out of the darkness with an ear-splitting roar, and the Guardians matched them with ferocity and volume of their challenge.

Muirenn could never create or imagine such a beast in her worst nightmares. The brutes had mottled brown skin with bone ridges across the shoulders and head. Two yellowed tusks protruded from the lower jaw, and its eyes sparked hatred from beady angry pig eyes. The hands and claws could tear a man apart as he and Colonel Grace described and Sheridan didn’t exaggerate about the size of its arms. The Orcs were bred to kill.

The axe bearers spread out to surround while the spearman attacked drawing the Orc’s attention. The axes fell on knee joints, and the brutes howled in pain dropping to ruined legs. Arrows flew striking wide opened maws choking the beasts who reached for the offending projectiles. It was what the spearman waited for. They rushed forward and stabbed the throats of undefended raised heads dropping the Orc to fall on its face. Axes, spears, and swords finished them. The Guardians tended to overkill, but she would not question their actions. Nay, she made a mental note to ensure the beast was truly dead before walking away.

Caitlin beat her sword against her breastplate in acknowledgement of their fine display of heroic actions. Colonel Grace barked an order, and they reformed for the next three. Muirenn yelled out she would appreciate the opportunity of killing one. The Guardians howled agreement and beat spears on the ground. Sheridan waved them forward.

“I’ll take the middle, you have the right side, and the Guardians will take the one on the left and back us up. Aye?”

Muirenn nodded and faced the brutes emerging from the tunnel. Sheridan touched her head, and a tingly sensation rippled across her skin. “What was that?”

“A shield. It can’t puncture the shield with teeth or claw, but it can clobber you to death.”

“What about…”

“The Ranger placed a shield on me before we entered the compound, My Lady.”

“Oh, OK, I’ll shut up and kill a gruesome Orc.”

Muirenn charged the beast with Caitlin hollering a Templar challenge in Máthair’s language. The brute stopped with its shoulders drawn back in surprise and arms hanging at its side. She dropped to knee guards and slid between its legs, stabbing its groin with both swords. She leaped to her feet and spun, hoping to find it searching for her. Caitlin’s sword swished in an arc and took the brute’s head in one shot. Muirenn squeaked and dodged the falling body. She smacked Caitlin’s raised palm and wanted more to kill.

Sheridan faced his victim with both swords lowered and held to the side. Why? For the shining gods’ sake, why didn’t he attack? The Orc teetered and dropped with a rush of air to bounce on its face and die. Sheridan stabbed its neck and pushed hard to sever the spinal column. He stabbed its back where the heart might be, and she shook her head. How many times must he kill the bloody thing?

The Guardians worked hard at extracting the tusks for trophies. Aye, it’s a grand proof to show off to friends. She sought out Sheridan and found him gazing at her. Caitlin had it right. He hadn’t a clue what to do with her.

“I’ll return shortly. I must dispose of the bodies or foul up my future cellars.”

“The volcano again?”

“Nay, these will feed sharks off the southern coast of Africa.”

He stacked three, moving the brutes with ease and attracted many gaping jaws from the Guardians. Sheridan blinked away to Travel thousands of miles. Muirenn pulled a rag from her bandolier to wipe her blade clean. She passed it to Caitlin and sheathed her swords.

“Is Tranquility as gorgeous as our dear Grainne claims?”

“Oh, good gods, My Lady. I walked on tip-toes until I was out of armor. It is the finest home you will ever visit. Well, Grainne also said he is doing wonders with Wexford. We should’ve climbed the hill and knocked on the door, My Lady. I know your birds showed Brenda entering with the girls and they were excited to meet her, but I would’ve liked to see where she’d live.”

“Aye, love. While Sheridan is busy, we will have six months to tour Esak and visit Wexford to see how our Brenda is dealing with life in his home. I wouldn’t mind a trip to Donnegal to visit my people. I am excited about the upcoming road trip with the Ranger. I imagine it won’t last longer than two weeks, but I can wear down his barrier a wee bit. Aye?”

Sheridan returned from taking the last three Orcs, and she noted a stagger. “Let me delve you, big man. I spotted that wee misstep you attempted to hide.”

He allowed her to hold his face again, and he gazed into her eyes. She forgot what she intended—oh, delve the fine man.

“Aye, your fever is up, and your thrombosis is the cause. You need bed rest with your feet elevated above your heart, and I will mix up a nasty little brew you must drink. I’ll tap your head and put you in a deep, restful sleep. Aye? Oh, do I see recognition in your green jewels?”

“Flashes. I don’t know if they’re from Ciara’s stories or reality.”

“Flashes are good, big man. Flashes of memory are bloody grand. A kiss would be finer, and you’d have all the memories of us restored. We could have a repeat of our little romp in the woods when you take us west.”

“South first, Muirenn. I had forgotten the King had moved his court to Somerset for the winter. Somerset is the home of the Rangers and also my first home. We will take a leisurely ride down the Appalachian River for two days, and ride up and over the gap to Hyden and on to London where our family lives in another home. Sinéad is busy at work in Somerset and my new companions are enrolled in a class. You know them according to Sinéad. My companions are Charlie, Maggie, and Syl.”

“You spoke my name without a prompt from me, Sheridan. I’ll follow you anywhere. Oh, I’d be tickled pink to see all four ladies again. Aye, it sounds like a grand fine week to me. I still need that meal, big man, and I would not turn down a glass of wine.”

“It is almost breakfast time here, should we Travel to Italy for dinner?”

“Oh, good gods, what a glorious offer. Well, I slept the whole night away. What about you? Caitlin?”

“I slept a few hours, My Lady. I could stay awake all day again.”

“Sheridan?”

“I don’t sleep very well. I’m awake for the day.”

“Than Italy it is, and I will not giggle like a loon the whole day. I promise.”



**Chapter 28 The Enemy Assembles**

**G**wydion called for the next applicant.

Ah, yes, a female, and quite attractive as well. The assassin might do well in her attempt to get close to the target. Hells, he would take her now himself if he didn’t need her to trust him. Such foolish people to give him their trust. He would kill them all in the end. No strings left attached, no witnesses, and nobody left to complain he didn’t keep his side of the bargain. The Fiona woman would be among the first to feed his Orcs.

The lady stopped at the desk and curtsied, displaying enough flesh to leave nothing to the imagination. She would have no problem reaching the Ranger’s side if she displayed her breasts for the boy. He would jump at the opportunity to die at her hands if only to experience the pleasure of her fine body first.

“Do you have a plan in mind as to how you will gain his trust and get close enough to kill him?”

“Yes, master, I have used it many times in the past to draw the victim close. I wish to depart now to arrive in time to accomplish the ruse I have devised. I will control his friends, and he will be forced to welcome me with open arms. Men more willful than the king has fallen to my scheme.”

“Yes, I can imagine, and I can understand seeing your beauty why you are so successful. Please depart when you wish. My men will do whatever you ask of them. Take what gold you require and whatever else you desire from our stores. I await your report of success.”

Two assassins down, and now he would address the third, and last. When the woman departed, he called for the third applicant. Gwydion hid his surprise by studying the papers on his desk. The applicant was young for what the job entailed but who cared if the heirs died.

He must not forget the damn Ranger. Knowing An Deorái masqueraded as a Ranger narrowed the field, but the Ranger’s name would make the work easier for the assassins. With him out there as a threat, it kept Gwydion within the walls of the cave until his power returned to full potential. That grated on his nerves, and he wanted magic back soon to get out of the smelly cave. He should not have had to live as he did. Where did the woman go? Hells, he would take whatever woman he had. Gwydion opened the door and yelled at his guard to bring Maura to him. He slammed the door in the idiot’s face. He did not care which one.

He spun around, cursing the fool to find Balor in his chair.

“Greetings Balor, how may I serve you today?”

“I believe you may be more trouble than you are worth boy. Why are you still in this castle? You should have armies on the field, destroying all who oppose you. When do you go to war? Oh, I smell your fear and know its name. You still fear the Elves. Find some warriors to destroy the Elves or to keep them in the damn trees. Use the Goblin to kill all the humans and finish this business. What did you do with the rock that fell from the sky?”

“Well, the goddess Fea reluctantly gave me the rock, but it held minute traces of magic, and I already have the Elves demise all planned and in motion. The Elves have always caused me the most grief. They are the ones who drained my magic with your sister’s help. I have barbarians deployed to destroy the Elves in Europe.”

“Your damn fear will kill you eventually, boy. What of your magic? You squandered the last chance. Have you followed my hint and sought a world with magic?”

“Yes, I have, and it is not as easy as you perceive. I will go to the world when I have the men to protect me while there.”

“The longer you wait, the stronger the opposition becomes. Send the swordsmen after him. They will obey you. I know for a fact Máthair’s child heads on a quest. I will not be at your side to aid you when you fail this time, boy. He is on a quest in the Western American Kingdom, the country you call Wesak. I have set new obstacles in his path to torture his mind and hopefully ruin it forever. We managed to delay him, but the boy is persistent. I built his fears though and will play to them as he suffers. You send men to steal what he finds to deny him powers if he somehow succeeds. Find the three destined mates and kill them to crush his heart and will. If you permit the three to find him, your chances of success dwindle as your strength does hiding in your home.”

“I sent the Nightmare years back to fill his dreams with horrors and cannot understand why he is sane. I have soldiers scouring the land for any sign of An Deorái, but he is too young to receive his awakening. Whoever the boy is, he can’t know his potential. We search, but it is a large world, and he is one man.”

“Why do you believe we would wait for him to mature? You work for the gods of chaos. There are ways to bend the rules. Kill him before he reaches age. If you can’t locate him, find the mates and kill them. Máthair’s child will fail once they die. He is weak because he is too damn sentimental. I am placing many obstacles in his path at great risk while you sit here doing nothing. I won’t continue helping if you don’t fight as you promised.”

An idiot knocked at the door. Gwydion spun to yell for the soldiers to wait and when he turned back, Balor had left. Damn, what did Balor expect in a world of idiots and incompetent fools? He would defeat the boy when he came to fight. He would come. He must come. He had better come. Gwydion didn’t wish to leave the mountain yet. Not until the Elves were gone. Without magic to fight them, they would do worse a second time. Oh, he had a new tool to use against the boy once found. An Deorái would never defeat the Wraith.

“Masser.” The damn Orc stomped in without permission.

“What?”

“We finds dem mans yous wants. Dem mans wit booms tings and dems wit horse meats. Deres be big doors for boat tings. Horse mens cwose toos boom tings, same doors, same mens fights sames.”

Ah, canon, and the horse soldiers from the world of grass plains. Good, he would send their ships to Ireland and wait, while the horse soldiers would pillage throughout the towns drawing him there. A quest in Wesak? The boy had gone there several times, and he would return to seek a treasure. Could it be where Maura hid? Had he found the girl already? Was she why he sensed the boy in Wesak as many times as he showed up in Ireland? He would inform the willful Templar woman and have her send Swords to search. He hoped Fiona failed so he could kill her. His sons were aware of the three possible mates, and Gwydion had to have the one who was his Maura’s mirror twin. There’s no chance the boy would find all three. Damn it; the boy can’t be twenty-one already. Forget the stupid boy; he had a war to plan. Gwydion would send the horse soldiers to the plains in Wesak and destroy the indigenous people to ensure he killed the destined mate.



**Chapter 29 Foraging**

**S**heridan slapped his hands on the wall and leaned his head against the panels to moan. Nay he must be a bit more patient and remain busy to occupy his time—his wasted time. He inspected the rigging on his six Percherons and checked the tires and each door and drawer for the third time. Where were the women? How long did it take to say goodbye?

The door to the carriage house opened and closed longer than it’d take for one person to pass through. He shut the cooler door abandoning the idea of white wine and dug divots in the packed clay turning to discover who entered. Muirenn and Caitlin strolled in like they were right on time instead of a half hour late.

“I do apologize for our tardiness, Sheridan, but I took too long thanking your family for their kindness and hospitality. I did learn something very interesting. Master Malcolm informed me that according to the magical knot on my necklace, I am family and would be welcomed as such in all your homes around the world as Lady Muirenn of House Kingston. You never divulged that fantastic fact when you presented the knot to me on my birthday. He also stated that only four people possess the magical knot. Four in all the world and I wear one. I must’ve been mighty special to you at one time, big man.”

“When I was fourteen, I owned a mere nine homes and housed one hundred twenty orphaned Talkers. I’ve never had a penchant for speaking about myself or my properties. At sixteen, we crossed the globe with a small army, and we discovered many homeless Cainteoirs, so the number of homes quadrupled. Aye, the magic of the knot opens doors and smooths pathways. You, Ciara, Grainne, and Michael are the four Malcolm mentioned.”

Muirenn didn’t budge, but her eyes drilled into his for more. Oh, he had another question hanging.

“Ciara assured me a multitude of times in the last three years that you are a special person in my life. I just can’t see it behind the oath, Muirenn.”

“Well, I’m tickled pink you are aware of me this morning instead of having to introduce myself again. Our non verbal communication worked, as well. I thought I’d have to drag the rest of the answer out of you. I will not badger you for a kiss, Sheridan. I am well aware you need rest, and I will see to it you get plenty on our excursion across the continent. Now, let me tell you what I discovered, and what kept us, big man. I happened upon a gorgeous herd of horses in the expansive pasture beyond the fantastic softball field—after I asked Malcolm if you owned any horses. Would you consider selling me two? I believe our trip would provide ample opportunities to ride off the road to explore wondrous sights in a land we will explore for the first time. I truly don’t wish to be cooped up in a wagon—even if it is the grandest wagon I have laid eyes upon, for sure.”

Sheridan hadn’t taken her wishes or needs into consideration planning the trip. He would’ve asked Ciara a dozen times if she had all she desired or required. Oh, the carriage.

“What of your carriage?”

“Oh, I sold that old thing to dear Mr. White at the Greenwood Inn. He overheard Caitlin and I discuss what to do with the carriage when we visited the powder room, and he offered to purchase it from me for what I paid. I do believe Mr. White is a spy or a peeping Tom. I don’t know how he could’ve heard us.”

“David White performs a few services for me and chief among them is spying, Muirenn. He utilizes a few clever Dwarven inventions to aid in eavesdropping private conversations. His interest is a free Esak and only passes on information pertinent to our fight against Gwydion. David will put the wagon to good use by renting it to customers for day trips. Aye, please choose two mounts each from our herd. I will have Kenneth find suitable saddles and fit them to the horses of your choice.”

Muirenn didn’t smile as he expected, but again her haunting eyes said plenty and her cheeks glowed rosy with a slight blush.

“Thank you, love. Malcolm assured me you would offer us two mounts each, so we chose them on our little impromptu tour of the facilities. He has Kenneth working on what you suggested. Our horses should be ready in half an hour. Would you care to return to the house for a fresh cup of coffee? I asked Laura to brew a pot before we walked out to meet you.”

Sheridan leaned against the wagon, crossed his arms, and stared at the harnesses and saddles stored above in the loft. Aye, like staring at leather goods would provide answers for him. He found a third lady who could read his mind and…oh, hells, why not.

“I could eat another turnover with my coffee.”

Her lips finally curled up in victory, a ray of sunshine speared through the overcast sky entered the window and lit her like a stage light. All he needed was to hear heavenly voices singing or laughing at him and he’d be sure his mother played a sick joke for fun.

“Excellent, love. My request for Laura to warm two apple turnovers for you will not be a waste. You’ll need to walk through the heather to clean your boots, big man.”

“Aye. I know. There are plans in the works to build a mud room off the kitchen entrance to both family buildings for us to use on a daily basis. All shoes and boots would be left there, and we’d switch to house slippers kept in nooks built into the wall. Too much sand winds up in the home, and it aggravates the children when they clean.”

“It’s an ingenious plan I hope to see completed one day. Come, big man. I‘ll walk with you through the heather. It is an old Irish tradition to walk hand in hand across the heath and into the hearth of the home. The tradition promises good luck to young couples in love, y’know.”



**M**uirenn guided her horse over to the wagon and knocked on the window. Sheridan placed a marker on his page, set his book down, and rolled down the port side window. He smiled for real, and it was a grand sight. She thought he might be upset with her constant barrage of questions about the landscape they rode through on the way to Harpers Ferry, but he answered each with a smile and enthusiasm.

“Would you happen to have foraging tools in your fantastic wagon? I spotted wild carrots and onions—and tons galore of Dandelion and Burdock plants. Don’t even get me started on the multitude of flowers. This country is an forager’s dream come true and fall is the perfect time to harvest roots.”

The team of horses stopped at his request, and he opened the door to exit the marvelous cab. She should ride with him on the cushy seat for a wee bit, but she couldn’t yet because the scenery was all new and breathtaking. He opened a tall thin door, and she had to shout her praise at his ingenuity. He had everything she needed from spades to gloves and buckets to rakes.

“We are in no hurry, Muirenn. The riverboats can’t leave before first light, so we have all day and night to reach Harpers Ferry. Enjoy yourself digging up plants. There are much more out there a healer would fancy. We have hooks at the top to dry the plants in the sun, or you can hang them inside, and I’ll open the portholes for air circulation. Just let me know when you stop. I don’t want to ride on without you.”

Her heart skipped a beat until she realized he merely wanted to protect her, and not desire her close by. Oh, he spoke a whacky string of words.

“How do you know there are more out there?”

“Ask your eagles to Talk with their mothers. My birds can spot old world farm sites with the gardens still producing vegetables, flowers, and herbs. It’s not a typical search target for raptors, but mine make a game of it and the first to spot a flourishing garden receives a juicy treat. Don’t ask. My Kestrel, Dusty was the winner this morning. There is a garden about five miles west of here. Would you care to explore an old world farm site? Dusty will show you the way. I won’t be far behind you, and a few of my dogs will join yours for protection.”

Muirenn searched his eyes for sarcasm, but what she saw was sincerity. She must learn to trust the man at his word and not expect ridicule or teasing all the live long day. Sheridan was a better man than most, and she should learn to appreciate his honest candor at face value.

A cute little raptor landed on the pommel of her saddle and tilted its head to inspect her. She Talked to it and learned the handsome fella was Dusty.

“Aye, we will follow Dusty and see what treasures we can find. Do you have a preference if the garden paradise offers an abundance of produce?”

“Well, it is the fall—zucchini. Aye, we could have fried zucchini, bacon, and tomato sandwiches. I’ll set up camp for lunch when I arrive at the farm location. Aye?”

“Aye, it’ll be a new one on me, but I’m game. We’ll see you down the road, big man.”

Muirenn grabbed two burlap sacks, a spade, fork, and a damn sharp garden knife. She climbed in the saddle, licked her finger, and smiled at the big man caught staring at her again. Caitlin chuckled, and Muirenn blew him a kiss. She nudged her fine roan mare, and they galloped west following Dusty.

She pulled the reins for her yet nameless mare to stop and gawked at the scenery. Bleached boulders of every imaginable size laid piled up in a line as far as she could see. “What in the blue blazes is this?”

Caitlin coughed to hide a bloody chuckle, and she pulled a book from her saddle bags.

“According to the book your Ranger’s family provided for me, this is called the Devil’s Walkway or the Giant’s Walkway. In truth, My Lady it is where the ice stopped pushing south during the last ice age. All the boulders were ground down from who knows where to land here for us to admire and ponder.”

“What other enlightening facts are in that book?”

“It’s just a traveler’s guide, My Lady. It lists all the points of interest and the locations of towns with Inns and other amenities. Harpers Ferry is the junction point where all the echinacea, tobacco, flowers, and herbs in the kingdom arrive for processing and shipping. It’s dubbed the herb capital of Esak. You’ll dance in the streets with all the bloody herbs available.”

“Oh, that is grand. I don’t need to crawl around in the dirt for herbs. Aye, we’ll search for veggies and flowers we can cut from a stem instead.”

“Maybe you should ask the Ranger what he stores in that huge wagon. It must have everything since it has a bloody kitchen sink. I bet a bottle of wine he has all the herbs, tinctures, and poultices your little heart desires, My Lady. Nobody carries foraging tools if they’re not hunting for herbs on a regular basis, and for a man who is injured as often as he, there must be herbal remedies on the wagon.”

Dusty returned screeching like his mother whacked him with a belt. She Talked to him, punched her thigh and screeched herself. “Soldiers are coming, Caitlin, and they aren’t the friendly sort, of course. If we didn’t stop to gawk at the bloody rocks, we would’ve been off the road. It will be the two of us against twenty smelly pukes. Aye, his lessons for fighting on horseback spin in my head like a bollexed windmill. We are better off on foot, Caitlin. Have you practiced unhorsing a Knight on foot?”

“Aye, My Lady, no worries for me. Can you scare the horses to toss the riders as he does?”

“Oh, now that’s a damn fine question. I sure will give it a go, love. Let’s see if I can plant an Orc’s scream in their minds. That blood curdling terror still echoes in my head. I’ll be calling for the berserker as well, so keep your distance as Sheridan cautioned me. The Kestrel will reach Sheridan in a wee bit to inform him, but I’d rather kill the stooks without his help y’know?”

“Aye, My Lady. You want to prove yourself to the Ranger, and I can’t blame you. I hope he has the white wine in the cooler.”

Muirenn didn’t want to scare the daylights out of their horses, so they tied them to a tree and jogged west to give her some wiggle room. Twenty men riding alone. Hmmm? They were the marauders Sheridan described. The slimy bastards who ran rampant in Esak pillaging small farms and homes with nobody around to protect them from robbery, rape, torture, and murder. Well, twenty foul gimps won’t see the sunset, for bloody sure. She drew her swords and held them ready at her sides. Caitlin pulled the long sword from its scabbard, planted the point at her feet and rested her arms on the cross guards casual as can be.

The birds voicing complaints as they took flight, and the pounding of many hooves vibrating her feet was ample evidence the whankers were close. Aye, they rode in view around a bend. If the stooks fell for her trap, they would stop and taunt them a wee bit believing they had the upper hand with numbers. Weak minded men took perverted pleasure by making a woman fear them. It sure as bloody hells wouldn’t work on her and Caitlin. Oh, if the maggots charged her at first sight, she was screwed.

Blessed bright gods watched over them for sure. The filthy whankers stopped in a lousy formation, and the cat calls and insults flew like startled birds shitting everywhere. Oh, forget them. She concentrated Talking to the horses, and when it felt right, she blasted them with the high-pitched, bellowing squeal of an attacking Orc. The lazy-ass soldiers weren’t prepared, and in no time, twenty horses ran west, and twenty eejits littered the road.

“It’s time to clean up the trash, Caitlin. My vision is turning red, and I’m bloody anxious to kill the brutes.”

Muirenn raced forward. A red veil lowered over her mind and blocked out her common sense, and with it, all fear. She feigned a strike at one bloke and stabbed the idiot watching her instead of protecting himself. Her back handed swipe took the first at the neck. She didn’t need to look. She knew it killed him, and Muirenn smiled. She kicked the next fool in the chest, and he slammed back against two more. They all died before they could gain their feet.

Her swords struck other blades blocking hers, but the sound was more like two pins colliding. The air around her thickened with oxygen to fuel her body and her heart beat steady and sure slicing, stabbing and chopping down the vile scum. She sliced her left blade across a throat and spun searching for more. The only living beings on the road were her, Caitlin, and her man, smiling like he received his first pony. His presence soothed her, and the veil misted away to expose a bright fall day with gorgeous colors in the trees surrounding them.

“How’s your head, My Lady?”

“I could use a wee nap, love. I’ll lie in the wagon to rest, and ask my smiling hunk if he has chilled wine for me. Oh, what else was I supposed to ask?”

“Don’t worry about it for now, My Lady. I’ll remind you when you wake. You killed fourteen to my six. It was amazing sword skills to witness.”

Muirenn wiped her blades clean on the eejits clothes, sheathed them, and stopped dead. He stood at her back. She could sense his closeness like a caress without having to see him.

“Will you stare at my butt all day without speaking, Ranger?” Muirenn spun around and caught him blushing.

“You’re wearing a cloak that blocks the view.”

Muirenn sucked her lips into a tight purse to prevent laughing, but her eyes watered holding it back. Her face and neck heated worse than sunburn. Oh, gods, how should she respond? Ciara suggested to return the sarcasm wit for wit.

“Oh, my bad. Next time I’ll remove it to provide a clear view. Hells bells, I should’ve this time for sure. I’m splattered with foul blood all over my new cloak. I need a nap, big man.”

“Aye. If you wish, I will rub your head until you fall asleep. I can’t sing, but I will read to you.”

Muirenn shot Caitlin a glance with brows raised high enough to feel her skin stretch. Her friend winked and nodded. Aye she’d be a fool to decline his offer.

“I accept big man. But first, let’s pile the bodies up so you can take them to feed the fishes. What about the horses?”

“Our birds and dogs—and one ambitious fox are herding them back here. The men hadn’t watered them today, so they are excited about a drink. There is a patch of alfalfa and a spring near the old farmhouse where we will stop for lunch. If I were the farming kind, I’d buy the place.”

“You could always buy it and lease it to a farming kind of guy, y’know. Not all young folks starting a life together have the funds to buy a farm, but they’d make a fine go of it with help.”



**M**uirenn twitched from a delightful scent teasing her nose. She scratched it, but the enticing aromas remained. Her ears buzzed, and she swatted at non-existent gnats. Oh, she heard voices buzzing in her head. Caitlin laughed, and she woke all the way with a smile recalling his hard calloused fingers trying to comb her hair smoothly. He ended up just rubbing her temples, and it worked for Muirenn. She stretched like a content cat on the wagon seat and moaned her pleasure for traveling with her Ranger as she dreamt for years. Muirenn sat up and waved at Caitlin waving back. They had a darling camp set up with a fire and a big old…what in blue blazes was he using to cook?

She slid out of the cab and stretched a wee bit more, pointed toward the trees and Caitlin nodded understanding. She returned and found the sink pulled out and soap on the ledge.

“Why is the sink mounted so high? Oh, never you mind, big man. It’s set at your height to wash dishes without nagging your lower back. I feel like I stand at the sink in my rooms at Kylemore when I was ten. What in blue blazes are you cooking on? I have never seen such a contraption.”

“It’s called a wok, and it originated in a country far across the Pacific Ocean. I used an old plow disc and welded handles to suit my needs. It sits on a stand I can adjust for the fire. How is your head?”

“Well, my head is fine, but I could use a drink to wash away the grit from all nine hells scratching my throat.”

Muirenn dried her hands, wiped her face, and turned to find Caitlin holding a cup of white wine. “The Ranger chilled it with magic, My Lady. There are ice crystals floating on top.”

She sipped it and moaned for the delightful refreshment. The next draw was a double gulper, and she released a satisfied haaah. Aye, white wine was the cure for what ailed her for sure. She noticed her spotless cloak hanging from a tree.

“Aw. Thank you for washing my cloak, Caitlin. It was mighty thoughtful of you.”

“It wasn’t me, My Lady. The Ranger washed it when he took the horses to the creek after they gorged themselves on alfalfa. We found what we needed for lunch and for meals later on too. Let me tell you, the zucchini, bacon, and tomato sandwich takes both hands to eat, but it is delicious and whatever kind of dressing he slathered on is worth dying for.”

Muirenn crept up behind him and encircled his neck with her arms, leaned in and kissed his cheek. She whispered thank you for the wine, cleaning her cloak and for preparing lunch. He hummed, and she almost giggled. Ciara told her about the humming, but Muirenn wasn’t ready to feel the vibrations along with it. She could understand Ciara’s affection for his hums. She sat on the stool beside him, and he passed her a plate holding the oddest looking sandwich.

“Oh, I recall what I was supposed to ask, Sheridan. Do you have herbs, and healing supplies somewhere in one of the hundreds of drawers or doors on your wagon? I’d like to inspect your back and might need herbs.”

“Aye, Sinéad stocked it for me, and there is an index attached to the door describing what is where, and the expiration dates in grease pen, so I’ll know what and when I need to replace or refill. The tinctures already prepared are in the medical cooler next to the wine cooler.”

“Aye, well, I owe my genius bodyguard a bottle of wine, but it’s worth it if you have what I need to care for you.”

Muirenn lifted the sandwich and eyed it like it would bite her. She could understand why it took both hands. The zucchini slices could slip out. Caitlin snorted a laugh and told her to give it a go. She bit into warm rye bread, smoky bacon, a wee bit of tangy tomato, and a helping of spicy breaded zucchini. She licked extra creamy dressing from her finger and hummed with her mouth stuffed. She pointed at the sandwich and mumbled it was scrumptious like she discovered the delicious combination. The sandwich disappeared in no time washed down with more wine. Oh, gods, she was living her dream.

“How far is Harpers Ferry, or better yet, how long will it take us to reach the town?”

“Four hours at the wagon’s speed.”

“Oh, than I suppose it wouldn’t make sense to play here all day in this gorgeous autumn forest and sleep under the canopy of trees all night.”

“The forest extends west to the Midland Sea, Muirenn. We will sleep under the wagon, in the trees close to Harpers Ferry. The Harvest Trading Fair is in town, so it will be crowded with farmers, distributors, and agents from miles around buying, selling, and shipping wares. We’ll see children running around, laughing on the carnival rides, and content drinking cider to wash down pumpkin rolls. We’ll sleep in the woods because I doubt we could find two rooms at an Inn.”

Muirenn spotted sweat on his brow and placed her hands on him to delve his injuries. She tsked and shook her head at the stubborn mule-headed man. “We should be doing the cooking, and you should be lying down, love. The Thrombosis won’t go away if you don’t rest. I hope I can find the right herbs in town to fix you a blood thinning cocktail. Aye, there’s my favorite dimples. It does call for liquor if we can find vodka in Harpers Ferry.”

“We have a bottle or two in the cooler, Muirenn. Michael enjoys a refreshing Sea Breeze for an after breakfast refreshment on the road.”

“Hells bells, just by the name, I’d try a Sea Breeze.” Sheridan offered her a second sandwich. She glanced at Caitlin who held up two fingers so she snatched it from him with a hearty thanks. Her wolfhounds and fox loped into camp with four other dogs tongues flapping and all panting to beat the band. Her critters dropped at her feet bushed from some trouble they found in the woods. The silly fox huffed like he ran fifty miles. She rubbed them with her feet, and they moaned as loud as she did with the sandwich.

“What’s a good name for my fox, big man? I should name the fella instead of always calling him my silly fox.”

“Well, for a silver fox, it must be Fairfax.”

“Aye, that is a grand name. Fairfax it is for sure. Thank you, love.”

All of his dogs returned in a bunch, and she couldn’t help the wide grin at the sight. Each approached him for a scratch and a few pats before finding a place to plop down for a nap. Eight dogs remained close to Sheridan at all times. They weren’t the same she saw with him earlier. Oh, hells. She asked, and he explained the institution of his Shadows. Eight dogs and four raptors remained close around the clock in four rotating shifts, so they all had a chance for danger during the daylight hours. Aye, the dogs were as bad as her Ranger.

Muirenn stood after eating and stretched. She jerked her arms back and about shrieked when he called out.

“I have a sandwich hot off the fire for you, son. Come on in and join us.”

She Talked to her dogs, and they groaned but replied with images of a small boy in the woods. The dogs led him to the camp, but he was afraid to enter. Muirenn called to him telling him the sandwich was delicious and they had cider for him to drink. She assured him nobody in the camp would hurt him. The bushes rustled, and a boy covered in dirt and scratches, no older than six crawled out and stood to walk barefooted with wide eyed fear towards the fire. Sheridan held his arms out, inviting the boy for a hug, and that put a smile on his face and quickened his steps. She used her third eye and clapped her hands. Another lost Cainteoir found her Ranger.

“What’s your name, love?”

His big eyes gleamed over Sheridan’s shoulder. He backed away and gave the big man a questioning glare. Sheridan winked with his nod, and the boy turned his big brown eyes to her and Caitlin. “I’m Robby, m’lady. Do you really have apple cider?”

“Aye, little fella. Sit down and start on your sandwich. You’ll need both hands, love. I’ll fetch you a nice cold cup of cider. I know I saw a cask labeled cider in one of the doors.”

The first door she opened housed the healer supplies with many jars containing—Oh, she could investigate later. The second cooler was jammed packed with wine and liquor bottles. Yep, he had two bottles of vodka. The third hit the jackpot with cider and cranberry juice. Hmmm? She hollered over the wagon, asking if it was hard cider and his rumbly laugh provided her answer. Muirenn filled Robby’s cup and delivered it to the boy halfway done with the huge sandwich. He gulped it down and gave her a sheepish grin. She asked for the cup to refill and decided when she walked around the huge wagon again to carry the bloody cask back instead of making a few dozen trips.

Robby told his harrowing tale of how he wound up living in the woods. Bloody Swords and a priest convinced his folks he was evil and they should take him to a place where he would be healed of his infirmity. Robby ran instead and ran from the Sword for days until one day near Lexington, the Sword and priest stopped chasing him. The bastards had a cage full of other kids. Sheridan informed the lad the Swords and priest were caught by his friend Grainne and the children released and they now live in Somerset where the girls chose to go to school to learn the healing arts and the boys hoped to become Ranger squires. Muirenn had to click her jaw shut and wipe her mouth. Cheers to Grainne for sure. She raised her glass and offered a toast to Grainne’s heroic actions. Sheridan raised his glass and Robby followed in a salute to her dear friend the Countess of Leith.

The young fella declared he wanted to be a Knight like Caitlin and fight the Swords. Caitlin rose to her feet shouting a Templar slogan to Robby’s delight.

“We must deliver him to Wexford, Ranger. Aye?”

She related their escapade in Ireland and how William promised to have Becky ready for Templar training in a year. Sheridan agreed without a hitch and promised he would Travel with Robby after the starving boy finished his second sandwich, and he commenced describing what the young fella could expect in his new home. Robby’s shiny brown eyes grew bigger and bigger, and his smile stretched from ear to ear.

Her Ranger found clothes that fit close enough for Robby in some magical compartment. Aye, Murienn should ask him what he didn’t have in the wagon. Sheridan led Robby to the creek carrying a bucket with soap and a scrub brush. She hollered asking him why he needed the bucket, and he yelled back to heat the water. Oh. Wow. She wanted to learn how to heat water with magic. Oh, bloody hells, it must be like he taught her to heat her hands forcing bloody Fionna to release her. Aye, it was worth a try, for sure.

Sheridan returned with Robby just as Muirenn and Caitlin finished cleaning up after lunch. Oh. She must assume the Ranger didn’t plan it that way. Aw, Robby couldn’t be happier riding a beautiful black horse. Wow. The lad’s hair was blonde, not muddy brown, and he was a wee bit pink around the edges from the scrubbing.

Muirenn closed the cooler door and leaned her head against the wagon warmed by the few rays of sun to spear through the brilliant canopy. The location of the huge wagon clicked, and she gasped, grabbed a handful of her tabard and searched for Caitlin. The Knight stepped out of the wagon’s back door and slid down the ramp the dogs used. Her friend was in a grand mood.

“Caitlin. How in blue blazes did he get the horses to pull the wagon this far into the woods?” Caitlin held her stomach with both hands and doubled over laughing. Her shoulders bounced with her obnoxious bout of silliness. She stomped her feet a few times, straightened up and wiped damn laughing tears from her cheeks. What was so bloody funny?

“My Lady. I’m thrilled to see your brain has finally decided to return from your trip to romantic la-la land. We located this fine campsite and unhitched the team on the road so he could Travel the wagon here. I wanted to wake you because you snored like an drunk Orc, but the Ranger did one better. He pulled your feet to situate your head on a level spot and suggested we let you sleep. You grunted, turned on your side and the snoring ceased. All the creatures in the woods celebrated the silence.”

Muirenn’s neck caught fire, and the heat crawled up her scalp. Her brow perspired, and the sweat chilled her to shivers when the breeze picked up. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot, trying to regain control. She would not squeak when she spoke. Her bloody throat was tight and dry already, thank you. She huffed and brushed the wrinkles from her tabard and yelled at Caitlin in a whisper.

“I do not snore, and besides, how do you know how a drunk Orc snores?”

“I made it up, My Lady. You needn’t whisper. The Ranger has enhanced senses.”

She sure as bloody hells would continue to whisper.

“What in blue blazes is that supposed to mean?”

Sheridan chuckled from across the camp. Muirenn spun to face him and squinted hard. Her stomach ached, and a bout of dizziness struck. Nay, damn it. She would not fold from embarrassment. She braced herself on the wagon and blew out a breath of tangled nerves to stand tall and dared him to make fun with a practiced look.

‘It means I can hear you, Muirenn. You did snore but not as bad as Lady Caitlin claimed. I have heard Orcs snore and you were nowhere near as loud. In my opinion, it was more like how your fox snores. It is not an unpleasant sound.”

Muirenn stuck her tongue out at Caitlin, who ignored it like it was a bloody everyday occurrence. Hah. Her Ranger liked her snoring.

“Please Travel the wagon to the road, Sheridan. Me and my shameless comedic bodyguard will hitch the team while you take Robby to meet his new family. Aye?”



**M**uirenn jotted down the last item needing replacement and closed the door. She must dig out her herb books to learn why he would stock papaya seed extract and gendarussa extract. She hadn’t heard of either herb used in healing. She could ask the Ranger but the bright gods alone knew when he’d return.

Her raptors screeched a barely audible warning from far to the east and she Talked with Ablin to see through her eyes. Another bloody platoon of soldiers approached from the rear. Oh, good gods, the female leader waved to her birds. She asked Ablin and Abban to fly lower so she could examine the soldiers closely and sighed with relieved satisfaction.

“A platoon of Guardians approach from the east, Caitlin. Aye, I got all wound up like a music box hoping it was more smelly eejits to kill, y’know.”

The platoon arrived, the dogs formed a semicircle on the road keeping their eyes on the Guardians. The lieutenant smiled at the dogs who relaxed their scrutiny. She threw a leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground leading her horse without the reins. She removed her helmet and shook out her long, wavy, black hair. The officer held her hand out palm up and a bloody flame appeared. The dogs’ attitude changed to no worries in a heartbeat when she removed her helmet, and they rushed to greet the Cainteoir when the flame appeared. The dogs recognized her.

With a crisp salute she introduced herself as Lieutenant Dina Phoenix of the Liberty City Guardians and asked if she was speaking to Princess Muirenn O’Kelly.

“Aye, darl’n. I am Muirenn. What brings you so far from home?”

Dina stated Colonel Grace did not approve of a princess entering the king’s court unescorted, so if it would please her, they would ride with her and introduce her at court.

Muirenn agreed it was a fine plan and welcomed the Guardians. She suggested her warriors dismount and lead their horses to the creek just a short walk north into the woods. She informed the lieutenant she and Caitlin weren’t standing in the middle of nowhere for grins—they waited for Sheridan to return. The young officer’s eyes brightened like twin suns.

“I graduated from the Kingston home in Phoenix last year, My Lady. Liberty City is my first posting out of officer’s training camp. I haven’t seen Máistir in too long. Colonel Grace promised me a surprise when I caught up to you, and it is the best for sure. Aye, we will water the horses and walk their stiff muscles out for a while.”

She motioned a sergeant forward and gave him instructions. He led his horse toward the woods and the platoon dismounted to follow the sergeant down the old trail with many of the Guardians petting the dogs. The lieutenant stared at something behind Muirenn with brown slits for eyes and furrowed brows. “Why do you travel with twenty three spares, My Lady?”

Oh, nay, love. Twenty of the horses were confiscated from smelly stooks we killed before lunch.”

Caitlin coughed. “OK, Caitlin. My friend with a cough and I killed the twenty enemy soldiers. Sheridan was five miles behind us in the brood’s wagon.”

Caitlin coughed again. “Well, then you bloody well tell the tale, Caitlin. What in blue blazes did I miss?”

“Lieutenant. My Lady killed fourteen of them to my six. The Ranger caught up to us in time to stand back and observe another master with swords. Aye, look at her blush pinker than a spawning salmon.”

Muirenn smacked Caitlin’s arm, hooked the lieutenant’s arm and led her to the wine cooler. She poured three cups even if Caitlin didn’t deserve one. She lifted her cup to sip and dropped it to grasp her chest. His dogs tore off like their tails were on fire.

“What’s the problem, My Lady?” Lieutenant Dina set her cup down and grabbed Muirenn by both arms expecting her to collapse.

“Oh, it’s no problem, love. In truth, it’s a delightful experience. Your Máistir has returned. I can sense him in my heart. His essence showing up out of the blue just surprised me, y’know. I am fine, but in need of clean cup.”

“You are Máistir’s Muirenn? Muirenn the healer? Has Máistir kissed you?”

“Nay, love. He hasn’t kissed me yet. We crossed the Atlantic to chase him down for a kiss. I have a good two weeks with him to wear down his stubborn walls. Aye?”

“Aye, My Lady. His family is rooting for you to join Lady Ciara.”

“Hush, love. Sheridan can hear a cricket cough from a mile off. We’ll speak woman to woman when the big hunk isn’t around. He is west of us and strolling without a care like he’s in a meadow picking daisies. Go greet him, love. He’ll be thrilled to see you too.”

Dina passed her untouched wine to Muirenn and set her helmet down before running west to greet the patriarch of the Kingston family.

They returned after Muirenn poured her second wine. Sheridan had his arm over Dina’s shoulder and she gazed up at his face with a grand smile. The two talked fast and animated like fisherman’s wives sitting on the dock repairing nets. So, the brute could hold a conversation like a normal person when it suited him. Hmmm? Her bullyguard read her mind again, damn it.

“Be nice, My Lady. He hasn’t squashed the caterpillar yet. Dina is his little sister, not a threat to you. Aye?”

Muirenn chugged the wine and poured a third for grins. “Aye, Caitlin. I just hope he will one day carry on a conversation like that with me, y’know. I’m not jealous, I’m wishing for a better relationship than cordial traveling companions. Aye, I know. It has only been two days. I’ll try to be more patient, love.”

The first Guardian led her horse out of the woods. Dina separated from Sheridan like he goosed her. She patted his arm and ran ahead. Her smiles were all for Muirenn.

“Thank you for allowing me the visit with Máistir, My Lady. I must put my lieutenant’s face back on and behave around my troops. Máistir agreed to treat me as an officer on escort duty. I don’t want my warriors to know he is my patriarch. I’m the new girl in town and must prove myself. Aye?”

“I can understand your situation, love. I’ve had my share of people at court waiting to pounce on me for any mistake. If we ladies can do anything to help, don’t hesitate to ask. I’m praying we’ll be sisters in the Kingston family one day, y’know.”

“Máistir is stubborn as the sky is blue, My Lady, but he is not stupid. I’d bet you have your kiss before he leaves for his quest.”

Dina cursed because she had to water her horse. She forgot to send her mount with the sergeant. Muirenn directed her to the port side of the monstrous wagon and slid out the trough. She filled it from the cistern and Dina’s horse was happy to oblige. Why in blue blazes was he studying the twenty mounts? Oh, gods, could he read her mind? Sheridan waved to her to join him. She strolled over with Caitlin snickering at her back. She wasn’t about to run, damn it.

“Yes, Sheridan? What can I do for you on a dusty road with witnesses?”

“Um. Oh, do you have a need for twenty horses? They are yours by rules of war.”

“Nay. I wouldn’t know what to do with so many except maybe sell them. I certainly don’t care to feed and brush them for two weeks.”

“Would you consider choosing two for your third mount and gifting the rest to the Guardian officer to pass them on to her troops?”

“It is a wonderful idea and I agree. I know who Dina is, love. She is Lady Dina Phoenix of House Kingston, and we will keep the secret. Would you assist us in choosing two?”

Her fox arrived and ran around the horses in a frenzy. Each one to panic or tried to bolt was crossed off her list. He and she examined the braver specimens and she finally chose the black Robby rode and a big gray mare for Caitlin. The Lady Knight’s armor wasn’t light.

Muirenn marched ahead of the horses following like ducklings simply because she asked them. It was a first for her and she couldn’t help the silly grin.

“Lieutenant Phoenix. The horses are mine by spoils of war. I have no home, barn, or paddocks in Esak to hold them, and I am well aware of the hardships a warrior’s horse must suffer day in and day out on the road. Therefore, I gift the eighteen mounts to you, lieutenant—to do as you wish with them.”

On a hunch, Muirenn handtalked the suggestion to divvy them out to her troops as prizes for good behavior or valent efforts. The young officer handtalked a heartfelt thanks in return, and ordered her sergeant to choose a few Guardians to take control of her spare mounts. He had sixteen volunteers before he performed a smart about face.

Muirenn grabbed her short legged fox—Fairfax to lift into her arms and scrub his head with her fingers. She climbed into the cab with Sheridan. “Let’s hit the road, Ranger. We need to arrive before dark to set up camp again.”

The wagon moved on and the cab remained deadly silent. She sighed a bored breath, opened each compartment out of blind curiosity and in one she found a thick bundle of papers. Muirenn scanned a few sheets and gasped. “Is this what I think it is? Did you write a tale about your exploits?”

“Nay. Ciara often wrote while she rode in the wagon. Aye, she forced my version of the incident to complete the story. You may read them if you wish. I must mail them to Ciara when we reach Somerset. I don’t believe she meant to leave them behind.”

“Are these tales no one has heard before?”

“Aye.”

“Oh, good gods above, you are a mind-twister for sure. I will read, thank you.”

Muirenn started with the first page and in three paragraphs she knew what it was.

“This is the tale of Ciara deciding to search for you? Is it personal?”

“Nay, it’s not personal, but it does describe who she searched for.”

“Oh, aye, I can keep that secret for sure. Tell the horses to take their sweet time, love, and forget about arriving before dark. I’m a fast reader but this is a chunk of paper in my hands. I’ll light up the woods with magic to make our camp in the dark.”



**Chapter 30 Fighting Fish**

**C**iara worked it for all she’s worth.

The sunlight flickering on the lake sparked reflections that blinded her. She took a step down the bank to change the angle. Hah. She worked it. That’s the way her father described fishing. When younger and learning, he would look up from his book, and yell from his spot under a tree. “Work it. Work it, Ciara.” Well, she’s working it, damn it to all the hells. Trying to land the bloody monster, after an hour of fighting him down out of the creek, took more work than she wanted.

Ciara took another step down the bank, she reeled in four more spans of the line without the fish charging away. The breeze felt pleasant on her skin, but the ripples of sunlight it caused kept blinding her, and that she could do without. Her fishing boot slipped on the muddy hill. She caught herself by leaning on the foot stable in the grass and stepped back as she pulled really slow to bring the sucker a little closer.

She stretched her neck, swiveling her head side-to-side, and in circles trying to relieve the pain of tension. Jerking her shoulders in hard shrugs, sent a chill rivulet of sweat down her back. She shivered at the tickle and cursed the damn fish again.

Her bloodless, cold and stiff fingers choked the cork handled pole and stung like a thousand angry bees laid claim to her hand. She knew that pain well, but the honeycomb she retrieved sure turned out worth all the trouble. Come on damn it, the fish must be tuckered out by now. The gods above knew she couldn’t last much longer. Reeling up more slack brought the big trout a bit closer to her net. Ciara pulled back again, slow and steady to draw the fish closer to her. She shrieked and slipped in the mud when the howl of the warning horns destroyed all the working it, she had done today.

She wasn’t the only frightened creature on the lake. The flock of ducks one moment skimming the placid waters took off in clamorous flight, quacking outrage and beating frightened wings to freedom, to someplace safe…someplace without the wail of sirens. She had what must be a prize-winning trout on her line, moments from her net, and the blaring noise startled her enough to cry out like a mushy little sissy. Ciara dropped her pole, cursing the bloody horns, kicked off her boots and raced for home.

Ciara dug her toes in the mud, slipped a bit and laughed. She dug harder, and leaned over to scramble up the embankment on all fours. She weaved through the red grasses an arm’s-length taller than she, zig-zagged through them on the crazy path until cleared the grass, and sprinted west with her bare feet churning up rooster tails on the dusty trail worn down by generations of hopeful fisherman. How many others had hooked the big one she had on her line? Hells, it didn’t really matter anymore. She’d only see that blasted fish again in her dreams.

She shut her eyes, screamed, and stutter-stepped to a panicked halt. Ciara grabbed her chest to hold the heart that leaped like the elk bounding across the path not two paces ahead of her. That many steps more and she would’ve collided with the lead bull. Every forest dweller ran from the horns, and here she was crazy enough to run toward the source. She’d get there if her racing heart didn’t give out first. A few deep calming breaths and she took off running faster to make up lost time.

Once on the forest road, she pumped her legs harder and blurred by the apple orchard with pinkish-white blossoms floating and spinning like Pixies all dressed up and dancing at a ball. The blooms added a delightful complement to the scent of pine trees, wild grass and springtime warmed dirt. Yes, she enjoyed the splendid day fishing—until the blasted alarm scared her witless. Forget witless, Ciara might have to check her drawers.

The warning horns had not sounded for what…sixty years? Yes, she remembered that early morning well. The bloody horns woke her from a deep sleep—sixty years past? Wow, it didn’t seem that long. So, what bloody catastrophe occurred this time?

Ciara cut the right-hand curve of the road by running through the ancient Oaks in bloom, but not as sweet smelling as the apples. She surged through the hanging branches with arms raised to protect her face and laughed as she rushed past. She, sure as hells, felt grateful there were no acorns to knock to the ground—or farmers to catch her in the Oaks. Another few months and she would be forced to run around the trees. Forget about angering the farmers, she didn’t wish to repeat the painful experience of running barefoot over green acorns…ever.

The sirens screamed sixty years back for a family of Dwarves who lost their way and entered the Great Northern Forest without permission. Ciara herself guided them through their home, blindfolded—well cared for of course, but blindfolded, and she left them as good friends a day's journey from their intended destination. The jokes that Grundle, the female Dwarf of the four, created on the spot about blind Dwarves in the woods, still made her laugh today. Why play pin-the-tail on a donkey, when you can play run the blind Dwarf into a tree? She laughed again and spat out the damn bug that flew into her gaping mouth. Keep the mouth closed and save the laughing for later, silly girl.

If this turned out as another lost traveling party, she would have much to say to the border guard without laughing and pin their sorry tails to something. There must be a gentler way to announce wayward Dwarves other than scaring the bloody hells out of her. Forget about scared and screaming like a mushy girl. She wanted that bloody big trout.

She cursed the tall sticker bushes ahead and cut to the right avoiding the gorse, leaped up and over the berm, crashed through the tiny space opened between two fuchsias and entered a lane on the outskirts of her town. Father dug the bush out, so she could sneak through for a shortcut to the lake. Nobody ever said anything about the missing fuchsia and using the shortcut always reminded her of father and their fishing trips together. Perhaps he caught the big trout once and released it as he always did to save the sporting fun for the next hopeful fisher.

Ciara picked up speed again on the straight run between the tree homes where many residents congregated to look west toward Gohálainn. They were curious themselves at the horn sounding. The should be, but they should be gathering at the assigned places, not in the center of a neighborhood. As she raced by, some recognized her and yelled at the others for the path ahead to open, so she kicked her speed up another notch. The citizens hailed her from the road and the tree homes as she ran by, and many called out questions for which she had no bloody answer. She kept on running with a shrug and yelled for them to go where they belong. Her mother should have the answers to all their questions. At least Ciara hoped the Queen had answers.

Closer to Gohálainn, the Earth-born trees gave way to the forest of Malic trees the Elves brought with them through the portals almost a thousand years in the past. The beautiful trees were tall enough to kiss the clouds, and wider than twenty people ringed, arms outstretched, around the base. A crown of broad golden-brown leaves, smelling of caramel, topped them. The Malic trees were perfect for creating homes among the large branches, and to mount the wind turbines way at the tops where the wind always blew to gather energy for their lamps, fans, and pumps. The pleasant scent of caramel always tugged a smile on her lips when she returned home. Except, no smile this time, by all the shining gods. Ciara didn’t know what she would find at home this time, but she smelled trouble. Bloody hells, just get there.

The crowds were thicker in the town of Gohálainn, but they moved in the same direction she ran. All the old and young headed for the cave entrance as they should when the horns sounded this long. The old and young could teach a lesson to the others loitering back in the tree homes. Ciara hollered out her warning, and the Elves stepped aside for the Princess to rush by them.

The throng of people milling around the palace gates created a jam. She pushed through them, waving, and hollering over the crowd noise for the guards to lift the bars for her. She scooted through the gates and picked up speed again in the open courtyard. Braelyn joined her mad dash to see their mother with a smack on her butt in greeting. Ciara stuck her tongue out, and Braelyn laughed like she always did. They would both discover what in the blazes happened.

"Do you have any ideas?" Ciara huffed and elbowed Braelyn for laughing at her inquiry.

"No damn it, I hoped you would know." Her big sister always laughed at everything.

The sisters reached the palace, took the stairs two at a time up the winding path around the tree to Baile na Banríona—the Queen’s Palace. At the top of the stairs, the guards saluted and hustled to open the massive doors for them. Ciara huffed her thanks, and Braelyn smacked the guard’s butt. Ciara would have a conversation with the girl. What would she do if he slapped her rump in reply?

Running through the halls to the throne room, the sister’s feet thudded on the walnut floors loud enough to wake the dead. They would catch nine hells from the staff for running through the bloody halls…again. Princesses were never too old for the staff to yell at them for running inside the palace. Damn, it’s a home, not a temple.

Once the silver gilded oak doors closed behind them, they walked the aisle with as much grace and dignity as they could muster to catch their breath more than the need for propriety. They halted together, placed their crossed palms on their chest, and bowed to Queen Morgun.



**Chapter 31 Ugly Comes to the Forest**

**M**other appeared radiant in her garments, as always. The teal blue she wore suited her perfectly. It caused her midnight black hair to reflect the hue and sparkle blue like a halo. The sun shining on her from the high window didn’t hurt the look either. Where the sun struck, her skin glowed as if from a light within. Yes, their mother perfected the word stunning. She could also be a smart ass like Braelyn. Well…the other way around. Somebody would owe her a fish if this nonsense was a joke between the two.

"Well done daughters, you both arrived faster than I believed you would. Take spears with your swords and join the warrior’s hunt. When you return, I’ll be waiting for you to meet with the Elder’s Council and other commanders in the war room.”

“War room, mother?” Braelyn’s voice squeaked when she asked. Ciara backhanded her sister’s hip for asking before she could.

“There is a high probability of warfare coming to our world my daughters. Trouble, the Elves haven't seen since our clan left the last world. We could face warfare I wished not to witness again in my lifetime, but it has come to our door. I have a letter you can read when you return, but if you would kill an Orc yourselves, you must run faster than the warriors.”

Mother rose from her throne and glided down the steps like her feet never hit the floor. What did she mean by Orc? They were elder’s tales to frighten the young to behave. Mother put on an elaborate performance as she instructed them how to kill an Orc. Ciara could picture every move, but somehow, in her beautiful gown, it lost the brutality in the translation.

“One of you rush in, slide between the legs, stab the groin, and when it screams, the other sends her spear through the mouth to kill it. Trust me. It is the best and easiest way to kill an immature Orc. You can’t dance or spar with the brutes. Kill them and move on fast. If you meet an adult with armor, you’d better wait for ten more warriors.”

The Queen slapped hands on hips when her display concluded. Ciara wanted answers, damn it. Ciara loved the little play, but what in bloody hells did she mean by Orc?

“Go, don’t let the men have all the fun. I have a wager with your father, so kill one before the men do.”

“Mother? You make it sound like this is a game.” Ciara wanted an explanation, not a game. Braelyn grabbed her arm and pulled her away.

“Go, daughters. Beat the men—at their game.”

Mother yelled at their backs as they passed through the throne room doors. Braelyn hollered back for their mother to heat the oils. She could guarantee the foot massage. Ciara huffed. Guaranteed her ass. Ciara had no clue what to make of the mention of Orc. The elder’s tales around the fires and other such stories never stated Orc were real. Ciara never liked what she heard. Mother talked as if she killed Orc, and she made it sound easy. More damn history of the family she hadn’t learned. It couldn’t be too difficult if mother wagered, they would kill one themselves. Their bare feet slapped to a stop in the hall by the doors, and each took three spears from the racks, and Braelyn laughed of course. Hells, she had a point. How much harder could it be from killing a boar?

“Do you believe we will kill three of them?” Braelyn lifted the strap holding her scabbard over her head and settled it on her shoulder. She hefted a spear with her right hand and repeated the drill with all three until she chose the best of them to hold with her throwing hand.

“I don’t know what to expect. I have only heard of Orc from tales. Today, I learn we will see one. Hells, we will have the chance to kill one. No, we should take six apiece. Six spears, forty arrows and our swords, we will embarrass the men to tears.” Braelyn raised her head to the ceiling, laughed and smacked Ciara’s raised palm in agreement.

Ciara found her sword stored in the wrong damn place. The shiny pommel among the others showed her where it lay hidden. Ciara lifted it out, and strapped it down. Braelyn moved it, without a doubt in her mind, but she wouldn’t swallow the bait this time. Ciara performed the same inspection of spears her sister did while they ran and held the best two with her right and tucked the remaining four in the slots made for them in her quiver. They picked up speed, passed a company of warriors running west, and the teasing began in earnest. The males remarked on their lack of armor, they ran too fast for the distance, carried too many weapons, and every other complaint they could contrive as the two little girls with no armor, left the men behind.

Eerie would describe the western part of the forest they ran through. Quiet like a graveyard at midnight, type of eerie. No birds chirped. No grouse, pheasant or quail sang out, running through the grasses. The game trails were all torn up by deer and boar from the animals stampeding away. Leaves and other organic litter drifted down from the riotous evacuation of birds. All the animals had cleared the woods to seek shelter deeper in from whatever the two ran toward. It must be her imagination, but the woods seemed colder and looked darker than usual. Yes, eerie for damn sure.

She heard what must be the Orc’s screams, long before they saw them, and she smelled their disgusting odor before they left the cover of trees. Ciara gagged and spat from the revolting stench even though it didn’t help remove the stink from her throat. The wind could change direction any time now, please.

Out on the blooming spring meadow surrounding their forest were eight horrendous beasts stomping toward the trees. Far behind them, a company of human soldiers milled about. Were they here to hunt Orc or were they with the beasts? What person would work with the Orc? The two drew closer, and both cursed at what they saw. She could live three thousand years in bliss, without meeting such grotesque and vulgar smelling creatures. Braelyn had no idea where they came from either when asked. Well, they won’t reach their forest. For damn sure, they would not reach the forest.

“Braelyn, we should wager on the outcome. How many more Orc will we kill than the men?”

“Let me think about it a moment,” Braelyn replied in her typical smart-ass voice, shook her head and rolled her blue eyes. Ciara meant it, damn it. Why not make a bet?

“Alright Ciara, we kill four I win, more than four you win.” Braelyn’s eyebrows couldn’t raise higher without disappearing into her hair. Ciara took her turn to laugh, and she nodded her agreement. Why not, they could kill five. They better kill five.

“I have heard the same tales at the fires sister. Remember what they say about the claws. One scratch can kill from the filth they carry, so stay away from its claws, Ciara.”

“Of course, it doesn’t pay to kill them before the men do and then die. We will survive this to gloat over our achievement to all the warriors on our victory march home.”

Their big ugly quarry spotted them coming and roared a hideous sound that scraped across her mind like an out of tune fiddle mixed with the moan of a lynx in heat. The huge mouth made a perfect place to stick a spear. The damn thing’s face resembled a boar that fell from a cliff and landed on its face. Two repulsive tusks protruded from its lower jaw in ragged nasty spikes, but the space between provided Ciara a fine target.

Braelyn howled back at the Orc. She saw the same target. The beast ran at them, claws swiping the air like swatting midges away. With as bad as the freak stinks, it should have had more than midges to worry over. Ciara screamed her challenge back at it, dropped her quiver and held the two spears with both hands and ran at her target. The Orc stopped when it saw her running at it. So, they were not accustomed to people charging them? Of course, most smart people would run away from the huge ugly brute. The thing bent over, opened its mouth and roared at her as it flexed the massive muscles of its upper body covered in slimy mottled green hide.

Her plan changed with the fool’s stance. She hoisted a spear up, stutter-stepped and hurled it for the open jaws. The thing widened its jaw as it gaped in surprise. She shrieked at the idiot when the spear entered the mouth, and the long thin steel blade exited the back of its skull. The Orc wobbled a bit before it dropped face first gurgling and choking on the staff. Hitting the ground drove the spear clear through the back of its head.

Ciara grabbed the other spear with both hands ready for the second one approaching. She sprinted toward it, causing the beast to stop and shrug its shoulders back. Gods above, were they all stupid like the first? She dropped to the grass, slid between the legs and stabbed up with all her might into the groin. The thing shrieked, jumped back, ripping the spear from her sweaty grasp, and with its head reared and bellowing like a stuck pig, Braelyn’s spear shut it up for good.

Grabbing their quivers, she dashed away from the claws of the third one swinging at her. Braelyn matched her stride and both sisters hollered back at it in their desperate sprint to escape. They both laughed loud now that they killed one and were safe. The sisters turned around and repeated the same strategy on two more stupid brutes. If all Orc were this easy, she saw no problem. She could teach children to kill the things.

The slow-poke warriors finally exited the forest, ran past and took over for them. They killed two quickly with ten men on each. They attacked the thing’s knees to make it drop and killed it by stabbing the neck as she planned to do on their next victim. Ciara and Braelyn jumped and smacked palms high overhead in victory. The walk home would be loud and proud fun. Two little women without armor claimed two each, and it took eighty, big, strong, armored men to kill four. One day, when Braelyn was Queen and Ciara took command and oversaw the warriors, there would be many more females fighting side-by-side with the men.

The warriors surrounded the last two when it dawned on her she must kill another to win. Ciara took up two more spears and charged for the one trapped by half of the men. She bellowed an order, which opened the circle. Running into the ring of men, she skipped, stutter-stepped to plant her foot, and hurled her spear through the Orc’s mouth. OK, enough for today.

The two sisters propped the spears on their shoulders and pointed out the soldiers to the men. They all spun together to look and took off after the soldiers. Damn, they should have thought of that first. Oh, what the hells, five dead Ogres were good enough for them. Ciara lifted her head to the sky and did her best imitation of an Orc roar just so the men knew what to expect on the walk home.

“We should interrogate one of the soldiers to determine where they come from, and why the hells they are here with the brutes.”

Gods above, Ciara hated it when Braelyn had a clever idea. She nodded back in defeat, or agreement, and the two chased after the men yelling for them to leave one alive.

“By the way Ciara, the last one doesn’t count since you had help. It is your kill, but it does not count. We will call it a wash.”

Good gods above, if Braelyn continued to speak so grave and mature, she would have the Warriors hold her down while she beat the person impersonating her big sister who never took anything seriously.

The Warriors and two sisters met with the soldiers and commenced to fight and almost slaughtered the first third. All the men they faced at first had glassy eyes, and their sluggish responses made the killing easier. The rest fought much fiercer and with skill. The last group of soldiers were cleaner, well-armed and proved themselves disciplined fighters. They brandished two horrid blades they used to hook and chop at their foe. Many Elves fell for the tactic at first until the rest recognized the attack and adapted.

Ciara’s spears proved a better weapon against the large blades than the men’s swords. She danced around the fools stabbing at open flesh with the long weapon until her foe collapsed and she speared their throats.

They did leave one alive, but not by choice. The last one heaved breaths in great gasps. The best of the enemy warriors didn’t want to die, and he fought that way. The axeman killed sixteen of the Elven warriors and remained standing with his two wicked axes swinging around as if he sparred with a tree.

“Why are we playing with this fool?”

Ciara shouted at Braelyn and pointed to her spear. Braelyn responded with a short laugh, a good sign, and when he raised both axes in his ridiculous routine, they each hurled a spear at the fighter’s legs. Why dance with the fool and risk injury? Kill him fast, kill him easy, not fancy. The spears struck, and he dropped to his knees cursing them with the foulest words Ciara had ever heard. Some of them, she had no clue what they meant. Ciara rushed in and pummeled his head with the hilt of her knife to end the tirade of obscenities. Gods above, why the hells did some people speak that way?

She would ask Braelyn if she knew the words he used, but not now. Not in front of the warriors. Not knowing a curse word would give them something to tease her about. They all gathered the men into a pile and set the magic pyre to rid the world of their stench. The Warriors hog-tied the survivor, and they all piled up and set the Orc to blaze. When the magician tossed the fire on the Orc, it exploded with a force that propelled the Elf twenty paces away. The Orc burned like it was soaked in oil. Ah, the oily skin proved their downfall. The green Orc had a weakness. She would remember that tidbit of knowledge.

The guard standing over the prisoner yelled that he woke, and Ciara ran to him with the rest to question the fool. Damn, the pig bled out. Her spear sliced the artery in his right leg. She hoped the men coaxed some answers out before he died. Captain Talen had command of the warriors on the field. Ciara only knew him by sight and not by reputation. With some luck, he could be better than most other officers she met.

“Captain, I suggest you send a squad south to see where the enemy camped and determine if this is all there are? If there are more, we need to kill them. Their leaders cannot learn they succeeded in finding us.”

Wow, he didn’t argue. He counted out twenty men and sent them off. Perhaps she found an officer unlike the others she dealt with and would take orders from the younger princess without comment. She would remember this man in the future. He wasn’t bad to look at either. She admired the way he…oh, leave the mushy stuff behind, girl.



**Chapter 32 War Room**

**M**other threw away formality and jumped down from the dais to present each daughter with a kiss before linking arms, and escorting them to the side door, which led to the war room. A room that hadn’t been utilized to discuss warfare in Ciara's two-hundred-year lifetime. Stopping to bathe and change could be the best idea of the day, thank you. With all the warriors and dignitaries gathered...If they stunk of Orc, it would give the men a chance to return the insults received on the way home. Elves, in general, don’t blush easily, but she and Braelyn had the male warriors scarlet and sweating from their taunts. Captain Talen turned away many times to hide his smile at their teases. She would keep an eye on the man.

The guards at the door opened it wide for them, and Ciara asked one of them to send a boy to the eastern lake to retrieve her pole and boots…and by the way if he found a huge fish on the other end of the line, it belonged to her damn it…with her favorite spinner bait. The guard smiled with his salute and headed off chuckling. Yes…of course, he would report no fish hooked on her line and dine by himself on a prize trout tonight. She received little consolation from her mother. A giggle, a pat on the back, and a sour smirk were all the Queen granted for her troubles. Everybody in the world, but her, considered themselves a damn comedian.

Everybody who held a vital role in their clan gathered with all the commanders. Ciara scanned the room she hadn’t ever seen used, and now they filled all the chairs. The chamber might not be ornate, but the atmosphere reeked of power. The chairs were comfortable, and plenty of light and air came through the big windows.

Mother took the appearance of Orc seriously. It didn’t take long for all the Elders to seat themselves and mother didn’t wait for father, nor did she waste time with pleasantries. Ciara gazed around the room for him but didn’t see the man destined to be her mate. Her future husband—maybe, for neither side reached an agreement. Sure, nothing worse than feeling like a side of beef at the butcher's block waiting for the right buyer.

The Queen read a letter signed anonymously declaring the monarchs should locate the man who would be An Deorái. It created a loud and heated conversation for a while. Hells, the letter stated the Orc would come to Earth. Gwydion? Oh. Oh? Hells, they had a name for the enemy.

Pacing behind her chair at the head of the table, mother announced to all gathered that many humans from southern Europe had gone missing in a mysterious fashion. Campsites were found trashed and abandoned. Herders disappeared from fields with the sheep, farmers never returned home after a days work. The elders of the council murmured and whispered among themselves for a moment. Ciara’s brows furrowed, and her squinting eyes scanned the faces in the room. What could they be discussing? People went missing every day. The young ran away from boredom and sought adventure in foreign lands. Hells, not only the young. So, what? People went missing every day. Mother cleared her throat to grab attention back and continued her report of Human and Elven people disappearing with only one thing left behind as evidence. A stench remained, so foul that some retched when they came upon the scene. Queen Morgun spun and pointed at her. What the hells did she do wrong?

"Ciara, I task you with finding everything we have on record regarding An Deorái. I want you to read...no, to memorize it all until you can pick him out in a crowd of humans by the freckles on his nose."

"Mother, do you believe the beasts we killed to be the trouble in Europe? The Orc can’t cause it. They were too easy to kill. Why are the people disappearing? What in the world is the emergency we need to discuss in the war room?"

Ciara cleared the lump in her throat and grabbed a glass of water to hide the effects of her cramping belly. Her heart attempted to beat its way out of her stomach and move back to where it belonged. Why the hells research the ancient records for a trouble today?

"It is Orc, daughter… You have seen a few of them today, but I believe our troubles are beginning. The evil ones have found the doors we used to arrive here. We can hope and pray it is the Orc and nothing more. Ladies and gentlemen, my two older daughters, killed Orc today. They are here, damn it, which means —with Máthair’s blessings, An Deorái is here as well, and we must locate him. We need him, his battle skills, and his magical weapons. Pray that Mathair has prepared him well for battle in this lifetime."

Dozens of chair legs scraped the floor when the members of the council jumped to their feet, shouting questions to anyone who’d listen or bellowed complaints to others across the table. Some whispered to their neighbor as the Queen looked on. She expected the outburst and permitted them to argue as children do over ownership of a bag of candy. The way she would argue with the guard when he returned with a trumped-up story about her fish. Ciara would remember this lesson from the Queen. Permit them to release emotions before settling down to business. Ciara and Braelyn observed their mother watching the rest turning red-faced with all the yelling. Braelyn laughed at the bickering of course. Nothing or nobody ever flustered her sister. Mother raised her hand, cutting off the debate, and silence followed…like she flipped a switch to turn them off.

"Those of us old enough to remember the last world we called home, recall the battle fought against the evil beasts and their despicable leader. We must bear in mind how they hate the Elves most of all, and we must prepare our warriors. I say we act before our troubles grow worse.” Mother again permitted the Elders to fuss a while before halting their complaints.

“With Máthair’s blessings, An Deorái will be willing to teach. We require his ancient knowledge and battle skill, but first, we must locate him, and inform him of our troubles. Mathair provides us with what we need when we need it most. Ciara, go, and nothing takes priority in your life over the research."

"Máthair provides, and we are blessed with her gifts. Yes, Mother, I will learn enough about the man to smell him coming a day’s march away."

Her mother smiled and nodded her dismissal. Ciara spotted Aedan entering, and glided out of the room as regal as she could in leather pants and jacket. Once the door closed; she sprinted to the library. Ciara need not be present while mother assigned other duties. Who in the hells heard of An Deorái? The meaning of the title would be...He who searches without stopping or concern, or perhaps...he who walks the land searching without concern. Gods above, she couldn't wait to learn his identity. The palace guard could keep the damn fish.



**Chapter 33 Accept a Quest**

**B**ooks slammed on the table jolted Ciara back to reality. Gods, where did her mind go? She looked up at the wise-ass smirk on her sister's face. Sometimes, Braelyn laughed too often, too loud and too many times in the wrong places. Ciara glanced around the room, only now remembering where she sat. Ciara would call the library a comfortable place to read. Well-lit at night, and during the day with skylights and plenty of windows opened for fresh air, made it ideal for study. She could hear the birds singing in the tree the library rested in, and the scent of caramel from the Malik trees reassured her with its warm, welcoming aroma. The chairs caressed her body like sitting on a cloud. Yes, she would swear it’s the perfect place to read.

"Five days already Ciara. You must have found something within all these smelly books." Braelyn flipped the chair around to straddled it and sat with her elbows up on the back. She propped her chin on her arms, and her eyebrows wiggled as she waited for an answer.

Five days? Máthair’s mercy, it couldn't be true. She looked down at the leather jacket and pants she had worn since beginning her studies. Gods, she needed a bath and some sleep. Had she slept? Hells, even if she did, she would’ve dreamed of An Deorái all night.

"I have discovered many interesting facts, Braelyn. First, I believe I am in love with An Deorái already, if he is who I think he is. You should learn to enjoy reading. With all the adventures to have, worlds to discover and knowledge to gain, you would learn to appreciate the smell of books.” Braelyn rolled her eyes up to almost disappear and bent her brows—making the funny face Ciara had always loved and laughed about. Alright, get to the point.

“I am wrapping up the report for our mother. He is in the Eastern American Kingdom. I am sure…enough to wager on it.” She pointed her finger at her smiling sister and showed her best mean look. “I would bet my best rod and reel on it.”

Braelyn rose from her seat like she accepted a challenge and laughed loud enough for the librarian to hush her, and then apologize when he recognized the Princess who made all the fuss. Braelyn dashed over to console the elder with a hug and returned to hover over Ciara wearing the smirk that always melted her anger.

“Well come on Ciara, you have enough time to bathe the stink of books from you before you present your knowledge to the council. You smell the same as the librarian already.”

“That is not kind, sister. The poor man is too old to climb the stairs each day. He sleeps in a chair at night. I considered requesting a bed and bath be installed for him yesterday…I believe it was yesterday. It doesn’t matter, leave the sweetheart be. We will go to mother now. I can wait another hour for a bath.”

“OK. Have it your way, but Aedan will not appreciate your rank odor or the fact you fell in love with An Deorái.” Braelyn face burned to laugh. Her cheeks were puffed up and rosy with her attempt to keep it inside.

“Oh, you are such a smart ass. I will certainly bathe and change first, but I’m not wearing a damn dress like you. Thank you for warning me. I completely forgot the man reading about An Deorái—my future husband.”

Braelyn may pretend, but Ciara thanked her for the reminder. It’s not like Aedan would pay any attention to Ciara. Even if their parents were negotiating a marriage contract, he never looked at her twice. Ciara could hope he may... someday. Even the younger princess must try hard to catch the eye of the Commander of Warriors of the Northern Forest. That title sure stuffed a mouthful. Did he have it embroidered on his clothes? CWNF would be easier. Gods above protect her, why did she bring up such mushy nonsense?



**C**iara addressed the council, conveyed all the vital information she discovered without divulging the man’s name or location per her mother’s request. Protecting the man’s identity made perfect sense to Ciara. The Elders all sat silent and stunned. Most members stared at their hands cradled in their laps, and two even laid their heads on the table with fingers combed through their hair. Some stared blank eyes out the windows as if the tree would provide answers for them. What did she say to bring all the somber looks? Mother glided to her side, gave her a hug with the usual loving kiss.

“Thank you, Ciara. They are upset because you did find him. An Deorái is among us, and that fact affirms we head for war with the beasts in our lifetime. The smelly soldier interrogated confirmed our fears. We were hoping the Ogres you killed, were merely a random accident where the eight discovered a door and came here alone. The man questioned validated our suspicions that the evil master is here as well. He will attempt to raise an army to take over the Earth.” Mother smiled with tight lips and closed Ciara’s mouth for her with a soft touch.

“Now that you found An Deorái, we know they will arrive in numbers as they have before in other worlds. The beasts you killed are juveniles, Ciara. I would not have sent you two out there if they were not. The Orc come bigger, smarter, armed and armored. Trolls, Goblins, Thants, and Ogres can come through the doors as well. The Goblins attack in overwhelming numbers like ants on a dead bird. The good people of Earth can deal with the human armies, but An Deorái must help battle the beasts and kill the master.”

Queen Morgun clapped her hands once. The council sat up straight like school children to pay attention. Elders with faces buried in their arms received a nudge from their neighbor and sat up in a lurch with guilty looks directed at the Queen.

“Ciara believes she has found him. We must prepare ourselves, and we must seek his guidance. When we received notice from the Rangers, he lived among us, and knew his destiny, we were skeptical, but now know they spoke the truth, and I bless the Master of Rangers for sharing his secret. The beasts attack our neighbors to the south. Our warriors will travel to the area affected, and with the Elves from the Southern Forest, lend aid to the people there.” Mother waited for the commotion to settle down.

“We have asked King Alderic of the Western European Kingdom for his warriors as well. Messengers are heading to ask the Templar leaders from Calais to join us. If there were many Orc here already, we would see hordes of them at our door for how much they despise our kind. Therefore, I believe their numbers to be small, and we should be capable of protecting our brothers and sisters on Earth.”

“Exactly who is he, Your Majesty?” Aedan asked mother without a glance in Ciara’s direction.

He would not speak directly to her? Was it shyness or perhaps he didn’t find her worthy of answering? Perhaps he believed himself too important to talk to the younger Princess or a woman. Mother smiled and nodded to her to answer. Thanks for the support here, mother.

“I believe his identity should remain secret. I only have a theory as to who he might be, and I will not put the man in jeopardy with a guess, Commander.”

“Who will search for him and request his aid, Your Majesty?”

Aedan asked Mother again, and again she looked at Ciara. Hells, she had no clue who mother would send. Why did she look…? Arawn’s hairy balls. Ciara dropped her head and clamped her eyes shut. A chill that iced her spine prickled her skin, and she shivered. Of course, who else knew more? She opened her eyes and answered with her gaze glued to the floor.

“I will go, mother. I know more of the man than any of us, and the fewer who know what I do, the better for An Deorái. I volunteer to find An Deorái and request his assistance.”

Ciara raised her head to face her Mother smiling brightly. The Queen’s eyes misted as they squinted a smile to match her lips. She bobbed her head acknowledging consent, and to prove she expected this.

“I will travel with my little sister to keep her out of trouble mother.” Queen Morgun’s smile widened. She clapped her hands, laughed with her unique musical voice, and Ciara had to laugh with her.

“I thank you both for volunteering. I wish for the two of you to travel to a human town and purchase horses, and once skilled riders, take a ship to Esak first to question the Master of Rangers. Hopefully, he will point you to our man. An Deorái will be sought out by the entire world Therefore; he cannot afford to come here himself to train us. You must stay with him to learn and return with the knowledge our people require.”

Mother joined her and Braelyn and held them close. Her visage somber, almost sad. Ciara would return. She had a mate to come home for. Well, she almost had a mate, and he glared at her for some damn reason.

“Ask if you may learn at his side, if he doesn’t already have many others, he may take you as companions. Do what your heart dictates at the time of your meeting. Ciara knows from the records what can be done if she is willing. Either way, find him quickly, learn well and fast, daughters. I miss you already.”

Walking out with Braelyn, Aedan loomed in the doorway to block her path. Ah, he would speak with her now that she must leave. Aedan certainly had good looks on his side. And size…his shoulders about blocked the entire door. She hadn’t noticed that before. Ciara cocked her head and lifted an eyebrow and her lips twisted into a question. What he did could be called impolite in anyone’s opinion, regardless of how handsome or big.

“Why did you volunteer? This search is not something for a woman. It could take years. You should be learning how to keep a house, cook, sew, or something. You don’t need to ride a horse or fish all day to keep a house. What if you don’t return or are injured? What am I to do for a wife if you don’t return?”

The first time in ages to speak with her and he bitched about her leaving and her favorite pastime. She had been casting her line in the wrong waters for damn sure. Her luck, he turned out a blasted momma’s boy.

“Oh my, Commander.” She twisted her lips and placed a finger on her chin and tapped like she pondered his comment.

“I suppose, you can always hire a cook, a seamstress, and a house cleaner to care for you. Perhaps you should consider a wet-nurse as well. Excuse me, Sir. You are blocking my way, and you reek of mother’s milk.”

Ciara nudged him aside and stormed off down the hall with Braelyn’s damn laughter chasing after her. Not once did the man say a thing about love. She would never marry a man looking for a cook. He could damn well stay at home with his mother for all she cared. This from the man she wished would pay her some attention? Damn, she sure could pick a loser. She didn’t need any man to be happy, damn it to all the hells. Perhaps she would fall in love with An Deorái.

She would learn to ride a horse better than the Templars in no time. That’s it. The best and quickest way to learn to ride was to climb on a bloody horse and ride. They would travel across Europe speaking the Common Speech before catching a ship to Esak. It shouldn’t take long at all and to leave the baby behind suited her fine. She already knew how to cook and sew, but she wouldn’t be doing it for Aedan in this lifetime for damn sure.



**Chapter 8 Foul Murder**

**A**shling directed Aibhilin’s cut on the flower stalk. “Aye, that’s perfect, darl’n. Now a new bud will emerge off your cut. How many flowers do we have?”

Aibhilin counted and Ashling stretched her back. They had enough fresh cut flowers for the house. She scanned the greenhouse and sniffed in the delightful aroma. The greenhouse was her favorite place. The bed of pale roses would not be touched for a while. They used many to adorn Lady Ciara’s rooms while she stayed. Hmmm. Máistir would marry three women. If he could get past his stubborn will.

“We have eighteen roses and twenty carnations, Ashling.”

“Excellent, love. Let’s pick some greens and baby’s breath and then we’ll put them in the beautiful vase in the foyer. Aye?”

The little girl clapped her hands and squinted her joy. Aye, such simple pleasures now the darling had a home. Praise the bright gods the old woodsman knew to bring her to Tranquility when he found her in the forest starving, and freezing in torn rags. Her father evicted her in the dead of winter because she Talked to birds. Some day the world would right again. Her Máistir would set it right. Ashling would appreciate the opportunity to help him avenge Aoife’s death. Aye, her anger interfered with her work at times, and she needed to release it before it festered.

Aibhilin chose perfect ferns and sprigs of baby’s breath. The darling had a talent for flowers. She placed them on the other flowers like they might break. Ashling hefted the wicker basket and nodded to the door for the little dear to hold open.

Ashling shifted the basket of flowers to her hip to hold with one hand so she could shade her eyes. She squinted at the front gate. Aye, there was someone standing outside.

“Let’s hurry and put the basket on the veranda so we can see who wishes to visit.”

Ashling hustled to the main house and placed the flowers in the shade. She took Aibhilin’s hand and crossed the drive to the gates moving faster each step. It couldn’t be Lady Ciara. When the truth stared her in the face, she yelled the command for the gate to open. Why did Lady Ciara return? She left on the Star three days ago. Oh, hells, Máistir was gone a whole day. He’d be on the riverboat and she’d never reach him. Oh, Máthair, help her. Lady Ciara was soaking wet. Her leathers stretched and sagged on her and they were stained white where the salt dried. Why did she—she couldn’t jump from the ship. Captain Jack would turn the boat back for her.

She jerked and screamed for help. The dark on her leathers was not all water. Lady Ciara had three arrow heads protruding from her chest. The gate slid open enough for the lady to pass through and she rushed to catch the poor woman barely able to stand. Oh, bright gods, give her the strength to heal Lady Ciara.

Lady Ciara coughed up black blood and gasped. “Tell him…”

She collapsed to her knees.

“Lady Ciara why did you leave the ship? Why not open a portal?”

“Forever…what? She coughed and gagged on her blood. Lady Ciara fell face down throwing her arms out like she reached for her lover. Ashling couldn’t stop her. She knelt to delve for vital signs and found none. She sat and wiped her tears. Lady Ciara passed on. Aibhilin hugged her neck and they both cried.

“Dear Máthair. Accept your faithful daughter and provide her with a new life where she could live with him in love.”

Ashling stared at the lady’s nails painted in a rust color—one of Máistir’s favorite hues. The portal ring’s power had to have faded because she did not wear it. Why would she return? Oh, her necklace with the knot was missing. The foul men killed Lady Ciara for a bit of gold. How would Ashling ever explain to Máistir some foul beast murdered his best friend, and lady?

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**Chapter 34 Camping**

**M**uirenn slapped the stack of papers on her lap and gazed at the sky still the brilliant blue of a fall day. The myriad colored leaves created a stunning view. The occasional multi-hued whirlwind dancing on the road with leaves falling away in its path thrilled her artistic soul. She shivered and glanced at the big man nodding off. His arms hugged his chest and his chin bobbed with the swaying of the wagon, but he remained still. The big man had to be awake. He wasn’t snoring.

“Sheridan?”

He snorted, sat up and reached for his knives. Sheridan turned to face her, his eyes unfocused but still gorgeous. He was asleep and didn’t snore. Hmmm? She wiped the sleepy drool from his chin and scooted closer.

“I loved Ciara’s tale. She has earned a ton more respect from me, for damn sure. She fell in love with you during her research. Why is it colder here? We have not climbed in elevation.”

“Aha, the Appalachian River originates at the ice cap up north. The water is frigid and has altered the weather patterns where it flows. You can toss fire onto the soapstone if you are chilled.”

“It’s a new river? Oh, thank you, but I’m not a sissy. I’ll toss fire on the stones if it becomes unbearable for damn sure. So, tell me about the river.”

He assumed his teacher’s voice and explained that in the old world there were five great lakes to the north. In their world there was one great lake encompassing them all and it filled with ice melt from the expanded polar cap. The Great Lake dispersed its extra water into three large rivers and the Appalachian flowed along a route where once small rivers and a major highway called eighty one existed. He stated the river flowed south to Atlanta and more east to Augusta and on to the Atlantic Ocean without passing another large town.

“Oh, so we should dress a wee bit warmer for our little jaunt down the river. I might need to purchase a coat if my cloak won’t suffice.”

“There are many jackets and coats to choose from in the wagon. Ciara did not take all her clothing and personal items home, and I don’t know why.”

“Of course, you know why she left her stuff, big man. Ciara hopes and prays daily for you to wake up and ask her to return and pledge so she can fight on your left forever. Oh, Sheridan; stop rolling your shoulders like a lad waiting for a whooping. You are too huge to curl up and hide.”

“Aye, it is a habit I have had trouble with since my youth.”

“May I ask you a personal question? Oh, it’s not about your youth. I won’t venture there until we are more comfortable in our relationship.”

He nodded slowly which to her meant he agreed but he was none too bloody happy to oblige.

“Ashling mentioned you were on a quest with a Spirit. Would you expound on her statement for me?”

He did and Muirenn wiped her face dry many times during the telling. He met his baby’s mirror twin and her mother who was Muirenn’s twin on another world. He claimed meeting Kristen was the grandest form of mourning the gods could provide. The Ranger had settled his daughter’s loss in his heart but he had not yet taken his revenge on the murderers. Sheridan needed to kill Gwydion’s soldier slaves and his beasts until his heart balanced the pain Aoife’s loss cost him. He related the events over the three months on the foreign world as good if not better than a Bard.

“You remained on the world to help Ciara’s mirror twin who the Blade wanted?”

“And your mirror twin, Muirenn. Rose and Kristen will move to the queen’s palace so Kristen can receive proper training in magic and Célia promised to protect them. Kristen is a seer or a prophetess. The Elves just say she has the sight.”

“What did Kristen tell you that has your tongue all twisted?”

Sheridan asked if she was certain she wanted the truth. Muirenn studied the woods out her window for a while contemplating what he could say to disturb her. Nay, the truth is what she wanted. She told him so and he sucked in a deep breath.

“I will return to her world to clean the sky with my three wives.”

“And? I can tell there is more, love. Pretend I am Ciara you speak with and there are no secrets between us.”

“One is you, one Ciara, and the third is Ena. Kristen pointed at her mother and Célia when Deoirenn asked her to describe the three wives. She described Ena as a funny lady who teases me and makes people laugh.”

Muirenn made a bold move and scooted right next to him and laid her head on his arm. She reached for his hand and he gave it to her to hold and she rested close to him and smiled at the windshield. “You are seriously considering marrying us. Aye? I know for a fact we three future wives love you.”

“Allow me to complete the quest and deal with the guilt weighing on my heart for loving three women. I will answer you when, or if I return from the mountains.”

Muirenn kept her mouth shut and her thoughts private. Sheridan had to return. He admitted enough for her. In a short while, they broke the silence by discussing small things, without a mention of duty, love, or past heartaches, and he opened up slowly like a spring blossom. They both laughed loud and often. She swatted him plenty of times for his wild tales and silly anecdotes and he nudged her with a shoulder sending her flying sideways when he wanted to make a point, but she just came back at him twice as hard and laughing harder.

The sun began its final and glorious descent. The clouds burned with red, orange and yellow fire to compete with the fall foliage in splendor. The scene transformed into a magical moment. She spotted the dogs gathered ahead on the road and sighed. Muirenn Talked to Finn and she learned they reached their camping spot. Muirenn sat up and breathed a blessed lungful of happiness and contentment.

“I will attempt to handle all the chores you normally would when setting up camp. Well, besides Traveling the wagon into a grand spot for the night. I want you resting with your feet elevated. I went through all the supplies on the wagon and know where most everything is. Between us and eighteen Guardians, we should be able to set up our beds and prepare a decent meal of…huge, juicy looking steaks tonight. Aye? Oh, where do you want our bedrolls?”

“Under the wagon is where I put them, so the dogs can sleep without worries if it rains. We have camped here before and the site, if available is situated near an effluence of the Appalachian River. There is fresh water, level ground and ample trees for cover and privacy.”

Muirenn hopped out of the cab and called for Dina. Well she asked a soldier politely to speak with Lieutenant Phoenix. Dina responded in a blink with her sergeant at her side, and Muirenn asked her to have a couple Guardians follow the dogs to their campsite, and if it was occupied they must travel farther west to a less comfortable spot. The sergeant barked four names and they ran to follow the anxious dogs. Dina handtalked with a question how her afternoon went. Muirenn smiled, winked, and flushed to heat the air around her. “I had one of the best days in my life. Oh, I don’t want him exerting himself. Sheridan needs to rest. His thrombosis could create a blood clot if he moves around too much. Could I ask you for help setting up the camp?”

“Certainly, My Lady. Colonel Grace informed us we would be escorts, guards, and laborers when you made such a request. My warriors know how to build a comfy camp in no time.”

“Excellent. Steaks and steamed veggies fresh from a garden today with a spud baked in the coals with ale or wine is the menu for tonight. The sooner we have a fire going, the sooner I can cook. Aye?”

“I will assist you with the cooking, Your Highness. We can’t have a princess cooking for us. In the home where I grew up, we all learned to cook many meals and my—big brother’s favorite that I prepared was steak on a an open fire. We have an ex-baker among us as well. Do you have dough for camp biscuits?”

Sheridan hollered from inside the cab proving his damn enhanced senses. He gave instructions for dinner rolls and where the supplies and the fire pit oven were located. Dina hid her laughter well behind fake coughs thanking the Ranger.

The Guardians returned in a short while declaring the campsite vacant and a damn fine site for them and the animals to boot. Dina ordered ten Guardians to enter the woods and clear the ground of the campsite for bedrolls. The remaining warriors were to gather firewood and try to pick mostly hardwoods if they could for the cook fire. She didn’t care what burned in the campfire for ambience.

Muirenn stood on the running board and stuck her head in the window to ask if the team could pull the wagon to the site and he nodded affirming her suspicions with a big smile. She strolled to the lead horses to Talk and asked them to follow her. They agreed with a toss of their beautiful manes and mentioned the little fact she might not know they had been there before. She laughed at the first star to appear in the darkening sky and smacked her thighs marching ahead of the six equine comedians.



**M**uirenn spotted the stubborn man and clenched her fists. Oh, he was a stubborn brute. “What in blue blazes are you doing on your feet, big man?”

“The brood must be fed.”

Four Guardians raced to his side and one yanked the scoop from his hands. The female pointed a wagging finger at the bedroll under the wagon. He nodded defeat and scuffed his boots returning to his confinement. The same girl gasped and hurried over to bend down and speak with the Ranger. She returned with two fingers raised. Oh, she asked how many scoops each dog received in their bowl. Two men took tubs to the creek to fill and the dogs started lapping at the chilled refreshment before they set the first down. Her silly fox leaped two feet in the air to compete but the short little fella would need his own bowl. Aha, another tub appeared for the beagles, terriers and her wacky Fairfax.

Muirenn poked at the log breaking it up into fine pieces of coal to add to the bed for cooking spuds. She glanced at the wagon where the Guardians had a blast calling out the names painted on the bowls. Each dog in turn approached to receive his or her dinner and a good scrub on the head from a female Guardian.

The flapping of many wings drew her eyes above the wagon. The day hunters landed to retire for the night in the aviary and the owls took flight for the night shift. Her babies stood on the roof unsure of where to sleep. Oh, Ice came back out and shrieked at the two who jumped and squawked like chickens. Her eagles hustled inside like good full-grown children.



**M**uirenn led the Guardians on the morning run an hour before the sun rose, and she organized the exercises and sword forms while Sheridan cooked at the fire with Caitlin. He cooked because he claimed they were in a hurry to catch a riverboat. She knew it was a bold-faced lie. He just didn’t want to sit around doing nothing. Besides, her Ranger promised there would be ample boats to choose because the festival lasted two more weeks. By then the boats would be loaded to the brim with goods and have no room for passengers let alone a wagon and fifty one horses—hells, they would require two boats.

The well fed and happy group broke camp and headed west on the road as the sky paled pink in the east. Ooh, red in the morning, sailor’s warning. She wrapped her cloak tight against the chill breeze. She would need more than her cloak for damn sure. The Guardians set up on either side of her and she rode in the middle of the pack. Caitlin winked her stamp of approval, but Muirenn felt like she was in a bloody parade—and she was the head clown.

A quick half hour brought them to a large and quiet town in the early dawn. The buildings, blue in the morning fog, remained dark and eerie. A sudden westerly breeze carried the aroma of coffee and she hummed with desire. The main road curved and Sheridan led them south for one block and west again until they came upon the sprawling docks jutting out into the river like fingers on a giant hand. Muirenn tugged Ciara’s coat tighter and zipped it up. She pulled the fur lined hood up to cover her frosty head. Lights flickered on along the pier and she sucked in a gasp of amazement. The piers were not as big as she imagined in the dark. The riverboats were bloody huge.

The lights coming on must’ve been a signal because men emerged from below decks to busy themselves on rigging and sorting cargo. One bear of a man with wild brown hair and a bushy beard to match leaped from a boat and hollered orders loud enough to wake the folks back in Liberty. Sheridan chuckled and his wagon headed for the boisterous overseer. The large furry man spotted the wagon and he let out a bellow of pure delight and stomped toward the wagon not waiting for Sheridan. Muirenn asked Dina to open the ranks so she could hear the men’s conversation.

“I know the man, My Lady. He is Captain Ziggy, and a grand friend to Ranger Sheridan.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about Sheridan’s safety, love. I’m a nosey woman and want to hear what they discuss, y’know.”

Dina ordered her Guardians to dismount when Muirenn did and selected six warriors to follow her to the two men standing beside the wagon pushing and shoving each other like adolescent boys.

The big guy—Captain Ziggy hollered in a voice that rang her ears. He declared in his thundering tone that the Ranger required two boats from the River Rats and they’d better hop to and load the wagon and horse flesh. The wakening pier became busier than an ant hill at dawn. Sheridan could even make longshoreman jump at his call. Squealing hinges and wood banging drew her attention toward town. Doors opened and shadowed people pushed stalls out for customers to peruse. Aye, she had to ask. Muirenn tapped Sheridan’s shoulder with the captain grinning like she was breakfast. Sheridan made introductions and Ziggy ripped his skullcap off, punched a fist and recited Sheridan’s salute.

“I heard all about yeh, little lady.”

Muirenn’s brows rose in alarm and her lips tightened. “What have you heard and from whom, Captain?”

“Oh, it ain’t noth’n m’lady. Lady Ciara rides our boats and when we stood watch up front talk’n, she told me fine tales and that’s when I heard of yeh and Lady Ena. Lady Ciara has a ton of respect for yeh.”

“Oh, well, thank you, Captain. I love Ciara like a sister. Can either of you gentleman tell me how much time I have to shop for herbs? Your supplies are dwindling, Sheridan and some need replacing. Oh, what are papaya seed extract and gendarussa extract used for? I forgot to research them in my books. Both canisters are outdated, Ranger.”

Captain Ziggy harrumphed, slapped his hat on his head and shuffled his feet like she caught him stealing from the cookie jar. Sheridan chuckled and in his blasé teacher’s voice informed her there was no need to restock the herbs. “They are used by men as an oral contraceptive.”

She would not blink, blush, or fluster, damn it. Nay, she would respond with her healer’s voice.

“That is grand news. It’s about bloody time the men shared the responsibility. Why won’t, um, don’t you, uh, I’m going shopping with Caitlin and my six guards, Sheridan. Talk me a hint to return if I dally longer than you like.”

Muirenn glided away in queenly fashion, stopped in a hurry to turn back and speak to two men frozen in their tracks. “I will replenish the supplies, Sheridan. Who knows what might happen between us in two weeks travel in the wild lands of America.”

She expected him to refuse or a deliver a sharp rebuttal, but all he said was to use the knot to purchase what she needed or wanted. She stopped long enough to gaze over her shoulder and nod in acknowledgement. Muirenn resumed her queenly departure with six guards trying to keep pace and Caitlin bloody well laughing louder each feck’n step of the way.

Muirenn led her six little ducklings, each carrying a bag of goodies, to the pier. The crews secured the brood’s wagon on one boat and the horses on a second. That made too damn much sense to argue. She wouldn’t smell like a horse for two days and she could sleep in the wagon if the bunks onboard were unfit as many were on smaller boats—in her experience. Well, the river boat wasn’t small either.

The boat crew covered the decking with a thick layer of straw for the horses to make cleanup easy. Murienn patted a few shoulders and commended them on the ingenious use of hay. A few doffed their caps and twisted it in gnarled hands as they thanked her highness-ship. There was no such bloody word, but somebody’s ears would burn when she discovered who informed the crew of her identity. She just wanted to be another traveler like the Guardians.

Well, perhaps her highness-ship status had its benefits. The good captain assigned her a spacious room. It contained two beds, stands at the foot of each for the trunks and a writing desk with a reading lamp bolted to the wall. A solitary window opened to allow the chilled morning air to enter and freshen up the room. Aye, it’d suit them for sure.

Her six guards bunked right next door and they told her to bang on the wall if she needed them. If she needed more help than she and Caitlin could handle, the whole bloody boat would be awake and fighting. Dina informed her she must bunk on the second boat with her men and Muirenn would have none of that nonsense. Officers deserved separate and finer sleeping accommodations than the troops. Captain Ziggy moved passengers around to suit Dina and the two female Guardians adding to her personal guard. She would never understand in her wildest imagination why Caitlin snickered and Sheridan crossed his arms and smirked like he held a bloody secret.

Muirenn leaned against the rail set into the wall of the pilot house with Sheridan, Caitlin, Dina and her guard. Captain Ziggy pointed his crooked finger at her alone for some bloody reason, and croaked orders to stay out from under foot while his men readied the boat and released it to the currents of the river. She smiled at him and nodded her head granting his crew permission to pull all lines in and secure the boat for travel before proceeding. Muirenn turned away quickly to hide her smile when the good captain tore his cap from his head and chewed on it like he needed to prevent himself from cursing. She winked at Sheridan and Dina who gaped at her with wide-eyed confusion. Caitlin informed the young officer that Muirenn was merely practicing her princess voice and how impressed she was nobody stuck a knife in her ribs. Sheridan declared, without a trace of humor, there were still many hours left in the day. Caitlin doubled over crowing her bloody sarcastic laughter.

She learned the purpose for the railing when the boat drifted free of the dock. The river clutched the boat in its current, and hurled them downstream. Muirenn gripped the rail and gaped at the town fading in the distance in a heartbeat. Damn, now she understood how they could traverse nearly a thousand miles in two days. Sheridan explained—well, she had to drag answers out of him one question at a time, that Roanoke was their first destination. They would reach the town in eight hours, and there were four-hundred-eighty miles between them. Caitlin reached across and clicked her jaw shut. Muirenn shivered awake. Damn, the bloody boat traveled faster than her eagles.

A crewman delivered a steaming cup of coffee for her highness-ship and Muirenn was in heaven. She dropped to her butt leaning against the pilot house and sipped liquid paradise. She chatted with Dina, and the guards about the area blurring by in glorious fall colors. She learned two of the men grew up in the Shenandoah Valley. They wore a nostalgic smile and had a glint in their eyes regaling them with the history and folk lore of the Appalachian, Smokey, and Blue Ridge Mountains.

Sheridan shouted for her and gestured to join him at the bow. Well, if he desired her company, she would not refuse. Lucky as a four leaf clover she drank enough coffee to prevent her from sloshing the contents staggering like a drunk across the expanse of the shuddering foredeck to reach him. She had less trouble crossing a deck on one of her crab boats in high seas.

Muirenn arrived unscathed at his right side. Her guard and smirking friend arrived in a huddle of laughter about the trek across the deck. Sheridan wrapped his arm around her and gripped the railing to pin her in place between him and the hull. It allowed Muirenn to drink her coffee with both needed hands or she’d spill it for bloody sure. Muirenn leaned against the solid mass called Sheridan and a silly groan escaped when she caught his scent. Damn, she would not melt in her bloody boots in front of the Ranger. He needed a strong woman at his side, not some prissy school girl fainting at the slightest emotion.

The Ranger spoke loud for all eleven to hear. He described the scene that would unfold when the boat completed the turn ahead. The two men from the area stamped their endorsement with hoots and fist pumps of excitement. Muirenn was more interested in how in blue blazes the swift moving craft would maneuver its bulk around the sharp bend looming ever closer off the bow. Large rocks jutted out of the water and the river splashed white tails high into the air.

Eight crewmen arrived to answer her question and add a gazillion more. Four men stood portside and four at starboard waiting for instructions. Captain Ziggy bellowed orders she couldn’t understand until the four on portside removed what looked like solid nets from a storage box. They tossed two far out into the current. The netting ballooned in the wind before it struck the water and the boat jerked left. The four men hauled in the two lines to a singing rhythm, and the bow shifted left in jerky motions. Sheridan compared what they did to a swimmer reaching left to change course. Aye, it was bloody obvious and ingenious. She asked who came up with the brilliant concept and Captain Ziggy’s belly bounced with his hearty laughter. The gruff boatman pointed at Sheridan and winked at her.

“The Ranger and his squires came up with it one day when a rope ripped both portside rudders off. He used a good sail and rope we were hauling to a customer but we would’ve crashed into those sharp rocks with force without it. Before, we had the wings as we call them we’d hug the eastern edge and used paddles to push her around.”

Sheridan’s face was crimson with a blush. She kissed his cheek and suggested he let the praise roll off his thick skin. “Praise like insults only affect us if we allow it, Ranger. They are your words coming back around to haunt you. Aye? You proffered the sage advice to me during our week-long trek through the woods in Ireland.”

After the riverboat shifted left into the mainstream and to Ziggy’s satisfaction, the four men hung the nets to air dry and joined their mates on the starboard side. The boat crabbed sideways and shuddered in the currents. She asked to see the rudders that steered the boat, and Sheridan agreed to show her but advised they remained in place until the turn succeeded. He stated the ride would become a wee bit rougher soon because of the vortex the current created striking the eastern shore and it whirled in a tempest before heading south again.

Captain Ziggy bellowed his orders when Muirenn was sure the boat would crash into the eastern embankment in mere moments. The eight men tossed four sails into the raging river and the jerk would’ve knocked her down without Sheridan’s strong arms anchoring her to the bow.

The song the crewmen sang was twice the tempo. The boat skittered across the ripples, but the nose pointed more south inch by nail-biting inch. The crew tossed the sails four times to right the boat and Ziggy declared his boat was safe. He ordered full rudders out and turned back to his vigilant watch on the river. His job heading downstream was to watch for flotsam that could damage or cripple his vessel. Ziggy directed the pilot with hand signals.

Sheridan escorted the group to the sides and pointed out the large paddles protruding from the ship. He described their function and how adjusting each could change course. The flat-bottomed riverboat was like a giant water bug skimming the surface of a pond.

Eagles, falcons and hawks screeched, Ziggy cursed at some foul dastardly deed and Sheridan grabbed her hand to rush them to her room. He told her to don armor and prepare for battle. Bloody blue blazes—he left before she could ask why. Caitlin hauled the armor trunk over to her bed and she dressed faster than two minutes for bloody sure. Muirenn slapped her helmet on, tightened her sword belts and nodded her readiness to the smiling Knight.

“You are having as much fun as I am. Aye?”

“Aye, My Lady. I’m enjoying the permanent bright smile on your lips. Hells bells, we head for battle on a bloody riverboat against pirates. It’s a first for me and I’ll treasure the memory if we survive.”

She just exited her room when Sheridan pulled them out to slam the door and pointed at the deck where Dina and the guards laid stacked up like logs against the wall. He told her to lay down and he would lie on top of her and Caitlin until after the crash.

“What bloody crash?”

“The pirates strung a rope across the river. When the boat strikes it with force, the stern will lift before the current spins us sideways to slam against the restraint. The rope will either flip the boat or Captain Ziggy will cut us free. Either way the course will change drastically and the boat heads for the shore too fast to alter. We have survived other attempts and will survive this one. There are over one hundred men waiting to pillage the boat. I say we surprise them with blades, arrows and fire. Aye?”

The Guardians and Caitlin hollered a resounding aye and Muirenn nodded her head hard in his unique language. She asked why he wasn’t lying on top and he bloody well laughed. “Two hundred sixty five pounds is enough weight to crush you, Muirenn. When the boat strikes the rope, I’ll hold you two down.”

Caitlin snickered and pushed Muirenn against the wall to protect with her body. Muirenn pondered the reason they laid at the back of the pilot house. Her studies of physics and momentum clicked on a light bulb and she realized all the pressure would be on the unlucky person at the bottom of the pile. She groaned and prayed for survival—from the bloody pirates and the forces of physics. He weighed two-hundred-sixty-five pounds?

“Your Ranger is a big man for sure, My Lady.” Muirenn gasped. “Did I say that aloud?”

“Nay, but I know how your mind works. I’ll brace my arms against the wall to keep his mass from squashing you like a caterpillar. You haven’t sprouted pretty wings yet, so you need more time to break out of the cocoon. Aye?”

The boat hit the rope before she could respond. The wood groaned and the forward momentum crashed to a grunting halt. Sheridan braced his arm next to Caitlin’s. The stern lifted and the weight of both protectors swooshed the air from her lungs. The battered boat slammed back down and her stomach twisted with the force spinning the boat sideways. It rocked, beams and boards creaked with the stress. She heard a pounding and suddenly all stress ceased. Ziggy hollered the boat was freed and Sheridan bounded away.

“Let’s go, Caitlin. I want to stand at his side with my swords to protect him. It is what I trained for, y’know. Bloody hells, it is why I was born and what I am destined for. It would be a sweet cherry on top if he returns my love, but I’m keeping him alive to face Gwydion regardless of what happens.”

Muirenn rose with Caitlin’s help. She adjusted all the twisted belts and wiggled her armor in place. Dina sent her guards away and faced Muirenn with determination burning in her eyes.

“You’ll make a fine First Sister, My Lady. I heard what you said, and will stand with Lady Caitlin to protect you and Máistir.”

Muirenn joined Sheridan at the bow. His eyes scanned the shoreline advancing like a falling boulder. Oh, bloody hells. “There are a wee bit more than one hundred of the smelly stooks, Sheridan.”

“Aye. My birds showed me the second groups arrival while we lounged on the deck counting the clouds in the sky.”

Caitlin spit a burst of laughter. Dina’s laughter tinkled like bells. Muirenn squinted up at his face waiting for a smile to crack the stern visage. He glanced her way and his sparkly eyes laughed plenty to satisfy her.

Comprehension of their predicament settled over her mind and she shouted a thanks the other boat wouldn’t become involved.

“If the second boat struck the rope, we’d lose every horse.”

“Aye, it is why we took the lead, but the bright gods smiled on us today. Let’s hope they keep smiling. I will Travel the boat to shore instead or waiting to break apart on the rocks. Aye? I might be a wee bit tired after. What is your opinion?”

Wow. He wanted to include her in his decision. Hmmm? “Does distance affect the amount of magic used?”

“Nay, and I don’t carry the weight of the boat. It Travels with me. I have moved a boat to the same shore in the past, but I was younger and new to my talent. This time I have a fever from thrombosis.”

“Oh, you want my medical evaluation.”

“And your military training experience. I will ask you as well, Lieutenant Phoenix. How would you attack the shore if the boat crashed?”

“I would have us stand on the edge waiting for the moment of impact, and leap free, Sir. We’d reach the shore wet and chilled but unharmed by the sudden and violent stop. You alone know the strengths and weaknesses of your magic, Ranger. If Lady Murienn proclaims you fit to move the boat, I will fight at your side with her, or stand with her to protect your sleeping body.”

Abban Talked her images of more men approaching the rear with stealth. “Sheridan, there is a large group of dark skinned folks behind the enemy.”

“Aye, we might have help fighting the soldier slaves. They are the fabled Melungeon of the Appalachian Mountains. You can’t find them unless they wish to be found. May I have your permission to Travel the boat to safety, Muirenn? Captain Ziggy is quite fond of the Ranger’s Dream.”

“The Ranger’s Dream? Are you the Ranger the boat is named after?”

“Aye.”

Muirenn squished her face and shook her fists at her stubborn man. She calmed when her duty here slapped her face. He needed an answer. Muirenn placed her hands on his cheeks and delved for his condition. “Your innate magical healing has done wonders in one night of rest, love. Aye, you are fit to move us to shore, and you may participate in a wee bit of battle. Let’s be at the whankers.”

Sheridan bowed in thanks with his hand over his heart. He faced a smiling Dina.

“I would like you to clear a spot for us with fire. Pick a location farther west with a sandy beach please.”

“Aye, M—Sir.”

Dina led the way to the bow where Ziggy stared at the shoreline. Dina pointed at a spot.

“Ice showed me the perfect place, Ranger. Does it suit your needs?”

“Aye, burn the vegetation away but stop it from touching the trees.”

“I do know what I’m doing here, Ranger. I was trained by the best.” Dina Talked fire to both hands and tossed the two balls. She followed with four more before she scanned the shore for results. The soldiers laughed at her for setting fire to the wrong location. Oh, bloody hells, they were close if she heard the stooks. Dina yelled the landing was ready and he didn’t bother looking. Muirenn did, and Dian was correct. The bushes, grasses, and reeds burned away leaving a clear spot for the boat to sit on dark loam and sandy soil.

Sheridan hollered the rules of physics did not apply. They would not grind to a stop, so there was no need to brace for impact. She glanced at her pink hands and white knuckles gripping the rail and laughed. His warning was for her, and he did it without pointing her out for the crew’s amusement.

Captain Ziggy bellowed orders for the crew to lift out the rudders. The men hustled to unbolt and haul the huge discs aboard. He shouted ready to Sheridan and the gray frigid nothing lasted for a blink and the boat rested on shore. Muirenn leaped overboard and drew her swords. Caitlin, Dina and the eight guards joined her. Caitlin hollered at the gaping stooks to come fight and the fools obliged. Ziggy and his twelve man crew arrived with spiked cudgels and broad staffs. They had seen fighting in their past. Sheridan jumped from the boat and squinted at the approaching soon-to-be-dead eejits.

“Lady Muirenn and I will take point. Beware of our reach. We’ll both call for the berserker and will not be aware of anything but killing the enemy. Clean up after us and protect our backs. Aye?”

To her he cautioned to not waste time on each soldier. She should deliver a killing or crippling blow and move on. Their object was reducing the numbers their friends must face, not collecting kills. She clipped on her face mask to hide her smile and nodded. Damn, she would fight at his side in a real battle—another dream come true.

Muirenn allowed the red veil to smother her common sense. The clarity and vividness of the scene startled her for a bit. The men charging at her slowed and she knew where each foot would land and when their arms would raise to strike. Muirenn beat them to it by meeting them half way with her swords blurring in her vision. She sliced groins, throats or straight down thighs to open arteries. She kicked fools away too close to stab and slashed gaping wounds in their chests and stomachs. Muirenn was aware of the falling leaves, the dogs attacking legs to confuse the enemy and she awarded their efforts by killing the distracted eejits. Birds dove and raked screaming men for her to plant a blade in their chest. Aye, the coordination and collaboration of the brood was a symphony of death and she absorbed the mastery and magic of the dance.

Four strong hands gripped her and she lowered her blades.

“We are done here, My Lady. I don’t believe Captain Ziggy will be picking on you anymore. He is stunned by your abilities and I am pleased as a pregnant peacock at what you accomplished.”

Muirenn focused on Caitlin and Dina. “You mean peahen. Aye?”

“Who cares, My Lady. It’s a bloody saying. How is your head?”

“Not bad, love. How long did the battle last?”

Caitlin sputtered her lips and Dina covered a bright smile her eyes conveyed.

“What battle? It was a bloody massacre. The other folks at the rear joined with us and the whankers died in droves. The Ranger is speaking with our accomplices. He asked me to fetch you to make introductions.”

“Oh, Well, let’s go meet and thank the fabled Melungeon.”

Sheridan turned at her approach and she knew he couldn’t hear her. How did he know? Her Ranger smiled and offered a hand she grasped quickly before he changed his mind. The crowd of men murmured and whispered when she faced them with a smile. The man closest offered a hand to shake.

“My people noticed your eyes, My Lady. There is a prophesy describing a woman with the eyes of a storm and sea in turmoil. The men and women mean no disrespect even if they blabber like children.”

“No offense taken, Sir. Sheridan had described my eyes with the same words once. He did include the gold specks as a storm washed sea pounding a beach.”

The man, Jason, explained the Melungeon patrolled the river and covered the distance from north to south in three months. He was heartened to hear there were no more soldiers north of their location because it meant they could return home for a much needed rest before the next group headed out. Sheridan was very pleased to learn they cleaned the river of smelly pukes. He offered them assistance and Jason chuckled.

“When the gods deem the time is right, you will meet us, Ranger, and we will pledge to you. If you are who I think you are. I’ll mention no names because even the trees have ears, but there are questions to answer and a quest for you. Well met, and have a safer voyage from here on. My Lady, it was a pleasure to meet you. The Elders will be excited when I tell them you are alive with him in our world today.”

Muirenn could not let the opportunity pass. “Who am I in the Ranger’s life according to your prophesy?”

“Well, it is a bit confusing, but what our Elders discern is you are one of three wives, My Lady.”

“Aye, and I will be, Sir. Thank you for your honesty. Polygamy is not as bizarre as you imagine. There are clans who have adapted marrying one man to multiple wives. When more females than males are born to a clan, how else would you insure bloodlines are carried forward? I will have no problem pledging marriage vows with Sheridan and the two other women who love him.”

Jason smiled one she hadn’t seen before. She would guess a light bulb lit in his head and whatever Sheridan claimed before she arrived was tossed to the wayside.

“Thank you, My Lady. The Elders will be up for days discussing your wise advice. We have the same issue. There are four times as many women as men and our home is not as happy as it should be.”

“We don’t own the man when we marry him, Jason. And the husband does not own the wife. Aye? The gods have declared our destiny and blessed our choices. Sheridan?”

“Muirenn speaks the truth, Jason.”

She glared at the man. Is that all he would admit? Hmmm? She must settle for him confessing the truth and continue to wear him down until he kissed her.



**M**uirenn’s horse struggled up the last few steps to the top of Pennington Gap. She directed the mare to the side and turned to gaze upon the silver snake of the Appalachian River winding through the Shenandoah Valley spread out below in its stunning autumn raiment. She should switch mounts to give the mare a break. Damn. She forgot Sheridan hitched their spare mounts to the wagon to assist the six Percherons hauling the heavy beast up the hill. Hells, she could walk for a while to work the blood back to numb toes and aching thighs. Her guard and Caitlin dismounted to walk with her thankful for the same reasons.

The overnight stop in Roanoke was interesting. The common room of the Inn where they stayed was abuzz with tales of ghosts slipping out from alley ways to slit the throats of invading soldiers. The cowardly enemy eventually abandoned the town only to be met by the full force of the Melungeon on the road. And the mystery of the Hill Folk grew. Murienn smiled her knowledge behind her raised mug of ale.

He told her Roanoke was where he first met Enapay. She and Ciara were kidnapped by Reynolds and he sent them downriver for a ship to Gwydion. He said there was something about Enapay that unnerved him so he remained behind an illusion of an older fella.

Sheridan woke them at the crack of dark thirty to hurry onto the boat. He promised the early rise would be worth the sight—much better than the autumn leaves they saw the day before. The Ranger was absolutely correct. The riverboats turned a gentle curve and before her spread a vision of heaven. The river widened and smoothed to glass reflecting a perfect image of the trees on the mountains. The sun just peaking the treetops sparked fire from dew soaked leaves and chased the fog deep into the trees. Dark gray rock formations jutted from the canopy adding an eerie atmosphere. One such projection, she would call man made. Aye, she would ask. It appeared to her to be a bridge abutment but the bloody bridge would’ve spanned a mile wide and hundreds of feet above the river.

Her morning turned glorious when he stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around so she could lean against his warm body. Muirenn forgot about the landscape and soaked up the miracle he gifted.

The splashing of water reached her ears and woke her from her wee day dream. Muirenn pointed toward an obviously often used clearing in the woods as a fine place to water the horses and wait on Sheridan with the wagon. They trudged on with stiff legs and sore feet until the tingling sensation announced blood reached her extremities. Muirenn walked on the wrong side of her horse to see what made her guards and Caitlin laugh. She halted the mare and stepped around her nose with a pat to discover Sheridan sitting by a fire with his feet up on a log. The wagon sat alone and the horses roamed the area chewing on grass and flicking tails at pesky flies. So much for waiting on the Ranger.

Muirenn unsaddled her mount and set it with the others on the huge fallen log. She removed the bridle and smacked the mare’s rump telling her to drink and eat. She sauntered over to the resting hunk. His eyes opened and he smiled both dimples. He was either pleased to see her or he hid a fine secret. She would not mention his speedy and cheating arrival way before her.

“I’m thrilled your feet are raised higher than your heart, big man. You do listen to your healer’s advice. The climb up and over the gap was spectacular. I believe every living being should make the voyage at least once in their lives. Where are we, love?”

“We are a good thirty miles, or six hours riding from our next campsite. The town of Hyden is the next place we’ll stop for a break and eat lunch at the Inn. We’ll swap horses and head out quickly to reach the camp before dark. From here on it is mostly pine forests, lumber yards, and mills. We’ll only see the sky above and passing wagons for a break in color from greens and browns.”

Greens and browns were just dandy with her and she told the man. Muirenn excused herself to go find a bush. He nodded and asked if she would like a glass of wine when she returned. She actually thanked him without a blush, but her skin prickled for damn sure. Muirenn affirmed her desire for a chilled glass of white to wash down the road dust. Caitlin held a palm high when they passed the wagon and Muirenn smacked it hard, delighted to be where she was. She smacked Dina’s palm and winked at the young officer’s grin.

When she and her two lady companions returned, he had the sink pulled out and three fat logs for stools set up. Each log held a cup of wine. Sheridan rested with his eyes closed pretending it all appeared by magic or maybe the Fairies did it for him. Dina giggled, in a sure sign she spotted his peculiar behavior. Muirenn dried her hands and asked if anyone would like an apple. She purchased a sack full in Harpers Ferry and ate at least a dozen herself already. White wine and apples were a match blessed by the gods.

Oh, yeah, Hyden was a hoot. She’d describe the Inn as, uh, quaint, in a pine scented woodsy sort of way, but the beef stew was hot, delicious, and filling. She didn’t much like the whankers in the dining room gawking and whispering, but they didn’t unnerve Sheridan so she let it slide. After lunch, she treated each of her three horses to an apple, and chose the roan mare for the next leg on her journey. Muirenn tossed the blanket on and hefted the saddle onto her back. She wouldn’t name a horse she wouldn’t keep, but it bugged her to call each by their color alone. Someday, damn it, Muirenn would have a horse she could name.

The afternoon ride felt like they descended a wee bit and she’d take it thank you. He was right about the pine forest. The sun warmed the air permeated with the scent of pine and her clothes absorbed nature’s perfume. Well, she had smelled worse than pine in her life for damn sure. Muirenn cantered over to the wagon and shaded her eyes to see him. Sheridan appeared on the brink of tears. She dropped from the saddle and asked the horse to follow along. She climbed into the cab and slid across the seat to hug the big man.

“What troubles you, Sheridan? I could almost feel your sorrow.”

“I dread returning to the house. I haven’t cleaned Aoife’s room and her scent permeates in each room. I don’t know what the memories will do if I enter the home.”

Muirenn hugged him and rocked to console the tough Ranger hurting inside. Aye, she had not once considered his emotions after his baby’s murder. It was a year since the tragedy, but it was his heart that broke. Oh, she knew how to help.

“May I borrow a Peregrine falcon? Aye, I’d like to send a note ahead to Somerset, y’know. Perhaps there is a way to smooth the path to returning home.”

Muirenn laid a hand on his forehead, cheeks, and neck, delving him. Aye, it wasn’t illness producing the sweat. She kissed his chin and slid out of the cab to greet the falcon perched on her saddle. She rummaged in her saddle bags and found the bloody paper and pen. Aye, she recalled him stating a person always found what they sought in the last place they looked. She hadn’t ever decided if he teased her with nonsense or if it was a deep philosophical statement.

The falcon, Scarlet, lifted off and flew west in a hurry. She asked the pretty raptor to deliver the letter to Athair. The bird didn’t question, so she assumed Scarlet knew Sheridan’s adoptive father. Muirenn climbed back into the cab, told him to open his window, lie on her lap and extend his long legs outside to elevate his feet above his heart. She rubbed his scalp and played with his curls as she dreamed of for years. Caitlin rode beside the wagon and winked before she slowed allowing the wagon to pass her and giving Muirenn privacy.

Just like the day heading towards Harpers Ferry—she initiated topics of conversation and he responded with effort at first but his enthusiasm grew and so did the light hearted banter. Pretty soon, his green eyes sparkled with interest and humor. He didn’t ask to move or attempt to rise and Muirenn would take that as a blessing. Caitlin might claim Muirenn talked too damn much, but if it helped her Ranger mourn properly, she’d accept the charge and plead guilty.

Muirenn dared to ask for a tale about Aoife. He didn’t cringe or sink back into despair. Sheridan brightened, his arms and hands became animated as he described how she waddled when she learned to walk and how her chirp before a squeal of laughter greeted him each time he arrived home. She would raise her arms expecting him to lift her and he never disappointed his baby. Sheridan talked until his voice cracked. Muirenn hollered out the window for somebody to please bring two cups of wine. Ginger, one of the female guards passed her a bottle and two cups. Muirenn thanked the lady and handed him the bottle to chill. Sheridan sat up and passed the bottle back. “I will teach you to chill the wine.”

Oh, yeah, she was living her dream.

It appeared to Muirenn the damn sun set in the west too bloody fast. The thin strip of sky visible between the tall pines looked like a river of fire for a short while and then darkness settled over the land. The birds switching duties made a ruckus and the smaller dogs climbed the ramp into the wagon. It didn’t take long, however, before the owls reported they approached the campsite and it was vacant.

She opened the door to exit and his voice stopped her. “Thank you for— everything you do for me, Muirenn.”

Aye, and how should she respond? Muirenn slid back over and planted a kiss on his cheek. “At your side is where I am destined to be, love. And caring for you, sick or depressed, is a duty my heart chooses to perform with pleasure. I’m not going anywhere, big man. You might as well get used to me and my habit of talking too much. We will set up camp. You continue to rest. Aye?”

He nodded and she leaped from the running board to grab her horse’s reins. The roan had an easy day for sure.

The campsite wasn’t what Muirenn expected. There were three buildings with electric lights and designated sites with water faucets and fire pits in each. Sheridan sent the small dogs in to each building before he would allow anybody to enter. She asked their breed when they exited the first building and Dina responded. Hells, fury, she could probably grill Dina for many answers. The cute dogs were Rat Terriers and they hunted for all types of vermin in the showers and toilets. The third building had some unwanted intruder. Three Dobermans joined the Terriers and the noise quadrupled in volume for a while. When it quieted, a Dobie came out with a huge snake in her mouth. Sheridan chuckled and accepted the gift from Pepper.

The fool man held the snake up to display and the bloody reptile had to be eight feet long. And then Sheridan offered her the snake with a boyish grin like he expected Muirenn to take it. Nay, no way in nine hells would she touch a bloody snake. She declined the offer politely, but Caitlin grabbed the sucker to examine closely. Her bodyguard asked if he knew how to tan a snake hide to make a belt. He knew of course and said it was easy. The Ranger offered to teach the Templar after dinner. Just the thought could ruin Muirenn’s meal.

Sheridan climbed on the roof of the shower building and heated the huge tank of water. He hollered for the one who had cold water flowing to yell so he could reheat the tank again because it refilled with chilly well water. Muirenn complimented the layout and facilities and the smart ass said thank you.

“What do you mean thank you? Did you build this campsite?”

“Aye, with Ciara, Braelyn, and my three squires. They had to earn construction credits and a new camp was needed between Hyden and London. It provided the perfect opportunity. Aye, we built the campsite with the help of a few trades. Oh, yeah, Ciara had a grand fist fight with a mason foreman here. He claimed girlies shouldn’t learn men’s trades. They should stay home, making babies and cookies. She beat him to a bloody pulp and when Ciara left him pleading with her to stop, the mason’s applauded.”

Muirenn couldn’t help but notice his change in attitude when he spoke of Ciara. He was damn proud of her and he missed her terribly. “Sheridan. Why don’t you quit being so bloody stubborn and ask Ciara to return?”

“Aye, Muirenn. You’ve given me much to contemplate in the last few days. Perhaps if you three were here together I wouldn’t worry as much. I don’t know what I want and I don’t know what to question to find an answer. There is still a quest to complete.”

“Aye, love. All I’m saying is that Ciara knows you best. She has lived with you for five years and loved you almost as long. My future sister-wife knows how to handle you in foul weather or sunshine. Aye?”

His smile was adorable. Of course, he knew she was right. Someone called for help and he left her standing with her change of clothes and bath products. Caitlin smacked her butt and pointed at the door. “Alright, damn it. I’m just digesting what the man said. I need to get Ena and Ciara together before he returns from his quest.”

“If he returns from his quest, My Lady. The odds are against him, but if any man could succeed, it is your Ranger. Hurry now, we need to start cooking right after we shower. I want to learn how to skin a snake.”

The hot shower was a blessing, the dinner could’ve been better, but she couldn’t have steaks every night camping. Hot dogs, canned baked beans and warm potato salad would never be her first choice for a meal. It was tasty, it filled her for sure, but the air around camp in an hour would turn rancid.

Caitlin learned to skin a bloody snake. She listened intently, plied the skin behind the head until she found the right spot to cut. She cut the tail off and stuffed it in her pocket. He began peeling the skin but allowed Caitlin to finish when she declared she could. Sheridan tossed the meat to the many owls waiting for a treat. All it took to tan the skin was to soak it in glycerin and alcohol. He declared with the motion of the wagon, it should be ready to strip when they reached London. Caitlin carried the sealed pot like she carried her first born. Oh, just let the lady have fun. It wasn’t her fault Muirenn was scared to death of snakes.

Muirenn pulled out her guitar after dinner was cleared. The Guardians drew close with fat logs to sit on in anticipation. She promised them she’d try not to disappoint. She played and sang many songs the men and women requested and decided to play the latest she learned. Sheridan had sat in the lotus position with his eyes closed and his lips turned up at the corners for each tune. When she sang the second verse of her new song, he rose and stalked away. She stopped abruptly and followed him with her eyes. Dina walked out into the darkness and looked out into the woods in the direction he ran. Murienn joined her gazing in the same direction.

“What did I do wrong?”

Dina sighed, looked around for any Guardians and huffed a sad breath.

“Máistir wrote that poem the day Aoife was born. He sent it to all his homes with the announcement of her birth. Máistir finally learned unconditional love with his first sight of Aoife and he poured out his heart on paper. You did nothing wrong, My Lady. The tune you created was perfect for the words and your voice was meant to sing his poem. Although, I’d sure like to string up and flay the person who gave it to you.”

Muirenn mumbled she purchased the poem from a traveling Bard in Ireland who claimed to pen the words himself. Murienn paid a hefty price for a song she would never sing again.

Caitlin woke her when the blankets shifted. She snuck off for the restroom. Muirenn extended her arm searching for a big warm body, but Sheridan didn’t sleep under the wagon. A grunt, and scrapes turned her over to scan the campsite. She didn’t hear a second sound and rolled onto her side facing where he would be if he slept. Muirenn drifted off to dream of holding him while she slept.

A rough hand, and Caitlin’s harsh whisper, roused her from sleep. She crawled out from under the wagon and stretched scanning the sky for any sign of sunrise. The eastern sky paled a wee bit so it must be an hour before daybreak. Caitlin drug her far from the wagon and whispered. “If we are running, I need to pee first.”

“Nay, My Lady. We can talk here without disturbing the others. We had unwanted visitors during the night. The Ranger wants us to rise early so we could head for the safety of numbers in London.”

“What about the intruders?”

“The Ranger killed them quietly so as not to disturb our beauty sleep. They were the men whispering about you at the Inn yesterday. One was a bloody Sword. I wish I could’ve killed the traitor. He did allow me to take his head, and I have the sword to add to my collection.

Muirenn asked Caitlin to slow down and explain herself. How did he kill them silently and why didn’t he wake them when they attacked? Caitlin pointed to an oak tree, and informed her Sheridan slept in the branches to watch over her. He didn’t trust the men and expected them to follow. The birds and dogs kept watch silently and told him the whereabouts of the foul whankers without making noise. Sheridan shot them from his perch in the oak, in the dark, and Traveled them away to feed the fishes.

“The scum dwellers approached the wagon when I rose to visit the toilets in the wee hours of the morning. The five dead were piled up for him to Travel when I returned and I never heard a sound. I stood watch since then so he could sleep a while. Didn’t you feel him crawl in next to you?”

Muirenn spun around to face the wagon and spotted his uncovered feet. She ran over, knelt to tug the blanket, and wrapped it around his size thirteens. She didn’t dream of holding him, she actually slept with her arm around Sheridan. It’s just wasn’t as lovely when she couldn’t recall, damn it.



**Chapter 5 Heartbreaking News**

**M**uirenn spotted a falcon ahead flying fast to reach them. Aha, Scarlet found them right when they headed west from the campground. The pretty bird flew to her and landed on her arm. Muirenn removed the band and note, gave the cutie a piece of hotdog and lifted her off to join the day hunters. She peeled the waterproof tape off the paper and unrolled it. Athair replied Sheridan’s surrogate mothers had already scrubbed the house clean and removed any and all evidence of Rihanna a while back. They left Aoife’s furniture and toys in her room but gave away all her clothes. The home should not still carry the scent of his daughter. He thanked her for considering Sheridan’s situation and stated he, Alannah, and his mothers looked forward to meeting her in person in two days.

She passed the note to Caitlin and rode for the wagon. She was getting damn good at hopping from the saddle to the running board. She opened the door and climbed in to find a sleeping giant. Damn, the big man never snored. Muirenn closed the door with a click and sat staring at her Ranger for a long while before he woke. Sheridan stretched, yawned and sneezed. She grabbed a tissue from a compartment and passed it over to a grateful sleepy head.

“Good morning again, Sheridan, and thank you for saving my life for the gazillionth time.”

“Good morning, Muirenn. What did Athair have to say?”

“How the hells do you know?”

“Scarlet woke me bragging to the entire brood that Athair fed her raw deer meet for being a fast flyer.”

“Oh, well, I didn’t think she would snitch. Your mothers have cleaned your home from top to bottom and removed all evidence of Rihanna. The house is repainted to boot. Athair stated the home no longer smells like Aoife. They did leave her furniture and toys in the room. Would you like them removed?”

“Nay. I should be mature enough to handle the sight of furniture and toys. Thank you , Muirenn. Thank you again.”

“Aye, well, you’re welcome and as Ciara would say—it’s my job, love.”

“Ciara would say it’s my job, brat.”

Murienn covered her mouth with both hands, but laughed for a long time anyway. She took a few deep breaths and wiped her eyes.

“Well, I don’t know you well enough to call you brat, yet, but I’m hoping too, love.”



**S**heridan opened the cab door when the team stopped and leaped out to kneel and greet the little ones first. Three young girls no more than four hugged his neck and declared they were so happy to see him again. He kissed Ava, Emily, and Ella, and rose to greet the older Cainteoirs of London. Emily spotted Dina and blew the lieutenant’s cover for sure running into her arms. Dina probably visited London when she had a break from training. The officer didn’t hesitate to kneel and lift the girl to squeeze giggles from her. The other two joined Emily and Diana was swamped with loving arms.

The last female in line was Vanessa. She hugged and kissed him and then stood her ground for an argument. He’d seen Ciara assume the same pose many times. Sheridan smiled and nodded for her to speak.

“I want to fight, Máistir. I’m almost eighteen and Master Damien says I’m ready to graduate. I’ve wanted to kill the bastards who murdered our little Aoife for a long time. We all have.”

Sheridan studied the young lady, scanned the faces of the older boys with the same look in their eyes, Vanessa displayed. He searched for Damien and spotted the old rascal. The finest martial artist in the world limped over and bowed with a fist to his heart. Sheridan pulled the stubborn man into a hug and pounded his back forcing laughter out at last.

Damien scrutinized his students standing firm with their convictions and returned to lock eyes with Sheridan. “What Vanessa said is true, Master. The oldest are beyond my ability to improve. I’d fight alongside any of them.”

Sheridan searched the four young adults for any sign of trepidation, and saw nothing but firm commitment.

“I suppose we arrived to celebrate four graduations. Aye?”

Vanessa jumped into his arms and hugged tight, she kissed his cheek and stood back for him to greet the young men. She pumped her arms like pistons and screamed silent jubilation. Phil, Rick, and Tom, greeted him with subdued handshakes and slaps on the arms. Oh, no more hugs from their big brother. He would not embarrass them on such a joyous occasion. Jessica approached last. Jessica, who was the Mistress of the home in everything but name. Hmmm?

“I do believe we will celebrate five family promotions. Jessica, would you accept the Fae kiss to become Lady Jessica London, Mistress of An Chéad Bhaile?”

Vanessa switched from pumping fists to hands folded in a plea for Jessica to agree. Jessica nodded and Vanessa screeched her joyous opinion. The family gathered and he stepped up to hold the young lady’s face in his hands. Sheridan kissed her forehead, traced an imaginary curve to her left cheek. Moved to her right cheek to plant the second kiss and returned to her forehead in a curve to complete the outline of the tree of life. He kissed her forehead and raised her face to trace the line to her lips signifying the trunk of the tree and the stability of the family. The magic struck Jessica and she moaned and collapsed in his arms. Sheridan rocked her, Vanessa rubbed her shoulder and the little ones crowded around to touch their new Mistress.

Jessica raised her face and smiled. “Thank you, Máistir. The other ladies told me what the kiss would do, but I wasn’t sure to believe. I do sense my children, and am aware of their health and emotions. They are healthy, happy, and pleased I accepted.” She released him to hug her charges.

Muirenn sidled up silent as Ciara and wrapped an arm around his waist. “I thought you said, Somerset was your first home in Esak.”

“”London is the first home I purchased for our family. London is the Kingston Family’s first home.”

Jessica glanced back at the sound of Muirenn’s voice and returned to curtsy. “Welcome home, My Lady. You must be Lady Muirenn. Lady Ciara described you perfectly. Has the stubborn man, whom I love dearly, kissed you?” Jessica winked at him.

“Nay, not yet, love. Thank you for the warm welcome. Why did you say welcome home?”

“You will be one of three First Sisters, My Lady. If my Máistir has a brain. All the homes and children are yours. Aye?”

Sheridan walked away from the woman’s talk. He was well aware of the truth, but why would he put them in harm’s way?

The thunder of running feet turned him south. He spotted Stephen running and crying. He shouldn’t be so upset just for missing their arrival. Stephen crashed into him with a grunt and Sheridan held the boy close rubbing his back and stroking his hair. Jessica appeared to brush his cheeks with her slim dark brown fingers.

“Stephen is more distressed than a boy his age should suffer, Máistir. There is something in his hand he doesn’t want to give you.”

Sheridan pushed the boy away and lifted his chin. “Hand the message to me, Stephen. I will not blame you for any bad news. Delivering messages sent by others is your job, son.”

Stephen raised his trembling right hand and unfurled his red fingers to expose a squished and wet message page. Sheridan retrieved the paper and spread it open. He lost his breath and collapsed to his knees when he read the news. Muirenn ripped the telegraph from his hand and screamed when she read that Ciara was murdered in Liberty City. She dropped to her knees and hugged him, rocked him as Ciara once did, but he would never be consoled again. He leaned in and whispered in Muirenn’s ear.

“Do you see what loving me, brings? Why would you stay near me, when Gwydion hunts you? He found Ciara. Gwydion took my daughter first, then Ciara, and he will take you from me as well. It is what he promised me when we last met in the dream world. He swore to find the women I love and kill them. He captures your mirror twins to torment me because he couldn’t find you. Well, he has found one of you.”

Muirenn pulled him to his feet, wiped his face with the dish towel Jessica gave her and grasped his face to lock eyes with hers.

“There is no safer place in this world for me than at your side. How many men sent for me did you kill on the way here? The men who hunted for me didn’t stand a chance because you killed them in a sleeping camp with none but Caitlin aware they attacked. I’m not going anywhere. I am at your side and my swords will help you reap revenge for Aoife and Ciara. Aye?”

“It is my fault for sending her home.”

Muirenn wrapped her arms tight and murmured kind words, but they didn’t fit him. She pulled away and faced Jessica.

“Mistress Jessica, we need a quiet place to talk.”

“Aye, Lady First. Follow me, please.”

Sheridan moved without will. His feet were two lead weights and his mind a haze of pain and anguish. Why would she jump from the ship to return? She could’ve Talked to him from miles away. She could’ve used her portal ring. Captain Jack would’ve turned the boat around on her command. He must complete the quest to begin his assault on Gwydion’s forces in earnest. The small battles were nothing compared to what he would do when he met them.

He focused on a door and realized it led to his room. Muirenn lowered him onto his bed. Vanessa and Jessica stripped his boots off and unbuttoned his shirt. Through the fog, he heard Jessica warn Muirenn that they would strip him to bathe. If she had an issue with his nakedness, she should leave.

“I’m a healer, love, and my Ranger needs loving care. I will not look upon his body with lust.”

“Nay, Lady First. You will see all of Máistir’s scars for the first time.”

“I’ll fill the tub, and strip to my chemise and drawers to bathe him.”



**M**urienn poured in a few drops of lavender and patchouli oil while the tub filled with warm water. She repeated the mantra started when she entered the bath room. She would not react to the sight of his scars. She would not react to the sight of his scars.

The door opened and the ladies held him up as he walked like a man who had given up already. She helped them get him into the tub and she sat behind him on the edge to rub his neck. The oils in the water formed bubbles and the scent did calm her, but it was not her anxiety she worried about. Jessica and Vanessa kissed her cheek and left her alone with her Ranger. His poor legs were shredded at one point in his life, and his chest bore more scars than she saw when he was young. She didn’t care about his scars. She worried for his mind and his heart, broken again only a year after losing his daughter.

Sheridan raised his head to meet eyes. “Hold me please, Muirenn.”

Oh, good gods, it was the moment of intimacy she had feared for years. Aye, damn it. Her issues meant nothing.

“Aye, love. If you scoot forward, I’ll slide in behind you and wrap my legs around you, hold you tight against my chest and rub your head.”

Adding her mass to the tub raised the water to his chin. She reached behind her and shut it off. Aye, it was the moment of truth. She wrapped her legs around him and her feet landed too bloody close to his groin but she’d ignore that. She pulled his stiff form to her and rubbed his scalp.

“Sheridan. Tell me something wondrous about your Ciara—a tale that pulled at your heart strings. Aye, tell me about the moment you realized you loved her.”

Sheridan’s chin creased telling her he smiled, he chuckled and took a deep breath before telling her of a day when the squires had off. He asked Michael to suggest a picnic, because he couldn’t ask Ciara on a date. He was just a young human man to her, her teacher, not a person to look at with fond affections. Michael told him Ciara convinced Braelyn to accept because the idea of a picnic with him interested her. He Traveled them to a high meadow he discovered in the past and the four of them spent the noon day walking and talking. He instructed when he couldn’t find a word to say and Ciara seemed to enjoy it anyway. A storm swept over the mountain and they ran for cover. He spotted a hollow log and told Ciara to crawl inside. Ciara told him to stay with her.

He crawled in first and Ciara’s back fit against his chest perfectly. They talked for a while as he said Muirenn talked to him and soon they drifted to sleep. He was content and he wondered who was the woman lying in his arms to him. The rush of emotions chilled him to shiver and Ciara woke asking if he was cold. He laughed, because he could control his body temperature and she knew it. In that silly moment, he realized he did not have a crush, he was in love.

“It was a beautiful story, Sheridan. Ciara also knew you could’ve Traveled them to a warm dry place, but she chose to cuddle with you inside a hollow log.”

“I loved her and I loved you, and how sick is that?”

He recalled his love for Muirenn behind the bloody oath. How the hells should she respond? Muirenn felt like shouting her dream came true, but it was not about her.

Muirenn lowered her voice and whispered in his ear. “I don’t agree. It is not sick because you are capable of loving three women. Your mother agrees with us. She said the All Father doesn’t count heads, he listens to hearts and ours are bonded, love.”

He hummed and remained quiet for a long while. Sheridan moved and coughed. “Time is running out. I must attempt the quest. There are answers there if I know how to look. I must complete the quest to begin my revenge.”

“How much time do you have? You have not rested a full week yet.”

“Aye. We must present you to the king first. I would not insult my friend by avoiding him. How would you like to visit Wesak? I will rest there at our campground for a week and head north to meet my destiny. I must find the entrance before the next new moon. Tonight is a new moon, so I have twenty nine days to find a cave in the Rockies.”

“I will follow you anywhere, Sheridan. First we must go downstairs and allow our family to mourn with you. Each person can relate a special moment in their lives involving Ciara. Aye?”

“Aye. I believe our spirits are intertwined, Muirenn. You say things on my mind before I have a chance to speak. I Talked to Vanessa and asked her to bring your trunk up here. You need clean clothes to dress in. Shall we leave the tub and take a shower? I don’t want to smell like lavender and my hair is filthy. We will only shower, love. I can feel your heart racing. I will leave and allow you to shower in privacy if you wish.”

“Even if I’m nervous enough to shiver, it doesn’t mean I don’t want to shower with you. I trust you, love. Aye, lets leave the cold tub and shower. I don’t want you smelling of lavender either.”



**Chapter 35 Somerset**

**S**heridan asked the team to halt and jumped from the cab. They were nearing the hidden gate to Somerset when his birds alerted him to Sinead approaching the road in a hurry. He laughed turning in circles searching for Murienn. She rode around the wagon and laughed herself. She chased him while he chased her.

“Sinéad and the Na Siúracha are running to meet us on the road for some unknown reason.”

“Aye, I’ll be thrilled to meet them anywhere, big man.”

“Lieutenant Phoenix. I suggest you sign your Guardians into the barracks and send one to request an audience with the king tomorrow at any time convenient for His Majesty.”

“Aye, Ranger, but why did we ride past both gates?”

“Aha, please follow Rex and Regina through our secret gate. The barracks are across the staging field and past the exercise—Oh, you know because you trained here. I’m an idiot. The Quartermaster will assign you a room in the visiting officer’s dorm and stalls in Barntown for your mounts. If he throws a fit about feeding and grooming two horses each, tell the old fart he’ll answer to me.”

Dina snapped a crisp salute, winked, and led her Guardians leading a spare horse each. They roared their surprise and approval when they passed through the illusion of a thorny hedge.

“Vanessa, you know where the home is and how to enter, You four need not wait for us.”

The young men looked to Vanessa to answer.

“We will sign in to the guest dorms, and we’ll take the dogs to your home to groom. We know where everything is, Sir. Can we shop for you? Tell us what you want for dinner and we can go to the stores. I have done it for you before, Máistir. I promise I won’t let Rick eat everything before we get it home. He’s always hungry.”

Muirenn opened a bin on the wagon and offered them an apple. Rick nodded first but they all agreed and thanked Lady First for the snack. He had wanted to ask Ciara…Aye, woulda, coulda, shoulda, was a waste of thought. He couldn’t ask her to accept the role of First Sister anymore.

“Aye, get the cooked whole chickens. Buy six, and rice for ten and veggies too. Oh, dinner rolls and whatever looks good for desert.”

The three Cainteoirs saluted and rode through the hidden gate. “I should’ve asked if chicken would suffice, Muirenn.”

“Aye, it does very well, thank you, and I prefer rice over spuds with chicken any old day.”

Sinéad slid to a stop on the road, spotted them and screamed the whole way west with her arms raised to hug.

Sinéad ran right by Muirenn and slammed into him. She wasn’t laughing. His companion cried and he held her tight and rubbed her back. Sinéad held him at arm’s length and pouted. “I am so sorry, Sheridan. If I knew how to fight, I’d join you killing the bastards who murdered Ciara.”

Sheridan wiped her tears and tried to smile, but she shook her head. Her eyes glanced left and she froze. He eyes widened and her silvery brows rose to new heights.

“Muirenn! Oh, the gods love you for sure, Máistir. Máthair sent Muirenn here at the best of times. Come here and share our hug Muirenn. You learned the tragic news with him, huh?”

Muirenn hugged Sinéad and she hugged them both, He wrapped his arms around the two whispering ladies humming to himself so he wouldn’t listen. Sinéad and Muirenn broke apart. Sinéad held Muirenn’s face in her hands and smiled. “He will, love. My Máistir is not stupid. He’s stubborn as a burr in wool, but his mind is brilliant. He will.”

Sinéad glanced to her right and waved the Na Siúracha closer. The four ladies talked faster and all at once and how the hells could any of them understand? Muirenn looked lost and lonely. He pulled her close at his side and wrapped his arm across her shoulders. She hugged his waist and leaned against his chest patting him softly. Sinéad spun around with something to say and froze with her mouth wide opened. She clicked it shut and smiled.

“Aye, it’s not so far away as you fear, love. Máistir, these three ladies have proven themselves in classroom studies. They and I are ready for a road trip to sharpen what they learned in books. Muirenn is the best of us and could teach them while we search for the last of autumns offerings. Aye?”

Muirenn raised her head to meet his eyes. “I must return to Kylemore, love. I finished my basic Warrior classes sooner than expected. We decided to hunt for Sheridan instead of running from Fiona if we toured Ireland. I can teach them foraging, poisons, herbs, and herbal medicine for the time we have, big man Field study is way better than classroom study. Your companions will learn much more about herbs on the road than in a drafty old classroom.”

He kissed Muirenn’s head. She shivered and hugged closer resting her head on his chest and squeezing hard. Oh, she enjoyed a kiss on her head. He would try to remember.

“Sisters? Would it meet your approval to study under Lady Muirenn?”

The three shared glances and sneaky smiles. Charlie answered for them. “Aye, we would be honored to learn from Lady Muirenn. We agree it’s a ton better than classwork.”

“Done.

They walked ahead of the team to guide them into the gate and the Sisters laughed passing through the imaginary hedge and they gasped at the sight from the top of the drive overlooking the Farm. He stopped to give them time to soak it all in.

“This is my third favorite spot to view the Farm. In the earl mornings in fall a fog lies low over this road. The buildings stick out of the mist like phantoms. When the sun rises above the eastern tree line, the fog glistens gold until it fades away.”

He headed down and turned right to cross the culvert bridge. Ahead on the road, a young lady dressed in work clothes similar to hostlers kicked stones and mumbled curses like each stone she booted had a face and name. Muirenn curled her arm in his and he released it to drape across her shoulders. She wrapped an arm around his waist and whispered a thank you. He had to ask the girl why she was angry.

The girl kicked a stone hard. It headed straight for Muirenn’s face. Sheridan snatched it out of the air and held it up to show the stunned girl. Her mouth hung open and her feet shuffled like she might run. She sucked in a breath and stood tall. Aha. He admired her already.

“My apologies, My Ladies, and Ranger. I didn’t realize anyone was on the road.”

“Whose effigy were you kicking?”

Sinéad laughed at the girls expression. “Whose face did you pretend was on the rock you kicked, love?”

“Oh. The brats back there. The boys wouldn’t let me speak to the Master of Horse. They said no girl could be a hostler.”

Sheridan hissed and took a step back. Muirenn felt his head and he shivered the emotion away. He looked at Muirenn and smiled. Sinéad must’ve seen his misstep too. She repeated the test of his face with her hands.

“Ciara swore she would hire a female hostler because there are none in Somerset. I see why now. I had thought the females never applied. Allow me to question her.”

Muirenn and Sinéad kissed his cheek and released him to face the young woman.

“What is your name, young lady?”

“Kailey Smith, Ranger. My Pa is as Blacksmith in town.”

“Did he teach you the trade?”

“Yeah, but I’m not allowed to work on customer’s projects. He says nobody would pay for work done by a girl.”

Six females sucked a breath and cursed.

“If you know forge work and smithing, why seek employment as a hostler?”

“The Rangers wouldn’t hire a girl as a smith. I am qualified to be a hostler. If they would let me speak to the Master of Horse, I could prove it.”

“Well, for your information; my personal smith is a woman, Her name is Sara but we call her Smitty like every other blacksmith. Would you prefer to work as her assistant or as a hostler?”

“Are you teasing me? Who are you?”

Kailey hugged her chest and her expression was pure doubt and distrust. Charlie stepped forward and placed a hand to her heart and bowed to the girl.

“You are speaking to Ranger Sheridan Kingston, girl. Show some respect.”

Kailey snapped to attention and her head locked in place. She glance sideways to meet his gaze.

Sheridan chuckled. “At ease, Kailey. How old are you?”

“I’m seventeen, Sir, Ranger, Sir.”

“You can drop the Sirs. Ranger is sufficient. So, you are old enough to accept permanent employment and move out of your father’s home. You still have a question hanging unanswered.”

Muirenn poked his gut with a finger and shook her head. Aye, he was guilty of the same infraction. Kailey pushed pebbles around with a foot and stared at the ground thinking hard.

“I don’t see why I couldn’t do both, Ranger. Horses don’t need babysitters all day and once they’re saddled, out of the barn, and the stalls cleaned, I’d have time to assist the smith until the horses return.”

“What if I took you on the road with my army? Would you be a hostler or smith? On the road each job is a full day’s work. There could be a thousand horses, hundreds of hostlers and a dozen or more smiths churning out shoes, arrowheads, and spearheads. Do you have farrier skills? Can you trim hooves and shoe a horse?”

“I can shoe better than most, Ranger. If we are discussing a real possibility, I would chose hostler and still help the smiths when I could. The bright gods know a smith could always use a hand.”

“Done. You are my new hostler, and you will room in my apartment above barn four. I will pay you a salary, feed and clothe you with what you need for work.”

Six ladies coughed and he glanced at all of them. Muirenn whispered she would need a dress or two on occasion.

“I will purchase any style clothing you desire to perform your duties or to join us for dinner at a fine restaurant. There are two squires living there already, and they will help protect you from the bullies in Barntown. Whose face did you imagine on the stone.”

“I don’t know his name but he brags that his uncle is mayor of Somerset.”

“Aye, he insulted my best friend as well. The two squires I mentioned defended her honor. I will see he is removed from Barntown and banned from ever entering again. Money cannot buy a squire position and that boy does no work for any Ranger. He is trespassing and using his uncle’s name to shield his laziness. Well, that is not your problem. We are heading to my barns now. Join us for a tour of your new home, Kailey.”

“Máthair blessed me today with the notion to try again. Thank you, Ranger. I’ll make you proud you hired me. I don’t have anything to fetch from home, so I’m ready to move in. My Pa doesn’t feel the same way you do about clothes. What I’m wearing is all I have.”

“After we choose spare mounts and take a tour, we will visit Einin in Somerset and she will provide a suitable wardrobe from her shop and the general store.”

“You mean the Ess Que Boutique?”

“Aye. You’ll see it’s not all fancy dresses. Einin is a friend and has performed similar favors in the past. I wouldn’t know how to choose clothes for a young lady.”

Six more coughing fits and he gave up. “Follow us, Kailey. One of the six ladies with a scratchy throat will explain the situation.”

The parade past the cantina proved interesting. Sheridan stayed inside the wagon and the fools harassed, insulted, and verbally abused the wrong females. When he stepped out, The Sisters had three on the ground with knives at their throats and Caitlin had the one he wanted held up off the ground and he pissed his fine wool pants he wore to allegedly muck stalls.

“Drop him Caitlin.” She did literally. The boy’s butt hit and he’d swear he heard a bone crack. He marched up to the boy and kicked him. “Stop your crying.”

“She hurt me. My uncle will hear about this.”

“The Knight didn’t hurt you as much as she’d like or you deserve. Your uncle can listen to your whining for the rest of his life. You are banned from Barntown. If you are seen anywhere near the barns, animals, or people associated with the Rangers in Barntown, you will be arrested. If I catch you taunting another female with your foul mouth anywhere on Earth, I will remove your tongue. Do you understand?”

“You can’t… Sheridan grabbed his tongue and yanked until he moaned. He slid a knife across it slowly without pressure but the blade cut a sharp edge. Sheridan released the boy too old to be looking for any position in Barntown. He was probably sent home packing from every tradesman in Somerset and the mayor believed his position would protect him in the stables.

“I can and I will, boy. You insulted my best friend. She was murdered recently which has put me in a foul mood. Leave now and do not return. I will speak to the King tomorrow and he will deal with your stupid uncle and his idiotic scheme to hide you here among good workers.”

The boy, Briton, ran off towards town. He turned once and thought to speak, but he touched his tongue and continued on. Sheridan stood over the three boys each with a trickle of blood running down their necks.

“Who do you work for?”

“We are in the general roll call, Ranger. We work for anyone. “

“Why aren’t you working?”

“Briton wouldn’t let us work. He wanted us to stay and protect him. If he is left alone, the boys he picks on beat him up. He talked to his uncle and got four boys fired for fighting. We can’t be fired, Sir. Our Ma’s depend on the money.”

“How many boys can you gather right now?”

“Uh, ten for sure, Sir. They run off when they saw your wagon. Briton don’t know your wagon, Sir.”

“Find the ten and go to my barns four and five. I want every horse bathed, brushed, fed and inspected by nightfall. I want to sell the horses in four so they best be show quality. Do you see Kailey over there?

The boy looked sideways for fear of a slice if he moved his neck. Kailey waved. The boy nodded. “Kailey runs my stables and she will inspect your work. If she is not happy, you will rewash, brush and inspect every animal in barns four and five. Understood?”

“Yes Sir, we will do a fine job, Ranger Sheridan.”

“Go. You will be paid well if the work meets Kailey’s approval.”

The Sisters chose two horses each because Muirenn reminded him they’d need a third spare same as her and Caitlin. Kailey saddled a horse for show since the horses were staying in to be washed and brushed.

“You have a mess of horses, Ranger. I will be needing help most days if I’m to do the job properly.”

Muirenn took the floor and spoke in her princess voice. “Kailey, do you know of any other girls who’d like to be hostlers and were turned away? Girls with experience, of course. Once we have them fully established we could always pick a younger girl as an apprentice, but we need experienced hostlers, farriers, and stable hands.”

“I could scare up ten girls from Somerset who are bored to tears with their needlepoint and embroidery lessons. I hang with a bunch who are damned good hostlers, My Lady.”

“We will round them up while we are shopping in town. Sheridan, would you mind if we ladies include a hostler or two for our journey while you are on the quest? I can shoe a horse, but they could use a job too.”

Sinéad ran to him and hugged him. “Give it up, love. Your life will be ruled by women from here on. Go along with whatever they decide until it sticks in your craw, and then you can put your foot down. It is your life, and your money. You’ll learn it isn’t so bad to include a feminine touch in your life. Besides, Muirenn is no prissy princess. Aye?”

He agreed. He didn’t submit, but he agreed with Muirenn’s request.

Sheridan heard the women discussing how degrading it must be for a girl to be forced to learn needlepoint. He stopped and faced the six sour grins.

“Do you know the history and purpose of why women learned needlepoint and fine stitching?”

“Because the men couldn’t stand a woman doing his job.”

“Nay, Charlie, it was so when their husbands, brothers, or sons returned from a battle, hunting, or the fields with wounds, they had the skill to stich the skin and save their lives. Young girls created designs with medical stitches and at marrying age would present their artwork to the mothers in town to prove they mastered the proper stitches. Another trade women learned was herb mixtures and growing flowers for healing. Most people today, agree a female can perform as well, or better than a man in any field. You six are living proof. Seven including Kailey. Today, with magical healing, needlepoint is a waste of time, and our populace is picking up bad influence from somewhere. Sinéad, did women do needlepoint one hundred years back?”

“Nay, Máistir. It is a new fad, and I wouldn’t end it entirely if women learn to stitch properly. There isn’t always a magical healer available. But from what I heard today it is a distraction. I will research the subject for you, love.”

“Aye. Men didn’t have the misogynist attitude prevalent today just one generation back. Why now, and who instigated the false accusations degrading females? They are the questions you need to ask yourself and investigate while you travel. Ask politely. A fist or knife in the face will never get you truthful answers. Gather information and pinpoint the source. We will eradicate the ridiculous beliefs, one stubborn man at a time. Gwydion is not the only enemy threatening our way of life. The Swords, false priests, and whoever is feeding the men with nonsense must be dealt with. Aye?”

Seven smiling females answered aye.

“Why are you selling the horses in barn four?” Aye, Muirenn didn’t miss a thing either.

“The horses were Rihanna’s. They are handsome creatures but spoiled rotten. I won’t ever use one and don’t want them around as a reminder. They will sell on the first day because how they show. The first thunderstorm will provide the new owners my reason for selling.”

“You can’t train them?”

“I don’t want them around, Muirenn.”

Sinéad wrapped Muirenn in a hug and whispered until Muirenn smiled and nodded.



Muirenn blew a kiss at the fine gentleman holding the door for them and stepped into Ess Que Boutique. She had heard much and seen many stunning dresses produced by the boutique, but she had never been inside one and it looked like from where she stood, she could have a whole day of fun. Sheridan entered and immediately six girls rushed to him and cuddled in his arms. An older lady, about thirty approached and shook her head at the sight. Her eyes were all knowing and smiling for the girls. Why did the girls hug and kiss him?

“Don’t be jealous, love. He found each of the girls begging or selling their bodies on the street and brought them to me for honest work. They are too pretty to sit behind a sewing machine, so I hired them on as assistants for ladies like you to help pick out and try on dresses. I’m Einin and I run this place. Sheridan owns it but he leaves it to me to run as I see fit.”

“Ess Que is his brand?”

“Aye, love. Think of the name as initials instead of Spanish words.”

“Oh, good gods—it’s another lovely surprise. I’m Muirenn…

“The Muirenn? The princess Muirenn?”

“Aye. Boy, have I heard a lot of that lately. It seems everybody knows me. Nay. He has not kissed me, but I am traveling with the big man, and he and I talk. I pray the kiss comes. Have you heard the tragic news concerning Lady Ciara?”

“Nay. I was hoping he would wake up his heart and return with her.”

Muirenn told her what she read from the telegraph, and Einin would’ve collapsed if not for Maggie’s speedy assistance. Einin huffed, squared her shoulders and excused herself. She walked to Sheridan and took over the hugs and she rocked him with learned experience. How long had he known Einin? A gorgeous girl with the same style hair as Sylvie approached. She smiled and Muirenn could see how it would work on customers.

“Hi. I’m Melissa Smith. My mom is one of the ladies Sheridan calls mom. He sort of adopted our family when we arrived. Oh, I’m rambling on. My mom says I talk too much. Are you here for a fitting?”

Muirenn grabbed Kailey and brought her forward.

“Nay, love. Kailey is Sheridan’s Mistress of Stables in charge of all our employees. She needs everything and Sheridan declared Einin knew what to do for her. We might have ten more young ladies to dress in similar clothing but Kailey’s must be special to denote her position.”

“Barntown is finally hiring females?”

“Sheridan Kingston is hiring females, love. He owns five barns and hundreds of horses, and the gods only know how many carriages or wagons, so there is tons of work for the live long day. The Ranger wants to hire qualified hostlers, stable hands, and farriers, male or female.”

“Oh, this will be fun. Come with me Kailey. I’ll fix you up. Will she need dresses, My Lady?”

“Aye, at least two for dining out or the theater—make it three, and a few skirt sets with matching shoes for all. She’ll need coats for winter, and gloves, hats, and scarves. Oh, we’ll return when the spring fashions arrive, Melissa.”

“The spring fashions are designed here, My Lady. You will be the first to preview Einin’s line for spring.”

Caitlin sidled up and nudged Muirenn. “Well, you certainly took control here, My Lady. I hope he has deep pockets.”

Sinéad heard her and laughed. “Don’t worry about funds, ladies. Sheridan is an obscenely wealthy man.”

Sheridan and Einin joined them with the lady still wiping tears. Einin escorted them to a waiting area and four girls brought out wine, cheese, and olives. Sheridan spoke to Einin in whispers and when they broke up Einin headed straight for Muirenn.

“Princess Muirenn. Sheridan would like to purchase a dress, shoes and accessories for you to wear when you meet our good King—if it pleases you.”

Muirenn glanced at the man trying to hide again. “You can look at me, love. I am well pleased by your offer and I accept only if the dress meets with your approval.”

“Aye.”

Einin laughed, twisted her lips and shook her head. She must be used to his peculiar language. “Please come with me, My Lady. We will take measurements, but I’d bet there are at least a dozen on the racks that would fit you. Blues and greens and gold sparkles to match your eyes.”



Sheridan asked Charlie to get the list of names and a general location from Kailey. He wasn’t about to sit in a dress shop all day. Sinéad volunteered to keep Caitlin company while he and his Na Siúracha scour the city for ten desperados. Yep, everybody was a comedian.

He and his three new bodyguards had to devise a trap for the girls, because the first two ran when he called their names. The dogs caught them, tripped them, and sat on them until they arrived but it was not how he expected to recruit workers. The last eight they surrounded and any who bolted ran into one of them. He had to explain ten blessed times, they were not in trouble. He wanted to hire them to work in his stables with Kailey as their boss. Each one, to the last, exclaimed if he mentioned Kailey first, they wouldn’t have run. Lesson learned. Post the jobs on the bulletin board and wait for applicants to arrive.

Einin and her assistants applauded when they entered with all ten girls. Did somebody make a wager? He would’ve taken a piece if he knew beforehand. Einin assigned five girls to escort two girls each for measurements and the waiting area calmed. The raging hormones in the room with ten adolescent females was painful. They couldn’t sit still or stay quiet. How did school teachers survive?

Sheridan rested with his face in his hands performing the breaths of tranquility when Einin called him. He dropped his hands and squinted at her. His eyes shot wide open and he was alert. Muirenn showcased a stunning blue dress with coral green accents and her hair was pinned up with more green stones he didn’t know or cared what type. Aye, it had to be a formal full length but the cut accentuated her curves and he had to move his tongue around his mouth for moisture.

“Wow. I mean, the dress meets with my approval, Muirenn. You are ravishing.”

His companions applauded and Muirenn curtsied. “Thank you, love. I would like Einin to take your measurements. She mentioned you haven’t purchased new clothes in years. Isn’t it time to throw away some thread worn shirts?”

“I will be fitted in the spring if I return, Muirenn. I have been reminded often, in the last five years, my clothes are worse than rags, but I won’t need them this winter, and if I survive, I will probably lose thirty or forty pounds. I promise to be fitted in the spring. Aye?”

“Your promise is always good enough for me, love. Can we eat somewhere in town? I’m sure the girls are starving. I mean the young girls, I know Sylvie is always starving.”

Sylvie gasped and smacked Maggie and it became a slap fight in no time. He just ignored them, but it was a pleasing moment.

“How about pizza delivered for everyone? We can eat in the back room so we don’t mess up the waiting area.”

“Ooh, I like how you think, big man. I haven’t had pizza in a donkey’s age. What about Vanessa?”

“I Talked to her. They didn’t reach town yet, and I told them to head here instead.”

Einin approved and all it took was twenty three females to decide the toppings, and how many they would need. Oh, how about salads to go with the pizza, and don’t forget the ale and cider for the young girls. But what about dessert? He folded in the chair and covered his head. He would love to hide.



Chapter 36 Visit a King

Sheridan rinsed the razor and wiped it on the towel. He yelled for whoever knocked to enter. It was Muirenn’s voice that gasped and Caitlin mumbled a response. The two turned the corner into his bathroom and Muirenn almost giggled.

“You have no idea how often I have wondered if you wore jammies and now I discover not only that you do, but you wear silk jammies. Why are your blankets and pillow on the floor?”

“The bed smells. Rihanna always sprayed her perfume on the mattress. I couldn’t stand it then and I will not sleep in it now. I must purchase a new mattress.”

They whispered a while but all he heard was Muirenn telling Caitlin to go ahead.

“Ranger. The obvious and most often tragic reason for a woman to spray her mattress is to hide the scent of another man. Had you reason to doubt your mate’s faithfulness?”

They could’ve picked a better time for questions than when he was shaving to ask.

“I have had a year to consider many of Rihanna’s odd habits, actions, and attitudes. There were plenty of rumors and a few letters slipped to me anonymously, and the evidence left behind, but I reached a conclusion last night sleeping on the floor in my bedroom. I didn’t care, Lady Knight. Imagine a man hoping his mate would find another and have grounds to annul the contract and keep his baby. That in a nutshell was living two years with her.”

Caitlin apologized and he insisted she had no reason to—it was a fact of life. He raised the razor to his cheek.

“Sheridan. Your hands are shaking and it must be the thrombosis. Please allow me to shave your face. I promise I have practiced on many patients and not killed one so far.”

He sat on the tub where Ciara always shaved him before Rihanna arrived, and he passed Muirenn the razor. She shifted from one side to the other with her tongue guiding the direction, and he knew why.

“Sit on my lap, Muirenn. It would be easier and less dangerous for me. I’d hate for you to slip leaning over. Aye?”

“Aye, and aren’t I lucky I’m in my house pants. It would be quite awkward for me in a dress.”

She straddled his legs and sat, wiggled a bit, and chuckled. “I’m sitting on a rock bench. Why are you suddenly so relaxed? Who else has shaved you like this? Rihanna?”

“She never shaved my face. She declared it was the role of a valet, not a mate. Ciara had shaved me in the past. Only you and Ciara have held a razor to my throat.”

“Wonderful. You couldn’t be in better or safer hands. Now, I know how hard it is for you, but you must hush for a while. Close your mouth, so I can do above your lips.”

The racket that only a herd of elephants could produce reached them and he felt the vibration in his feet. Muirenn held the razor away from his skin and smiled. “Our young ladies are awake.”

Aye, the Master of Horse refused to allow females into Barntown. Sheridan was not about to argue with the idiot at midnight, so he brought them home and they all slept in the basement barracks for twelve. They were the first to ever sleep in the bunk beds. He heard them laughing and singing to the wee hours.

The stampede reached the kitchen, moved off to the living room and finally wound down the hallway and into his bathroom. Ten girls in various stages of undress giggled and waved. He waved back and greeted them with a good morning. They all responded and separated to migrate through the bathroom, opening drawers, doors, and the closet. They gasped and Kailey spun around.

“You wear suits, Ranger?”

Muirenn answered for him. “He does and he will wear one today to visit the King. Is there a blue suit hanging up?”

The girl—her name might be Mila replied he had four blue suits. Muirenn asked her to take them down for her inspection. The girl giggled and in a flash four girls displayed his suits on hangers. Muirenn didn’t like the double breasted at all so the choice was cut to three. The bone buttons were out and she twisted her lips to almost the side of her face studying a damn suit. He mentioned there was a fine brown he really liked.

“We must wear the same colors, Sheridan. Don’t look at me like a cross-eyed cat. We’ll use yours Gigi. Girls, find his shirts and ties, but bring only the light blue and green shirts. Oh, dark blue socks and black shoes while you’re at it, and a black belt with a gold buckle to match my jewelry.”

His closet became a warzone. Ten bodies shouldn’t fit in a closet, but they managed and they were not quiet about it at all. He finally understood what damage a bull in a china shop could cause. Muirenn returned her attention to his face and he had to close his eyes or laugh at her tongue guiding the razor.

One girl yelled he had thirty pairs of black shoes. He opened his eyes. Muirenn’s brows rose and his laugh rumbled quietly in his chest. She ran into the closet and picked what she liked. She returned shaking her head in disbelief. Her eyes and brows expressed the question.

“People had a habit of gifting me clothes. I guess they all share the same opinion as you about my wardrobe. I bet I haven’t worn three pairs of black shoes in that closet. I didn’t know I had four blue suits either. I always grabbed the brown.”

“Not all the shoes are for dress. Half are casual and you should wear them. Who gifted you clothes—was it for your birthday?”

“Nay. Alannah and Ciara would show up unannounced and surprise me with new clothes and accessories they just had to buy while the sale lasted. I haven’t had the pleasure of a clothing invasion in years.”

“I bet there were no sales. Ciara had a blast shopping for you. How tall were you two years ago?”

“I reached six foot five at seventeen and stalled. My mother appreciates a sick joke and a good tease. I thought it was it for me, but I sprouted an inch in September.”

“Aye, you’re a tall drink of water for sure. All I have left is your upper lip, so keep your mouth closed this time and do that funny face to give me room. Aye, that’s perfect. Hold it right there.”



Muirenn held his arm and leaned against him waiting for their carriage. He kept looking back at his home. He probably wondered about its condition when they returned after leaving ten young girls inside. She patted his arm and pointed at the approaching team and carriage.

The horses were four matched black beauties and the carriage incredible. It came to a halt and she gaped at the luxurious appointments. Rubber tires, spring and leaf suspension, and the new fifth wheel steering.

“Goods gods, Sheridan; how much did this cost to rent?”

“Nay. The horses and carriage are mine. We confiscated it from Gwydion’s Blade and Crook who attempted to infiltrate Somerset with false documents. Alphonsus didn’t want it so I paid the tax to add it to my carriage house. Ciara claimed the inside is better than the exterior.”

Aye, so many simple daily activities, places, and personal possessions to remind him of Ciara. They couldn’t throw out everything like they did with Rihanna’s things. The coachman hustled around and opened the door. The bloody steps extended automatically. She would not giggle. Caitlin didn’t miss it and she guffawed very un-lady like, but she was permitted. Muirenn had to put her princess face on to match her tiara.

Sheridan assisted her up the two steps and she grabbed a handle in the perfect location. Caitlin entered next and sat across from her as per their plan so Sheridan would sit beside Muirenn. It wasn’t a devious plot but she did think of it way before she saw the carriage. The three Na Siúracha chose to ride on the running boards and rear deck instead of crowding the cute couple is what Charlie said and Sheridan just shook his head and agreed.

The leather was soft and cushioned and the seat sufficiently deep if she wished to rest, but she had her dress to consider on the way there. Caitlin pointed out the black out curtains and the steel security shutters. Sheridan climbed in and pointed out a few other nifty amenities Caitlin missed. There were flip up foot rests and the damn seat folded into a bed. He opened the bar and poured three glasses of wine. Damn, he should have one at each home.

“May I ask what you paid for this?”

“One thousand silver pieces. It was a steal.”

“Aye, and I have never seen a finer design. You should purchase more.”

His eyes darkened and he flinched. “I’m sorry, love. I struck another reminder of Ciara?”

“It’s fine. It is no different than spotting little redheaded girls in town shopping with their mothers or hearing a little girl laugh around the corner and I jerk only to realize it would never be Aoife. Loss is a…recovering from a loss is a long process, or so the books tell me. I can’t change the world to suit my needs. Aye?”

Sheridan was reading self-help books. Aye, he was not the type to sit on a couch and tell his troubles to a stranger. Would he ever feel close to speak to her? She would pray and hope for the day. Muirenn patted his knee exaggerating the effort to reach so far and it worked. He slid closer and took her hand to hold on his leg. If she didn’t fear wrinkles she’d lean against him.

The ride was exceptionally smooth and surprisingly short. She laughed and had to agree he was right. They could’ve walked it in ten minutes. She downed the wine and he collected them to place back in the bar. Two footmen opened the door and stood aside while Caitlin leaped out. The Sisters joined her and joked how tired they were from the long ride. Sheridan led her to the steps where a Footman offered his hand with a bow and a Your Highness, and she gladly accepted. She would not fall down at the door. Sheridan exited regally instead of leaping out and handed a tip to one and asked to keep the carriage close. The man assured him it would be ready in an instant. Why?

Dina and the Guardians were lined up and stood at attention. They wore their dress uniforms all shiny and crisp in the fall morning. Dina bowed and greeted her as Your Highness and Muirenn snuck a wink when nobody was watching. The Guardians performed a sharp alternate turn and their boots snapped heels perfectly. Dina led ahead of Sheridan and Muirenn while Caitlin and the Sisters scanned the grounds from behind. Muirenn had no clue what danger could arrive on the Kings property, but Caitlin didn’t care. She’d tackle the King if he moved too fast.

The Shadows ran past them to sniff each person by the entry to the obvious discomfort of the house staff. They didn’t like what one man had and Dina called a halt. Muirenn Talked to Sabra and learned the man had a poisoned blade. Sheridan must’ve given the OK because the dogs took him down in a messy pile of growls, snapping teeth, and barks. The man cried for help but nobody moved. Dina glanced back and Sheridan nodded. Damn, she missed their Talking. Dina barked orders for two to don gloves and relieve the suspect of his poison knife. Oh.

“D—Lieutenant Phoenix, please ask your Guardians to inspect the man’s scalp for tattoos under his hair?”

“Aye, Your Highness, It is an excellent suggestion.”

Muirenn could’ve fit both feet in her mouth. Dina had already considered the man could be a Sword. She should just shut up and observe and let the professionals do their work. An eagle screeched and Dina smothered Muirenn a blink before Caitlin covered the rear. Arrows plinked off their armor and Sheridan was gone. No other arrow struck them. Muirenn peeked over Dina’s shoulder and discovered why. His birds attacked the men on the roof. She spotted his shoes and suit jacket on the lawn but no sign of the Ranger. The Na Siúracha raced across the lawn with Charlie cursing the man for running so damn fast.

She asked somebody to please retrieve his jacket before it ruined in the grass. Dina chuckled but she sent a man to fetch his jacket and shoes. A man’s scream brought all the Guardians close in a tight circle. The loud thud caused a sharp and bloody loud laugh from Caitlin. Sheridan shouted from the roof top a whoops, the man slipped and all the Guardians laughed relaxed. He yelled not to worry. He had another who would talk or he would slip and join his friend. Sabra Talked the birds declared the area clear. Murienn searched the sky and trees and spotted the kestrels, falcons, and hawks surrounding the front lawn with the eagles high overhead. Dina ordered her guards to reform and Caitlin released Muirenn but she didn’t move far.

“So much for nothing happening on the King’s property, My Lady. Your Ranger had to ruin the shirt and pants climbing the roof. He could be as bad as a toddler in need of several changes of clothes each time you go out. We should pack a Ranger bag instead of a diaper bag.”

“I know you are talking nonsense to calm me down, love, but I’m not frightened or worried. Sheridan placed a shield on me before we left his lovely home. Neither the arrows or knife would’ve harmed me. I am mad as a wet hen about his suit, for sure.”

The second man fell and screamed for maybe three seconds before he face kissed Mother Earth for the last time. Sheridan waved and she blew the crazy man a kiss. A dozen Paladins exited the door and added a second line of protection for her. A wee bit late gentleman, but the gesture was appreciated.

“Come down here and let me inspect your clothes, big man.” Oh, gods, his socks had to be soaked from the wet grass.

“Aye, Caitlin. Perhaps a change of clothes for my big toddler is the wise choice.”

He came around the north corner with the three Sisters shaking their heads and talking to each other. Sylvie pointed at the roof and shrugged. He nonchalantly tucked his shirt in and adjusted his tie. His feet were bare. Oh, gods. Please let them be in his pocket. How did he climb up to the roof? He said he never used magic in public places. He sure as nine hells couldn’t climb with socks on, so he had to remove them—and saved them. Please.

Sheridan’s shirt was not as bad as she feared. The pants were fine. “Where are your socks, love?”

“Socks? Oh, do I really need socks?”

Muirenn turned and buried her face in Caitlin’s chest. She would not laugh with the rest, damn it. She blew out a breath and spun to face the impossible man. He pulled his socks from his pants pocket and winked. Charlie smacked Maggie’s back. Dina spat raspberries without trying and slapped a hand to her mouth.

Muirenn placed the shoes at his feet, and he kissed her head. How could such a simple gesture thrill her to the core? She offered a hand to help him balance, but nay, not him. Sheridan bent his left leg and lifted it balancing on his right and slipped the sock on easier than she could sitting on a bed. He slipped the foot into a shoe and repeated the process for the other sock. Muirenn held his jacket and he donned it and settled it with a shake, buttoned only one as she told him, and he was ready to enter the King’s winter home.

“Sisters, how did he reach the roof?”

“Like a bloody monkey, My Lady. He climbed the drain spout, grabbed the roof and swung up like a bloody monkey. We couldn’t follow. One day we will for damn sure, but we couldn’t follow Máistir this time.”

“I must ask, Sheridan. Could Ciara have followed you?”

“Aye, if she didn’t beat me to the roof.”

“Aye, Sisters, we’ll all be able to race him to a roof one day.”

He asked nobody in particular if they recovered the arrows. Dina snatched them from a Guardian and presented them like they smelled bad.

“Obsidian arrowheads. Somebody expected you would be protected by a magical shield. Thank you Lieutenant and Lady Knight. Muirenn would be dead without your quick response and protection. Obsidian passes through magical shields. Do we have the knife, Lieutenant?”

“The Paladins recovered the knife, Ranger. You’ll need to ask them.”

“Nay, Lieutenant. You were assigned to protect the princess. The paladins have no jurisdiction over you and I promise the King will back you. Please assert yourself and demand the return of evidence in the crime scene you preside over. Aye?”

“Aye, Ranger. I can still learn something new every day. Remain here, please, Your Highness, while I go assert myself against the King’s personal bodyguards.”

Dina marched inside, she yelled, and returned in a heartbeat with a towel in her hand. She passed the towel to Sheridan and he opened it to expose an obsidian blade. The stink of poison turned her head away. “They didn’t mess around, Sheridan. I smell nicotine, nightshade and foxglove. Nobody uses all three.”

“Each knife I took from the women sent to kill me had the same combination. It is the Sword’s calling card. Your knuckles are red, Lieutenant. Did you bloody the man’s nose?”

“Aye, Ranger. He tried to caress my bumps that don’t belong on a soldier. Retrieving the knife was a simple matter since his nose exploded. He didn’t want the poison near him.”

“Well done, Lieutenant. You marked the inside man. I suggest you arrest him for interrogation. Order the paladins out here to assist you. They will because they know who is in charge.”

“You’ll have me busted down to dishwasher in my first week, Ranger.”

“Nay, Lieutenant. Trust me.”

Poor Dina looked like she’d puke. But she moved off smartly. She picked the Lieutenant of the Paladins and spoke for half a minute before the man barked an order for four to accompany the Lieutenant to arrest a traitor. Dina led the Paladins inside and a loud scuffle occurred immediately. Why didn’t the whanker run? A man cried out in pain and shortly the Paladins led the suspect out cuffed behind his back. Dina rubbed her knuckles and Caitlin whoop-whooped, punching her fists to match. Dina punched the man’s already broken nose.

Muirenn rubbed her temple when Dina looked her way. The young officer’s eyes lit up and she pushed at the man’s hair aside at his temple and cursed. She nodded to confirm he was a Sword. How in blue blazes was it possible to infiltrate the Paladins? The prisoner spotted Muirenn and he rushed ahead escaping the grips of the two Paladins. He screamed something like power to the Swords. The man lowered his head to ram her and he stopped like he struck a wall and fell at her feet. Oh. She winked at Sheridan for creating the shield, and turned away to face the breeze.

“There is no safer place in the world for me than at your side, Sheridan. Dress me in armor, give me my swords, teach me your magical weapons, and we make a formidable team Gwydion can’t touch.”

“Aye, Muirenn. The walls are crumbling. I…

“Its’ fine, love. We’ll discuss our private life later. The world doesn’t need to hear our plans for the future together. How did your dogs know the man had poison?”

Sheridan smiled in understanding of her misdirection, and pointed to the bushes beside the door where a beagle stuck her head out real quick and ducked back in. “Pecas snuck up close when all eyes were on the stunning princess. She can smell poison at great distances. Her word was good enough for me.”

Her Ranger offered his arm and Muirenn accepted it graciously and they proceeded inside to meet the King. Finally.

The royal family’s winter home was not huge so the reception hall was no larger than two good-sized dining rooms, and it was packed with what Sheridan called roosters. They make a lot of noise and strut around but nobody needs them to make eggs. The hall was mortuary silent until a young girl screamed his name. He laughed at the girl pushing her way past the roosters and peacocks and when free she raced for him. Charlie stepped beside him but he waved her away. Caitlin remarked a wee bit too loud the girl could be Muirenn’s little sister.

The black haired, hazel eyed teen crashed into Sheridan and she hugged him like she hadn’t seen him in years. Oh. The girl cried. She knew poor Ciara died as well. Sheridan released her arm and she started to back away, but he didn’t want her to go, he wanted her closer. Sheridan’s arm pulled her close and he held her with trembling muscles. Her Ranger needed to release his tears and mourn for Ciara and Aoife soon. Muirenn hugged his waist not caring a damn about her dress anymore. The girl released him, wiped her eyes and glanced Muirenn’s way. She froze and they stared at each other. The girl shook hard and blew out a long breath.

“Who are you?”

The King coughed and the girl spun around and chirped an Oh. She curtsied and retreated behind the crowd again.

“Well, Your Majesty. I tried to behave myself and walk up your aisle properly. But y’know, I prefer Renee’s version any day. Aha, we will take it from the top. Too many people have invested hours of practice for this moment to allow all their hard work go to waste. Lieutenant?”

Dina spoke her order in a low voice but the heels snapping and the boots stomping in perfect unison wasn’t quiet in the small room. The Guardians marched forward and moved into a inverted V formation. Dina approached Muirenn and snapped a salute. Sheridan released her to Dina’s care and stepped back while she was led forward to meet the smiling man seated on a huge chair, and not a throne. Dina spoke clearly and loudly when she introduced Princess Muirenn O’Kelly, Duchess of Donegal, future wife to Ranger Sheridan Kingston. Muirenn whipped around to find him smiling. He just bloody winked. She faced forward and curtsied.

“Your Majesty, I present myself to the throne as ordered. My intentions are to remain forever at Ranger Sheridan’s side, whether it is here or breaking down Gwydion’s front door. May I have your permission to remain in your kingdom?”

“Absolutely, Your Highness. Who is your mother, please?”

“My mother was Donna O’Kelly, Duchess of Donegal and sister to King Seosamh O’Kelly, Your Majesty. My mother passed away when I was eight, and I never knew my father. He was wrongfully banned from the Irish Islands.”

The king rose and asked for the room to clear except for Sheridan’s party. King Alphonsus thanked Lieutenant Phoenix for her service and dismissed the Guardians. Sheridan had other plans.

“The Guardians remain as my guests, Your Majesty.”

The king squinted at Sheridan but his smirk could not be mistaken. He canceled his order of dismissal and sat waiting for the roosters to leave. The young girl remained and she approached the king and stood at his side. Oh, bloody hells, she must be the princess Renee Sheridan mentioned. Muirenn was a dimwit.

King Alphonsus removed his crown and passed it to the girl who stowed it under the chair.

“Did you know, Sheridan?”

“I had my suspicions, Alphonsus. Muirenn, I’d like to introduce you properly. May I?”

“I don’t know what you are planning, big man, but I trust you for sure.”

Sheridan moved closer with her to the king and princess. “Muirenn, meet your uncle Alphonsus and cousin, Renee. Alphonsus, I believe Muirenn is Renee’s daughter.”

“We can see the obvious for ourselves, Ranger. Muirenn, Renee was my brother lost these past thirteen years. He loved one woman in his life and lost her to Fiona’s schemes. Your dear father had no idea your mother was expecting or he would’ve fought the dark gods to reach her. He loved Donna for life. We sent him on a mission to give him something to occupy his time, but he never returned.”

She pulled Sheridan’s arm to turn him and studied his eyes. “This is all true? I do have family? I will not cry and ruin all Einin’s work, damn it. You bloody well could’ve given me a head’s up Ranger. Oh, I’m sorry, Your Majesty…

“Nay, Muirenn and my crown is off. Please call me uncle and don’t ever apologize for chastising the Ranger. I would sell tickets and make a fortune if you’d do it again.”

She dove into Sheridan’s arms and snatched the hankie he offered. She would not ruin Einin’s work. She performed the breaths of tranquility for a while and raised her head to kiss his cheek. “Our dear Ciara had you pegged all along, love. You are a brat.”

She faced her uncle and spunky little cousin. “Well met, uncle Alphonsus. I apologize for taking so long to visit. Hi, Renee. I’m your cousin, Muirenn. I am tickled pink to finally meet you.” The girl leaped into her arms to hug tight and bounced. She snuck a quick look at Caitlin but her bodyguard shook her head and wagged her finger. Mature women do not bounce. She gasped when it struck her, and glared at the big man with his secret grin. He bloody well knew.

“You know what this means, don’t you. You sneaky Ranger. I’m a princess in two kingdoms. I can never be crowned Queen of Ireland. We should broadcast the news to the world and maybe my bloody great aunt and her bloody Swords will stop trying to kill me. Oh, uncle, did you know your Paladins were infiltrated by the Swords? One of your men organized the attack and gave the archers access to your roof. He has the tattoos on his head to boot. Lieutenant Dina subdued the man twice. The whanker attempted to cover up evidence, but she caught him.”

Uncle Alphonsus hollered a name. The doors opened and closed and a Paladin officer stood before his king. “We have learned of the incident, Your Majesty. The man is one of the six sent from Governor Regis in Atlanta to supposedly bolster our ranks for the protection of Princess Renee and a visiting princess. We have the four still alive in custody and they have tattoos.”

Renee giggled when Sheridan informed the king two had an accident and fell from the roof. Uncle would’ve laughed too in a different setting.

“Renee and I are their targets, uncle. The Swords are assassinating many heirs in Europe and Ireland. Fiona desires to rule the world as empress and we are in her way. I would be warry of any sudden appearance of self proclaimed advisors, uncle. King Alderic executed two women trying to worm their way into court with—well, you know what wiles a woman would use.”

“My queen and heir apparent were murdered in Wesak on their way to meet my son’s betrothed. Sheridan helped me exact revenge on any enemy soldier we found in a month.”

Her uncle thought long and hard about everything he heard and blew out a harsh breath when he reached a conclusion. He told his Paladin captain there would never be another such offer of assistance accepted and he wanted to meet each Paladin in the kingdom within a month. The king stared at Dina for a uncomfortable period and blinked his way back.

“Who are you, Lieutenant? I seem to recall your face but it was on a younger girl.”

Dina looked to Sheridan for help and he smiled.

“It must be a family resemblance, Alphonsus.”

Uncle smiled and shook a finger at Dina but he didn’t dig deeper into her identity.

“Well, young Lieutenant. I am pleased with how you and your Guardians protected my niece on the voyage here and in my own front yard. Your actions will be rewarded and I will write to Colonel Grace to forward my praise and thanks. I see why the Ranger wanted you near. He always has a devious reason for everything, but I have learned over the years he is usually right. Why are Na Siúracha warriors accompanying you, Ranger?”

“Charlie, Syl, and Mags are my new companions, Alphonsus. You will see them around for years. He introduced his three companions and they stood tall and couldn’t hide their smiles.

“Excellent. Welcome Sisters and good luck. He is a hard man to keep up with.”

The three covered chuckles, but Charlie bucked up. “We have learned that lesson quickly, Your Majesty. We need to learn to climb like squirrels to follow him.”

“Drop the title when my crown is off, Charlie. I don’t often have the luxury of just speaking to friends. If you stick to his fanatical exercise routine, you’ll be climbing like a squirrel in a year. So, how do we celebrate the discovery and arrival of our dear Muirenn? Ranger?”

She studied Sheridan’s face and would swear she saw ideas passing across his eyes. He nodded hard to himself and gazed at her. “What is your favorite meal, and please don’t answer with a political response aiming to please me. I always prefer the honest truth.”

“I’m not a hard girl to please, big man—when it comes to food. I would have to say a fine steak is my favorite meal. The sides vary, but sautéed mushrooms and onions are a must. Other than that, I can eat anything. I spent nine years at Kylemore eating crappy cafeteria fare, so any food cooked properly thrills me to giggles.”

The Na Siúracha grumbled their agreement. Sheridan returned to staring into space and nodded again. “Well, if it is steaks you want then my home here is the best place. Dina and I will cook and anybody else who has recipes for side dishes have the inside kitchen to themselves. Between my dining table and outdoor tables we can accommodate thirty people. Besides, Alphonsus leaves his crown at home when he visits. Aye?”

Renee bounced on her toes and her smile would melt the coldest heart. She glanced at Dina for a response and she was damn close to bouncing herself. Sylvie volunteered to make scalloped potatoes, and Mags promised the best green bean casserole ever. Charlie shrugged and said she could open cans of baked beans. Dina offered to make Spanish rice.

“I’m game, big man. Uncle?” He glanced up glassy eyed and shook himself.

“Oh, sorry, I was trying to decide what we could bring.”

Renee whispered in her father’s ear and he nodded with a grin. “My daughter declares we will supply the appetizers to pass around before the meal, and dessert.”

“Where is John Grace?”

“Oh, your gung-ho friend is up north with his Guardians. I swear you are a bad influence on the Colonel. He is always training and testing his warriors. Two companies of Guardians are learning how to build shelters in the deep snow in Minnesota County, Ranger. We won’t see his frost-bit toes for weeks.”

Renee whispered to uncle again and he pointed back at her. She blushed but smoothed her dress and smiled at Sheridan. “Could I bring my guitar to sing? I wrote a song about Lady Ciara this morning I’d like you to hear, Ranger.”

Sheridan bobbed his head. Muirenn rushed her cousin for a hug and agreed she should and they could play and sing together.

All that was left was to decide the time and he told Dina a dog would be at her dorm to escort her and her Guardians to his home two hours early, and dress casual. He had an arsenal of weapons if anything happened. Dina winked because she was well aware.They left the king and drove directly to town to shop in a damn dress and him in a suit. He introduced Muirenn to each vendor and had her display the knot so they’d know for the future. All the items would be delivered which shocked her, but he did live alone and probably always had his groceries delivered. Well, he’d be the only one to carry sixty pounds of steaks for sure. Mags and Sylvie bombarded him with question about what he had in his kitchen and he told them after the third time he had everything they would need or want in a kitchen and most of them were unused. His sister and Ciara took him shopping for items a man living alone would require if he ever decided to host a big dinner party, and they organized many because they could.

They made one more purchase and it wasn’t for dinner. He paid the man an extra two silvers to deliver the mattress before his guests arrived. Sheridan stated he would place the old one in the Farm’s kennels for puppies to sleep on. Rihanna’s scent would be eradicated in no time. He ran into Einin’s to invite them and Mrs. Smith. He sent birds with notes to invite Athair, Alannah, Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Beck. The smile on his lips prevented Muirenn from asking any questions about their identities. If he was happy, she was delighted.



Muirenn had the best time of her life in a home she could easily call her own. The man had impeccable taste and a grand eye for design. She found each painting hung on his walls and bragged about the two she had hanging in Falcarragh to anyone who would listen.

The ten hostlers wore a skirt set and acted as servers until dinner reached the table and her uncle eyed them when they sat to eat. Muirenn coughed to hide her laugh and relieved the king of his worry.

“Uncle, the ten girls are Sheridan’s new hostlers. The sweethearts volunteered to help out today. The Ranger assigned them rooms above his barn like any other hostler, but the Master of Horse refused to permit females in Barntown like the misogynist pig was in charge.”

Gorgeous Alannah and his three mothers came over very interested in the king’s response. The ladies had already discussed the girl’s presence, new occupation, and were not happy with Bruce Trainer. Uncle took a gulp of wine and set it down with a sigh.

“Bruce cannot deny any employee entrance to Barntown. I wish you spoke to me first, Sheridan. I applaud your decision and will assert what influence I have on Ranger property, but it is Athair you should address. Athair hired and pays the Master of Horse. The Farm is not in my jurisdiction. The Rangers control the land, town and employees. The sole purpose for Somerset is to support the Rangers. The only reason Somerset has a mayor is for the Rangers to deal with one person instead of fielding questions and requests from the populace. The title of mayor is a bit generous and it has gone to his head.”

Mrs. Baker led the ladies out in a storm to go find Athair. Sheridan’s laughter rumbled in his chest and his shoulders bounced so much he had to put his glass down. Muirenn asked him what was so funny.

“I’d hate to be Athair with those four ladies attacking enforce. The hostlers will have full access to their rooms by tomorrow, and Bruce will walk around with his tail between his legs for a while. Mrs. Baker has wanted to knock him down a peg or two on what she called the snooty ladder. Athair only believes he runs the Farm, but every man, woman, and animal jumps when those four ladies speak.”

Dina and her guards served their table, because she insisted and Muirenn’s steak was cooked to perfection. Everyone praised the Na Siúracha and Dina for their culinary creations and the room quieted while they all shoveled food. Muirenn leaned toward Sheridan to ask a question bugging her since she first entered his home.

“Why do you have a dining set for eighteen?”

His answer was it fit the room. He moved into the home at eleven and purchased a table for six not knowing anything about furnishing or decorating. When he and his creative talents matured the table became too small for his artistic eye so he bought a complete dining room set to fit the room. The marble topped carved credenza and breakfront china cabinet finished the set and the wool rug over ash flooring if she had to guess created a luxurious setting. The china visible behind the lead glass was a pale green trimmed in gold and she’d bet it was genuine.

“I was gifted the china and it has never been used. I have silverware sets untouched in the credenza drawers.”

Muirenn glanced at the credenza and nodded toward it for Charlie. His guard opened the drawers and whistled. “You should have fine dinners more often and use them, love. People like to dress up on occasion and it is great practice for squires or companions. Aye, Charlie?”

“Aye, My Lady, we could use a bit of etiquette training for sure. I couldn’t guess the purpose for all the forks.”

“Done.”

After the fine meal, they all retired to the huge back patio where two fire pits burned juniper and she could walk around all day with the aroma on her clothing and be happy. Renee joined them outside with her guitar and Muirenn held his arm and squeezed hoping he knew it meant she was here if he needed her.

Renee’s song was titled “Song of Ciara”. The words were moving and delightful. Renee didn’t write a mournful tune. She wrote a ballad for Sheridan’s best friend and biggest teaser. Even Sheridan clapped along for the last verse and a repeat of the refrain—“you’ll always be a brat, but a lovely brat to me.”

Sheridan grabbed her hand and took her with him to thank Renee. The princess couldn’t be more pleased he approved. Muirenn ran for her guitar and the party started. Everybody danced with everybody except the six Paladins, but they brandished fine smiles watching. Sheridan had a record player and a collection of records larger than any she had seen. Of, course he found them digging underground in old world stores without a care to roofs collapsing.

Her uncle cornered Dina and drug the truth out of her and he laughed. He wagged a finger at Sheridan when he walked by and her Ranger took it as nothing. He handed her the wine and sat beside her. He leaned his head back to gaze at the stars and he sighed. Sylvie ran out distressed and on the verge of tears. She claimed she let the bloody pan sit too long and she can’t clean it. Sheridan huffed a laugh and rose to assist. Her uncle took his vacated seat and they had a lovely discussion about her mother, her father which enthralled her to tears. They talked of Kylemore, and Sheridan. He said he hoped to be present when they married and the dam broke.

Two strong hands gripped her arms and two strong arms wrapped her when she stood, and one strong heart beat in his chest to the rhythm of her heart. He rocked her to the song playing and she chuckled but joined his feet in slow movements and she calmed. Muirenn raised her face and kissed his lips. “Thank you, love. Thank you for today, my found family, my life many times over, and for our hearts beating in sync. I can never replace Ciara, but if you look to your right, I’ll be here trying my best to make you happy.”

“You don’t need to try, Muirenn. I’m happy around you. I’ll have an answer and a request for you when I return. Wait for me?”

“Hah, I will wait forever, love. Will we leave tomorrow?”

“Aye, but we’ll Travel like you have never before. It’s a surprise.”

She smacked his chest. “You can’t tease a girl like that. I’ll get no sleep tonight for sure.”



**Chapter 37 Stalking Woman**

**S**heridan gathered his bow and quiver, hoisted the straps up on his shoulder and sighed. He faced the source of his—distress is what he’d call it, or confusion. Muirenn packed a sack with meats for her brood, and she headed off with Caitlin, Charlie, Maggie, and Syl carrying their bows and spears on an exploratory hike. Syl wanted to find pheasant, Maggie a boar to take on and Charlie didn’t care. She needed a walk. All the women leaving him in camp alone could be construde as devious if he was paranoid. Muirenn headed south because she spotted intriguing structures from the top of his mountain and had to search for them. He’d better pay attention. There was a deer to kill, and a game to play before the twenty six riders his birds spotted reached his camp.

He scratched the grit out of his eye and sputtered a sorry laugh. They’d catch him flat-footed and stupid, damn it. Sheridan had to do something productive before the people stalking him caught on he was aware of their game. Muirenn should’ve reached a safe distance by now if she followed his directions. Aye, good luck with that. Why did he only consider her safety? Oh, gods, he was losing it.

Hells bells, it’s not like he lacked work to do. It was past time to stop dawdling and worrying about what Muirenn’s presence did to him. Sheridan dropped the bow, yanked the arrow from the deer, and slit the buck’s arteries to bleed out his kill. Well, his and his brood’s kill.

The birds and dogs might have a stronger claim to the trophy if they cared to argue. The Golden Eagles grappled with the deer holding on tight to the nine point rack. The Deerhounds took it down, and Sheridan’s arrow struck the heart. OK, it was overkill, but by the gods, it was far less gruesome than dogs tearing out its throat for sure.

What were the stalkers trying to do? Sheridan watched the confusing Talked images of his raptors’ observations while he gutted the deer. The twenty-six riders dismounted, circled his location and closed in. The Lakota showed skill. Hah. They stood no chance of success. One female circled around low to the ground darting from cover to cover sneaking up behind him, and he chuckled with the dogs. Well, it was more like a snort for all concerned. Nay, he chuckled, and the dogs snorted. It wasn’t his fault he had a dry throat, and it didn’t come out right. Yeah, Sheridan would stick to his story if the dogs teased.

The lady sneaking up behind him—he knew for certain a female slinked in the brush at his six because she was skantily clad, and her curvacious figure spoke volumes in his lustful tome. Toned, tanned, and gorgeous should take a gander at all the raptors in the sky. Several species had no business flying in their present location, and she should know it for a fact. How many sea eagles hunted in the high desert? Hells, the Marshall eagles, and Stellars Sea eagles didn’t inhabit the American continent.

The birds and dogs kept an eye on her approach, and some of the birds laughed so hard at her senseless attempts; they were forced to excuse themselves and flew away. Birds with a sense of humor? Aye, it was his lot in life. Sick humor for sure, but they had always appreciated a good laugh, and usually more so when it was at Sheridan’s expense. His birds enjoyed making fun of him—often.

Sheridan wiped his brow. He tired too quickly, and it made no sense. His body recovered fully from the ordeal, but his muscles screamed for him to rest. He’d never understand magic if he lived a thousand years. Gods, imagine if he could, he…oh, yeah. He’d never live a thousand years with Ciara. Cowards stole the life of his best friend. It added to the torture of his aching body and his broken heart. Why didn’t he ask her? Why didn’t he just come out and say I want you to stay with me, Ciara? She’d be hiking with Muirenn—trash-talking him, but still, alive and near him.

Aye, Charlie asked the same question when he arrived in Somerset. The Sisters knew as only women could he didn’t speak the words to Ciara before she left. Sheridan would pay for the failure his whole life. Muirenn didn’t make one remark admonishing him for his failure.

Muirenn and Caitlin were pleasant company on the five day trip down the river to Kingsport, and over the gap to Hyden and on to London and Somerset. The sparring each morning and evening proved grueling. The women were masters of their chosen weapon. Plant identification, and foraging, Muirenn knew. Tracking and evading lessons were fodder for his ego. They hadn’t a clue. Hand-to-hand fighting was their favorite. It was always the same. His students cherished the lucky punches they landed on their Teacher’s nose.

The family in London treated Muirenn like she was already First Sister. It’s amazing how fast word spread between women. He’d bet the Farm the whole family knew he traveled with the princess. Aye, and here he was, resting before attacking the quest, missing his best friend and guilty for not confessing and proclaiming his love for Ciara way before she left and asking her to stay. He was guilty for not being there to protect her—hells, for sending her home in the first place. Ciara should’ve stayed. Aye, he could spout the same old bullshit all his life, and it wouldn’t bring her back.

His brood suggested resting for a week with them, and he couldn’t come up with a logical argument. He tried, damn it—about resting, not for them keeping him company. His body and mind wrestled daily for dominance. The body wanted to sleep, and his stubborn will wanted to get moving on with the task. Mind over matter was fallible. Or, in his present state, the mind didn’t matter. He might have lost his mind if not for his family and brood when he learned he lost Ciara, his best friend, to foul murder. Aye, they saved his sanity. What shattered shreds he still possessed. Muirenn gave him plenty of space after receiving the news. He could only hazzard a guess and bet he’d be wrong. He had no clue how a woman thought. Nay, he knew his Ciara like his favorite book.

Ciara. His dear Ciara lost forever. He prayed she would find peace in her next life and a man more worthy of her love. She needed a man who would protect her better than he had. Hells, he didn’t protect her at all. She died, and where was he? Sleeping for two days on a riverboat while she bled to death. Why she jumped from the ship to swim ashore, he’d never understand.

Sheridan brought all of his dogs, cats, and raptors for a restful week before he returned them to Somerset for what might be six months. Well, he also brought his companions, Muirenn and Caitlin, but who’s counting. The brood decided to play in his campground at the base of the anvil shaped O’Branain Mountain, named for his Elven companions. His best friend’s family. The lady he failed miserably in countless ways. What in the world wouldn’t remind him of Ciara?

He had to enter the damn mountain and complete the quest to return and take his revenge on her murderers. Aye, pay attention, or it would be he to perish with an arrow in his back shot by a woman half dressed. He had lost a few marbles already because Sheridan hoped for a close up view of her body before she killed him.

The campground was situated in the shelter of the last basalt mountain in the long chain created when the caldera at Yellowstone bubbled out of the ground in the distant past. The world’s populace should praise the fact it didn’t explode. He certainly did. The new range of mountains was named the New Mountains, and boy how the name became a contention with people since. After Earth’s denizens emerged from the safe zones underground, and they discovered the mountains, scientists chose to name the chain, Yellowstone Mountains. The fact they were black caused a bit of concern. New Mountais was a name supposedly temporary until somebody came up with a better, but as was typical in governments and polotics, nothing happened. Seven hundred fifty years after the naming, the New Mountains remained. He purchased the last—or perhaps the first huge blob of lava pushed south. It stopped and cooled near the town of Guymon. Sheridan purchased the land, set up a campground and the family had added to the amenities on each excursion in the last seven years.

He tossed the innards to the side for his avian, feline, and canine family to attack. The dogs and raptors actually made an unpleasant task more revolting. Benji and Bane, the Black-footed Cats from Africa, sampled the fare with politeness. Henna and Tawny, the Rusty-Spotted cats of Asia, were a tad messy, but who’s watching? Why the hells was he watching?

Aye, as a point of fact—field dressing a kill ranked as his least favorite job. Nay, he spoke a bald-faced lie, or was it bold-faced? It didn’t matter—he lied. His absolute least had to be fishing, which always elicited a fit from Ciara who loved to fish more than breathe. Well, maybe more than talking. Nay, she sure liked to talk. Damn, who cares. His best friend would never enjoy her favorite pastime again. Sheridan was certain she would choose living over her joy of fishing. Forever and always, dear Ciara.

Sheridan would, in a heartbeat, choose to gut a deer instead of fishing each time asked. Gutting a deer, at the least, accomplished something unlike sitting still and staring at a string in the water for hours. Regardless of Ciara’s unwanted advice when he did fish to shut her…to concede to her polite requests, he wouldn’t jiggle his rod in public for anyone. He would give his life to have Ciara back to make amends. Aye, he would learn to fish patiently to recall the best days of his life with her while he studied the sparkling surface of a lake or stream. In truth, he didn’t need a rod in hand to recall the glorious days with Ciara. Oh hells, the brood made disgusting sounds. Sheridan bent over, hands on knees, and pretended to study something in the grass while he spied on the huntress.

His dogs, cats, and birds feasted noisily on the organs while he observed the young woman attempting to sneak up on him through the manzanita grove. The Kestrels flitted about over her position, giving him an excellent view. He could see the dimples on her lower back. Her creeping around half naked was a sight far more pleasant than his dogs and birds devouring intestines for sure.

What she and her twenty-five friends were doing in the area became apparent when she strung her bow, placed an arrow to the string, and snuck up within striking range. She wouldn't succeed in robbing him of his deer. All her attempts at skulking wouldn’t accomplish her goal, and the cute faces she made slinking through the bushes had him wondering about her personality. Would her silly actions prove her excellent humor and imagination? She certainly appeared to enjoy herself in her stealthy approach, but she should raise her head and spot the raptors watching her watching him watching her, and they were also laughing at her in his mind.

Thoughts of the woman and her personality were a waste of time. Sheridan didn’t want or need a woman in his life. He failed Ciara, and he would not repeat his failure for Ena and —Muirenn. How could he forget her when she was the first to greet him when he exited a door, woke from his bedroll, returned from the shower? She was everywhere. Nay, he failed Ciara, and he didn’t need a mate—especially not like the one doing her best to crawl up and kill him before he had a chance to say boo.

Sheridan patted his chest. His heart couldn’t beat faster if he ran all day. Arawn’s balls, was she the source of his second heartbeat, the pulse of magic? Could her arrival be the special event he expected? His heartbeat told him her appearance implied something unusual, and with luck, pleasant. What a damn let down. A woman? He needed a woman in his life…aye and he’d miss Ciara—both confusing and most likely painful in the end. He experienced the same heart throbbing the day he met Ciara and similar magic when they kissed. It did not guarantee a successful relationship. Well, he and Ciara had a wonderful if not romantic relationship. Hells, he had to change his train of thought before the lady put an arrow in his ass while he moped about like a puppy who lost its favorite squeaky toy. Ciara was no toy. What about Enapay? He had too many ridiculous notions lately. Enapay and the other woman—Muirenn would be better off if he remained alone. Máthair declared he needed to live alone. With Ciara gone, it would be his future, damn it.

Whistling to pretend ignorance of her approach didn’t work because his laughter at her movements ruined his tune each time and he wound up spitting razzberries. He gave up, showing off his ignorance and decided on portraying idiocy. Idiocy proved easier for him. If the lady could hear him, she might believe she found a man who had a few screws loose. Hah, imagine coming upon a man working in a field half-ass whistling a loony tune and laughing for no apparent reason. Aye, she would swear he acted nuts. Where did the squirrels go?

The enchanting huntress rose with bow drawn to attack. Sheridan turned to speak with her, freezing her mid-step, and mid-draw. If he did have a screw or two loose, he would laugh at a person with an arrow aimed at his chest. His eyes made the long journey from the deadly point of the arrow to the bow and up her tanned and muscular arm to her silky smooth shoulder and on to her sensuous neck and her face, and he had to pull his tongue back up from the ground.

“Wow…Oh. Wow. Damn. Good morning, young lady. Wow. How may I help you? Are you lost? I sure hope I found you.”

“Young lady? What have you been smoking? How did you know I came up behind you? There are none better at silent walking than me. What do you mean by wow, oh, wow? Wow, what wild white…?”

She froze mid-insult and her widened eyes misted. She raised her face to the sky in what he would call a prayer until she shrilled a warbling tone at the huge silvery clouds drifting lazily by in an azure sky. It could be her form of prayer or her way of preparing to kill him. Her hands dropped to slap bronze toned thighs, and she stomped a foot attached to a gorgeous naked leg.

“Sheridan Kingston! What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere without our family? Where is my sister wife? Your long hair and ratty attire confused me for a moment. You, city boy, should not travel unescorted in the wild lands. I had believed you needed a woman’s touch before, but this wild look is not appealing for my man and is proof you need constant care. Well? Wake up your brain engrossed in lust for my body.”

He ripped his gaze from her legs to her bright eyes and smirking lips. Enapay? Hells, it’s no wonder he didn’t recognize her. She dressed half naked. He won’t ever complain, but wow. Wow. She typically garbed herself, when not in a dress, in leathers from neck to toes. What she wore didn’t contain enough leather to make a boot. But he wasn’t complaining. He never would. She had a magnificant body. Wow. She stomped her foot again. Oh, she asked a question.

Ena removed the arrow from the string, slammed it back in the quiver, and dropped the bow mumbling something Sheridan didn’t understand in her lilting language. He really should call up her language to memory. He never cared for people insulting him in an unknown language. Well, insults were one thing, but not understanding the crude taunts was far worse for sure.

The gorgeous lady ran to him with her arms outstretched for a hug, and he held his bloody hands out to warn her. But, damn; he didn’t want her to stop running because of the way her hips, and her breasts and her legs, her stomach, her outfit…Enapay stomped to a halt and pursed her lips in disappointment, but she did cross her arms under her breasts to prop them up for him to admire. Hah. She shot him a knowing smile more deadly than any arrow. She caught him. Ena glanced at the sky and smiled with bright white teeth. Was he in trouble?

“Hold your disgusting hands out and prepare to scrub. I will provide wash water. Your future wife does not wish to wait long for a hug and kiss, city boy. So, please don’t dawdle.”

Rain fell, and it fell one foot in front of him and only there to rinse away the drying blood. It’s a talent he would appreciate learning. Damn, he’d give his big toe to learn her skill. Sheridan scrubbed like a good boy shaking his head and laughing in amazement of her skill.

“Pay attention to the task at hand, city boy. I will permit you to return to ogling my body after you kiss me. Do you approve of my outfit? I wore it today for the first time. The Good Mother had a hand in my choice of apparell this morning. I certainly approve of your hungry grin, Sheridan. It is reassuring your future wife appeals to you. I imagine if you sought my face first, instead of my hips and breasts, you would have recognized me, but I will not admonish you for the lustful gaze.”

“Wow. Oh. Wow, it’s—I, uh, I mean it’s what the material barely covers I was admiring. I never had the pleasure of ogling your fine body in the flesh. I mean, your legs, your belly—Your attire merely displays and accentuates your stunning figure. Oh, you have friends. I’ll behave, Enapay. I’m not alone, dear lady. My brood observed the movements of you and your people for hours. I am here to recoup my strength before I tackle my quest. My companions are hunting to the south. I’m not alone, but the shining gods blessed me to be here for your arrival.”

He displayed freshly washed hands and wiped them dry on his wrinkled shirt. The magical rain ceased, and she ran for him, jumped into his arms and wrapped her body around him to hug, and she kissed him with sincere and welcomed passion. She was truly pleased to see him. Aye, her presence was a godsend.

Enapay released his lips, laid her head on his shoulder, and he wouldn’t let her go forever if the world was kind—and she allowed. Ciara always knew his heart. She knew he attempted to push them away, but the truth was he…he loved Ciara, and he loved Enapay. She sighed, kissed his neck, and smiled sunlight for his soul.

“I have missed you, city boy. I feared I’d never see you again. Dreaming of your lips does not do justice to your loving kiss. Oh boy, the Good Mother blessed me in a most peculiar manner. We were harried by Swords, soldiers, and beasts from the nine hells for days. The smoke from your fire drew our attention, and we decided to investigate. Where is my sister wife? Where is Ciara?”

“Ciara was murdered, love. I left her in Liberty City to board a ship for home. For some unknown reason she swam back to land, and somebody put three arrows into her back. We lost our Ciara to the enemy.”

Enapay raised her head to the skies and howled a mournful sound her companions picked up and joined in the cry of remorse. She hugged him tight and sobbed against his neck, speaking prayers in a hoarse voice. Tears streamed down his cheeks to mingle with hers and dropped hot onto his neck. The first tears he shed for Ciara. He was a fool to wait so long but comforted to share the moment with Enapay.

He held her a while before Sheridan spotted movement in his periphery. Two Lakota men stood over the deer. One pointed at it and his shoulder. Sheridan nodded his thanks for the kind offer and returned to consoling his future wife. Was she? Would she not remain safer without him? Hells, she was chased by the enemy, and he wasn’t with her to protect. Aye, how had she survived? She survived without him.

“Enapay. Why are you here?”

She raised her head, kissed his lips, and released her legs gripping his waist. He set her down, and she attempted a smile he knew was not in her heart.

“First, my dear future husband—our love is a newborn compared to yours with Ciara. I promise to fill your heart with love to ease the anguish evident in your eyes. Thank you for sharing your grief with me. Good Mother spare my man additional heartache. He has suffered more than his share in his short life. Oh boy, I can see your worry, city boy. Do not run or send me away to provide safety for me. They find me to harrass without your company. I am a warrior and will face any danger unafraid.”

“You read my thoughts correctly. Ciara admonished me for the same caution, and she wound up dead because of her affiliation with me.”

“No. Ciara died because our enemy is evil. They shot my sister wife in the back without providing her an opportunity to defeat them with her spear. They are filthy spineless cowards.”

Ena stomped her foot to exagerate her final words. A bolt of lightning struck somewhere north of them, and he tried to look away to hide his smile but failed. Sheridan unwrapped her from his arms and offered his hand to hold. She smiled the don’t be stupid look and smacked it away to hug his waist and pulled his arm over her shoulder to hold her.

“This is the way Lakota lovers walk together. I have waited a lifetime to walk the same way with you, Sheridan Kingston.”

Aye, it was a more pleasant way to walk with her. Her supple and warm skin was an added bonus. Sheridan nodded his head toward the camp. The two Lakota volenteers hefted the deer, and all twenty-five followed.

Enapay petted each dog who came to greet her and waved to the raptors in the trees and sky while she explained her presence between sniffs. She squealed at the sight of his cats and took a moment to scratch each head. The Black Footed cats from Africa and the Rusty Specled cats from India might be cute, but they could rip her throat out in a blink. Her sniffling never ceased. He dug out a handkerchief, and she snatched it with heart-felt thanks.

“You are the perfect gentleman. I claim this hanky as mine, city boy. I will keep this as a token of our blessed encounter and gaze upon your emerald initials pretending I stare into your eyes for the entirety of your quest.”

She questioned who embroided the monogram and seemed pleased when he answered one of his mothers. He couldn’t recall which lady created it, but she was satisfied. Enapay detailed her exploits since they parted in Wichita and her tale was rife with hardship on the plains. The enemy chased her west when she wished to return to Wichita and answer the summons from the Seven Council’s Fire—the gathering of leaders to discuss the encroachment of the enemy on their lands.

“Do you have seasoned meat in your camp? Do city boys know not to eat fresh kill?”

“Aye. I have hunted for many years. The deer will bring us a fine meal in trade when I Travel to the butcher at home. What would you and your people prefer to eat?”

“Oh boy, a choice of menu out in the wild lands. Can you provide ingredients for a vennison stew to satisfy one hundred thirty hungry people? I will demonstrate my cooking skills to my future husband.”

“So many people?”

“Yes, love. My warriors will locate us in due time and will be famished from their ordeal.”

“Done. Well, one hundred thirty five people. My companions will return soon.”

Enapay chortled and hugged him tighter. “You are a treasure, city boy. Where must you travel for your quest, and when will you depart?”

He guided her through the manzanita on the path his family created, and a melancholy moment struck him. He and Ciara toiled for days to dig out the bushes and replant them unharmed to form the trail.

“Somewhere north where the New Mountains brush up against the Rockies, and I planned to leave tomorrow, but will not until we defeat the force chasing you. I would see my future wife safe from the pursuing enemy before I depart.”

“Sixty Swords, one-hundred-fifty men, and more than one hundred horrid creatures and you speak like we will air out the wagon after a long winter. We welcome your swords and your expertise in battle, Sheridan Kingston.”

They turned into the camp and Enapay released him to run ahead and inspect the amenities. Her companions joined her investigation, and many heads shook in consternation.

“Shower facilities, a flushing toilet, cisterns of spring water, coolers run by wind generators and better cooking devices than my home. This is not camping, city boy. This is outdoor living. I am not complaining. I am in awe of your design and implementation. What’s behind the fallen wall of rock? It appears the gods sliced two slabs from the mountain and laid them against the face.”

“Sleeping quarters.”

“Good Mother spread the silk sheets and fluff up the pillows—my man is a marvel. Will we sleep there tonight? I imagine with all of us it would be crowded inside. Hmmm? Shouldn’t we share blankets to provide a comfortable space for my honored companions?”

The Lakota laughed, and a few ladies clapped with enthusiasm demonstrating their opinion of her suggestion. They roared with approval when he nodded. “Done. Any who wishes may shower while I Travel for the food. I’ll leave most of the brood here for your protection.”

“May I accompany you? I could provide extra hands to carry supplies.”

“Where I am headed is much colder than here.”

“Oh, boy. So, you prefer I change instead of standing here appreciating how you devour my body with your eyes? Go, Sheridan before you spring a leak. I will set the pot to boil and shower. I would prefer not to smell like horse, sweat, and road dust when you return. I do have clothing more suitable for a camp. Do you have bath oils, shampoo, and soaps? Towels?” He showed the women where they stored all the items, and the ladies chatted away like drunk weasels. Sheridan would assume they approved.

“Your wagon is a wondrous conveyance, city boy. I could spend a day exploring the doors and drawers. How do you pressurise the water for showers and the toilet?”

Sheridan pointed to the top of the mountain and explained how they pumped and stored well water in a tank. “It is filtered on the way down, and this time of year should be comfortably warm for showers. I could heat the water before I leave.”

“No, city boy. We Lakota are accustomed to bathing with creek water in all seasons. Your shower is a grateful luxury to my weary companions and me. Wait. Where do the shower and the toilets drain? Will we create a flood?”

“I had a few Giant friends dig and install the well, a septic tank, and drainage pipe. The shower waste waters the trees hiding our camp. When the septic tank fills, I will burn what’s inside with magic and start afresh.”

“You have Giant friends to call to perform such laborious chores. Sheridan Kingston, you truly are a marvel. Your future wife, who has never met a Giant, would appreciate an introduction.”

Sheridan showed the male, Takoda, the trap door for weapons hidden in the covered area. Takoda drew out the six bows and quivers to distribute to five men and one woman. He passed long boar spears to more and nodded his approval of the setup. He must have noted Sheridan’t confusion and answered his unspoken question.

“We are delgates to the Seven Fires Council. Normally we would never need weapons to travel because we have an escort. Enapay’s warriors drew the beasts away and were separated from us and herded west by the gruesome creatures. We worry about their safety. Never fear, Ranger. We will protect our Storm Woman while you’re gone.”

Sheridan asked where they spotted the warriors last and Talked his eagles to fly and search for them. Six large raptors lifted from the trees and flapped hard for the southwest.

“Create more smoke on the fire or burn some brush in the other pit since Ena needs the cook fire. We may draw your warriors to us.”

“We might draw the enemy as well.”

“It is what I hope, Takoda. I will see them dead before I must leave Ena.”

Sheridan asked two each deerhounds and wolfhounds to guard Ena. They loped over to the shower, and her squeal of delight enticed a laugh from the camp. He hefted the deer to his shoulder, touched his Shadows, waved at the curious Lakota, and blinked away.



**S**heridan grilled hot dogs for everyone while three women worked on the stew. A few never experienced the pleasure of a hot dog and watched him with trepidation as he slathered on sauerkraut, mustard and onions. He took a bite and hummed his pleasure for them. They laughed, but they sampled one the way he preferred, and he heard more hums. Aha, another convert.

He delivered one for the cook cutting vegetables. Ena changed into dark blue cotton leggings, and a pale blue cotton tunic belted at her waist with a torquois buckle, and he admired the way it accentuated her hips. Sheridan traded the hot dog for the knife and replaced Ena at the cutting board. Oh, damn. He hollered to Takoda where the cask of ale could be located in the wagon and in response he received many of their special warbling calls he would take as appreciation. He got busy cutting while Enapay moaned her pleasure over the hot dog. He always considered a good hot dog, the finest quick meal.

“Sheridan. Why waste time cutting each piece with precision? We are not children to choke on a carrot if it’s oversized. Oh boy, your eyes tell me a dark tale lies behind the reason. Speak to me, future husband. You can reveal your secrets, and I will keep them close forever.”

“One day, love. Not today. Consider my actions as an ingrained habit.”

“I will be there that one day and hold you close.” Ena smiled one he hoped to see forever. She set her knife down to take a bite of her hotdog and moaned with pleasure.

“Oh boy, I have a new favorite way to garnish my hot dogs. Thank you, city boy. We will never find sauerkraut on the plains, but I can brag I enjoyed the flavorful vegetable.”

He informed her it was merely salted cabbage set to brine and she howled for Nina and Isi. They ran to her like she was on fire and both sputtered their lips in frustration at her report. Ena repeated what he claimed, and they asked how to prepare the delicious treat. He gave them the recipe while he cut veggies for stew. Ena retrieved a second cutting board and helped him. She attempted to cut the way he did, and he smiled through his blush in thanks for her actions.

“It is a wife’s privilige to assist her husband in all things. Even to soothe a sad memory. You and I will create a fine and lasting memory today and tonight, Sheridan. Would you care to learn the Lakota ways? The traditions and rules of society?”

“I’d be honored to learn, Ena.”

Her smile came straight out of the chapter he titled innocense. One lone chapter in a tome of female secrets would be lost in the reading, but he must include the gestures for posterity.

“It is my duty and pleasure to instruct my husband.”

“I have decided to ride with you to Wichita to provide scouts and exra weapons. It is not out of my way when I travel with magic. Once I reach the mountains, I am forbidden to use any talents, but I’m not there, yet.”

She pressed a smile to her lips he had never witnessed in his life and could not recall from ancient memory. It must come from a chapter farther in the book of secret expressions.

“I have decided to allow you to ride with me, Ranger. Thank you for asking.”

“Aye. My apol—”

“No. Please never apologize for desiring to protect me. It is merely your first lesson. In this singular instance and any when I’m in public as the Storm Woman—I must lead. When we pledge our marriage, and I am joined with your army, I am yours to point the way to war even if I stand among my seven thousand warriors. I promise they and I will follow. Please understand. Women must fight to maintain their position and even their dignity in a warrior clan. Men are buffoons who consider us the weaker sex and believe we should remain at the tents making babies and cooking for them.”

Several of her clan drew closer to inspect the stew. One lady took up the ladle and stirred it vigorously while another stoked the flames. He asked Ena if he could stay with her group until they reached Wichita and offered his swords in her defense. Her bronze skin blushed below her paint. Ena took a deep breath, sat up straight, granted permission, and thanked him for the generous offer, and she approved. The women smiled at him for his one smart moment in weeks. He should’ve allowed Ciara to stay with him, damn it. She would’ve called him a good boy.

He spotted the men dipping leaves in water and tossing them on the fire to create heavy white smoke. Ena explained it was to make a signal fire for her warriors. They used a blanket to created clouds of smoke released when they yanked the blanket away. Three puffs followed by the steady stream of smoke repeated twice would inform them the camp was safe. Lesson learned. Well, two lessons. The Lakota males were misogynists.

The three women, satisfied on the stew’s progress retreated to the fire where a man threw more hot dogs on the grill. There’s no such thing as too many hot dogs.

“Do all males treat women in this manner?”

“Oh, boy, you are a true treasure. I berate you with rules of protocol, and you inquire about the women’s plight. The answer is no, my future husband. Only the young males behave like a badger with his nose stuck in a hole and only when there are no elders in the vicinity. Takoda and Nina wonder if our troubles this week were not instigated by the young idiots. Our departure from the clan should have remained a secret.”

He dumped in his cut veggies, stirred the pot and considered her words. The young men told the soldiers and Swords where to locate her warriors and Ena? A warm hand rubbed his neck. She kissed his cheek and whispered to shiver his skin.

“I must instruct my future husband again. The Lakota have strict rules what chores a man and woman may undertake. The Council would not report my actions in this instance because they are aware of our loving relationship. Sheridan—A woman prepares the food the man provides. The women cook and clean the camp. The men hunt and clean the kill, but once it is butchered, it is the woman’s turn to take over. I love you for your help and your questions. Have I angered my city, boy?’

“Nay. I know rules better than most, love. It’s just I find it hard watching people work when I’m sitting on my butt.”

“Oh, boy, I have your answer. Go drink ale and speak with the men around the fire. My request to you is open up and demonstrate to them the wonderful man I know and love. The women will join me here once you vacate the cooking area. We will make the bisquits with the dough you brought and play with the only fire pit oven in the world. While we cook, I will brag about my future husband’s many outstanding traits where you can’t hear and blush scarlet.”

Sheridan poured a mug and sipped as he walked. Not three steps toward the fire and the raptors screeched. He Talked to them, requesting a reason for their outburst and smiled.

“Your smoke signal worked as desired, Takoda. The warriors are about five miles to our west. Oh, they are circling. Aha, they cover their tracks as they seperate. Excellent. Would anyone care to assist in stringing a picket line, and to fill water troughs and nose bags for the horses?”

All sixteen tipped back their mugs, drained them and rose, placing the mugs on the table where a woman rushed to gather them. A lesson in the flesh. He retrieved the rope and leather buckets from the covered area and passed them out. Thirteen with buckets headed north. He needn’t direct them to the creek they crossed earlier. The creek would be faster than the spigot on the well. Sheridan fetched the feed bags and grain from the other side of the mountain with three men. They followed him through the small opening, laughed and congratulated him on a fine camp. One elder remarked that even if people came to the camp, the items would remain safe from plundering because of how it was hidden. They also questioned why he stored large supplies.

“We often travel with a company of Guardians or a Fist of Elves. The camp is maintained to accommodate one hundred of us when needed. I offer it to you as well when you pass this way.”

“No stipulations?”

Sheridan shrugged. He wouldn’t set rules to an offer freely given. The two men smacked his shoulders like he did something good.

“We will replace what we take if we ever visit. This is not far from our journey, north, and south. Our Načá might send hunters for deer if he tires of buffalo and one of us will accompany them to ensure the camp remains pristine.”

We often travel. He pictured Ciara standing at his side when he spoke. Sheridan strung the rope in the area with hollowed out logs for water troughs. He poured grain while two men handled nose bags, and they had one hundred prepared before the women entered the camp from all directions at a slow and cautious walk. The warriors held a bow with an arrow ready to shoot. Ena rose from the fire and faced a group of her warriors.

“I see you, Chumani and commend you for returning with all your warriors unharmed. Care for your horses first before rest. The men have provided water and grains, but I see many in need of a rub-down. Care for your mounts, warriors. We have vennison stew with warm bisquits baked in a fantastical oven and cold ale for my weary warriors when you finish. I would welcome your tale while we enjoy the hospitality of Ranger Sheridan Kingston. If I hear the other foul moniker ignorant people use to name my future husband—that woman will brush our mounts alone for a week.”

The warriors responded by lowering bows, calling out warbles in their unique tone and dismounting to bob a head as each passed Ena, stirring the stew. The ladies nodded at him with shy smiles. Most did. Some glared like they would eat him. The mounts received water first as should happen, and the bags were fitted to noses while the warriors unsaddled them. They placed the saddles, blankets, and tack at the horse's nose below the picket line and between the water troughs. He would not interfere and tell them of the storage cave on the north side. They brushed the horses in a fine mood, laughing and singing. Perhaps their ordeal was not as bad as he feared.

A strong hand gripped his shoulder, and he turned to find a mug filled with ale in Takoda’s fist. He accepted it with a nod.

“Come, Ranger. They know what they are about. Some sing that you stare at their butts too hungrily. I know it is in innocent fun, but no sense pushing them to cruder comments. Ena’s warriors are a rough bunch forced that way by weak minded men. I’d choose a female Lakota on my side in any battle over our young males.”

“Aye, I’m merely curious how they set up and placed the saddles. I didn’t glance at a single butt. Ena touched on the subject of the male warriors. Do you know the reason?”

“All I have are opinions and speculations. Forget those troubles for now. Sit with us and discuss how we will battle overwhelming odds when they come. The Swords and soldiers will not relent until our Storm Woman falls into their clutches. If all three forces arrive together, we are in trouble. What is your opinion?”

The men discussed the Swords, beasts, and horse soldiers wearing Wesak’s uniforms but were not King Josef’s warriors for the time it took to drink two mugs. A female warrior ran up to the men, slowed and circled until she stood behind Sheridan.

“Wasnawin requests to speak with the Ranger. She also desires to know if the stew is seasoned to his liking.”

He squinted over at Ena, sitting at the cooking fire. He glanced at all the men at his fire.

“Takoda, this is my land, my mountain, and my camp. Do you follow clan protocol when you visit my ranch up north to hear the Bard’s sing?”

“Well done, Ranger. You struck the perfect chord. No. We are your guests and will follow your rules of etiquette. I did not know Northstar Ranch was yours and wish to offer my sincere gratitude for your family’s generousity and hospitality over many years. I have seldom met such loving, caring people and prefer wintering there among your family. Amitola, please advise the Wasnawin we men are ignorant. All Lakota are guests in the Ranger’s home and will follow our host’s rules. If he desires female companionship at his fire and wishes to visit the cook fire with his generous offer boiling in the pot, it is his perogative.”

“Yes, Elder. I will inform the Wasnawin of the Ranger’s wise decision and generous offer. Ranger, our Wasnawin stated there was ale. Many don’t want the water to quench our thirst if we can drink ale. Do you have one hundred mugs?”

He rose, gestured for Amitola to follow, and led her to the thin crack in the wall of the mountain. “This sliver of an entrance opens to a cave that maintains a cool temperature even on the hottest of days. It is where we store the ale and mugs. There are more casks than you could drink in a week and more than two hundred mugs available for your pleasure. Do you require a flashlight?”

“Thank you, Ranger.” She pulled a small flashlight from a pouch. “I am a warrior and prepared for every battle, whether smelly soldiers or the dark. Our Wasnawin would not offer your ale herself. Ale is what she wished to discuss in private.”

He smirked, and the woman almost giggled and sucked it back before it bloomed. She hollered a few names and waved to come assist her. Sheridan stared south. Where were they and what was taking them so long? He strolled over to the cook fire and smiled at the blushing Storm Woman.

“I do wish to learn your customs, Ena. As your future husband, I must before I trip over my tongue or big feet. Here in this camp, we live by my protocol. All are welcome at all the fires and you, dear lady—you share all I have as my future wife. It is your ale to offer. Aye?”

“I see you in a new and treasured light, Sheridan Kingston. It will be as you declare. Your rules in this camp. Would you please sample the stew and tell me if it is seasoned to your liking? I truly desired your opinion. The ale and sharing fires is an added bonus, city boy. Oh boy, my boundless curiosity forces me to ask what all you have to share with your future wife.”

“Enough to secure a comfortable life for my wives, and my family in many homes spread across the globe.”

The raptors screeched a harsh warning. He yelled louder. “Rise and arm yourselves.”

He turned to speak with Enapay giving orders to a warrior. “The soldiers have arrived. They must have a decent tracker. My camp is not easy to locate without smoke to show the way. Perhaps they followed the tracks of the warriors.”

The warrior who led the women spun and glared at him.

“Wasnawin, we left no direct trail to follow us once we spotted the welcome smoke. We scattered and erased our tracks. Only an expert pathfinder could follow us.”

“It is well, Chumani. They must have an experienced tracker. I would appreciate a suggestion on how we will defend your camp, Sheridan.”

“Our camp, Enapay. Do you recall the street in Roanoke?”

“Yes, Sheridan. How could I ever forget the horses dancing to dislodge the riders? Oh boy, you want us to surround the pigs and shoot them…how did you put it? Oh, like shooting fish in a barrel. My warriors will surround them, and you and I will face them with blades, city boy. Save a few for me, please. You moved like a whirlwind to rob me of many kills the day in Roanoke.”

Footsteps rushed up and skidded to a halt.

“Paint, Wasnawin. We all washed and have no time for painting faces.”

Ena glanced at him and squinted. Did she steal a bad habit already? Oh, she asked a question without speaking.

“I can place a shield on each as they walk by me. Aye?”

“They will need proof, Sheridan. We Lakota have no knowledge of your magic.”

“Call them up after I armor myself, and I will provide them definitive proof.”

By the time he was dressed in his armor, the warriors had arrived. He smiled at the one hundred skeptical faces and froze when his eyes landed on Ena wearing armor that appeared painted on her fine body.

“Not now, city boy. Don’t speak one endearing compliment to blush my face before my warriors.”

He placed the shield over his body and drew a knife, lifted his breastplate, shirt, vest, and stabbed his stomach. Ena called out in alarm and yelled at him in her language to the delighted laughter of her warriors. She shook herself speaking words he would swear were curses at herself and stepped forward to place a soft hand on his face.

“Place the shield on me and use my body to demonstrate your magic, Sheridan. I wish to atone for my childish ouburst. I trust you.”

“Does that imply I will see your belly again?”

She graced him with a look straight out of chapter three of the secret (and sacred) women’s book of expressions handed down through the generations to stifle and confound men. The title he concocted was “How to Kill a Man With Kindness.” There wasn’t an actual book on the shelf or existing in the world, but he would write it one day. He’d need to use a feminine pen name or be hanged as a traitor.

“It is possible, you hungry bully, but would take effort and waste valuable time. Tonight offers ample opportunity to sate your lewd appetites. Slice my neck instead.”

Sheridan placed the shield on her. She smiled his favorite and lifted her chin with faith. It was an action he deplored, but he sliced the blade across her throat. Ena laughed. She declared it tickled and her warriors howled and yelled their approval. Ena set them orders, and he tapped each head of the one hundred warriors as they walked by. After passing by, many drew blades to slice exposed skin and reacted with wild abandon when they didn’t bleed.

Takoda arrived a bit out of breath with the six council members stringing bows. He brandished a spear, stuck the butt in the ground, and nodded to the others. Sheridan placed a shield on the seven and sent the bows up the slanted rock. They smiled like they approved and ran. The remaining elders sheltered in the sleeping area, and they didn’tt appear apprehensive.

“What of the horses on the picket lines, and yours roaming free, city boy? You must be wealthy to possess six matched and gorgeous draft horses. The spotted stalion is spectacular.”

“I can direct the call out in one direction. If the mounts on the picket line hear, it will be no louder than a kitten’s purr. My horses are acclimated to the sound. I will give them a warning, but they are accustomed to my magic and don’t frighten easily.”

Ena described her experience in Roanoke, and the smile on Takoda grew like a boy reeling in a fish. She informed the Elder he would perform the same with the smelly soldier’s horses and they could pick them off with ease. She hoped. So much for faith. He received the images from Storm and shook his head in disgust.

“Ena, the soldiers approach. They left one behind at the line of cottonwood. The one who tracked for them. He is a young Lakota.”

Takoda growled. Ena hollered out orders, and four women slipped from the darkness and ran west. “He will never track for our enemy again, Sheridan. A young male, Takoda. This is Luta’s treachery. Would you care to wager the tracker is a Dog Soldier? The fools don’t train many and now will lose a competent pathfinder.”

“I will speak to your father when we return to the clan, Wasnawin. I do not doubt Luta’s involvement, but the Swords have too much influence on all the young men.”

The dogs growled one sniff before he caught the scent of horses and filthy riders. He Talked four fireballs and tossed them in the air to light up the stretch of road outside the camp. The sun sat on the edge of the western horizon and burnt the sky in many shades of red making for a poor arena for a battle. His fire filled in the long shadows and provided clarity to the killing field. The archers on the projected rock yelled their thanks for the light and a lot more in their language. Ena laughed and looked up at him with a sly smile. “They wish to know what other talents my husband commands. Did you hear me? The men declared you are my husband. Is it your intention to marry me?”

“Aye, it is my intention and would be my honor and eternal pleasure if you accept.”

“Oh boy, we must continue our conversation later—and we will, but the enemy is here, and it is time to kill. Please allow my warriors first blood. They should dispatch this small group with ease without us working up a sweat. I will take two showers in one day if necessary, but I’d prefer to stand here in your arms while we observe my warriors kill the smelly brutes.”

Sheridan smiled his apprehensive best, hoping it didn’t appear snobby. He moved her to stand before him and wrapped her up with his arms. She held each arm and swayed. Aye, peaceful moments in chaos. The horse soldiers turned left in formation. An invitation to disaster on their part. The officer raised a hand, and the rest reined in the mounts. They did wear Wesak’s uniform, and it was disturbing to realize one-hundred-fifty honest men from Wesak died to clothe the soldiers. The captain’s eyes fell on Enapay leaning against his chest, and he sneered with recognition, moved forward on his horse and Sheridan Talked a cougar’s roar into the horse’s minds. The effect was expected, but he still laughed at the fools attempting to remain seated. The bunch were the best he had encountered, but the horses were determined to escape after he Talked a bear’s roar. The Lakota shot arrows with precision from the bushes, from behind him on the slanted rock and men fell in quick succession. The dogs remained back waiting for their turn, but the women were damn efficient. Ena yelled a command, and the women rushed out of the manzanita and creosote bush to fight the remaing men with spears. It didn’t take long to clear the field of soldiers on their feet. He sent the dogs out, and they moved slowly among the fallen.

“We have discovered by sad experience some men are skilled at imitating death only to rise and stab a friend. The small dogs will detect the slightest breath and the faintest heartbeat. Please ask your warriors to follow the large dogs and kill any deceivers they discover?”

She smiled the sly one he was quickly becoming accustomed to seeing. Ena hollered, and the warriors attached themselves to the dogs. They shrilled their pleasure at finding a few fakers. The dogs received hardy scratches and pats for their work. The Beagles tails couldn’t wag faster without lifting their butts off the ground.

“How did you know they were not Wesak’s horse soldiers? You struck the moment they stopped.”

Sheridan explained that he spotted the off world saddles, the fact the men were filthy and the armor horrendous, and mostly because when they took notice of her, he knew by their reaction they were ordered to find her.

“I will strive to become more observant of the details, city boy. What about the horses that ran off?”

“They are calmed, and the smaller dogs herd them back. The horses are grateful for the offer of water and food. The smelly soldiers ran them all day without water to find you.”

“How can you Talk to so many horses?”

“How did you command one hundred warriors?”

Ena’s lips pursed, and she squinted chapter four before her face broke into a sweet smile.

“You must instruct your future wife. Please? Good Mother spread the hay. They are walking straight for you. I am impressed, city boy. Oh, I must tend the stew. The Elders claim it is bad luck to burn the first meal I prepare for my husband.”

Sheridan turned to Takoda and asked if it was improper for her to call him husband—actrually he wanted to know if he was out of line.

“You conduct yourself with honor, Ranger. Your question proves it to me. We Lakota are not as strict with our affections or traditions of the heart. Enapay has chosen you. We would need to be blind not to see the love in her eyes. And you declared yourself to her with your words, actions, and the expression on your face when you see her. In our minds, you are her husband. Congratulations. Many have sought her hand to enrich their lives and gain power in the clan without ever considering love. You don’t need her wealth, and you have more power than any Lakota. We are all aware you love her. You are a good fit for the Wasnawin and will add strength to our clan. By instruction and babies, Ranger. We know you cannot renounce the battle to live on the plains.”

“I hope one day to follow the herd in relative peace, acting only as Ena’s husband.”

“The Lakota will assist you in reaching the blessed day, Ranger. Good Mother willing, the day we all hope to see again.”

He returned his attention to the horses walking toward him. He raised his arms, and they didn’t hesitate to approach. When the small herd reached him, he spun an about face and marched his new horses to the picket lines. He had a momentary bright moment. Well, two. He headed for the creek instead. He spoke in a low voice, passing the fire where Ena sat stirring the stew.

“Ena, please place every warrior’s name in a basket. Each receives a horse chosen in the order their names are picked.”

“Oh, boy, my husband is wise and generous. You will double their personal wealth and win their hearts this day, Sheridan. Yes, we will do as you ask. Would you please taste the stew?”

“Oh, I forgot.”

He Talked to the horses, and they continued on to the tall grasses beside the creek to drink and eat their fill.

“They won’t run? Oh boy, forget my ignorant question. I will trust your magic, city boy.”

He sipped from the ladle she held to his lips. “Hmmmm!” He sipped again and rolled it over his tongue. “Hmmmm! I need a bowl. A very large bowl. It is the finest stew I have tasted.”

“Yes, and thank you for the blush of pride and pleasure I am unaccustomed to, bully. It is fitting you voice the first compliment for my cooking. My mother will cry with delight I succeeded with my husband’s first meal. Sit at the fire and your wife will bring your stew, and mine to sit beside you. I believe I will speak to my father concerning communal fires for both males and females to enjoy a meal and each other’s company. It might entice my warriors to learn manners and to socialize without a knife fight involved.”

After his third bowl, he sat back against the rock wall and moaned with pleasure. Ena stopped eating after one bowl to find paper to tear into strips. She placed them on a table and ordered her warriors to take one, write their name on the slip and place it in the ceramic bowl usually used for washing. They didn’t hesitate. Takoda again noticed his consternation.

“Enapay often draws names for special duties and does not reveal the assignment until the names are chosen, so they don’t know if it’s a reward or punishment. The warriors will explode with delighted excitement. Enapay spoke the truth. You will double their personal wealth. A good horse is valuable, and two stands out in our clan. Enapay owns four plus her draft horses befitting her station, but two for a young warrior will provide them a great honor among the wagons. I hope they don’t tackle you or frighten the horses away.”

Sheridan nodded to Takoda and smiled at Ena’s scheme, he’d remember for the future. They could fabricate name tags to wear around their necks and drop in a bowl when Ena had a plan. Ciara would…oh, damn. She would never throw another fit at his crazy schemes.

The women stood in line as they were called awaiting the orders. Ena turned to him with a smile from chapter two. “I believe you should give this particular order if you’d be so kind, Ranger Sheridan.”

It was his turn to squint back. Oh, what the hells. He took a deep breath and faced the warriors wearing skeptical expressions from chapter three.

“In a gesture of gratitude for the fine work eliminating our foe, I present one horse to each of you taken as spoils of war. You will find the herd resting and munching on the grass by the creek. I suggested you choose according to your position in line, but you may do as you wish.”

None of them moved. Their eyes opened silver ten-piece wide, and their mouths hung broken jaw slack. Ena covered her laughter with both hands and shook her head, denying him assistance.

“I am not deceiving you. The mounts are your property now. There isn’t room in my stables for one more foal.”

All one hundred turned to Enapay, and she bent over double laughing at the situation. She rose, nodding her head. Shiny eyes betrayed her mirth. She huffed and dropped her hands.

“Yes, my fortunate warriors. They are your horses. It is a delight to witness my future husband’s generousity.”

Not only did the warriors run for the creek, but they ran together in one large happy group. He had learned much so far with the Lakota’s visit. The women could be as crude as they wanted if they remained honest, unselfish, and loyal to each other and Ena.

In twenty minutes, one hundred horses were added to the pickets, and the warriors brushed each of the new horses, and the boisterous conversations made their last one whispers in the dark. Oh. He walked the picket line tossing fireballs to float above and light the area and received many honest and heartfelt thanks. He returned to the fire and a new mug of ale.

“They are singing your praise, Ranger. They call you horse lord and fire master. There are no more lewd comments.”

“Husband?” He spun toward her voice and smiled at the sight of her. She changed into a dress, and she did it for him. He won’t mention he admired her armor instead. It was another rare smart moment. His smile withered, and he plastered on a false one, but she spotted the deceit. She hurried to him and sat on his lap. Ena grabbed his chin and lifted so he could see her eyes.

“Visions of my sister wife? I worried you might recall the dress I wore when we Traveled to Rome for dinner. May I comfort my husband? Women in our clan—oh boy, no need for instructions. We are in your home. Your home, your rules.” She hugged and rocked him to console his sad memories.

“I wonder if fate or the gods took her to redirect my anger and hate for the death of Aoife. I treasure your comfort and promise I will improve.”

She pulled him closer and whispered softly for his ears only.

“No, Sheridan. Hold onto the loving memories. I would cherish any tale you could relate to me of your life with our dear Ciara. I knew her for a short time, but I loved her. We were meant to be sister wives, to be sisters in love with the same man. I love you, Sheridan. I accept your request to be your wife. I promise myself to you and you alone for life.”

“I love you, Enapay. I promise myself to you and you…

“And my sister wives for life. We will both carry Ciara’s love in our hearts. I will carve Ciara’s name on my spear, so she is with me when we kill the enemy.”

“Forever and always.”

“Yes, forever, and always. Ciara explained your personal pledge, and she also declared there is another fated wife in Ireland. Will you please bring her to me? We must acquaint ourselves to determine if we are compatible as sister wives because you would not appreciate a home with two warring women, city boy. Ciara claimed to love and admire Muirenn, so I will as well, but we must speak.”

“Well, you can speak to her tonight. Muirenn has returned with my companions. They appear in good health and unhurt. I was starting to worry. Do you see the woman with the eagle on her shoulder? She is Muirenn. The woman Ciara told you about.”

Ena stood and flattened her wrinkle-free dress. He rose beside her, and she grabbed his arms to wrap around her. He moved her in front and wrapped her in his arms. Ena hummed a little song.

Oh, he noticed the pheasant finally. Sylvie boasted a proud face for her accomplishment. Maggie didn’t have a boar, and Charlie was ready to burst with laughter. He would’ve bet Muirenn would be the first to speak when the five stopped not six steps away.

“I must assume the gorgeous lady in your arms is Enapay, or have you found another woman with a magical glow that matches yours, Sheridan. I see you Enapay.”

“Enapay Wasnawin, it is my pleasure to introduce…”

“I have deduced which one of the lovely ladies is my future sister wife, city boy. I see you, Muirenn.”

She left him in a flash to grab Muirenn in a hug and kissed her cheeks. “He is a bully to find another gorgeous sister wife to make me appear a dirty farm girl.”

“Oh, darl’n, you need to find yourself better mirrors. You are a stunning beauty and I’d kill for your skin.”

“Has the bully kissed you to dispel the foul and stupid oath?”

“Nay, darl’n, he hasn’t kissed me, but he hasn’t killed me either. Sheridan does recall my name each time I greet him after a long break. I thought the magic would wipe me from his mind, but he smiles when he wakes and greets me by name. I have hope, Ena.”

Sheridan approached Syl to inquire how and where she shot the pheasant, but she put a finger to her lips and pointed at Muirenn and Ena.

“There are two of us to wear down his rock hard stubborn resolve, Muirenn. I suppose you’re aware of our poor Ciara’s murder. It was terrible knews to hear. I loved my sister wife, and I will love you. Would you care to join me at the fire? It’s the first meal I cook for Sheridan and I cannot allow it to burn. We are preparing a vennison stew and baking bread in the strangest but most amazing oven.”

“Aye, I’d love to learn to cook vennison stew. Caitlin knows not to use fresh meat, but after that, we are lost. I loved Ciara too, darl’n. She provided me with advice on how to approach Sheridan and how to handle his peculiar problem caused by the oath. Aye, let’s leave him to teach his companions how to pluck a pheasant, and we can talk privately without boiling his skin lobster red.”

The two walked off without a bugger off or good boy. Syl smiled bigger than happy she shot two pheasants. He wouldn’t give her an opening.

“Did you use your stars or an arrow?”

“Arrow, Máistir. Will you teach me to pluck and clean them?”

“Aye, but in three days. We always hang game birds in a cooler. The size and age determines the length of time. A young hen like you shot will be ready in three days. Some people season them longer but I would rather eat the bird than look at them. No boar, Maggie?”

“We saw three Máistir. My arrows bounced off the suckers. You need to teach me how to kill a boar. Caitlin suggested to use a spear, which makes sense.”

“Well, we have sufficient people here to finish off a boar when we find the next. The easiest way is to provoke the boar into charging you and you must kill it before it kills you. There are feral pigs out here that survived from the old world. Some of those suckers are a big as cows and nasty as a boar.”

None of them moved. Even Caitlin remained instead of joining Muirenn at the fire. The three gazed at Charlie.

“Speak your mind, Charlie.”

“Thank you, Máistir. I apologize for my harsh words about you not asking Lady Ciara to stay. I hope you don’t hold it against me.”

“Nay, Charlie, there is nothing to forgive. I was wrong not to ask Ciara to stay. I did ask her in Liberty to join me as a partner when I returned for her, but not asking her to stay is on my head and burns my heart. I only anger on the battlefield, ladies. I am susceptible to hurt, but I no longer anger or strike out like a spoiled child. The oath I spoke to Muirenn taught me that lesson. Today, I walk away and consider my options.”

“What would you have done differently with My Lady if it happened today, Ranger?”

“I would’ve killed the false Knight and lived with her anger. She probably would have sent me packing. But he has lived to do much more harm than attack me. I will find the man and kill him.”

“Sheridan?”

He flinched and turned to the cook fire. Ena and Muirenn sat together conspiring.

“I was relating the battle we had here and an issue came to mind. What will you do with the remaining horses?”

“Well, that is a far better question than I feared or expected, Ena. Let’s see—One each to the council members and one each to my five companions and the remainder are yours, dear lady.”

Ena’s nose scrunched up, and her eyes closed for a bit. Aha, she was counting.

“No female Lakota has owned thirty horses. None in the history of our clan.”

“They are yours, love. I’m not taking them back. You will make history and the clan will record that Enapay Wasnawin—She who stands unafraid in the face of danger, owned thirty horses

Ena leaped to her feet and danced. She raised her dress to show off her legs and spun in circles singing a song her warriors joined in with enthusiasm. They understood her and appeared delighted with her demonstration. He did need to call up the language to memory. Muirenn clapped to the beat of her dance and men took up the rhythm with drums.

Takoda stepped up beside him and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Your wife is declaring her praise and thanks to the gods for delivering her wonderful husband who has gifted her with far more than thirty horses. Personal wealth means little when he has enriched her life by acknowledging his love. Her husband provides her heart shade in the heat, warmth in the winter cold, and nourishment all her life. It is an ancient song young women memorize but few ever sing in public, Ranger.”



Chapter 38 Goblins for Lunch

Sheridan laughed and quickly looked out the driver’s window at the old world grain fields they had passed for three days without finding a crop to cultivate until four hours after leaving camp in the morning. Ena caught him red-handed admiring her body bent over in the wagon’s cab investigating the soapstones for heat.

“I could feel your eyes examining my body. It tickled from head to toe, city boy. There is no need for your blush, or for you to avert your gaze. I did wear this outfit expressly for you. My mother packed six similar outfits she wanted me to wear to catch some man’s eye at the council. She will be pleased when I tell her about meeting you again and how you reacted to my attire. The only reason I wore the buckskin one when we met was all my clothes needed washing, and all I had left were the cotton leggings, dresses, or these two piece outfits. The cotton would not survive a day of hard riding. Oh, thank you for allowing us to use the washing facility at your unbelievable campground. Takoda promises he can replicate the process for our clan using three wagons. Oh boy, I hope you realize you may admire your wife to your heart’s content, city boy. Without blushing my... How old are you, Sheridan Kingston?”

“I celebrated my nineteenth birthday with Ciara and family three weeks back, Enapay Wasnawin.”

“Oh boy, I am delighted our Ciara shared the day with you. You, my handsome city boy, are younger than I imagined, and not too old for me. I am seventeen until Winter Solstice. Oh, look, my warriors and your companions—and my future sister wife are returning on their new horses with the grains they harvested. Good Mother roll out the grinding wheel. You can teach them how to prepare the grains for our horses?”

“Aye, it is not difficult but entails a great deal of manual labor to make flour without a grinding wheel. I will instruct only how to thrash the oats for horse feed. We will purchase grains in Liberal to supplement the horse’s diet, and flour for bread, but it is wise to learn how to forage what you need from the old-world fields. Many great crops grow wild and unused if we don’t harvest them. I’m hoping my birds find vegetable patches out there as well. We might come across Second Harvest cabbage. I have salt and a few jars to make our own saurkraut.

Ena declared she understood the value of having birds to scout, but she wasn’t aware they could hunt vegetables as well. She asked if they would sleep under the wagon again, and he nodded compliance. She spoke to a warrior who smiled and headed for the wagon. Ena had warriors who waited on her like his squires did for him. He slept under the wagon to remain close to the council members and warriors and to listen to the night winds. The beasts she declared chased them for a week hadn’t located their party, and he had an itching feeling what pursued them were Goblins. Muirenn rode up beside the cab and blushed but smiled.

“Am I disturbing you?”

Ena sputtered her lips and gestured for her to join them in the cab.

“Sister wives never need to ask, Muirenn. We share all things with our husband — even the shade under the roof of a fantastic wagon. You will never impose, Muirenn. Is this why you have remained aloof?”

“Aye. You two love each other. Sheridan doesn’t recall our affections, so I don’t want to intrude.”

“He will kiss you, Muirenn. I catch him glancing your way often, and his eyes show me his heart is melting the oath away. Forgetting he loved you once does not preclude falling in love with you again. Sit with us, drink wine, and we will talk like a married family. Sheridan, can you relate a moment in time with Ciara? I would be very grateful to hear a tale of laughter and frivolity you shared with her. I don’t want heroics or blood and battle. Tell us of wildflowers and romantic times in your life with our sister wife.”

Sheridan closed his eyes and called to memory a myriad of loving moments.

“I am not romantic, but I can relate many moments that warmed my heart, from walking barefoot on a dusty road with fishing poles over our shoulders. I recall the warmth of the sun, her delightful scent, the reflection of the sky in her eyes when I handed her a bouquet of wildflowers, the glow of her skin if we stared too long. Aye, I watched her face smile in wonder as I talked a group of songbirds to perform for her. We often sat snuggled tight just to enjoy the falling of the autumn leaves. I can see the forest path we walked in the early summer when the greens were so bright and new, the birds were happy to be alive. Waching the stars cuddled in a chair on my back patio…sorry, I lost myself .”

“Do not apologize, Sheridan. I was there with you each memory. I could only hope you and I have moments you will cherish like those. Muirenn. You are quiet.”

“Aye, love, but you spoke my sentiments exactly. I did wonder why you didn’t mention a winter moment, big man.”

“Well, there are a few and one in particular where we walked together down a snowy path calm as can be, and she shoved me, and I fell. Ciara jumped on me to wrestle until we rose soaked to the skin and freezing. When I dropped her off at home, she kissed me and thanked me for a wonderful date. I didn’t know we were on a date.”

“Ciara could push you down?”

“Nay, Ena. He intentionally fell, and she knew he would. That’s the grandest part. You are more romantic than you know, big man. It’s the little things we adore. Big gifts, fancy dinners, and thirty horses are nice, but it’s the bunch of wildflowers out of nowhere. Talking songbirds in the woods to sing for her. It’s falling down in the snow on purpose and the knowing you think of her first, and often that is romantic. Tell us another of Ciara, Sheridan. Thank you, Ena. This is quite enchanting. I’m tingly with goosebumps.”

He told them of memories of laughter, peaceful moments, times he needed consoling, times he needed a whooping too. He scooted over toward the door and laid down on Ena’s lap and closed his eyes. Ena sang for him, and he dozed for a while soaking up the mesmerizing notes until she nudged him to wake and pointed out a rest area. He asked the horses to pull in for the noon break and to teach a class on thrashing.



Sheridan walked by the prep table where six warriors cored and chopped the lettuce they foraged from the field beside the rest area. It was meant to be, but more people should harvest the crops. He marked the location on his maps to harvest the bounty in the summer. The women dug out the core with long knives. Oh, what the hells. He stepped over and grabbed a head, slammed the core on the table, turned the head over, and plucked the core out. The six women stared at him like he grew a second head. ”It’s a shortcut I learned as a child. The entire core breaks loose and what remains is edible lettuce.”

Chumani didn’t hesitate. She slammed the head down and pulled out the whole core to show her friends. She asked if he had a tip for cutting it up for their taco salad better than chopping it to death. He took the head and sliced almost through it four times, turned it and made four slices perpendicular to the first cuts and laid it on its side to slice through in half inch strips. The lettuce fell away in neat sections of tiny slices perfect for taco salad, and his impromptu students warbled their appreciation.

“The remainder of the head must be chopped to death, or you might cut your fingers off. The procedure works for dicing potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and cabbage as well.”

Caitlin stood over and stirred the shredded beef cooked in one large wok he made from plow discs and the second held diced potatoes sizzling in bacon grease, onions, and spices. Oh yeah, taco salad. The idea for the meal came when Nina bragged she had a jar of red chili sauce from Hatch. The finest chilis to grow in the Americas. He observed from a distance the eight women working the flour into tortillas. He had no advice for them and wouldn’t stick his nose into all the women’s business. Aye, mark the calendar. He had a bright moment. Sheridan smiled recalling Ciara saying the same. Earl screeched from far overhead. He Talked to his eagle and cursed. A woman close by laughed, and he shook his head. So, he had no talent with swear words. He spotted Ena and ran to where she patted and flipped dough into nice round shapes before passing it to the hot plate. Her shoulders and the front of her cotton top were coated with flour. Her nose had a white cap where she must have scratched an itch.

“We have a horde of Goblin about a half hour away heading straight for us, love.”

“Oh boy, you call me love when I expected a sarcastic remark for wearing more flour than in the flat bread. Goblins? I don’t know what a Goblin is, but the brutes will die fast, so they don’t ruin our lunch. Remind me to ask you to build me a few—woks? It’s an ingenius appliance my people will utilize to its fullest potential.”

“I will instruct anyone you choose. The wok is a plow disc used beyond its worth, and I welded legs and handles onto it. It must be burned in a fire pit with cooking oils scrubbed on the disc for days to clean and cure the steel. I store it wrapped in oiled paper to prevent the steel from drying out or gathering dust.”

“I possess the welding skill to create one. There are many worn out discs in scrap piles along our seasonal route. When you return to me, I will show off the wok I fabricated. Where do you want my warriors? How do we attack to defeat Goblins?”

“To fight a Goblin does not require fancy spear work. We must be brutal against the Goblin. Slam your shield or foot into its chest to knock it back and stab it dead. Go on to the next until no more stand before you. Slam and stab. Aye? They have no skill. Their great numbers and savegery is their strength. Leave fear behind, and we will prevail.”

Ena whistled three shrill notes and every warrior not preparing food ran for her to group together waiting for orders. She told them to grab shields and spears to kill Goblins. None of them questioned or commented. None of them appeared frightened or concerned either. She repeated what he stated about sheer force winning the day, and almost one hundred heads bobbed. They ran off to prepare for war, and he searched the wok cooking the beef. The smell was enough to entice growls from his stomach. He snatched a tortilla from the stack. A bit of potato, lettuce, and cheese, and he went searching for Nina’s chili. One in no way would fill him. He hoped it would help put an end to his drooling.

Muirenn and Caitlin joined him waiting on the others, Caitlin continued to tighten her Lady’s straps without missing a step. The Na Siúracha arrived eager to kill the brutes.

“Goblins, big man? I can see why you wear armor more often than casual wear. You face danger almost daily. It must make for a depressing life after a while. Aye.”

“I was informed the dark gods send them my way, but nay, The silly times, the—acting the maggot times, cooking tacos together, watching stars fall, and the grasses wave like the ocean. Those moments make up my day, Muirenn. Killing Gwydion’s vermin is a mere interruption of our day. Would you ladies care to join the warriors in killing Goblins?”

“What are you doing?”

“Ena wants her warriors to gain bragging rights and experience. I will stand at the rear and help if needed. I have not reached the end of time I promised Ciara I would rest.”

“Oh, that’s grand. You still hold to your promise, and you claim you’re not romantic. Aye, I need experience killing Goblins if I’ll be good for you as a partner. We will join the warriors.”

He ran with Ena, Muirenn, and the warriors toward the Goblins. Nobody wanted their stench close to camp to ruin their appetite.

“The clouds have gathered into a perfect day for lightning, Sheridan. May I soften them up?”

“Aye, and I will lend my limited skills with lightning to yours.”

“You are a pleasant surprise, city boy. I wasn’t aware you could control the weather.”

“Nay, I can only call lightning. I will ask for a better talent when I succeed with my quest.”

They waited at the northern end of a saddle in the road. When the Goblins filled the dip, the lightning commenced. Ena’s bolts struck fast and furious while his came slower even if they were larger and scattered more Goblins with each bolt. Bodies shot into the air enticing howls of pleasure from the warriors. He and Ena killed more than half and released the lightning so the women could experience killing Goblins. Ena yelled an order, and her warriors lined up as they planned and marched toward the rushing to die Goblins.

“Would you care to join them?”

“No, Sheridan. I only wish to stand with my future husband as long as I can until you must depart. You will return to your promised wife?”

“Of course, Ena. I am no fool, and my heart is yours. I will search the plains when I succeed. I believe I should conclude my business in six months or lessa. The clan should be down south in the winter grounds and easier to locate. I will stand in the path, waiting for the buffalo to show me the way to my future wife.”

“I implore you to go to Ciara’s home and pay your respects before you return to me, Sheridan. Her mother needs to hear from your heart how we mourn her passing, and her daughter is missed by both of us. I will wait for you. I have faith in your promise. I would beg you to kiss Muirenn if it would convince you to accept her back into your heart.”

“Someday, Ena.”

A group of warriors ran to them. Two helped a third unconscious and dragging her legs. She had a nasty gash across her chest. Chumani was one of the helpers, and her gaze pleaded with Ena for some kind of good news. Enapay glanced at him, and he smiled.

“I have the talent to heal her, Ena. Lay her down, please, and leave her to me. Is this from a weapon or a claw?”

“A sword, Ranger. Wawetseka lost her shield to the foul beasts and used her body as a shield to save my life. I killed the ugly brute who harmed her. Can you help my second sister?”

“As I stated, I can heal her wound. A sword wound is better than a fetid claw or tooth.”

Muirenn ran up to join them and stared blank eyed at the wound and him for a while, but shook herself and puffed her cheeks to blow out stress. She feared speaking with him. She shouldn’t.

“Sheridan. Are you certain you can heal her wound? I will gladly, but it will take a while. There are many lacerated organs.”

“I have recalled a healing technique from my past lives. I can heal her but will need to sleep after. Please watch over me?”

“No harm will come to my handsome city boy while I hold a spear with Murienn.”

“No harm will come to you, big man while I hold my swords with Ena.”

He couldn’t ask for more than that. Sheridan tapped Wawetseka’s forehead, and she slumped, her head lolled to the side, and she smiled in the peaceful Fae sleep. He also recalled what he did for George and where he went wrong. Sheridan laid his hands on her third eye and her belly and sent his magic into her body to heal. The high pitched undulating warbles faded in his ears to become a soft hiss. He laid down and closed his eyes. He’d need just a little nap.



Sheridan woke to joyous laughter and delightful peals of celebration. His eyes devoured Ena sitting beside him lying in the tall cool grass. He reached for her, and she warbled her version of joy.

“You are a remarkable man, Sheridan Kingston. Wawetseka is healed. Nobody would believe she had a wound if not for witnesses. You slept a few hours, my wonderful magical husband. I would wager you could use a meal. We saved a good sized portion for you. I recall Ciara saying food is the fuel to your healing. I will assure you are stuffed. We have set up camp for the night in the rest area. My warriors piled the filthy beings to burn, but our flames do nothing.”

Muirenn ran over when she heard Ena’s call. She stared at him like he had two noses and no mouth.

“Can you teach that, Sheridan? You have an incredible talent. You healed her all at once. I can see why you needed sleep. I don’t believe I have the magical strength even to attempt what you did. It was an honor to witness, big man.

“I can teach any knowledge or talent I possess, Muirenn.”

Ena shouted an Ey-hee and clapped her hands. “He recalled your name after a nap, sister wife. Our future husband is breaking the bonds of the oath each moment you are near.”

“Aye, but he must depart soon, and I’ll wait for him hoping he learns something on his quest to defeat the oath.”

“Where will you go?”

“I was hoping you’d permit me to visit your homes, Sheridan.”

Muirenn was afraid of him, or overly cautious, and he was an ass.

“You could visit many in six months, but I’d prefer if you didn’t travel with you five alone. Gwydion’s slaves know you. Why not stay in Somerset? The Rangers and Guardians are a great buffer to Gwydion’s forces. The Swords continue to search for you and they are getting better. The doors on the home will answer to you, and the dogs are close at hand.”

“Thank you, Sheridan. Aye…How do you know the doors work for me?”

“You wear my knot, Muirenn. I don’t recall when I gifted it, but it is on your neck.”

“My twelfth birthday, big man. You presented it to me when we walked on the beach in Spain. It was the first time we were ever alone together, and it was very romantic. I was only twelve, but it warmed my young girl’s heart.”

“You have walked the beach with my two sister wives, and they both spoke of it as romantic. I have never had the privilidge of visiting a beach. You owe me a walk on the beach, city boy.”

“Aye, and I owe Muirenn a kiss. It must be a mutual desire to dispel the oath. You must be aware that I will pledge with two women if you’d have me.”

Caitlin grabbed Muirenn before she collapsed. Ena ran over to assist holding her with arms wrapped tight and swaying while humming the same song he heard before. Caitlin shot him a wink and thumbs-up. Ciara would’ve told him he’s a good boy. Caitlin rubbed her Lady’s hair and whispered something in her ear to wake her up. Muirenn stood on her own, kissed Ena and Caitlin before facing him.

“I accept, Sheridan. I wish the oath gone and forgotten. I will pledge my heart to you with my sister wife.”

Sheridan stood and opened his arms. Muirenn stepped in, and he bent to kiss her lips. Ena cried an Ey-hee, and she rubbed his back higher than Muirenn’s arms. She reached up and tousled his hair.

He released Muirenn’s lips, and she rested her head on his chest. Ena rubbed her back all smiles.

“You gifted my sister wife a marvelous treasure, city boy. I shared the magic as Ciara did when you kissed me. Muirenn, how are you?”

“It was a magical kiss, Ena. I hardly felt his lips. I need another, but a real kiss from my man. Sheridan? Do I see a spark of recognition?”

“Aye, Muirenn. I love you. I should’ve killed the man and had a fight with you instead of abandoning you. I recall the night on the beach, and we pledged to be Ranger partners when adults.”

“Aye, you could have stopped at I love you. Thank you, Ena. I don’t believe this glorious day would have come without you and Ciara chiseling at his resolve.”

“It is what we do as sister wives, Muirenn. We love him, protect him, and sometimes we need to work together to set him straight. Ciara would’ve stated in her sweet voice how you were a good boy, Sheridan. We are a family—except we haven’t spoken a pledge other than a promise to pledge. We will when next we meet, city boy.”

“I see you Enapay Kingston. I promise to be faithful for all my life.”

“I feel the magic in the air, big man.”

“I see you, Sheridan Kingston. I promise to be faithful to you for all my life. Yes, Muirenn, I can sense the magic coursing through my body.”

“I see you, Muirenn Kingston. I promise to be faithful for all my life.”

Enapay cried out in her undulating song that tingled his spine.

“I see you, Sheridan Kingston. I promise to be faithful to you for all my life. Oh, gods, I will faint from the marvelous sensation. How do you create a magical oath with just words, Sheridan?”

“Will, desire, and intent, Muirenn—It is magical because we possess magic and our promises are the catalyst. Magic is based on desire, intent, and talent.”

“Aye, big man. I understand the logic. You wobbled a wee bit. You must be starving. We sister wives will feed you to regain your strength.”



Sheridan spent three delightful days and nights with Enapay and Muirenn hunting in the grasses, foraging for vegetables and herbs, or strolling along the bank of a creek for privacy. Ena demonstrated her fine skill with a bow by taking down three pheasants flying across an abandoned corn field. Muirenn wouldn’t be outdone, and she shot down a large tom-turkey with one arrow. He could learn to travel as the Lakota with ease and be content. Aye, but Gwydion wouldn’t permit such pleasures.

He only had sixteen days to find the cave, so he packed what he needed and said goodbye to his two wives. He looked back before dropping over a rise and they still remained watching. He waved and they waved in return.



**M**uirenn wrapped an arm across Ena’s shoulers and squeezed a hug.

“I must return to Kylemore to complete my training and earn my Warrior insignia. I promise to finish before next spring and we will find you, Ena.”

“Sheridan promised to find me next spring as well, love. It will be a glorious reunion.”



Chapter 39 Enter the New Mountains

Sheridan hauled his trembling body over the ledge, crawled forward on his belly and pulled one foot heavy as a lead weight over with him. The second foot made it, and he collapsed with a groan. Safe at last. He removed and set his weapns down, and his wasted body splayed on the cold granite, muscles spasmed from exertion. His mind, frayed from hours of concentration, begged to shut down. Climbing a rock face wasn’t a brainless activity. He was unsure which of body, mind, and spirit was more used up and worn out from the ascent. Nay, both his mind and body were equally worn to nubs, and his spirit faded when memories of Ciara surfaced. He could sense her in his heart, as he could Ena, and it should not be possible if she died. It was a thought to chill his spine. Life without Ciara would…nay; he would not consider the future. He must concentrate on his quest. He hoped his ladies— Enapay and Muirenn had more to do than worry about him to occupy their time.

Sheridan flexed his cramped, broken nailed, and bloody fingers thankful they prevailed and survived the climb. His lungs heaved to recover in the thin and frigid mountain air. A wimpy moan escaped his lips when he rolled over to peer down at the face he scaled in five hours of muscle-weary, nail tearing hardship to reach the cave he couldn’t see from the ground and climbed for in blind faith. Six gruelling weeks to find the spot and he reached the cave in one day. He laid his head on the cold rock and closed his eyes to rest a moment—just a little while. The ascent kicked his ass. Carrying more food would’ve helped.

A screech like a demented alarm clock yanked him from a hectic slumber. “I’m awake, Ciara.”

Eyes opened, fuzzy-headed, and barely alert he scanned the cave with the same sad results. He was on a quest, and Ciara wasn’t with him. Sheridan forced himself past the pain to sit up, elbows locked forming two legs on the tripod stabilizing his position and searched for what made the damn noise waking him from dreams of Aoife—his darling baby girl.

It took a moment of blinking and staring at walls to recall where he woke and why he laid on the floor of a cave instead of chasing his daughter across the lush green lawn at home laughing with joy in the sunshine of a gorgeous day. Sheridan smiled at the image in his mind, shuddered the dream away, and whispered a prayer for love and peace in Aoife’s next life. She could be reborn to a new family on Earth, and he would see to it she had a long and peaceful life by defeating Gwydion. He failed his baby once. There would not be a second failure.

He glanced up at the azure expanse streaked with the high wispy clouds of a lazy sky-painter and spotted the two condors circling their prey—him if he had to guess. Aha, they were probably deciding how to land in the cave entrance for the meal the two scavengers hoped he’d provide. He waved to the disappointed carrion birds, and they both answered with an angry screech. They might be pissed, but he was delighted to be off the menu. Hells, condors would make a fine pair of day hunters to add to his brood. Aye, another item to remember when he returned from his quest. Sheridan had succeeded with the first step. He climbed the damn face of the mountain without the aid of magic. He leaned against the rock wall and nodded out again, hoping to see his daughter in dreams.

The next time his eyes opened, the sun passed its zenith in an angry sky packed full with silvery-blue and furious gray clouds. The type of cloud he could stare at for days on end without tiring. They churned and billowed like smoke in a jar and changed hues in a blink from black to sparkling white when struck by the sun. If he had to guess, in about an hour, he’d be glad to walk around inside a mountain instead of facing the storm raging overhead. It sure made for a grand panoramic view he might paint if he succeeded and returned home alive. The colors of the sky, grass, trees, mountains, and the rocky ground brindled with snow all appeared richer, more saturated in tone with the foreboding storm in the background. Aye, but the sun already past the apex and the dark clouds roiling above left the cave shrouded in darkness.

Sheridan chuckled at a sick thought, but it, in fact, would not be the least bit funny if it turned out he chose the wrong cave. Forget the damn rule banning magic on the quest. He would Travel to the ground if it turned out he found the wrong entrance. There was no way in nine hells he would descend in the storm. Sheridan pushed himself up to all fours, grunted, rose, every muscle screaming at him for pity. The climb and lying on the bloody cold granite too damn long stiffened and cramped muscles now complaining of the torture he put them through. Knowing better didn’t always count when the body wanted to rest. Aye, damn it, it was past time to take the first step of his quest into the belly of the mountain and find, “She who lives among the stars.” His voice echoed in the cave, and he cursed a silent admonition for his screw up. No more talking. There could be more than one somebody who lived inside the mountain listening.

A fireball sparked into existence in his hand, and he Talked it to float and light the back of the cave. The flame drifted head high and slow moving toward the rear wall he could, at last, discern with the light — a myriad of sparkles reflected from assorted precious gems in the rock. Sheridan scanned the walls bearing an immense amount and diversity of gems in one location. Hells, how long had the cave existed, and why were the jewels not harvested? Well, they wouldn’t stay on the walls long. He’d return to the cave and remove quite a few after the quest. Aye, wherever the quest led him and ended, he’d Travel right back to the cave for the jewels and down to his camp—if the camp remained intact. With the massive storm looming, digging it out from a mountain of snow might be necessary. Hells, with the jewels he could buy new camping gear and tent. He might not be fit afterward and too tired to dig for his property.

Sheridan had trudged through the snow for four weeks around the foothills in old Colorado to find the magical path that led him to the mountain and the cave entrance. The shining gods sure as hells could improve on their instructions and directions. The description the location is where the new meets old, sure as hells was not illuminating. His awareness that the New Mountains of basalt created by the caldera in Yellowstone erupting led him to the right place, but he found the cave in the old mountains.

There weren’t four weeks as long or lonely in his life to date. He didn’t call for his Fae companion either. He assumed calling for Patience would be construed as cheating by the shining gods. The instructions weren’t explicit concerning the location, but they stated he must journey in solitude. Sheridan passed the time as he searched by daydreaming of three women in his life. Two ladies survived. Ladies destined to be his wife. Aye, if that topic wasn’t ridiculous enough to start arguments with himself, he had no clue what else could. Hells, he even scared away two wolves with his solo tirade at the clouds. Three women, who would love him? Two, damn it. Sure, he had a vivid and lecherous imagination. He wasn’t worthy of one, let alone three. Ciara. He loved her for sure, but she would never return the love in this life.

Sheridan shifted his gaze north away from the storm and to the direction of his ranch hundreds of miles away. Aye, it was his first destination upon completion of the quest. He and Ciara were never apart for more than a day in nearly five years and now the place in his heart she once occupied, once filled with her essence, sat vacant, devoid of love, life…her, his best friend. It was not a sensation to dwell on. Why did he sense her essence outside and not inside the mountain?

For the long, cold, and lonely nights, he studied the stars hoping to hear a song, and he wrote. He wrote his heart’s hopes, questions, and desires. He wrote to each of them in his journal because he wasn’t sure how to communicate his desires, his love for them and how absurd his situation, the fact he loved three women must appear to them—how it would alter their affections for him. In his written musings, Sheridan confessed he loved Ena when they first met, and he remained behind the illusion because he feared rejection. Aye, he pondered the prospect of three women to love too damn often. Aha, but it gave him a reason to rise each morning and continue the search for the mountain cave.

He turned his gaze east at the sound of distant hooves and spotted a company of enemy soldiers riding towards his camp. For a heartbeat, he considered Traveling down to protect his property but had a rare intelligent moment. The rules stipulated no magic unless required to save his life, not his camping gear. He’d need to buy another tent and supplies after he concluded his test and won the quest. He didn’t tell Ciara about the first half of his journey. Ciara... Aye, his best friend he could never…

The two women would be better off in life without Sheridan for damn sure. There was nothing but danger and death in his future. Muirenn and Enapay should stay far away from him and his lecherous heart. It was selfish loving them, corrupt and cruel to expect them to stay. Lewd and greedy—criminal to hope for the chance they would love him in return. His ladies could end as Ciara had and it would push him over the looming edge of madness.

His mind refocused on the present, and he noticed the flame reached the end of the cave and illuminated an opening on the left. He chose the correct cave, and it was time to enter the mountain and walk to the belly of the beast as the clue stipulated. He Talked the fireball through the gap in the wall and followed, walking like a drunk on over-exerted legs.The opening narrowed to a hallway leading to steps descending without end into the gloomy darkness. One step was all he needed to begin his journey. One step on the path of death and resurrection of his spirit — the Spiritual Path of the Warrior.

After walking down steps cut unevenly for what felt like an eternity, Sheridan had to sit and stretch his tired muscles. Too many steps were short and caught him off guard. It wouldn’t help to trip on cramped legs and fall. The stairs went on forever, and falling down them would not prove beneficial and would be painful. Well, …he could recall sliding downstairs on a stiff carpet. Aye, it would be a blast if he knew what waited at the bottom. It’d be a big mistake if the stairs led to a fiery pit or the maw of a monster. Lucky for him and his whack-job idea a carpet sled was not among his supplies.

Three more hours of shin splinting progress, the stairs continued on descending into darkness. So did his morbid thoughts. Why didn’t he allow Ciara to stay? Allow her, hells. He should’ve begged her to stay. She could’ve and should’ve become his Ranger partner even if she didn’t love him. Ciara would accept the role of First Sister. Sheridan about stopped for a second break when he spotted the landing. On the landing, he discovered a steel door mounted in the wall with a pink granite lintel. He stretched tremoring legs and tight shoulders tensed from waiting for danger to leap out of the darkness. It was useless stress. He needn’t tense until attacked, but there were too many cracks and crevices where his mind placed danger waiting to spring.

He couldn’t place the last time he saw a steel door in a steel frame—inside banks or on ships were the only two he recalled. Did the builder use pink stone for a specific purpose? Aye, he’d go nuts with such mundane musings. They probably couldn’t detect the color so far below the surface. Aye, where were the lights? He hadn’t seen sconces for torches either. His imagination created beings with huge eyes able to see in the dark. Aye, and what did they eat? Nay, Dwarves thrived deep inside the Earth, and they weren’t deformed creatures. They used lights, torches, lichen. The mountain was not the home of Dwarves. It could house them if the missing Dwarves from Europe were located.

Sheridan’s fist poised to strike—frozen with the thought he might now want to know who would occupy the room behind the door. Well, he’d never know without trying. He rapped on the door, tried the handle, pushed and pulled to no avail. Oh, hells, he knew where he stood. Yeah, he’d bet it was a safe zone humans used to hide inside during the wars and the Earth’s efforts to clean up after the fools from the old world attempted to eradicate mankind. Greedy bastards who came too damn close to laying waste to Earth. All in the name of religion and marks on a map.

His hand reached instinctively to the inside pocket, drawing out the worn, ragged, water stained, document to read the clues one more time. He should have the paragraph locked in memory. He couldn’t enumerate the times he read the paper, but he should know it by rote. It became more a security blanket than a clue. He read silently, not wanting to disturb the bug-eyed creatures his whacky brain concocted. Oh, sure, why not add pincers instead of hands?

Deep and treacherous is the trek. Dark and dangerous for the boy is the walk. Near the end of the march when your feet will burn, you must go through it once if you wish to return. At the end of your journey is the lake like no other lake. If you remember who you are, and not for your sake, the prize you find you are welcome to take. Older than the earth and wiser than you by far your prize is guarded by she who lives among the stars. Speak the truth and show no fear for you are her purpose for holding the prize dear.

Oh, bloody hells, there were new lines not on the page yesterday, and not written by his hand.

The way down is not always the way to reach the bottom. Sometimes ignoring the paradigm is key. What is up or down when all seems lost? The journey begins where the wall ends. The Way is where you walk, and apotheosis is your destination in death. You must die to rise, perish to live again, sleep the long-lasting death to wake anew. Remember who you are and who you are not. Recall the boy to forget him. Set him free and you free yourself to love for once thrice for real, forever.

Sheridan tucked the note in his pocket and continued down. His legs burned with the effort, but he’d never finish unless he reached the place he needed to begin. His right foot struck the edge of a portal. His toes tingled with the frigid sensation. Ciara would not enjoy walking through a portal. Hah, she wouldn’t need to hold his belt to walk through. Aye, he’d rather she was there to hold his belt and…oh, hells, forget her for his sanity’s sake. The clue stated he must go through it to return. Was it the portal he must go through or the quest? Hells, he wasn’t about to turn back.

He walked into the freezing space between planes of existence. Ciara hated the place, afraid of being trapped in the gray nothing forever. He had no clue how to help her dispel the fear. She found herself trapped once, and it didn’t alter her reaction or fears of the gray place. It about summed up his frazzled thoughts of his future. The space between didn’t last long, and he emerged unscathed into a hallway identical to what he left. Squeaky hinges and the bang of a door echoed in the long hall.

“This mountain is not vacant.” His voice reverberated in the space, repeated four times, each less clear than the last before fading away. It was a stupid outburst to announce his presence to the inhabitants. He should keep his mouth shut.

Sheridan rounded the next curve and came face to face with two full grown Fomori wielding hammers. He dove under a swing and plastered against the wall. He had fought one of the beasts in Huber’s mountain when he was younger, shorter, less aware, and he triumphed. He had grown, and yet, the brutes didn’t look any smaller than what he recalled. Aye, he did recollect he must strike at the head and heart. Their limbs regenerated too damn fast to kill, but not even the demons could recover from death. His mundane steel blades would not suffice for the work he faced. Sheridan drew short swords he fashioned with King Stone on the edges made from his bracelets. He’d need to chop at their legs and cut the necks, attack them when they fell and cut their damn heads off before stabbing the heart. Fancy footwork and sword forms wouldn’t do him any good. Fearless and ferocious strikes with King Stone blades would destroy the beasts.

The Fomori attacked. They inundated his mind with doubts of survival and stabbed him with childhood fears. He slammed shut the door in his mind and charged the startled demon closest to him. Its hooved feet slipped, attempting to back away. He chopped off its left leg at the hock, and the demon tumbled. Sheridan swung his left sword with force at the second brute attacking his blind side. The blade struck the Fomorian's upraised arm gripping its hammer, cut through, and he dodged the flying hammer and hand. He sliced the neck of the second one with his right sword and spun back for the first one limping to reach him on one leg and its ruined stump.

Sheridan drove the beast back swinging wildly to block his thrusts and swipes. The Fomori’s hoofed foot sparked on the granite floor slipping out from under it, and it slammed into the wall. Its free hand propped it up. Sheridan feinted left and stabbed with is right when the thing committed. His sword cut through the tough hide and burned the flesh. The Fomori howled, and he fed it a good foot of his left King Stone blade burning as it pierced its throat. He stabbed its heart with the right, searing skin and organ with the magical blades. He struck with his left cutting into its neck and with the right blade, he removed the head to silence the damn squeals forever. He repeated the process with the second beast flailing its arms in desperation. Both beings proved wise by not requesting mercy he’d never give. His blade stabbed the heart, and it flopped to the floor—its large ram-like horns clacking as the head bounced twice. A hard slice took the head, and it stilled forever. He Talked white-hot fire to his hand and tossed a fireball on each body. A grissly notion of keeping the heads as trophies passed. Two more fireballs burned them. He backed away and watched the two bodies burn to ash. The smoke drifted towards the stairway pulled upwards like the flue of a chimney. Aye, damn it. He couldn’t help but wonder how the smoke would pass the portal, but he wasn’t sufficiently curious to climb the stairs to find out.

Balor ruled the Fomorian. The god of chaos had a hand in delivering the beasts. Was he permitted to interfere? Did the deformed god linger in the mountain to cause more trouble? Sheridan whispered to the dark with a hope Patience or his mother observed the presence of Fomori.

Patience’s reply tickled his mind, and she departed his awareness with a mental kiss.

Up ahead, the hallway lightened. Aye, the walls were visible from far off. There must be a huge source of light to illuminate the walls for so far. He stepped faster to reach the lighted area, descended stairs, and the hall curved to the left and descended in a slope. His weary legs needed to reach the bottom soon. Sheridan tired, and he was in need of rest, but would not stop until he reached the bottom. The path rounded a corner, he passed the curve, doors slammed down behind him and in front ten paces away boxing him in. Sheridan gripped the lip of the closest door and heaved. A visible and sickening sweet gas hissed from jets in the wall. He pulled up on the door and coughed from the noxious fumes. It lifted the steel trap to his knees, he shifted his stance to haul the damn thing higher, and he dropped, gasping for air. Sheridan lost the battle against time and the gas. The lit tunnel blurred to dark red, to black, and through the veil of death. Perhaps he’d find Ciara and remain with her always.



Sheridan and Ciara hugged the wall and padded on silent feet to the steel door. He tried the handle, and it turned. A quick glimpse back earned him a nod declaring her readiness. There was an oddity to her clothing he’d not bring up. Sheridan pushed the door open to a dark room. Rough hands grabbed his arms, and somebody from behind him placed a hood over his head, blocking him from magic. Ciara? Damn, an iron-laced hood. He failed to call fire to his hands. His captors shoved him his knees and kicked him in the ribs cracking at least two. It had to be a dream, a day terror. Ciara wouldn’t betray him.

“Now, we’ll see how tough you are Earth Ranger.” Why would Ciara say that? Something struck his head, driving him to his belly, and he lost the battle to remain awake.

Sheridan’s body rested in a strange place. His eyes wouldn’t open. Were they open, or perhaps they didn’t work. Did they blind him? Did he need his eyes? Every other sense heightened to painful levels of awareness. Why would Ciara betray him? Hands forced a liquid between his lips. Sheridan lost the struggle with his abductors and his fight to remain conscious.

Bodies moved about with the sound of walking landslides. Sheridan’s skin stretched and itched more than it did healing from wounds. Tightness crawled over his muscles, and each wisp of hair picked up vibrations from his surroundings. Through the hood he smelled the overwhelming musk of the unwashed beings around him, and the wet earthy scent of stone and the tang of rusted iron that held him in place. Sheridan laid upon a metal grate digging into his skin with each thrust. What thrust? Why did he move?

The sensations stemming from his loins were incredible. He experienced an intense orgasm. His body shuddered with pleasure and chilled with the sudden stillness. The drugs sent him to sleep with little effort. Sheridan jolted awake. The movement didn’t escape the notice of one who approached on feet that pounded in his head like a drum in a warning. The body crawled on top of him, rubbed him to arousal. Gods, no, they were raping him. The clues stated the women wanted seed and would take what he wouldn’t give freely. Rape, nor mention of women were included in his clue. They were the occupants of the mountain, and they sought his sperm to produce babies and had drugged him, preventing his body from resisting. He failed to halt his arousal and failed to prevent an erection, and, in a while, he didn’t care to stop her.

Sheridan’s mind shrunk behind the safe place he constructed to protect himself at five when his Máistir punished him for not saddling a horse quickly, cutting vegetables wrong, not striking the bullseye, not making his bed properly. The drugs administered didn’t provide his mind an escape. He laid awake and aware each time without the ability to stop them. He didn’t voice a complaint, but he screamed silently in pain and cried in his heart because he failed again to protect the boy he was from rape.

He knew the room was crowded with people, and yet, he sat apart, alone, and in a breath of revelation, he didn’t care. Being alone needn’t be painful. He could live alone, but could he live lonely? Existing, abiding in a place without company didn’t ache as bad as sitting in a packed room missing someone you love or the ability to love. Solitude didn’t torment him, Sheridan feared nobody would return his love. He’d not had success with love in his life. Living without love was the loneliest existence. He never did love Rihanna. He tolerated her because she gave him Aoife. Someone slapped him out of his musings. Rough, stinking, hands forced his mouth open, and they drugged him. He fought the effects, but lost and slipped back into numb darkness.

A woman’s hands bathed him with warm soapy water, rubbing softly and laughing at him when her ministrations aroused him. Her voice thundered in his ears, and her words were bitter when she detailed their plan and how they would beat him daily because they were paid.

The five-year-old Sheridan cowered and curled up in his shell to hide from the shame. The child inside struggled tied to a tree again and helpless. His adult body responded to the woman’s gyrations and pumped his seed into her womb. Woman after woman, hour after hour whether he lay awake or slept drugged out of his mind, they tortured him. The times he did wake to silence, he panicked at first, but after a few times, the solitude didn’t strike him as harsh. In time, he cherished the moments they left him alone.

Aye, he could live alone if he had to. The abusers were doing his psyche a favor with the bondage and seclusion. His heart would prefer solitude instead of breaking from betrayal or dying from heartbreak as it did when Ciara died. Aye, he must drive Enapay and Muirenn from his mind and heart for their safety. Ciara. Nay, it wasn’t real. What was real? Was he real? Or dead?

He wasn’t always alone in the cave. They didn’t make noise, but he could smell the spies. A tube of some kind pushed through his lips, and a fluid filled his mouth. Hands massaged his throat, so he must swallow or gag, and he tried to rise and fight it, but the restraints held tight. He swallowed and blacked out for what had to be the hundredth time.

His coherent moments were spent fertilizing unknown women, and his drug-induced sleep filled his mind with nightmares. Sheridan dreamed of Aoife’s death by fire, drowning, and murder by enemy soldiers. Rihanna appeared in horrid dreams attempting to kill him in bed by suffocation, strangling, knife, and poison. His mate tried to push him off a cliff, or hold his head under water. He watched Ciara burn in a building fire he failed to reach in time. He saw his friend die by an Orc’s blade and watched the beast eat her. She fell to her death, drowned in the ocean, froze in a white wasteland, crushed by a landslide, and shot in the back with three arrows. Enapay died in similar situations over and over unti his jerked awake to relieve his mind. He wished he never slept, but the drugs made his wish a fantasy he could not resolve. Remember who he was? How about a tortured soul? He would claim he’s a man, damn it. Just a man? Certainly, no bloody hero—a man trying his best and limited in his mental capacity. Or his lack of emotional maturity. Sheridan would survive this ordeal and strive to mature, to pay closer attention to his feelings and learn to share them. If he dealt with everyone as he did with Aoife, his life would improve. Aoife. Why did Rihanna take the baby with her on the ill-fated trip? He drifted off.

He jerked awake when slimy tenacles wrapped his body and pulled him down through the metal grate into darkness, and the stench of the creature assaulting him. He struggled, but the sinewy bonds grasped tighter and pulled him faster. The hot breath of the creature stole his senses, and he almost fainted. Its horrid maw gaped displaying rows of needle-like teeth. He fought for his life and lost.

Sheridan woke worn out from the fight and sweating profusely. Did he wake on the slab? It was only a nightmare. One bare light bulb swung above him on twisted wire, the bulb cast shifting shadows and bands of illumination across the faces of three women bleeding from grievous wounds. Ciara, Enapay, and the third unrecognizable woman who must be Muirenn were tied to a tree, and there were signs of torture on their bodies from horrible implements designed to induce severe pain. He recognized the wounds from personal experience. A misshapen shadowy figure shuffled forward, blocking his view of the ladies he loved. He tugged at his restraints, jerked and twisted to break the bonds that held firm. Bonds preventing him from reaching them. The dark form cackled a scratchy laugh and pointed a crooked finger at him.

“The three will not divulge the information I seek. They suffer for you because they love you and hold their tongues to protect you. It makes no sense for them to be so loyal to you who denies them. Who would you choose if you could only save one and live happily? I’ll permit you to save two if you cut off a hand and live with the love of both. You could rescue all three from their torture if you pluck out your eyes and never enjoy the sight of their beauty again.”

“Who are you to ask such an asinine question? Take my eyes, you demented bastard. Their beauty lies not only on their face; it’s in their hearts. We are bonded, and my heart would be content for eternity without my sight if they were mine to love.”

The shadowed evil stilled. Moans escaped the lips of his three wives. They each pledged their undying love. It was torture for him to hear his Ciara speak words of love he’d never share. Shadow demon ambled closer.

“You would sacrifice your eyes to save all three but refuse to acknowledge your love for any of them. I know your offer is sincere, but it is illogical. Remember who you are and forget who you’re not. Does it make sense to you yet? It is the answer to the question I posed to your women. Tell me who are you, and who are you not?”

“Who are you? You ask questions without giving answers.”

“And, many people rightfully claim the same of you. You know who I am. I have tormented your dreams for years. Who are you, and who are you not? I must have the answers to provide Gwydion’s slave a chance of surviving the same trials when you fail.”

The response made no sense. Hadn’t he completed the quest? Sheridan was aware of what made sense—he must forget. He knew what and who he was. He wasn’t An Deorái. It merely designated a role to fulfill, not an identity. Other than Sheridan, he would accept Ri Cloch as a name to mark his identity, and he would gladly leave his ego on the metal grate where the women hoped to steal it from him by rape and torture. Sheridan had no need for ego. The young boy would not be forgotten, but he could go to the white room and rest under the tree of life until his fear no longer threatened or consumed his sanity. The three—Ciara, Muirenn, and Enapay, kept their silence to protect him? Sheridan could love three women. Hells, he did love them and would acknowledge his love and keep them safe from Gwydion. Nay, he would love them because it is what his heart desired. Did Gwydion search for them? Aye, he had found the answers each god and goddess asked. Who asked this perverted question?

Sheridan imagined the restraints gone and rose from the slab.

“How did you accomplish that? You are not permitted to aid them.”

He was dead or dreaming, and he could control his actions in either place.

“You have no power over me, Deceiver. Light and love will prevail to defeat you.”

He stumbled and stalked towards the shadow. The questioner backed away into the dark recesses of the room. With a thought, Sheridan blasted the room with light. A creature more hideous than a full grown Fomori glared its loathing for him for a heartbeat and disappeared. The deceiver, the tormentor, Nightmare in his natural form bated him. He ignored the demon of chaos and stepped over to the women.

With his knife, he cut the three free, catching each to lay on the slab. He healed their grievous wounds, and held the three women he could love, and they returned his care with warming emotions enveloping his spirit, and he realized they, in truth, did love him. They loved him as he was—broken and scarred, beaten and exhausted, worn and too often wrong, and he accepted their loving embraces. Sheridan had to accept their belief in him. He could permit himself to love. He laid down with his three ladies to hold and comfort falling asleep at peace and in love for always and forever in his life. Ciara cried on his shoulder. He cried with her knowing it would never happen in his reality.

He woke naked and alone. Sheridan bathed in a room that didn’t exist before he slept, and he shaved weeks-worth of growth. The three, his three ladies were just another dream. Ciara couldn’t appear because she perished at the hands of cowards. He leaned on the sink to feel the cool caress of ceramic. He rose and found himself in a room with only a small hole in the wall to exit. Aye, he must’ve hallucinated. His hand rubbed a smooth face. What was real? How could he dream he shaved and wake with a smooth face? Aye, the hole gaped at him. It would be a cramped escape with sharp-edged rocks on the walls in the tunnel angled up to his death. The ritualistic journey of The Way in the flesh. It was a reality he expected. Once he entered, he would not wake in a clean room.

Sheridan’s pack with his supplies of food and water was nowhere in sight. The rules stated no food or water for the journey, but he would need them when he completed the trial. No answers, nor food and water would materialize with complaints. How long had he gone without sustenance? He squeezed through the orifice and crawled upward on sharp stones biting, stabbing, slicing his skin. He crept along, pushing, pulling, inching upward with effort and pain. He wormed his way upward for hours without respite—without hope of an ending to his trials.

The old woman at the shrine told him to remember who he was. Airmid said to remember the same and also what and who to forget. Artio reminded him to recall his identity and leave behind his painful past. Sheridan contemplated the problem while he slid onward, resting each hour according to his internal clock. The walls tore at his body, stripped the skin from the palms, and left bloody handprints. Blood lubricated the stones for his body to slide upon. He couldn’t stop, couldn’t allow the mountain to be his death shroud.

Sheridan slithered upward on his belly, scraping the skin, and bleeding on the sharp projections. Each grueling inch forward provided a lesson in patience and forced a dire need to take command of his fears. He slept when he believed he crawled for ten hours and repeated it four times before the walls smoothed and the opening widened freeing his arms to move to his side. Remember to forget. What or who to remember? Who or what to forget? He licked the salty perspiration from his arms and slept.

The next day, or a week, or eternity, the tunnel opened to crawling space. A lifetime later, he could walk stooped, and in what he called the morning of the tenth day with back pain throbbing, legs cramped, he reached the spot he could stretch and walk upright. Sheridan’s internal clock would swear he walked another day uphill with no end in sight. On the thired sleep cycle, his path flattened out, his tongue swelled from thirst, and he staggered a few times dizzy from exertion and hunger. He came upon a cool, wide area on the following day. Sheridan had to stare at it, blink, look away and back to ensure it was not a mirage. Water trickled down the rock wall and flowed through a hole. He sampled a finger full and attacked the wall with his mouth lapping up all he could consume. The finest wine would never taste as fine and couldn’t satisfy as well as the sweet spring water. He rested a while, slept without want, and woke to rats gnawing on his fingers. He chased the scavengers away and returned to his trek.

Two days counted by his sleep cycle, he came upon a blessing. It was a room reached by six stairs and contained a slab table with a gold cup sitting top center and a pillow he would die to rest on at one end. Aye, it was his tomb, and he welcomed the sight.

Sheridan trudged up the steps that never ended. He counted six steps and checked his progress, and there were six steps to climb. He gazed back to realize he never placed a foot on a step. He also spotted stairs going down. Sheridan set off to walk down the six steps and wound up right where he started. Or was it? He ran back up the six stairs and found himself in the room with the slab, pillow, and cup. He had to descend to rise above and ascend the same path to the altar. A sad laugh escaped his lips. After the trouble with the paradigm, he stood at the slab—the altar of his sacrifice without recalling the steps it took to cross the floor.

A dark, pungent liquid steamed in the cup filled to the brim. The surface rippled in dark rings reflecting no light existing in the mountain No light his eyes could detect. He reached for the cup and received a strike to the back of his head for the effort. Several hands grasped him and held firm. It wasn’t worth the struggle and Sheridan had no strength left to fight. The men threw him down on a board and pinned him in place. He realized their intent and surrendered. Dark figures stretched Sheridan’s arms out, and two people or ghosts for all he knew nailed his hands and feet to the crossed boards. Someone held the cup to his lips. He’d never understand how he could drink when he laid on his back, but he swallowed the entire contents with hopes of a peaceful death. He laid his head back. The perspective altered. His vision blurred. He waited to die. Sheridan wanted to die. He begged the shining gods for the strength and soundness of soul to resurrect.

The thundering tumult of rushing water woke him. The raging river splashed against rocks spraying his already soaked clothes and shivering body. A thin slice of night sky packed full of stars shone above, and the walls of the ravine became apparent, and he was aware where he laid. Sheridan was seven years old in the worst predicament of his young life. The ledge he laid on for six weeks waiting for help and in fear for his life, his sanity, and his soul. The voices of the many men who held the role of An Deorái, implanted in his mind by Balor at the age of five ridiculed him the whole ordeal for his failures, berated him for mourning the loss of his friend, and taunted him with threats and curses for his weakness. His mother removed the curse on his thirteenth birthday. He didn’t miss the voices insisting he roll off the ledge and attempt to swim to safety in the flood waters even with a bleeding head wound, two broken legs, and a broken arm.

Adult Sheridan commanded the incessant and irritating voice in his head to shut up without success. He Talked to Broke, his dog whom he knew stood guard above him but Broke didn’t respond. The only reality within the dream came with the pain he suffered, sharing the burden with the boy. He incurred the injuries when he leaped from the log to save his friend, and the fear he would be abandoned to die on the ledge all alone pained him worse than the broken bones. His worry for his friend, his fear of abandonment, his desire for love from anyone tortured his soul far harsher than the wounds. Sheridan spent the nights shivering too hard to sleep and his days crying for his friend until he slept exhausted to start a new night again in pain, freezing cold, and lonely realizing he’d never experience love. His young body had no such desire, but his ancient mind knew, and he cried for his failures. He didn’t want to die unloved. His last two Máistirs added to his grief. Were there no Teachers who would care for him?

For three weeks he sucked the water from his sleeves to hydrate and endured the complaints of his empty stomach until one morning a smiling face, as black and beautiful as the star-filled night peered over the edge and spoke to him. The Wood Fae discovered him. They didn’t have the resources or strength to pull him out, but Dina and the Children provided blankets, food, and water until Michael arrived three weeks later with the two dogs he had sent home for help.

Why did he relive the horror and suffering of the young boy he was at seven? He starved as the boy did, and his body shivered each night for six weeks. It couldn’t last for six weeks. Sheridan introduced his younger self or was it himself to the white room he learned to hide in when the world seemed bent on destroying his will. Aye, the time in the ravine taught him he could withstand any pain if he knew it was temporary. His Máistir’s torture taught him to accept pain without complaint or receive more. His seven-year-old body slept, and Sheridan curled up next to him to hold and promised his life would one day be glorious first with the arrival of Ciara and then Aoife would arrive. Later would come the three women who entered his world to brighten even his darkest moods. Aoife…he sobbed, mourning the loss of his baby. An act he wished never to release for it consumed him. The boy hugged him back and rubbed his scalp telling him it would be alright. Aoife was happy in her new home. Sheridan attempted to heal the boy. He sent healing magic into the boy to no avail. The sad reality of the dream included only the excruciating pain and dreadful sorrow. Was it his worst nightmare?

A door opened to his right, filling his bedroom at Liberty with a silvery radiance. A door to the right in his room, in truth, didn’t exist. A silhouette stepped through and drew closer on noiseless feet. A light flickered on overhead, and Ciara stood above him smiling his favorite, and her coffee brown eyes glistened, emanating her sincere love. His body laid on the slab, nailed to the crossed boards, but he looked out from his bedroom? Tears welled and ran down both sides of his face. Ciara died. Why did the gods torment him?

“Answer me truly, Sheridan. Please?”

“Ciara. I wish you asked when it counted. I have loved you from the moment my eyes rested on your stunning beauty, and the guilt buries me daily. Why would you love someone like me?”

“Oh. Oh? Thank you for admitting your love, but I could beat you to a bloody pulp for the insult to my heart and intelligence.”

Ciara declared he and she were a unique pair, and she had loved him as well, in all the many lives they shared, and she would love him for eternity—forever and always. His face heated when she said he was the finest mate for her heart and soul, in any form and in any life.

“Why would I love you? Well, for starts, you don’t pander or cheat, are kind, and sincere, always warm and loving even on the worst of days. You are a blast to play with on a battlefield, a ballfield, or hunting food, swimming, in bed, or just lying in your arms watching stars shoot across the sky. Do not believe I will choose the man my mother arranged for me to marry. You, dear stubborn love, are all I desire and need. I will never love another. It is you forever and always. My heart, mind, soul, and body are yours for the asking because I trust your love.”

Sheridan closed his eyes and turned away. He was not naïve. In truth, he couldn’t be a bigger fool. She loved him, and he played the idiot ignoring her. Now, it was too late. He opened his eyes to a dark room and stared at nothing for an eternity. He slept not willing to face his guilt. Aye, the brave Ranger hid from his true feelings like a coward. Place a sword in his hand, and he’d challenge the gods. Place a woman to love in his life, and he’d run for cover. Mrs. Baker told him he was worthy of any woman he chose, and to look upon the woman on his left with love. He failed her. Ciara would no longer stand at his left.

He woke when the door on the opposite wall opened to a bright green light glaring in his eyes. He squinted to focus on the figure framed by the doorway. It appeared to be a verdant field behind the shadow flickering as it entered. He laid in a pistachio-colored tent. Green light from above filled the space with a peaceful glow. A female stopped at the table to study him. Her smiling face bore a fanciful design painted with blues and reds in a strip across her forehead to below her eyes. The gorgeous lady could be a goddess.

“I see you and know you, Ranger. My grandmother dreamt of you. She said I would love you and you will love me but abandon me. Should I love you? Are you worthy of my love?”

“I see you, Lady. Oh, I know you Enapay. I realized when we traveled together, I have known you forever and will always love you. I don’t wish to see you harmed but desire your hand in marriage to the detriment of my soul. I love you, lady, and would never abandon you.”

She laughed at his answer and continued to laugh, filling the room with her melodic ridicule echoing back drilling into his brain, slicing his resolve and burying him in guilt. He closed his tear-filled eyes and slept to erase his mistake. His remorse would smother and kill him. A soft hand wiped the tears from his cheeks, and softer lips met his in a kiss.

“I laugh with relief, not ridicule, Sheridan—never ridicule for my city boy. You will always love me? Come back to me and love me as I will love you forever. I will share your love with my sister wives, and we can marry in the Lakota tradition. Adding to my sister wives’ weapons, my bow and spears will protect you. They and I will bear the sons and daughters you desire.”

Sheridan blinked. Enapay was gone, and he walked in a familiar meadow with white flowers covering the ground as thick as snow, and the aroma lightened his mood and his steps. Aoife’s Kisses blanketed the ground to the edges of eternity. An old man waved and beckoned him to a picnic under a ficus tree. He took one step to reach the blanket and stood in the cool shade.

“I have chilled white wine, son. You must be thirsty by now. Would you rest a moment?”

“I thank you for the offer, kind sir, but it is not permitted while I’m dead. Rest and refreshment must wait for my resurrection. I have stood here in this room before. Aye?”

“Many times, son, you only need to see from your heart when you rest here. Now that you know how it isn’t so bright to wash out the resting place after all. In this place, there is always room for you to restore your health. Healing of both mind and body occurs quickly in this place. It will not mend the tear in your heart, though. That grievous wound needs love freely given to heal without any magic other than the blessings inherent in love. Have you the strength and will to heal your heart?”

“I know I want to, but I must avenge my daughter’s murder and the murder of my love. I must exterminate the filthy vermin molesting and killing our people and destroying our homes. I must close the portals. I must learn to live alone.”

“Must, must, must, must. Well, it doesn’t matter if it’s must, need, or want, don’t fall with them when you seek vengeance. Remember who waits for you. Aoife will not return to love you, but there are three who will if you ask them.”

“I did enjoy eating your meat pies.”

“The master of misdirection. I know you heard me. You have not thrown a wormy staff of duty into your woodpile of responsibility either, son. Many are proud of your actions, but the same mourn for the death of your heart. The boy you hold onto can’t roam free while you bind him in chains of doubt and regret. The child could no more protect himself than you can harden your heart to love. The older boy could not have saved your new friend when the evil men were so determined to see you dead as well. He and his pain burden the adult who has proven his worth.”

Sheridan’s hunger and thirst abated without consuming refreshment. He smiled at the old man who returned it tenfold. The codger was at his side, rubbing his shoulder.

“Why don’t you set both the boys and your self-reproach free and see where life takes you? Trust me. If you succeed here against the struggle to free your burdened soul from the past, there is no limit to what you can accomplish, and the trio of warriors standing at your side and in your heart for eons will remain to protect you and continue the battle against evil forever and always. The All Father has turned His gaze upon you, son. He is pleased, Sheridan Ri Cloch. Finish your chore and when the time comes, reach out to take His loving offer.”

Sheridan woke to a blaring horn. He laid in a room with a short ceiling. He blinked. Why did he…where could he be? A ship? He laid tethered to a bed sitting on the deck of a ship with a man and woman standing at the rail looking out on a nightmare sea. The sky roiled with blacks, reds, and yellows like the belly of a furnace. The woman turned, expecting to see him and smiled. Her stunning eyes sparkled hazel brilliance, and her smile tore at the barrier of memories. Sheridan had no clue as to the man’s identity. The lady stepped toward him but jerked to a stop and looked down at the chain connecting her wrist to the man’s wrist. Her eyes darkened, and she yanked at the chain, breaking free, and the man faded. She walked over to the slab in the cave with a brilliant lamp overhead—the type of lights above an operating table.

“Are you in pain, big man? Oh, I can see it in your eyes. You still don’t trust me. I would die for you, my Ranger hero. I would kill for you. I will kill to protect you. Please love me as I love you? I am not what you believe and would never betray you. I am yours forever. Please trust my love.”

He wanted to ask the identity of the man, but the chain struck her like a viper, wrapped around her wrist and pulled her back through the door in the hallway and he laid his head on the slab. The man who would not turn around for a good look waited for her. There was something familiar about the man, but he couldn’t pin it down. Before the door closed, he saw the man embrace her, and the woman tried to pull away. It wasn’t Sheridan’s place to interfere. He closed his eyes and left her. Abandoned her — betrayed Muirenn.

Sheridan wept under his shroud. He smelled the decay, the pungent scent of loam they buried him under, the mournful aroma of funeral flowers. The ominous void of silence engulfed his soul. He slept again and dreamed of the impossible concept of love freely given. He’d need to forgive himself to love. He’d need to love himself to forgive. Sheridan observed his essence struggle to find the path and escape from the vicious trap of doubt until three sets of hands reached out for him and helped him step outside of his foolish misbeliefs and stand as a man to face his fears. They wouldn’t burden him. The ladies would bolster his resolve. Why must he play the stubborn ass?

A door slammed on his right from where Ciara entered earlier. She strolled into the room with her hands on her hips and her lips twisted in wicked mirth.

“Will you come downstairs and dance with me? I can dance with a handsome man who has asked several times if you don’t.”

“You are not interested in dances.”

“Oh. Oh? Well, it doesn’t matter. Why can you have three wives, and I can’t have multiple husbands?”

“You are asking the wrong questions, Lucifer.” He Talked a brilliant light to his fingers, and the false image of Ciara faded. Lucifer cringed with arms raised, hiding his eyes from the light.

“You lack the knowledge or discipline to create an image of Ciara properly, and your lack of attention to the details broadcasted the false lady. I know the lady you imitated intimately, and your doppelgänger was flawed. Leave me, fool. Find a weaker soul to torment. Go play these games with Gwydion or Balor. They would dote on your parlor tricks.”

“You don’t know half of what you believe and less of what you perceive of the woman. The Maura twin will leave you for the man with similar eyes as she. You cannot prevent her deception. She loves the man already.”

“Of course, she does. Leave me or face me with steel. You can die as easily as a Fomorian. I blooded Balor; I can bleed you dry.”

He woke on a cold slab in an empty room, pain-free, and content. He rose to discover his backpack beside him and left the torture and trials behind forever. The boy he once was stayed safe in the All Father’s hall. He waved goodbye for now to the image in his mind’s eye. Once he killed his share to sate his loathing, and avenge his love and daughter, Sheridan would rejoin the world of the living—and perhaps, if he had any luck, two wives. Well, if he kissed…the Irish lady. He could not recall her name. How could he be certain of his love for a woman if he didn’t recall her name?



**Chapter 40 Older than the Stars**

Sheridan had to rest often due to the extreme heat and his lack of water. By his reckoning, he trudged downhill for three days, but it could’ve taken longer without seeing the skies to mark the time. When he woke the sweetest smell caressed his nose. He followed his senses to a trickling stream cascading over rocks from a crack and disappearing as quickly as it entered. If he didn’t smell the water before sleeping, its source must be rainfall or snowpack from far overhead seeping through thousands of feet of rock. He would be a fool to leave it without tasting. The water smelled fresh, didn’t carry bits of sand, or discoloring. He placed the tip of his tongue in his palm and moaned. He sated his thirst, filled his canteens, and soaked his clothing to cool his body. No magical talents permitted. But didn’t he win? He drank his thirst away and refilled the canteens. No other reason for remaining set his feet to walking down again.

Three sleeping cycles later he stepped through a door and slammed it shut behind him and stared at the lake that wasn’t. It was a lava lake fed and drained by rivers of molten earth. To his left, a mountain of shiny stones rose from the black rock. He stared at one huge emerald and sucked in a breath when an eyelid closed over it. The mound reared up, roared and it spat fire from its mouth attached to a huge head and immense body.

He stood in the presence of a dragon. It didn’t threaten him. From what he read, they were considered a mystical being and, in some worlds, mythical. He’d read only one account where they were evil and found the reference in a fantasy book. The clue said to be calm and trusting. Another record declared the dragon was the All Father’s first children. The clue gave him more vital information. He would trust she who lives among the stars.

“I wish you no harm, My Lady. I am on a quest from Máthair to retrieve objects of power to aid our battle against the evil beasts and their master. You have waited long for my arrival.”

The dragon settled back to the floor, curling her long body around itself like a snake and smoke gushed from nostrils as she plopped down with a grunt. Gods above, she would speak with him.

“A simple thing for me. I know who you are and why you come, Chosen One. I have questions for you. Your answer determines if I allow you to reach the prize An Deorái seeks or destroy you where you stand. Who are you, and what did you leave behind on your journey? What did you receive in death, and what would you sacrifice to save the three?”

The dragon’s voice vibrated the floor and rumbled on throughout eternity. Her mental voice reverberated in his mind like bells with a deep resounding ringing. Sheridan knew the answer to two of them because he experienced the assault.

“I am blessed to be tortured on The Way to learn the answers, Lady.”

Aye, before her stood—just a man living the best he can to care for and protect his family, loved ones, friends, and the innocents of the world. He gave his name and admitted he was a man, friend, teacher, father, student, and Ranger. He left his ego behind with the women who raped him. He received advice to let go of the burdens, not his. He would, without hesitation, give his life for what they offered without question, but hoped to learn to accept their love and return it freely. He would sacrifice his stubbornness to save them and revel in the light of their love. Many declared he didn’t boast from shyness, but he learned it fed his guilt to stroke his ego thinking he could defeat it alone. Without the one, he may unburden himself of the harsher sentiment and be free to accept them and finally admit his love.

Aye, he knew he loved them, but would he have the balls to admit his love? With whom did he stand before and converse?

The dragon replied in his words, she was no more than the first of her kind, waiting for him to arrive. She named him young Searcher.

“Please hear my name. It is an honor to speak my name to you. I am Annabellinda. I have waited for not a long time to meet you, Wanderer. Your Mother is correct in her assumption of your actions and her description of your character. No being has passed me to reach the stones since your Mother’s request to meet your predecessor and asked me to remain for you when he retired from the field of battle. I had hoped to return to my children; now, my duty is complete. I have missed them, but Alphabelios, my stubborn mate, came looking for me when I did not return as scheduled, and Gwydion captured him while he searched suitable hiding places I could use. I won’t leave this world without him. Choose wisely, Sheridan. The stones are not as obvious as you would assume. Not all shiny gems are as precious as what you seek.”

“Do you live among the stars?”

“No, Chosen One. There is a portal among the stars; only my kind may pass through to protect us from mankind. I am heartened to see you associate with the third children. If all were like you, I would return to live on Earth, for she is a wondrous world, but many men lose their minds at the sight of my adornment, and I do not enjoy killing they who attempt to kill me for my roost.”

“Aye, I can understand your plight, dear lady. I thank you for your vigilance and your dedication to protecting my birthright.”

Sheridan could sense the prize this close. He would not have a problem finding what defined his essence in this life. It proved a hard lesson to learn, but he finally remembered who he was. If Balor hoped to destroy him inside the mountain, he failed miserably.

Sheridan rubbed the dragon’s scales walking down her length. He reached up and took what looked like two thick metal rods from the space between ridges on her back. Annabellinda’s laughter vibrated the floor in the cave and resonated in his skull like a gong. He found the charged King Stone, but how would he use two rods? Aye, he knew how to wear them.

He bowed to Annabellinda in the formal style. When he rose, Annabellinda had her snout close to his face.

*“*In your travels, Lord Protector, please keep an eye out for my mate, Alphabelios. If you find the chance, free him for me. When you earn the power of Mother Earth, your hands can remove his bonds forged in Earth’s fires if you have the strength. I will remain here hidden from Gwydion. He will never find me in this place. The path upwards will be sealed when you leave, Child of Wonder. Those beasts who walk like humans will not venture down into my domain again. Sheridan, we are in danger. Gwydion wishes to use our bodies to gain immortality. The insane man believes it would transform him into a god. Beware of him, Seeker of Truth. He must have two innocent children with sufficient magical powers to perform the dark ritual. He also seeks one of the destined mates of yours to share my body. The children would be lost forever without a soul to take them to another life. Please protect the children. My mate and I will fight, but not if it costs the soul of an innocent. We would choose death and rebirth over an innocent soul lost for eternity.”

“You have my solemn promise to free your mate. In truth, I know where Alphabelios is held. It will not be an easy task, but I will free him. You said, destined mate. Could you be more specific?”

“You will learn soon, Son of Máthair. Know this, for a fact, and pay heed your wives will hear my words as well. Your life need not end when you defeat Gwydion if you are prepared. The sacrifice the records speak of need not be your life. Recall your words to me. There is more you could offer as sacrifice other than your physical body, An Deorái. Where the records state you gave your all, it did not imply your living body. Think more than you ever have on your future. I will also suggest you look to your left with your heart as others have suggested. The man who thinks too much may choose a book from my library, limited as it is, I will share one with you. It is my gift for your promise, Sheridan. The books I have are rare, befitting my treasure.”

He could look to his left forever and not enjoy the sight of Ciara again. He’d not burden the dragon with his troubles. Annabellinda had enough of her own. Sheridan perused the titles of the books Annabellinda had stacked up against the wall farthest from the fire. She must protect them in some way from the fires. Hells, it was not crucial to know the answer. One book drew his attention, and he slipped the journal from the stack.Rifling through the pages, he could discern many authors written by many distinct hands. He looked up at Annabellinda, and her eyes glowed with delightful green fire.

“Yes, it is a record of sorts and daily musings of many past men who accepted the role of An Deorái. I learned what to ask you by reading the book. There are many chapters on using your magical talents, but it contains dark and mournful passages as well. This life you entered cannot claim the sole source of anguish for your heart. The Eternal Hero has many troubling histories, and all amazingly stem from his refusal to love freely. Imagine that.”

Sheridan laid his head on Annabellinda’s snout, and the dragon purred like an avalanche.

“The rods are not your only prize from me, Sheridan. You earned the wells of power reaching here. For completing your journey along The Way, you may visit the grotto. Within is a relic of immense power. It is one of many that fell from the sky to percolate to the surface and releases into the air, filling lungs and bodies with magic. Full strength and direct contact will increase your magical powers. I am permitted to tell you where the rock is and grant you permission to visit when you wish with your mates. I know you can, Travel and your wives will learn as well. Place the location in your memory to return with your mates, but I would be honored to meet the three who—drive you to distraction as Patience claims.”

Annabellinda lumbered back to her corner by the lava flow and curled up, laid her head on her tail and closed her emerald eyes to sleep. The dragon would remain and wait for Sheridan to free her mate? What could Gwydion do to harm the magical creature? Three wives?

Sheridan bid farewell to the dragon entered the grotto and sat against the rock radiating magical strength. He called for Patience to ask for his magical gift.

Patience flashed in showering sapphire sparks, and she wrapped his head with loving arms and squeezed. He mumbled against her chest.

“Well met, dear Patience. I have missed your company.” Patience released her hold and held his face in her two warm blue hands. She sat with him in silence until his time came to depart, and they Traveled outside, and he sat on the frozen ground. Patience rubbed his neck and smiled sadly.

“Aye, and I have missed you, love. It took you longer than expected, but you passed the tests. My love survived the brutal treatment not devised by our Máthair. Balor is a monster to place you in such demented and perverted hands. Aye, you have learned to forget the troubles of the past. What magical talents do you wish to possess as a reward for finding the path?”

“Talents?”

“Aye, you are not brain dead. You receive two in recompense for the treatment you endured. No bright soul should suffer such torment. Máthair received permission to grant you two, love.”

“Aoife suffered far worse. They killed her. They killed Ciara.”

“Aye, and your family awaits to assist you with your revenge. Ask, love, and begin your devestation of the enemy.”

Two talents. He was not prepared to ask for two. Aha, Annabellinda mentioned what his heart desired for power. He wanted to possess all the natural forces of Mother Earth. Earthquakes, landslides, storms, floods, lava, wind—all of her elements at his disposal to wage war against the enemy or to rain on dry crops. He could create waves for a silly Elf to surf on the calmest of days, or snow in summer to delight the children.

“Aye, and only you would use such devastating powers to please Michael or thrill our young Cainteoirs. And the second?”

“Is maintaining a level of power a possible gift?”

“You are a genius. Máthair praises your brilliant choice. You will maintain the level of magic you possess when you leave here today. Your level of power will not drop lower. It will not guarantee your health will remain. You can still fall from physical fatigue. It will not make you invincible, love. Will we collect your army to protect you while you regain your physical health and seek revenge?”

“Nay, Patience. I will seek my revenge alone, and the enemy will pay dearly for my little Aoife’s life, and my dear friend whom I never admitted loving will be avenged. The enemy will learn to fear me. The trials in the mountain forced me to realize and admit how much I loved Ciara, still love Enapay, and even the lady I can’t recall awake stirs in my heart. I must seek my revenge alone to protect them from danger and from me. Ciara’s death proved to me they are better off without me.”

“You are a stubborn man. Unless you order me not to, I am going to snitch on you, love. I will tell your family and friends where you are to help you. You should not be out here alone. Living alone is not the same as waiting to die alone. What would Ciara say? What of Muirenn and Ena? How can you insult their desires?”

Aye, what would Ciara say? He should not involve the ladies in his schemes. They should stay far from him to remain safe. “I will always love them, but I cannot endanger them either. It is a task I alone must perform.”

Sheridan crumpled. He closed up into the fetal position and cried. A myriad of questions flashed in his mind, but he could not ask but one. Why did Ciara appear in his trials if she had died?

“What is going on inside your overworked and troubled skull?”

“You know, love. Without her, I will always live in solitude. I will take my vengeance alone. I’m leaving, dear friend and don’t follow. I will call for you when my fragile heart mends.”

Sheridan Traveled to his abandoned campsite to find it destroyed by the soldiers he spotted…gods how much time? Three months was what Patience claimed crawled by since he entered the fateful mountain. The sixteen weeks of trudging through snow, frigid creeks, and dodging enemy soldiers searching for the cave entrance would be forever recalled as a frozen hall of the hells. He dropped exhausted beside a large boulder, leaned back, waking old pains from beatings. Sheridan raised his face to the cerulean blue firmament and the huge overripe clouds passing by teasing the landscape with fat, chilly drops.

His shoulders shook to the beat of the sobs he couldn’t prevent or stop. He gasped air between painful moans and thanked the rain for hiding his tears. What would he do without Ciara in his life?

He gave into his mourning and let go. Sheridan released the emotional burden pent-up by stubborn will. Aye, release his burden? He carried his own bounty named vengeance, and the berserker inside would release his loathing and reap the enemies’ life-blood. What of Ciara’s blood lost on the drive of Tranquility? What did he owe her? Ena asked him to offer his heart to her poor mother and Braelyn. Sheridan closed his eyes to call up images of his lost love and his lost baby.



**S**heridan marched up the aisle to the Queen’s throne holding his sword with both hands as an offering. Queen Morgun smiled at him . The smile would not remain. He knelt and lifted his sword, informing Morgun it was for her.

“What need have we for your sword, Sheridan?”

“I offer you the blade to use as vengeance for my failures.”

“What failure?”

“I failed the woman I loved. My Ciara died because I loved her. Please stab my broken heart in recompense for the death of your daughter, my best friend, the woman I will always love.”

Morgun hissed through gritted teeth. She rose and descended the four steps, took his sword and glared at him. He knew pure hate lit her blue eyes. Queen Morgun drew the blade and lunged. Sheridan closed his eyes. His body lurched when the point dug deep. His body convulsed. He didn’t care. He might see Ciara again in death. Sheridan fell face first.

Sheridan shivered. It shouldn’t be wet and frigid in Arawn’s halls. He shivered hard and jerked awake. He opened his eyes onto the camp and moaned. It was only a bloody dream.

*“Mother?”*

*“Oh, my boy. You have a propensity for testing my resolve to maintain the rules of engagement. How may I assist?”*

*“Don’t break the rules on my account, Mother. I want to rejoin my best friend.”*

*“Sheridan. I will not stand idle to witness your suicide by neglect. Enapay is a wise and compassionate lady. Where did she suggest you visit?”*

*“Aye, Queen Morgun may end my life in a more honorable fashion.”*

*“I struggle between a desire to throttle you or cradle you in my arms. Rise dear boy, and offer yourself to Ciara’s mother. It is a far better choice than dying on an arctic mountain. What fate and destiny can offer are wiser options than suicide.”*

Sheridan ignored his body aches, rose and scanned the area. He needed food to sustain himself for the duty he faced. Ena’s proposal rang in his ears. He would visit the Queen and hope he survived to search for the Lakota. “Patience, come here, please.” She blinked in before he finished speaking the request. Her eyes were teary, and he held his hands out to hug her. She flew into his grasp. He pulled his friend to his chest. He released a sigh that didn’t console either of them. He knew what his responsibility was.

“Duty, respect, and propriety demand I Travel to the Northern Forest and offer my life to the Queen for my failure to protect her daughter. I must make my apologies and offer repentance for my failing. Ena asked me to visit the forest once the quest was completed, and I agreed. I carry too much anger in my heart, and I apologize for my harsh words. I did not intend to hurt, love. Please forgive me?”

“Aye, love, there is never anything to forgive between us. I know you love me, and I know you must dispel the hate inside for love to enter your heart before you look for your wives. You couldn’t face Ena in your present state. Ciara would be proud of your choice. Oh. Braelyn will be delighted to see you. Máthair declares your decision is wise and honorable. Your Mother is pleased with your decision. Please call for me so I may offer my condolences? I loved Ciara too.”

