

Chapter Two

The key to success and happiness lay in the relationships one chooses to accept, work and build. At least that was what her grandfather said.

As a child, Siobhan thought that message ill suited them. They spent most of their time traveling around the world doing a myriad of cons and high-class thievery. She learned to accept it as a tool of their craft. It was a necessary mindset to do what they did well. The better they were at creating and feigning relationships, the better the con.

However, her grandfather most often made that point during her teenage years. It was a time when she struggled with the two most complicated facts of her life that made any relationship difficult.

First, she was fiercely provocative to a wide range of people. Her training under her grandfather gave her an athletic, muscled build that evoked powerful reactions. Her dark auburn hair and diamond shaped face was unique enough to get attention anywhere. All of which was

quite useful and did attract people. It just didn't usually attract good people.

Second, as a teen she first discovered that she was a *draíochta*, a magical creature outlawed in most places. Being a *draíochta* could also be useful. It added to her natural athletic grace, a confident strut and sway that garnered even more attention. She instinctively moved like a predator eager for a fight. There was smoothness to her gait and a bounce in her step that said she was not only ready for anything, she was eager for it.

Between being a *draíochta* and her grandfather's martial training, she had yet to find a fight she couldn't win. Not that her temper and instincts hadn't tried... hard. She was much quicker, stronger, and her senses simply more attuned to danger than most.

All useful traits. They were just not necessarily the best traits for forming strong relationships. This was particularly true if the relationships you attract were the unsavory sort. Despite being raised by one of the greatest con artists in the world (in her eyes at least), relationships were not her forte.

All of this flashed through her mind as she walked down the street toward the only tavern in this rather secluded mountain town. She tracked a man referred to only as "the Wizard" to this tavern. She would have to be on her best behavior. Her grandfather's life depended on it, a fact that made her distinctly uncomfortable.

The tavern and its town existed in a distant and the least powerful providence of the Athnia Federation. Most of the cities in this providence were smaller. In fact, it only contained one major city, a port city just outside the mountains. The people of this providence were mostly mountain people. In times of war, they preferred to retreat up into the mountains. The passes were highly defensible and difficult to attack. It created a people that were very independent,

self-sufficient and not at all tolerant or overly bothered by larger government. Siobhan found she liked them quite a lot.

The town itself was called Branora. It was the last trading stop before either descending down out of the mountains to the major port city Montrose, or crossing over the mountains outside the Athnia Federation.

Overall it looked like a great place to escape. The cobblestone streets appeared to be well tended. The town sat near a beautiful mountain lake that was easy to see from just about anywhere in the town. It held a reputation for being a bit lawless due their remoteness but the town people also had a reputation for banding together in times of need.

The outside of the tavern was made of white, rounded stone that seemed to glisten even in the pale dusk light. It had a single sign over the door that read “Laughing Coyote” with a detailed and lifelike Coyote face laughing at all who entered. She looked up at the sign of the tavern with a sigh. Who said the Saints didn’t have a sense of humor?

Siobhan entered the Laughing Coyote with a wince. The smells and sounds assailed her sensitive senses. Smells of smoke, sweat, and cooked meat struck her nose while the sounds of laughter, scuffing chairs, and the din of conversation offended her ears. She worked to block it all out with a practiced skill.

Siobhan had to adjust her eyes to the darker room. Candles filled it with flickering light and shadow. As she walked in, a large bar sat in front. A stairway could be seen behind it, leading to some sort of private area. The room stretched out away from the bar into large rectangle of dark, red wood. The height of the ceilings was impressive. They were supported by thick wooden beams from which dark iron candle chandeliers hung. A fireplace sat in the back

and a single musician played the lute adequately in the corner. The notes floated and weaved through the tavern din as smoothly as the sweet smelling cigar smoke. A kitchen was in the back, sending out steaming food for waiting patrons.

The room was not full. This was likely due to it being so close to winter in the mountains. However, the eclectic group of people in the tavern was noticeable. Mountain men in their home-made furs, wealthy traders, and local townspeople all spread about the room. Taverns are often a hotbed of social activity, but classes and trades usually divided people. Something about the Laughing Coyote seemed to breed a unique inclusively. Business was obviously good.

Siobhan stepped into the room with her predatory grace. She hesitated only a second before withdrawing the hood of her fine traveling cloak, displaying her wealth of deep dark auburn hair. As her hood came down, heads turned and conversations stuttered. Whether it was in recognition of a stranger entering the tavern or was just the usual reaction to her features, Siobhan couldn't tell. It didn't really matter, so she ignored them and strode up to the bar.

The bartender made his way down from the opposite end, smiling in greeting. For a flickering moment, no one else existed. Their eyes met and Siobhan felt a sudden shock of near recognition. He was a hulk of a man, with massive muscles stretching his worn shirt. His hair was a bright orange red and he wore a neatly trimmed red beard.

It was his eyes that nearly dropped her. They were deep green eyes that radiated a calculating and constrained power. She felt them shoot through her system like a jolt of adrenalin. His smile was warm, kind, and generous.

"Good evening, Lady. Welcome to Laughing Coyote. My name's Connal. Can I get you anything?" he asked. He was maybe in his late twenties or early thirties.

"Your best whiskey will do. Thanks. It's a bit chilly out." She felt like she was coming out of dream and nearly shook herself. She removed her cloak, displaying a lithe, athletic form in tight traveling breeches and tunic of dark green. Her sister, Charity, always said; if you have them, flaunt them.

Connal turned a slight red and laughed. "For those of us used to mountain winters, it's simply a nice cool day."

He opened a bottle. Immediately its aromatic, oaky flavor floated into the air and jolted her senses. He poured the amber colored liquid and the scent sharpened as it hit the glass.

She took it and sipped, tasting a fruity flavor with hints of butterscotch. Her eyebrows rose in surprise. She nodded to the bartender and smiled. "Very nice."

His answering grin lit up his face. It was almost contagious.

She then looked for a table in the corner so she could scout for her mark. She settled herself close to the bar. It was strategically close to the entrance, she told herself. She sat with her back to the wall and took in her surroundings.

As she sipped her whiskey, she studied the patrons of the tavern. What did a "Wizard" look like anyway?

She doubted he was a real one. A real user of magic hadn't been seen in generations. No, likely she was looking for a clever man and a talented healer. She hoped.

As she scanned the room, her eyes locked onto a man trying not to be seen. He sat in a darkened corner of the room, having removed the candle from his table. It obscured the corner just enough to cover his features and movements. To Siobhan's sharp *draiochta* eyes, he was as clear as if in the daylight. She could smell wine in his cup. She watched as he observed the room

same as she. He wore faded green, unremarkable clothing with long sleeves and breaches. Dark complexioned, his features were otherwise ordinary to the point of boring, except for a nose that had once been broken. He hardly moved at all and any movement of his hands were careful and slow, as a hunter stalking prey. He smelled of smoke and oil. She noticed a slight bulge at his forearms that she recognized as daggers. His eyes were dark, intelligent, and purposeful. Siobhan recognized another predator on the hunt.

Her eyes then moved to a curious individual eating a meal and reading a book. He was a tall, slender man, bordering on frail looking. He wore wrinkled old grey robes with a cowl on the back and had an assortment of odd pouches at his waist. A long white beard reached past his chest and to his stomach. A tall wooden staff leaned against the wall behind him. His feet were propped up on a stool and he moved with the careful speed of one used to his aging body. He had long, thin fingers with a single ring that he twirled as he read and sipped on a slightly smoking drink.

Curious.

“I see you finished your drink.” Connal said and startled her out of her musings. He sat a new drink down in front of her, blocking her view of the room. “I brought you a local beer this time. I think you’ll like it.” His smile was friendly.

“Thanks. I hadn’t noticed.” She studied him. He had that same calculating look that made her uncomfortable.

“Do you mind if I join you for a minute? It’s slowed down a bit and I like to get to know the people that come in,” he said.

She hesitated. Yes, she did mind. She had a purpose and was not in the mood for small

talk. But her grandfather's lessons held. She stifled a sigh. "Sure." She replied with a deep breath.

Connal noticed her hesitation and grinned.

She smiled an apology. "It's fine. I'm just a bit tired from traveling. I enjoy your company." She surprised herself with the last statement. She was even more surprised to realize it was true.

"Oh, I understand." Laughter in his eyes and she couldn't help but smile back.

He sat down in front of her and leaned his large frame back into the wooden chair to get comfortable. His massive shoulders stretched the fabric of his shirt in a way she could appreciate. "So what brings you to Branora?" he asked.

It wasn't necessarily a secret, but she was secretive by nature and habit. "Just passing through," she said.

Their conversation turned to the city and her thoughts of the providence. She told him of her experiences with the remote mountain people and how she enjoyed their independent spirit. Connal listened well and conversation came easily. He shared with her his love the mountains and the people. His obvious intelligence and insightfulness surprised her. He gave off an innocent quality as he spoke that she found refreshing.

Before she knew it, Siobhan found herself talking more. She told him about her grandfather and their travels. She told him about the family that her grandfather had built around them in the form of a foundling sister and their life as a traveling group of entertainers. She talked of her sense of responsibility toward them and her worry about being away from them. She conveniently left off the description of them as thieves.

“You lead an interesting life, it seems.” His eyes sharpened but the easy smile remained. “So your grandfather is sick? That must make the jobs you do difficult.”

“I never said he was sick. “ She said, trying to keep the defensive note out of her voice.

“True, but you’re traveling alone to a remote town that is well known for having some type of magical healer. I could hear your anxiety for him in your voice when you spoke of him. It wasn’t a great leap. Is he okay?” His voice was careful, as if not to spook her and he leaned forward. His brow furrowed in genuine concern.

She hesitated a second. She couldn’t explain it but something about him urged her to keep talking. She wanted to share. She needed to. “Um, when I left he was alive but getting worse. I’ve taken him to normal healers and they can’t do anything. This is all I know to do. Do you know of this Wizard people talk about?”

“I’ve heard of him. It’s possible he can help. ” For the first time, he looked uneasy and looked away. “Is your family with him? These thei- I mean traveling entertainers?”

Siobhan stopped and stared at him.

His calculating eyes, held hers. “Sorry, that was a slip. I didn’t intend to reveal anything you didn’t want me to know. It was just a logical conclusion.” He ticked off the logic on his fingers, his speech a bit rapid. “You’re obviously wealthy but didn’t come from wealth. Two, you move with a practiced grace of someone trained in movement. Three, you study the room with a trained eye. Four, you are obviously self-assured and confident as a loan traveler, despite your wealth.” His kind voice spoke rather carefully and rapid, as if he was remembering rather than thinking through what he wanted to say. His mind seemed much further ahead than the conversation. He paused and whispered softly. “Lastly, you’re *draíochta*. And there are only so

many ways a *draíochta* can maintain or create wealth.”

They sat quietly as Siobhan reassessed the gentle giant in front of her. She sipped the beer in front of her, thoughtful.

She started to speak and the tavern door slammed open.

A huge man stood, paused in the doorway. He let his eyes adjust to the tavern light. He had a barrel chest and body that said he liked to drink as much as fight. His height was impressive. He was easily taller than anyone else in the room. He had ruddy brown hair with a thick, frizzy beard that nearly reached his chest. He wore brown leathers with chain mail and wore a self-made cloak of some type of animal fur. He carried a war axe on one hip and a sword on the other, neither looked particularly well made or well kept. Daggers crossed his chest in a baldric and large fighting knives stuck out of his boots.

He entered the tavern with the careless, lazy power of a lumbering bull. He stomped to the bar and demanded loudly. “Ale,” he said in a gruff, deep voice. It had that note of fragility to it of one slightly performing for others. She didn’t know him but Siobhan had met this type plenty of times in her travels. Fragile ego and huge fists. She felt the wolf inside her awaken. She took another sip of her beer. It’s flavor improved with her heightened senses charging up. He’d go down fairly easy, but it could be fun.

Connal appeared behind the bar and with a drink somehow already in hand. He passed the man the mug. “Ale on the house!” he said enthusiastically.

The big man grunted and downed the mug in one long, noisy draw. Connal caught her eye and winked.

The man banged it down and then proceeded to pull out a wrinkled, stained piece of

paper. He took out one of his daggers from the baldric crisscrossing his chest, and stabbed the paper to the wooden beam above the bar. He then turned and addressed the patrons of the tavern directly.

“My name is Antwr. As a member of the Sealgair,” he said the word with fierce pride, “I have a legal warrant for the arrest and execution of a man referred to as the “Wizard. I’ve been told that this place is how people find him. If you help me, and you’re not associated with him, you can leave.”

Siobhan tensed and had to stop herself from springing up. The Sealgair were a fraternal organization that said they existed to protect society from magic users and creatures. In reality they were mostly militant bounty hunters. The Athnia Federation paid a fee for any magical person they found. The proof that anyone they caught were actually magical was usually thin. It often only required an X of a coerced witness and a scalp of the person they accused. In Siobhan’s eyes, they were murderous bullies.

The room was silent and tense. In sudden surprise, Siobhan realized it was not with fear. This man threatened one of their own and while a stranger walking in may not know who the famous “Wizard” was, the townspeople did. The patrons in the tavern didn’t cover the way Antwr expected or was used to. They glowered at him.

The strange man in grey robes started to stand, but Connal shook his head sharply. The old man ignored him. He grabbed his staff and faced the big hunter.

“Boy, you’re lucky.” He said in a rasping voice. “Stupidity is not a crime here. So you’re free to go.” He said it quietly but with confidence.

Everyone in the room smiled, but one. The man was incredulous. His face turned bright

red. His chest puffed up and like a bull, Siobhan could tell he was about to charge.

Before he could take a step toward the old man, she was in front of him. Her hand on his chest. Furious he tried to backhand the girl out of his way, but she caught his fist. He jerked at it to free it but she held it firm. She stood a good foot shorter, his wrist in her hand. She knew her blue eyes now glowed yellow. The wolf inside was joyous.

Then Connal was there. “Easy, easy, people! Let’s take just a minute.”

Siobhan let go of the man’s wrist, never taking her eyes off of him. She knew he couldn’t leave this tavern without a fight. His ego wouldn’t let him. The tale of this would travel faster than him. She grinned up at him.

“Just a minute, I said.” Connal stepped between them.

Antwr transfered his confused look to Connal, and glowered again. Connal’s own muscled frame was an instant challenge. “Move barkeep, before I move you.” He growled,

Connal smiled charmingly. “Um, I think I miscalculated. Mostly on my friends’ eagerness. Sorry about that. Can we talk a minute?” He put his hand in front of the man’s face, palm out with all five fingers- asking to wait. “I’m sure we can handle this in a way that doesn’t destroy everything here.” He held up four fingers. “I am sure everyone here wants to help.” He looked into the big man’s eyes and weighed something in his head. Then changed to three fingers.. Then two.. Then one.

Antwr blinked owlshly as Connal paused for about 3 seconds, holding holding up one finger in front of him. Then Connal, very casually, put his finger to the big man’s chest and pushed lightly. The man fell backwards like a felled tree. He thundered to the floor in front of the bar. Unconscious. The room was stunned silent.

The tavern bar door opened and a tall, blond dashing figure entered. He wore a wealthy green tunic and trousers of the Anther military. On his shoulders, fastened on one shoulder by a large brooch, was an impressive blue cloak that distinguished himself as a general.

Connal scowled at him. “Rafe, you’re late.”

“Late? How can I be late when no one knew I was coming?” His voice was smooth and slightly honeyed, even while tinged in irritation. He looked at the big unconscious man on the floor. “Huh.” He said eloquently.

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Later after the tavern patrons gleefully dumped the sleeping man out the door, the tavern settled down to normal. The lute played again. People talked, ate, and drank. Siobhan sat at her seat. Connal stood back behind the bar, talking with Rafe and the gray-robed old man.

Siobhan took the moment to study Rafe. He had removed the blue military cloak. Left were the red tunic, trousers, and knee high riding boots. His torso was long and lithe. His honey colored skin and features bordered on pretty. She noted with interest an ornate long sword adorned his waist, a signature of Emperor’s Príomh Guard. The Príomh Guard were the Athnia Federation’s elite unit, pulled from the best of the different providences.

Rafe chatted casually with Connal and the tavern patrons. He kept a sunny disposition with an easy, infectious laugh. Siobhan also noticed that he scanned the room with the cold eyes

of one who has seen more than he wants. Siobhan saw a man ready to face any threat with the fatalistic courage and stoicism of a lifelong military man.

“Connal, we need to talk.” Rafe said with a mug in his hand.

“We are talking.”

“Privately?”

Connal sighed. “Let’s go upstairs to the office then.” He addressed the old man in the grey robes. “Morvyn, the bar is yours again. My thanks.”

He then led Rafe to the stairs behind the bar. He stopped and turned. “Come along, Siobhan. We didn’t really get a chance to finish our discussion.” Rafe and Siobhan both looked at each other with similar expressions of wary hesitation.

Connal shrugged. “You both want something from me and upstairs is where I’ll be.” He then turned and climbed the stairs.

They immediately sized each other up. Siobhan grinned at him and gave him a wink that was more taunt than flirt. Rafe held the stare for only a half beat, before laughing softly and shrugged. They both followed Connal up the stairs. Siobhan let Rafe lead.

Connal’s “office” was a room as long as the tavern downstairs, made of a rich dark wood. Siobhan quickly noticed there were only two exits, aside from the windows. There was one behind her and one at the far end of the room. Two windows adorned each side of the room. Every square inch of the walls were covered in book shelves. In them were books of every size as well as thousands of journals.

The room itself seemed to be divided practically by function. In one corner was a majestic canopy bed. It had a beautifully ornamented shape with detailed, enchanting carvings.

Near it was an equally well crafted armoire.

In another corner was some type of worktable, filled with diagrams and drawings.

Around it odd contraptions were scattered, inventions of some sort. She wouldn't hazard a guess at their purpose.

The third corner held privacy shades. Around it were what looked like a raised cot. A table held a collection of medical devices, vials and potions.

In the back, sat a large mahogany desk. It was positioned near the fireplace along with two comfortable chairs in front of it. A glass chess set sat beside the desk. The desk was filled with books and journals. Behind the desk was an iron wire, spiral staircase seemingly leading down to the kitchen.

Siobhan didn't see a weapon or any hint of jewels, paintings, or antiques. Aside from the bed, which is historically hard to steal, the closest thing of any real value was an immense and wonderfully detailed map hanging over one set of bookshelves.

The whole space was an interesting clustered mess of interests, half finished projects, and thought experiments. Siobhan found it fascinating, charming, and slightly intimidating all at the same time. It smelled of paper, wax, ink, old wood, burning candles, and Connal.

At the center of the room was a collection of lounge couches and chairs with two thick support beams holding up the ceiling. Siobhan sauntered passed the two men in a walk that was both challenging and inviting. She leaned against one of the pillars where she could see both exits and subtly encouraged the men to sit in front of her.

Connal's mouth twitched at the corners in a knowing smile and blushed slightly before choosing a chair. He couldn't be that innocent, she thought with amusement.

He pulled out and put on a pair of wire framed glasses. He then pulled out the bounty warrant and studied it closely. Siobhan smiled slightly to herself. The man was undeniably cute with his strong jaw, wire glasses and a blushing look.

Rafe marched in and plopped himself down unceremoniously on one of the couches. He did so with practiced skill so as not to spill a drop of the mug he carried.

“Interesting place.” Siobhan teased.

Connal gave a flustered grin. “I tend to get bored easily.”

Rafe laughed, “Just don’t ask to see his basement and if asked, refuse. That’s where the explosions happen.”

“I have a lab downstairs. He’s exaggerating. Explosions rarely happen”

Siobhan’s eyebrows rose, “Rarely?”

Rafe grinned. “When we were kids, it wasn’t that rare. What about your father’s old barn?”

Connal shrugged, “It was old and unused.” He was grinning openly now.

Connal looked up from the warrant and with a shake of his head, asked, “So Rafe, what was so important to bring the General of the Scabhta back to my tavern?”

He said it pointedly. Siobhan startled back to the present. A lot of mystery surrounded the Scabhta. It was widely known that the Scabhta were a special paramilitary and reconnaissance element of the Athnia army.

Siobhan knew of rumors though, that the Scabhta had graduated to intelligence operatives in the service of the Federation. Some even said they were engaged in darker activities to protect the interests of the Athnia ruling families.

It was a lot of rumor. In Siobhan's experience though, rumor usually held some truth. If Rafe was the general of the Scabhta, then he was a man to be careful of.

Rafe sat up, set down his mug, and gave Connal a long look of disapproval. Then, he took a breath like a man about to dive into deep water. He declared evenly, "We need to talk, privately. What I have to say is sensitive for both of us."

Connal shook his head. "Trust has to be given before it can be asked. Siobhan came here for help and she needs to know that I trust her. Go on, Rafe. I'll vouch for her."

Rafe grunted. "You've always been stubborn." He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. He considered his options and studied Connal's face. He looked like a man who wanted to throw something. Siobhan stifled a grin. "Fine. My brother wants you to meet him at Montrose."

Connal looked unimpressed. "And what would he want with me?"

"My guess. He wants to kill you," he said, rubbing his eyes, "but I've said it before and you're still here."

Connal shook his head. "I doubt Cyrus wants to kill me. Killing someone is generally a thing you only get to do once. As long as he thinks I can be useful, I'm safe enough. Why does he suddenly think I'm worth the trouble?"

In Siobhan's head the name 'Cyrus' sounded a silent alarm. Rafe was *his* brother?

Rafe shook his head. "He hasn't told me specifically. The Council are gathering for the vote at Montrose though. He's going to ask for a vote to stay in power."

Connal frowned. "He wouldn't want me there for that. Talking openly against him was what landed me in exile in the first place."

Siobhan pursed her lips. They were both some type of nobles, she thought thought distastefully. She was careful to keep her face neutral and her movements still.

For the first time, Rafe looked worried. “The world is going to hell, Con. I think he hopes you can see or figure something out that his people can’t. The Scabhta have been called back from the border. He wants us close.”

“What type of chaos?”

Rafe looked at Siobhan carefully. She was very still, as if on a hunt. Shouldn’t hide the sharpness in her eyes, however. Rafe looked back at Connal in frustration. He finally shrugged in defeat. “I’ve spent the last several months fighting off... “ he hesitated and then bit the next word, “monsters at the border.”

“Monsters?” Connal said with a laugh. “Isn’t that a little hyperbolic?”

Rafe’s face was stone. “No Con. I’m mean monsters. The kind out of children’s stories or myths and legends. This year has been absolutely unreal. Giant snakes, beasts with multiple heads, huge spiders, and things I can’t describe. They’re coming across our borders. Sometimes they come alone and sometimes in packs. My men and I have been hunting them down and stopping them from getting through to our cities for the past year. We have no idea what they are or why they’re trying to cross our border.”

Connal’s eyes lit up. He sat up straighter and a near grin touched his lips. “Really?”

“This is serious.” Rafe rolled his eyes. “Don’t get excited. I know you.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “This isn’t one of your mysteries. People are dying and its getting worse.”

Connal turned red and bit his lip. “Sorry. You’re right, of course.” But she could tell he could hardly contain himself. “It’s just so interesting and new!” Rafe’s jaw clenched hard.

Connal shook his head and held out his hands. “I get it! I’m not dismissing the danger or seriousness. I promise.” He gestured his apology “But why would Cyrus be calling back Athnia’s elite forces if we’re getting attacked at our border?”

Rafe’s faced screwed up in disgust. “Fear and politics. I’ve left what men I can dare without open reprimand, but most have been ordered back to protect him and his loyalists against assassins.”

“What assassins? The Celte stick to the families. They’ve never attacked the Emperor before.”

“That’s because an Emperor’s power used to be mostly ceremonial. The Emperor’s legitimacy depends on the seven Families acceptance of him as the Emperor. The Families worry that it’s no longer ceremonial.”

Connal scratched his head. “I warned them about that. Cyrus never wanted that power for defense. It was obvious.”

“It was obvious to you. But now others are starting to believe. He thinks the Families would see any request this year for an extension as an attempt to push off the vote of the Families. ”

“I supposed he blames me for that.”

“More than a little, yes.”

“That doesn’t explain why he would want me there now, though.”

“That’s only the backdrop. Several of the noble families have had key members targeted by assassins. No one will claim credit.” Seeing Connal’s face grow alarmed, Rafe quickly reassured. “Your family hasn’t been targeted. That’s part of the problem. You were vocal against

the last vote for my brothers' extension. The fact that every family but yours has been attacked, hasn't gone unnoticed."

"My parents wouldn't be behind a coup like that. They tolerate the Federation more than anything. They believe in taking care of their own."

"No one really knows who's behind the attacks. Now everyone is on edge- including the Emperor. The rumor is the Families are going to Montrose but with their elite forces at their back. No one trusts anyone right now."

"So Athnia has an unknown threat at their borders, someone assassinating members of the Families, and the federation at the edge of an open civil war."

Rafe nodded. "They've chosen Montrose as the city for the vote. It's the furthest away from the Emperor's base of power."

"That's quite a lot, Rafe."

"It certainly is. That's even without the odd religious things happening on the edges.

"What religious 'things'?"

Rafe shook his head. "I haven't had the manpower to dig into it much. I also have to be really careful. Anything that deals in the realm of the Athena priesthood is technically off limits. I'm getting word a strange new cult is brewing in Athnia. One that seems bent on promoting some old magic."

"Magic? Rafe- we haven't seen any true magic in centuries."

He gave Connal a hard look. "We both know magic exist today." Connal squirmed. "It's unnatural and illegal but it exists."

"Are you sure its not some desparate recruiting ploy for a new cult? Promise of magic

sounds more like a scheme than anything real.”

“I don’t know what the hell is going on. That’s where you come in.”

“Rafe, the last time we spoke, he was deciding between the headman’s axe and banishment. In the end, he only chose banishment because Randi had a ‘talk’ with him. What is driving this?”

Rafe looked uncomfortable. “Cyrus is convinced the answers lay in one special special book.”

Siobhan nearly jumped and tried to mask it by shifting. They didn’t seem to notice.

Connal brows shot up. “A book?”

“It’s more an artifact than a book. It supposed to hold secrets and powers from before the Wizard Wars. He thinks it will have answers for him.”

Connal scoffed. “With all that’s going on, he wants me to go on a treasure hunt? Even if I could find it, those times are best left in the past. The world itself was almost destroyed.”

Rafe smirked and shrugged. “Desperate times. He has intelligence that the book recently crossed into Athnia. Some thieves stole it from across the sea and have brought it here. He wants you to find it for him.”

Connal shook his head. “He has to know even if I found it, I wouldn’t bring it to him. I’ve spoken against his ambitions since we were children.”

Rafe gave him a sour look. “He’s offering a full pardon...”he trailed off.

“And the headsman block if I don’t.” Connal shook his head. “Any leads on where it is?”

“That’s all I know, my friend. My advice?” he glanced at Siobhan before continuing.

“Get out of Athnia. Its time to take that banishment to heart and find a life somewhere else.

Emperor Cyrus would have me flogged for saying this, but I think its time you ran away from home. I don't trust him. My gut says he's up to something. I know he's trying to find a way to turn this chaos to his advantage and make his position permanent."

Connal leaned back in his chair thoughtfully and then looked at Siobhan.

Siobhan shifted. It was the same calculating look he gave the brute downstairs before pushing him over. "So what do you think of all of this?" he asked her.

Her eyebrows rose. "I think its none of my business. I'm still wondering what I'm doing here."

"You know why you're here. Here is another question." His green eyes bored into hers. "If you've already tried every accomplished and known healer for your grandfather, what makes you think I can help?"

Siobhan shifted, "I'm running out of options. You're my last hope."

"No, you're a practical woman who is accustomed to a lot of street rumors. I doubt you believed in rumors of wizard healers with a magical cure. What brought you here?"

Siobhan glared. "You'd be surprised what you believe when you want something bad enough." Connal waited and held the silence.

The candles flickered and the sounds of the patrons below could be heard easily as they waited. Siobhan's jaw tightened. There were too many unknowns here, too much intrigue., too much risk. Her instincts told her to get out. The wolf inside her smelled a trap. Her nostrils flared and she found herself glancing at the exits.

She truly didn't have any other options for her grandfather. She didn't trust these two men and she didn't have to. She just needed to get one of them to heal her grandfather.

Rafe broke it with a laugh. “You might as well tell him.”

Siobhan whirled on him and demanded, “Tell him what?”

“I have no clue, but he’s figured something out. I recognize that look.” Rafe grinned.

Siobhan ran a hand through her hair and looked at the exits. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t ask.” He said it softly. “You’ve already found your miracle cure. You’ve acquired it. Now there is something you want from me.”

It was Siobhan’s turn to weigh options. She was here for a reason. She would not let him die without trying. She still had leverage but the wolf growled inside of her.

She bit her lip and stared into Connal’s eyes. Despite the power, they were kind and understanding. She did believe he wanted to help. She cleared her throat. “My grandfather is suffering from a type of unique poison.”

“A magical poison?” Connal prodded.

“It’s - a special type of poison. I’ve taken him to the best healers I can find. I’ve even tried the priests’ healing magic. Nothing seems to work.”

“Except?”

She looked at Rafe, overtly sizing him up now. His eyebrows rose. He wouldn’t know where she hid it. She could still make this work.

“It’s called the Book of Knowledge.” She said it defiantly with her chin raised.

Rafe swore. Siobhan watched him warily from her post. Her eyes narrowed. Arms were still crossed at her chest and her posture looked relaxed. The wolf inside of her was awake, however. She watched his hands. If he drew that sword, he was dead.

Rafe froze. Duty and instincts warred inside. She could almost see the options rolling through his head. Take her by force, talk the book out of her, follow her later...

Connal spoke. "Easy guys." He looked at Rafe and said firmly to his friend. "You're safe here. Siobhan, keep going."

Siobhan grinned invitingly. Her safety was never in doubt.

Rafe grunted. He sat back down. Gone was the lazy and carefree friend. Rafe watched her intently. His eyes could bore holes with their intensity, yet he held himself still.

It was Siobhan's turn to study Connal. She cocked her head. The man oozed sincerity and a little bumbling naivety. He was clever but looked mostly harmless. Who was this man to order a general? In the end, she concluded, she didn't have to trust him. She needed to use him. She didn't fear either of them.

"Stories say it is the key to unknown and vast knowledge of all men past. It contains the answers to countless mysteries. I think the answer to my grandfather's healing is in this book."

"And you can't read it. What language is it in?"

"It's not in any known language. I was told that no one has spoken it for generations but if there was anyone who could figure it out, it was the "Wizard" who hides at Branora."

"Where's the book now?"

Siobhan stared at him.

"I can't help if I don't see it. I know you don't trust easily but we're going to have to get passed that. I am guessing it's with your grandfather and your sister."

"I told you I left them to find you."

"You're looking for a lifesaving cure. A cure of which you've already sought and tried

multiple solutions with no success. You'd keep him close."

He was too damn clever. "There is danger involved." She paused. "Can you translate it if I bring it to you?"

"How in Hades should I know? I need to see both the book and your grandfather to know what I can do. You're just going to have to trust me."

It was Siobhan's turn to laugh. "Trust who?" Her frustration burst out. "A rich, clever noble of the Athnia government? What's with the wizard games? I didn't come here to get involved in politics. There are people after this book who are a danger to anyone that my path. If I am to trust you." She glared at Rafe. "Either of you. It would mean trusting you with the lives of my family."

Connal studied her thoughtfully.

"I don't trust you. You scare me 'Wizard.'" She said it scornfully. "What I see is a noble who says he cares but when the going got tough, he ran." Connal flinched. "Why are you hiding here if people you care about need you out there?" She gestured vaguely.

They were nobles playing games! What did they know of regret and suffering? She was off the wall now with fists clenched. She surprised herself with the sudden anger. She knew it was misdirected. It didn't matter. The rage was real. It always seemed just under the surface these days. The wolf wanted to launch at them both.

She swallowed it back but her voice was a subtle growl. "If it were me, and I truly cared for someone. Nothing could tear me away!" The wolf inside threatened to overwhelm her. With sudden panic, she thrust it back harshly. Her breathing was heavy. Her face red, but she felt the wolf settle back within her with a slight whimper.

She nodded to herself. “You may mean well but I don’t think you have what it takes to make the real sacrifices for something you care about. My family is on the line. I can’t risk trusting someone who is content to hide.”

Connal looked at her thoughtfully. She knew her blows landed. She could see the pain and regret on his face. He swallowed hard but his eyes held hers. Sadness filled them, but also understanding. Even through her anger, his eyes pierced through to see her. Even through the pain she caused him, he felt for her. She suddenly felt naked in front of him. Vulnerable to those eyes. Anger leached out of her, leaving her alone with the now whimpering wolf.

Finally he whispered, “there’s a fine line between brave and stupid. Causes can’t be won if you’re dead and sometimes regrouping to find the right allies can make all the difference.”

Rafe stood and interjected before she could respond again. “Con, I know you like—no, need— your puzzles and hard luck cases. Now is not the time. I don’t care if she has the book. You need to get on that monster of a horse of yours, and head over the mountain. They sent me to bring you in, one way or another. The last time you jumped into the Athnia politics, it didn’t go well. It’s time to leave.”

Connal stood up and walked to his desk. From a drawer behind the desk, he pulled out a bottle of liquid and a glass. Then he poured himself a glass of the same sweet smelling amber liquid that he poured her earlier. Its scent hit her nose from across the room. He sipped and considered.

He walked to one of the windows and looked out at the dark night. When he spoke, his voice was measured and thoughtful. “I don’t believe in coincidences. There is something larger going on. Both of you here on the same day. The Emperor wanting the book and Siobhan the one

to have it. There's also another strange man downstairs for one of us. Those are not coincidences."

He smiled a secretive, boyish grin. "There's a game stirring. Someone has carefully placed us in positions where we'll act predictably." He looked at the chess set beside him. "The first moves are usually predictable. It's the endgame that matters. Maybe it will give us all a chance to exorcise some demons on the way." He took another sip before whispering quietly to himself, not realizing how keen her hearing. "And I'm sick of my prison. Boredom will be the real death of me." He looked at them both.

She looked into his eyes and saw that boyish excitement. She pleaded with him. "This stuff is serious. We don't have time for games."

Rafe laughed. It was resigned, cynical laugh. "Siobhan, everything's a game to Connal."

Connal quieted them both with a wave of his hands. For the first time irritation tinged his voice. "Don't you both see? At this point, we don't have many moves in front of us. Siobhan, you have to bring the book and your family to me." She started to object again but he nodded his head. "You and I both know you don't have any other choices. You wouldn't be here, arguing with us otherwise. You have my word, I'll do everything I can to help him."

Rafe shook his head but with resignation. "If someone or something is setting things up, then why do the predictable? If the game is rigged, don't play."

Connal smiled, "There's more to gain by winning than forfeiting. But you're right about needing to be less predictable. That's why, we'll need to get your sister. She's isolated herself in the mountains."

Rafe's lip curled, "Randi? Why?"

“I suspect some form of orchestration. Your sister is great at adding a little chaos to anyone’s plans. Are we agreed?” He grinned at them both.

Siobhan stared at him. His face shone with boyish excitement. As a first step, he wanted to add someone else for her trust. Someone, he said who would add *more* chaos. Yet he was also right. He was her last hope.

She looked at Rafe. She saw her sentiments reflected back at her in his eyes. They were both resigned to their fate. Her grandfather’s words seemed to mock her. *‘The key to success lay in the relationships one chooses to accept.’*

Siobhan sighed and nodded. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Connal grinned wider. “Trust me.”

Chapter Three

Rafe and Connal rode up the trail with the mountain looming over them. They rode out at early light and would travel all day across the mountain range. By mid morning they left the well traveled pass that climbed through the mountains and instead headed into the rolling trails that led into the deeper wilderness. They headed toward the deep forest and gray crevices where Randi sought her solitude.

The mountains were covered with a rug of trees, green, yellow, scarlet and orange. From carved rocky outcrops, waterfalls both trickled and roared. In between the cover of foliage they could see the silver glint of rivers and the occasional mirror-like flash of a mountain

Normally the awe and power of the mountain accomplished the rare task of smothering his racing thoughts, but not today. Connal's thoughts raced. They raced through what he little he knew from the events at the tavern to the infinite possibilities of who and why someone would stage such elaborate mischief. They raced through worry for his friends. Both Rafe and Randi

were childhood friends. As children of powerful houses in Athnia, they found a rare connection and spent most waking hours together. Their parents encouraged it as alliances of powerful houses often started in childhood friendship.

Time and events had torn them apart. Rafe was pushed by his father to join the Athnia Federation's guard and quickly rose up the ranks.

Randi, the independent one, joined the local noble warrior class called the Searbhantan. She didn't stop there. She joined the Searbhantan of Connal's house and not her own. Her being a bastard daughter gave her that freedom. Then she rebelled again and did what no one ever did. She left the Searbhantan to pursue a new path.

Connal never learned where she went but this summer she turned up in his mountain escape. Her eyes, always hard, were colder and he thought more haunted. She was troubled and he was worried about her. He had to admit, at least to himself, he was using the recent troubles as an excuse to check on her. He couldn't leave the mountains without knowing she was okay.

If he could talk her into leaving her isolation, he would. Doing so might help them both and give him time to figure out what was wrong with her. She was also the most dangerous person he knew. At least until Siobhan.

He felt his heart pick up a bit when he thought about Siobhan. She was exciting. Sexy, smart, full of mysteries and puzzles to solve. She was interesting from many angles.

"You're thinking about her ass again, aren't you?" Rafe asked from behind him.

"What!?"

"You just sat up straight in your saddle, like a soldier at attention." Connal didn't have to look back to see his friend grinning at him.

“The asses I’m thinking about are ours and how to keep them out of the fire.”

Rafe snorted. “You think too much. Though in this case, I should probably agree. Your sense of priorities are always skewed but you’re ten times worse when you think a woman needs your help.”

The trail widened so Connal slowed down where they could talk easier. “What are you talking about?”

Rafe paused as if thinking about it. “Kirsten, Keana, Tilly, Isabella- I could go on, you know.”

“I’m sure you can list dozens of women’s names, that’s not making any type of point.”

“Oh you want specifics. Was it Kristen or Keana that robbed you?”

“I wasn’t robbed and you’re thinking of Tilly. She didn’t rob me, she just borrowed some mon-- “

“Oh yes. Kristen had the angry husband that tried to kill you.”

“We weren’t doing anything. He beat her. I was helping her make some decisions for herself.”

“Uh huh. Then there was Isabella...”

Silence for a moment.

“Ok, Isabella tried to kill me, but I knew she wasn’t completely healthy in the head when I took the case. I thought I had something that would help her.

“Did it leave a scar or did it heal without one.”

It scarred, but he wasn’t going to tell Rafe that. “What about you? You’re the one with a different woman in every city.”

Rafe paused, suddenly serious. “Well my family doesn’t send knives to random women. Bastards can’t inherit. That stopped the conversation for a bit.

“How much further, Con. Its going to be getting dark soon.”

“We should be getting pretty close.”

“Should? Con, you told me you knew where you were going. I know because I specifically asked, if you were sure you knew. I believe I said something like, ‘the last thing I want to do is get lost in these accursed mountains looking for a woman who was trained and adept at hiding and who- by they way-- doesn’t want to be found.’. Yep, pretty sure that’s exactly what I said.”

“It wasn’t exactly what you said.”

“Con.”

“I can tell you exactly what you said, if you want to know.”

“Con!” he pulled his horse up. “I’ve wasted almost a full day trekking through these woods with you. Dang it, Con. This is serious. If we’re not back soon they’ll send people out looking for you- us. And those are not the sort of people we want looking for us. We’re turning around.”

“Rafe, she needs us. She’s out here alone. You’re a damn Scabhta. You can find anyone.”

Rafe swore inventively. Connal wasn’t sure what he said was actually physically possible. Those parts didn’t fit.

“She doesn’t need us, Con. She’s never needed us. She’s the most cold hearted, brutal, vicious bitch I’ve ever met and I’ve met a lot. You, I, and just about the rest of the world are safer with her o— “

“Love you too, brother.” A voice said from behind them.

A tall woman with long dark black hair slipped out of the shadows of the woods. She slid out of the darkness as smoothly as other women might emerge from a still pool.

She wore at her back two curved blades and a shorter blade at her waist. She had the same long lithe body of her brother, though she moved with more of a deceptive grace than his hunter’s stride. She wore red leathers that fit like a glove. Her smile was very slight. To Connal who knew her, it was a wide grin.

“Miranda.” Connal said with both pleasure and relief. He slid down from his horse and envelop her in a hug. “We’ve missed you.”

The corners of her mouth twitched in what Connal recognized as a smirk. “So I heard.” Connal was the only one who dared called her Miranda and he used it sparingly.

Nonplussed, Rafe replied with mock gravity in his voice, “Randi, apparently we’re here to rescue you.”

She ignored him and addressed Connal. “You’re being followed.”

His eyebrows rose. “Any idea who they are or what they want?”

“Not yet. Stay on this trail. At the next fork, go right. It should lead you to my cabin. I’ll meet you there.”

“You sure? We can go with you.”

“You’d only slow me down. Meet me at my cabin. Rafe, keep him safe.” She then faded back into the trees.

Connal and Rafe looked at each other for a second and Rafe said, “She hasn’t changed. Well, let’s go to the cabin.”

“We’re not letting her go back there alone.” But it was said as a question.

Rafe shrugged, “Of course we are. Come on, she knows what she’s doing.”

They continued down the trail and found the fork in the trail. They took the right branch as instructed and soon came to an old shack. It was a bit shabby and didn’t look like anyone stayed there.

“This can’t be it.” Connal said.

“It suits her perfectly.” Rafe said drily. “Besides, do you expect to find another building out here in the middle of nowhere? Let’s get our horses around back and get inside. “

‘Around back’ turned out to be a sheer cliff. They found a place to tie their horses, but left them saddled and tacked up. They didn’t know what was coming and wanted to be prepared.

They entered the building. It was a small two room shack. One room for living with a fireplace and another for sleeping. In the small sleeping room, a cot lay on the floor. The furniture in the living room was minimal and there was only one window next to the door.

“Well this is lovely.”

Connal looked around. There was no sign of food. Dust covered the corners. What was most noticeable was that there were no weapons of any kind.

“She doesn’t live here.” He said, looking at the cot. It was unmade and lay in a rumple on the floor. But there was no dust from the door to the sleeping room. He looked back at door and the path from the door to the room showed signs of wear. He walked over to the cot.

Rafe was watching outside the window with his hand on his sword and noticed Connal poking around at the cot. “What are you doing? I doubt she bathes regularly. I wouldn’t get too close to that.”

Connal ignored him and then found what he was looking for. He pulled the cot aside and a crude door lay under it. He pulled it up to show a ladder leading down into a cave in the cliff. He turned and grinned at Rafe.

“Well done. Now if you don’t mind- oh, here she comes.”

Randi slid into the room with a relaxed satisfied smile tugging at her mouth. “There were seven behind you.”

“Were?” Rafe asked.

“Two were scouts and are no longer a threat. I came here to make sure you two had found the shelter before worrying about the rest. They are a ways behind.”

“Five men? Do you think they’ll find us here?” Connal asked.

“No, I’ll find them first. They are Ceilte, likely assassins.”

The Ceilte were secretive mercenary groups. Each major Athnia family used them for more covert business. In response to the Emperor creating the specialty military group of the Scabhta out of the Príomh Guard scouts, the great families felt the need to recruit their own set of spies and assassins in response.

Randi continued. “They’ll find this place. The tracks aren’t hard to follow. I just wanted to make sure you two weren’t wandering blindly into anything. Stay here. There’s a door in under the cot, that will take you down into the caves. If one gets passed me, those are easily defensible. There is also food and water down there and an exit down the cliff if needed.”

“So why don’t we all go down and wait for there?”

Randi shrugs. “Lots of reasons, but mostly because it will be dark soon and it’s better to end threats. There are only five. Stay here. I’ll be back in a bit.” With that and before they could

object she was out the door.

Connal started to follow her but Rafe stood in the way.

“Rafe move. I’m not letting her fight those killers alone.”

“Con, stop. Yes we are. This is not about bravery. This is about terrain. Out there, in the dark is their advantage. If they get here, we’ll fight. But until they do, this is her fight. Did you see the mark on her wrist?” Connal didn’t answer. He saw it. It was a small tattoo of a bow and arrow.

Rafe took his silence for answer and continued. “She’s Ceilte too. That’s why she left the Searbhantan. She joined Ceilte. Did you recognize whose mark she wore?” Connal nodded in frustration. “Of course you did. It was the Manaigh Sléibhe.” The Manaigh Sléibhe are an order of Ceilte that can be found in Connal's home land. They have a special, honored relationship with Connal's Family. “I don’t know if the men out there are here for you, me or her. But she’s the one trained to deal with them. We know how good she is. You came here for her help. Now, let her help you.”

Connal punched the wall in frustration, making his hand bleed. He didn’t come here to get her killed. He came her to help her. Now she was killing for his family. She was killing for him! He couldn’t just sit here with her out there. Though he was trained in basic combat like most nobles, he wasn’t the fighter or tactician of either of them. He felt helpless. He hated it. He looked up suddenly. There was one thing he could do.

He moved to the corner by the cot and sat down. He crossed his legs and settled his breathing. He calmed his thoughts and reached out to the Void and felt himself float out of his body and into a dark, empty space. He focused his thoughts on Randi and felt his consciousness

zoom through the space of the Void and slip back out. Now a shadow of himself in the night, a mental manifestation of his consciousness, he sought Randi.

He found her crouching in the trees. Her body was relaxed as she watched out into the night. Her breathing calm and smooth. In all the time Connal knew Randi, she was characterized by her tension, a coiled spring ready to snap into action. But here, with the danger present when he could feel his own heartbeat back in the cabin beating with excitement and fear, she looked serene. And just faintly, he thought her eyes gave off a slight red glow.

She watched as five men stalked through the forests toward the cabin. They all avoided the path and stayed in the shadows. They were spaced at least 10 yards apart. Their feet careful to avoid sound. Randi, quietly climbed the tree next to her and slipped closer along the thick branches.

At first Connal thought she was going to wait until they passed, and take them out silently from behind, but then he noticed the gleam in her eyes and a violent hunger. He realized her intent. In her mind, her job was to protect him. If she was noticed attacking them from behind, they could scatter for the cabin. No, she wanted their attention. With a scream she dropped into the middle of them, her two swords flashing in the moonlight. The first went down with a slash to the throat before he knew he was being attacked. Another was disemboweled before he could react, then they were on her.

She parried and glided in the shadows, but the only sounds were the ringing of steel on steel. Another went down as she caught the artery in his thigh and then whipped up to slice his face. She was too much for them. They realized it too and broke in opposite directions.

Rather than give chase, Randi broke straight for the cabin. She would be at a

disadvantage now, she had to run fast and couldn't afford to focus on the sound she made, the assassins could blend back into the woods. Connal followed, willing his consciousness after her.

As soon as she could see the cabin, she stopped. She got as close as she dared, a knife's throw from the door and crouched low in the forest brush. She waited and watched for any sign.

They knew she was out here now. As she ran they could also have tracked her path. They might not know exactly where she was, but they had a good idea. She needed to keep moving, to keep blurring her location, but couldn't get far from the cabin. She quietly stalked through the forest, keeping herself close enough to the cabin to react.

Her eyes caught movement to her right, as she did, she instinctively rolled to her left and barely missed as a dagger shot passed her head from behind. She rolled into a charge at the direction the dagger came from, another flashed toward her but Connal was ready. When she first rolled, he gathered from himself a great surge of energy, pulled it from his body through the void and when the second dagger flashed he thrust it at the attack. The dagger redirected sharply and thudded hard into the ground next to the charging woman. Then she was on him, her sword flashing through his throat.

Randi never stopped moving. With a fluid roll she slid into the brush and behind a tree; immediately controlling her breathing and listening.

She heard no sound of the final attacker and with a flash of panic, Randi glanced at the cabin and saw the door open. She jumped to her feet and sprinted toward the door.

With a startled jolt, Connal realized the threat and jumped back into the Void. When he came back to his body, a great weariness hit him as if he had ran all day. His eyes were still closed and struggled to get them open. He finally looked up and saw Rafe cleaning his sword on

the tunic of the last assassin.

Rafe looked down at him. “Did you have a nice nap?”

Randi then burst through door, rage on her face before she took in the scene. Her transformation was remarkable. With visible effort, Connal watched as she clamped down on that rage and fought it to submission. For a second, he thought she might lose the battle. Then her face was the same cold expression. Without a word, she turned and walked back out.

Rafe in a mock Connal voice, “Let’s go up in the mountains. Find your sister. It will be fun, he said.”

Warily, Connal wiped his face. “I never said it would be fun.”

“You act like all your ideas are going to be fun. You’d tell men to charge a hill with a tone of someone telling people it was going to be a party. What are you doing?”

“I want to know what family these are from.” He said, kneeling at the dead assassin.

“Rafe, this one is from your house.”

“That would mean the Emperor.” Rafe replied, his face going white.

“That doesn’t make sense. He just sent you and we haven’t had time to come out of the mountains yet. If he was going to send someone, it wouldn’t be for a day or so at the earliest.”

“Unless he never really wanted you to come in?”

“Maybe. Can you go check the markings of the others? I don’t think I can right now and I think this may be important.”

Rafe gave Connal an exasperated look as he realized why he was so weak. “Sure. But we’re going to talk about this. We have enough problems without you playing with your other gifts.”

Connal sighed but didn't respond. He made himself stand as he waited. He propped himself on the wall. At least he wouldn't need to work in the forge or chop wood to get to sleep tonight. He didn't think his usual racing thoughts would compete with body's exhaustion for change.

Rafe came back moments later with Randi trailing. They were both frowning. It was never good when they agreed on anything.

Rafe spoke. "They are from six of the seven Ceilte houses. I've... I've never heard of any of the Ceilte working together before."

Randi added. "That's because they have always hated each other."

Connal rubbed his face. "Which one wasn't present?" though he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"Manaigh Sléibhe," they said in near unison and both grimaced.

Connal nodded. "What is the biggest difference between the Manaigh Sléibhe and the others?"

Randi answered quietly, "The Manaigh Sléibhe exclusively worship Arduinna. They're monks. The others, mercenaries."

Connal nodded. "And Rafe, last night you said that assassins were attacking the Families. I think we need to get back quickly."

#

Siobhan made camp after a long day traveling out of the mountain. Connal had been right. She kept Charity and her grandfather close, but not too close.

Siobhan knew she drew danger like jewels drew thieves. She wanted them far enough away so that she couldn't bring them harm but close enough to reach them quickly. It was a difficult balance. Now as she tracked back she admitted to herself she probably erred too much on keeping them away.

As the sun went down, her fire became bright and vivid. Siobhan added more wood and poked it with a long stick. It crackled.

The light cast by the flames danced across the dark trunks of the trees. The heat from the campfire warded off the night frigid air, making the night breeze refreshing rather than biting.

A lake nearby reflected a distant glow. A great owl dressed in a gray suit with a bow tie across its chest watched her closely. It studied her quietly on a nearby limb. She could have sworn she saw that same owl several times throughout the day.

Siobhan hoped her family were safe. She gave some thought of riding through the night. She was tired though. She knew she needed to keep herself fresh for anything that might find her. It was hard to sit, stretched out by a fire, when they could be in danger.

She thought of Charity, her adopted younger sister. She was short woman with a bright innocent smile. She could use some of her optimism right now. Nothing ever seemed to get to Charity.

Connal would like Charity. Siobhan frowned. Connal was a distraction. A pleasant,

amusing, befuddling distraction. His size and strength were appealing, and his nature more so. Of course, Charity would say it's been too long since she was "distracted."

Siobhan jabbed at the fire. This was a bit different though. Something told her that this man wouldn't settle for anything quick like a "distraction." Anything more would be a full on disaster.

That thought brought her mind to her grandfather. He found them, protected them, trained them and cared deeply for them. He made for all three of them a family. He deserved better than to die for her foolishness. She couldn't let that happen.

A sound of a distant hoof beat broke her out of her thoughts. Siobhan jumped to her feet, hands on her daggers. She listened carefully. The beats were drawing closer, creating a steady rhythm of anticipation. Whoever it was, was not in hurry. She slipped out of the firelight and into the shadows. She sniffed the air. She smelled metal, steel, horseflesh and man.

A few minutes later a tall dark skinned man walked out into the light. He was leading a mountainous charger. He wore chain mail armor and a white cloak with purple trim. The symbol of a great Owl rested on both his chest and on a shield being carried by his horse. His dark hair was cropped short and a grizzled, gray dusted beard decorated his face. He was a handsome man with hard, golden eyes.

Siobhan immediately recognized him as an Athena Church Knight. She put away her daggers but hesitated before coming out. What was he doing at her camp?

"Good evening," the man said in a deep gorgeous voice into the night. "My name is Argos. I just rid the area of some thieves not far from here. Would you mind if I rest a few minutes by your fire?"

His tone was confident, but smooth and reassuring. Siobhan slipped out of the shadows, her hands away from her weapons. The Church Knights were known to be heavy believers in the law, promoting good, and stamping out hard what they saw as evil. In her line of work, that was both reassuring and uncomfortable. She didn't consider what she did as evil, but she doubted they saw the world the same.

"I'm afraid I don't have much to share but a bit of water." She gestured to the water skin by her pack. "Its fresh from the lake."

The big man nodded. Siobhan noticed that he carried himself with a sense of authority and wore his large broadsword like it weighed no more than a riding stick. He tied his horse. He then loosened, but didn't unsaddle, him and helped himself to the water.

They studied each other across the fire. He took in her weapons and her attire. She didn't get the usual interest from him that she received from most men. When he sized her up, it was cold and professional.

"Its unusual to see someone traveling alone at night. Particularly one so lightly armed." His sonorous voice held concern, but his eyes were thoughtful.

Siobhan gave him a cocky grin. "Its unusual to see a Church Knight so far from a city, even more so in a random camp in the forest."

They held each other's eyes and measured. The only sounds were the crackling fire and rustling of the leaves in the breeze. Siobhan's auburn hair blew around her face, but she held still. Her body was relaxed like a wolf watching an intruder in its woods, wary but unconcerned. The silence held for another beat.

He broke it first. "I'm on a mission for my Lady. She has directed me to find a lost

book.”

Siobhan cocked an eyebrow. The book again. He wasn't here by accident. How did these people keep finding her? “Did you check lost and found?”

Argos arched an eyebrow. “I'm afraid it was stolen recently.”

“Really?” she said in a smoky voice with obvious mock surprise. “The world is such a dangerous place. Its lucky to have guys like you.” She sauntered toward him, hips swinging suggestively. “Big strong guys with sticks to make things right.”

Argos backed up a step, palm out. “I'm just here to talk. I don't want any trouble.”

Her eyes flashed. “Mmm. I can see that.” She stopped and cocked a hip.

“This book is dangerous. In the wrong hands, it could unleash something catastrophic that hasn't been seen in over a 1000 years. It has secrets that my Lady believes are best left buried.”

Unconcerned, she shrugged. “Sounds like you better find your thief then. Please be careful, sir knight. There are dangerous people out there.”

Argos frowned and started to speak when Siobhan sensed something new. She interrupted whatever he was going to say with a curt question. “There are men out there. Are they yours?”

Startled, Argos shook his head vigorously. “I'm alone.”

Siobhan nodded. These men smelled different. Smoke and Oil. With a growl, she dove into the woods, hands pulling out her daggers. She ignored a startled shout from Argos.

Ceilte liked the dark. The dark created fear and obscured movement. They liked the symbolism and the unpredictability of attacks that one can't see coming. They enjoyed and used

the terror it could help induce. But most Ceilte weren't so foolish to try and hunt a wolf in the woods.

Siobhan slipped through the night and found them easily. Five men stalked and surrounded the fire. Argos stood in the center, stalwart knight facing the darkness with bravery. The symbolism and image was vivid. He was a man standing proud and strong in the light against the darkness. The Ceilte converged and Siobhan hunted.

Siobhan stalked the first and when she was close, rolled and hamstringed him. When he screamed and fell, her dagger slashed his throat. She quickly moved on.

The Ceilte froze now, realizing the tables were turned. They tried to move on their colleague's position, where they heard the scream. To Siobhan they were blind men fumbling in the woods. The second, she swept his legs and buried her dagger in his heart and then moved on quickly and quietly.

Finally realizing the firelight was their best bet of surviving the night, the remaining three charged the brave knight. Argos shouted with triumph and swept his great sword in large arc, beheading one, as the other two flailed back out of reach.

Siobhan charged into the light. "I need one alive!" she growled fiercely as Argos took a thrown dagger on his mail shoulder and impaled one of the remaining Ceilte.

Siobhan faced the last Ceilte, growling off the big knight. The Ceilte lunged in and swiped diagonally from his right shoulder. His movement seemed so slow, like moving through mud. She easily side stepped the strike with a step inside. She controlled his knife hand with the blade in her right hand as it passed. Then she struck straight with her left, catching his face with the pommel of her dagger. She connected with enough force to send him flying from his feet.

He landed with a limp thud. He should live.

Siobhan straightened, her heart still pounding and turned to regard the knight as he cleaned his sword on the last assassin he killed.

“Good fight. The Lady should be pleased.”

Siobhan didn't say anything as she calmed the wolf inside. She checked on the assassin she hoped was still alive. He was out cold, but still had a pulse. She found some leather strips from her packs. Then proceeded to bound his hands and feet as tight as she could. Finally she dragged him to the fire.

“So, why are the Ceilte trying to kill you?” Argos asked.

“That's why I wanted one left alive. Now all I have to do is wait. This didn't turn out to be a good place for you to rest. You may want to find a more peaceful fire.” It was an obvious dismissal.

Argos looked surprised. “We just fought off five assassins, and you want to be alone with one? You are an usual woman. If its okay with you, I'll stick around a little longer. I would like to find out what brings these beasts to this forest.”

“We may be in for a long wait. I'm not even sure he'll survive. I hit him a bit harder than I intended.”

“It was a good blow, well driven.”

Siobhan held back a smirk. It was better he believed that. She didn't know where the church knights came down on the *draíochta* but she could guess.

“I may be able to help shorten the wait. If he'll let me.” He knelt down by the injured man and murmured quietly to himself and laid his palm on the man's forehead.

Siobhan let out a small gasp. Argos continued to murmur to himself and his hand glowed a light purple light. The damage to the Ceilte's face healed before their eyes until the man's eyes fluttered and tried to open weakly.

Hesitant, Siobhan said out loud, "The healing magic of the church was something I never believed."

Argos nodded. "Its given to only a few and we guard the identity of those that can do it carefully."

"But why? You could help so many? Is healing less important than justice?" She said, looking pointedly at his sword.

Argos met her eyes with confidence and she saw again his steely resolve. " They are two sides of the same thing. They are both gifts from Athena who is the goddess of justice, wisdom, healing, and righteous battle. When you accept her gifts, you do so with complete faith and understanding that they are for her purpose and not your own. We reserve our talents for her purpose. "

Siobhan shook her head, not in disbelief but in wonder. "I talked with several of your Church. I have a grandfather who is very ill. They told me they couldn't help. They said only a few had the gift and that they couldn't help." She looked at him with a question.

"They didn't lie. A true priest of Athena would not. We keep the knowledge of those blessed with Athena's gifts to very few. So that Athena can guide their use and we don't succumb to our own desires to misuse her power. The power is not ours, you understand. It doesn't come from within us. We simply ask for help and when the purpose aligns with hers, we can feel her gifts pass through us."

“So you’re saying saving this assassin is her Will? Why would she want this man saved but would let my grandfather die?” She didn’t say that she had thought it a wonderful con before. If it didn’t work, it wasn’t the con artists fault. It was Athena’s Will. But she’d just watched as this man’s wounds healed before her eyes.

Argos smiled. “She did it for you. I told her that you needed this man healed. I asked if she would grant you that so that you could learn what you must. I told her that I wanted your trust so that I could continue to serve her purpose in stopping the evil of the book.” He shrugged as if it was simple. “She granted the request. It’s possible she would do the same for your grandfather. I truly do not know.”

Siobhan watched him thoughtfully and then at the assassin. The man was waking up. The first thing he noticed was that his hands and feet were bound. Then he looked up and studied his captor

“Hello, Siobhan,” the Ceilte said. He showed no fear and sat as comfortably and still as he was able.

“How did you find me?”

“Our people are everywhere. You know that. You could have been one of us. You were given a great honor and you spit in our mouths.” He spit the last words out with disgust as if what he said was literal.

“I want you to back off.”

The assassin cackled. “Back off? You stole from the Bas Ceilte.” He shook his head and clicked his tongue. “That can’t happen. No, Siobhan. You’re a dead woman. Everyone you’ve ever cared for is dead. Anyone we think you so much as liked...” glancing meaningfully at Argos

behind her "... are dead. We are the assassins of Bàs Naomh. You'll die screaming as will your loved ones. The only difference will be that they will die screaming your name and you'll die screaming the name of Bàs Naomh."

Siobhan growled. She grabbed the man by the throat and lifted him up with one arm. She held him over head, his feet dangling and him choking. "Listen to me you little rodent. You know who I am and what I'm capable of. If you or any of your kind so much as look at my family wrong, I will hunt all of you. I will see that your whole "Order" is exterminated." She brought his face close to hers. "You recruited me. You know what I can do. You know I can do it." And she flung him against the tree. "Leave us alone!"

The man grunted and wheezed out, "We love death. We invite it welcomingly. It's done. As soon as we knew your location we found them. We unleashed the Biast bhàs. They're likely dead already. It already knew the scent of him, it just needed to know where to hunt. We were sent to send you a message. Enjoy knowing that you caused their death before death comes for you."

Siobhan cursed and for the first time that night fear shook her system. "Then I grant you your love." She snapped out a dagger and sent it flying into the assassin's throat. She sprinted for her horse, trying to contain her terror.

"Where are you going!?" Argos shouted.

Siobhan hesitated for only instant. "There is a small village just outside the mountain. It's off the main road. Its called Myra. My family is there. The book is there. If you can help me save them and help heal my grandfather, it's yours." Without looking to see his reaction, she saddled and mounted her horse as fast as she could. She vaulted into the saddle and made her

way to the road as fast as she dared. Then she urged her mount into a gallop.

She knew she couldn't gallop all the way. She pushed as hard as she dared, promising to make it up to her horse later. It was still hours before she reached the village.

She was perhaps 100 yards before she smelled it. Death. It was already here. As she entered the village, she saw three dead men, their body parts scattered across the road into the village. Their only weapons, farm tools.

The rest of the village was quiet and she feared the worse. Her horse was near exhaustion from the rushed ride down from the mountain. It now found new energy as it smelled the blood and carnage.

Siobhan got off her horse and looped the reins so it wouldn't tangle them and let it run off. She didn't have time to tie it. She pulled out her daggers. With a heavy sense of dread she made her way into the village.

The village was small. It had no inn, no trade center. It wasn't much more than two rows of houses and a path for a road. It was off the main road and had nothing about it to attract attention or strangers. She thought its obscurity would keep them safe. The villagers were very happy to see her gold. It would have lasted them several seasons.

She did not mean to bring this doom on them. She made her way to the house that she knew should hold her family. Her legs trembled and her heart pounded.

It was the thunderclap of its wings that warned her. She dove to the side and the Beast bhàs only caught a glancing slice of her back.

It landed on all four feet with a loud thud and dust flew up. Siobhan turned. Her terror was transformed to anger. The wolf inside her leaped into her heart. She bared her teeth and

shouted her defiance.

The Biast bhàs was the size of a horse but had the shape of a large winged cat. It was covered in black fur with a thick mane of hair surrounding its head. It roared at her, dwarfing her shout. Its tail was a narrow, segmented thing that arced and whipped over its head menacingly. At the end of the tail was a stinger that she knew carried deadly venom. Only a slight drop of that venom had sent her grandfather into a sleep he still had not wakened from.

Siobhan lunged. She snapped at the monster's face with her dagger, quickly jumping back to avoid the stab of its tail.

As it always did for her, time seemed to slow. The thing was huge, powerful but slow to her.

She slashed in and out with her daggers. She connected time and again. She made slices and cuts but nothing serious.

The Biast bhàs roared. It lunged at her with its great mouth and fangs. Siobhan easily dodged aside. It rose on its hind legs. It leaped at her, trying to bury her with its weight. Siobhan waited for the right moment then leaped to side. She swung as she did so for its throat. Her daggers failed to penetrate its thick hide. Her daggers were useless.

She was quicker but she had no weapon that could hurt it. She knew she was going to die. She stood straight. If she let it bury her with its weight on its next strike, she might be able to impale it with her daggers. She'd die but she'd end the thing that killed her family.

From behind the beast, a group of villagers leaped out from behind one of the houses. They were all carrying hunting bows and were being led by Charity. Siobhan's heart surged.

They peppered its hide with arrows. The monster screamed in anger. It twisted in mid air

with an agility that should have been impossible.

It leaped for Charity and the villagers. They were scattering but Siobhan could tell they would be too slow. Without thought of what she was doing, Siobhan crouched and leapt for its back. She grabbed a fist full of mane and jerked herself onto its back. Her weight pulled it off balance and away from Charity.

The beast staggered to the side with the new weight. Siobhan hung on in desperation. The beast roared in rage and confusion. It went into frantic motion, leaping and twisting. Its stinger stabbed and sliced at her.

Siobhan dodged the stinger. To her time was slow, but the stinger was quick. She barely dodged it twice. Despite her best efforts it caught a slice on her shoulder and she felt the poison burn into her blood. When it cut her, she dropped one of her daggers and caught the stinger in her hand. She quickly lopped it off with her other dagger. Its blood sprayed everywhere, coating her in its stench..

Both hands free, Siobhan was flung aside by the great cat and felt herself flying through the air. She landed with a painful crash into one of the houses, breaking through the wall. She heard the creature scream in pain and rage.

Siobhan was bloody, hurt and the poison was racing fast through her system. She could feel her heart beating rapidly. She forced herself to stand up and face the beast. Warily, Siobhan glared at it through blurred vision.

She faintly heard a thundering sound and seemingly out of nowhere a flash of white and purple slammed into the *Biastr bhàs*. Argos jumped off his charger and faced the beast. His helm gleamed over his head and his shield raised. "For Athena!" he shouted.

The Biast bhàs roared back at him in defiance. But its tail was wounded. Its hide was peppered with arrows and a lance jutted out of its side. Now facing a fully dressed and angry Church Knight, it had enough. It roared its defiance one final time before taking off into the air to nurture its wounds.

Siobhan wobbled on her feet a few moments more. The threat passed, all her wounds hit her at once.

Her sister rushed to her side. “Siobhan!” Charity’s brown hair falling in her face as she knelt beside her. Her normally smiling and cheerful face streaked with horror. “Please no” she cried.

Siobhan smiled weakly before everything faded to black.

Chapter Four

His green eyes shown with hidden power that nearly punched through the fog covering her senses. The face though was blurry and unclear. She winced. Her stomach was on fire.

“Is she alive?” a woman asked from a distance.

“She’s alive. You should appreciate one thing about her. She can take a beating.”

“If that Church Knight hadn’t arrived when it did, it wouldn’t have been enough.”

“Are you saying you could have taken on a Biast bhàs all by yourself?”

“Maybe not.”

“Maybe not.” He agreed.

Biast bhàs? She remembered something of a fight. She couldn’t shake the fog. What had happened? Had she botched a job? No. She remembered woods. Yes. She could smell them around her. She hated the woods. She felt too alive. Too.. she shivered and tried to sit up.

“No, no. Sit still. You’ve got some nasty wounds here. You seem to heal fast, but you’re

not done yet. Here. Drink this. It will help us be able to move you.” She could feel that now, the pain of him tending the cuts. Something sticking out of her leg. The pain however was thankfully still buried in the fog.

She faded back to black again. A book. A very blue book and something she was supposed to find or use or... something. Why did it matter? Sleep. Sleep sounded good. Then her grandfather would find her. He always found her. He'd find her and carry her to bed.

Grandfather!

She heard them bustling around her. She tried to shrug off the drug he had given her and sit up again. “A Wizard...” she said. “I came to find the wizard...” she managed.

“I think you’ve had enough of Wizards and magic for a bit.” A familiar voice said from across the room.

She struggled to think. “Not magic. A healer. Rumors say magic, but need a healer. My grandfather.. Please...”

“Ok. Just rest. We’ll talk after you’re a bit better. Right now you need to rest. Just relax. I’ve got you.”

His voice was soothing and calm. Despite her past lessons, she trusted him. She couldn’t say why. It felt instinctual.

She felt herself lifted and carried. She felt weightless, as if she was floating through the air. Arms were around her. Secure. Safe. With those thoughts she let the darkness carry her away again.

When she woke the third time she was more herself. She remembered the assassin, the Church Knight, and the Biast bhàs. She winced at the memory.

That wasn't all that caused her some pain. Her wounds hurt. She did heal fast, but apparently not that fast. She started to get up and realized two things.

One, she was in a strange room. The room was made of wood. It seemed a single room cabin with a fireplace. Pelts covered her as she lay in the strange bed.

Two, she was completely naked. She looked around for her clothes but didn't see them. Instead she found a new set of red leather breeches and tunic.

She got up painfully to put them on when Connal walked in. They both froze. Connal moved first, turning a bright red before quickly leaving. Siobhan finished getting dressed. They weren't hers, but they would do.

"Can I come in?" Connal asked from outside.

Now he asks, she thought. "Yes." She replied. He cracked open the door sheepishly which she found both slightly annoying, but also adorable. She wasn't often around such innocence.

He sat next to her on the bed. "You're healing well," he said.

"I should be dead. The Biast bhàs poison..." She dropped off with a sudden surge of hope. "The Church Knight. My grandfather?"

Connal shook his head. "I'm sorry. You're own *draiochta* blood is fighting off the poison. I'm using a few tricks I know." He looked uncomfortable at that. "Mostly its your own hardy constitution."

There was something else in his voice. "What about my grandfather?" She asked with her heart in her throat.

"Just rest. We can talk about your grandfather when you're feeling better."

“What-“

“You’ve been out for two days.”

“Two days!”

Connal nodded. “When you didn’t return, Randi and Rafe helped track you back to the village.” Connal swallowed. “You were in bad shape but you were healing. You turned a corner just last night.”

“I- I don’t know what to say.”

Connal smiled and rose. “There’s someone who wants to see you.” He walked to the door and shouted something.

Siobhan shifted and winced again. Moments later, a familiar face peaked in.

Charity’s grin lit up her face. Dimples flashed adorably when she saw Siobhan was awake. With a small squeal, she rushed in.

Charity was a short, curvy woman with brown hair and a tiny waist. She had a heart shaped face, button nose and noticeable dimples when she smiled.

All of Siobhan’s tension released. She grinned at the sight of her. Charity rushed to her side and enveloped her in arms.

“Oh I’ve missed you.” Siobhan said. “I thought I’d lost you. I thought I’d lost you both.”

Connal smiled sadly. “I’ll give you two a moment.” He then slipped outside.

Charity smiled at him and then turned back to Siobhan. “You did good, Siobhan” Charity said and pulled her tight again. “You got there just in time.

Siobhan pulled her Charity tight. Her throat was thick as she remembered the terror of

the previous night. “He said said they were going to kill you. That they would hurt me through you. All I could think of was how far away I left you. I didn’t think I would make it in time.”

“You did. I knew you would.” Her voice cracked slightly.

Alarm bells went off in Siobhan’s head. All the sad notes from Connal clicked into place.

“Charity- what is it?” Siobhan pushed her back to look at her. “Is something wrong?”

Charity ducked her head away. Her voice was soft. “I’m sorry. You did what you always did, but I messed up.” Charity said. Her voice trembled as she tried to explain. “I-I heard the fighting outside. I looked out and” She trailed off, as her voice caught.”

Siobhan got cold. “What is it?”

Charity swallowed. “I saw that thing, Siobhan. I didn’t have a choice. I had to leave him.”

“For the love the Saints, just tell me what happened.”

Charity stood and looked outside. She fidgeted with her hands uncomfortably. “We were in the cabin, playing dice. They noticed before I did. Their livestock was restless. Something was out there. Something that scared them. When we looked out, we saw it. We saw the Biast bhàs.” She breathed in sharply as she saw it in her mind again. “It was horrible, Siobhan. I remember the night grandfather fought them off. It all came back to me. Except he was still laying helpless and you weren’t here. It was just me and these villagers. I.. I froze.”

“Charity, it’s ok. You have many gifts but that type of fighting isn’t one.” She smiled comfortingly. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Charity sniffed and continued. “We turned off the lights. We huddled down and stayed quiet. We lost sight of it through the door slits but we could hear it hunting and slaughtering. We were all hoping it would just get its fill and leave. That it wouldn’t find us. Then I heard you.”

Charity finally looked over at Siobhan. Her eyes were filled with regret. “I heard you yelling at it.” She grinned sadly. “Swearing at it, actually. I knew that voice anywhere. I couldn’t leave you out there alone. I-I gathered who would go with me and we got behind it..”

“It’s ok Charity. It’s gone. The knight hit it with his lance. I don’t think it’s coming back anytime soon.”

But Charity wasn’t done. “I had to go to you, didn’t I? I couldn’t let you face that alone.” Her voice was pleading.

“ What is it?”

“Grandfather’s gone.” She said at last.

“What?” She was confused but her heart sank. “What do you mean, gone?”

Charity shook her head. “I don’t know. I went out to help you and when we got back, he was simply not there. I’m so sorry.”

Siobhan closed her eyes. She hadn’t gotten back in time afterall. She’d failed him again. Grief, hopelessness, and frustration coursed through her. The wolf inside her wanted to howl.

But she snapped it off. Charity was hurting too. She didn’t have time for this.

Siobhan gritted her teeth and rose. Siobhan ignored the pain in her side. It was nothing to what she was holding off inside. She gathered her sister to her. “It’s ok. It’s not your fault. We’ll figure it out.”

“How?”

Siobhan was thinking rapidly. “I’m not sure yet, but I’ll make it right.” She had to. For both of them.

They held each other for a moment. Finding comfort in each other.

Finally, Charity pulled away and asked. “Who are these people, Siobhan?”

Siobhan stepped back and sat down on the bed again with a wince.

“Do you remember the rumors about a healer, called the ‘Wizard’?”

Charity nodded. “We both said that sounded like a con.”

Siobhan nodded. “Well I found him. He’s the big guy who brought you in.”

“He doesn’t look much like a wizard.”

Siobhan smiled. “No. He’s clever though.” She paused before saying. “He and his friend are after that book too.”

Charity frowned. “Everyone is after that thing.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I never wanted this.” No matter what she did, she seemed to make things worse.

“I know, sweetie. What about this wizard, guy?”

Siobhan hesitated. “I...I trust him... Um a little.”

Charity looked at Siobhan in near shock. Those were not words she expected to hear.

Charity looked at Siobhan thoughtfully and smirked at her. “He’s cute.”

Siobhan shook her head. “He’s clever,” she said again. “If-“ the word stuck in her throat. “When” she corrected herself, “we get grandfather back, I think he’ll be able to read it. I think he might be able to help us heal him.”

Charity picked up a curl of her hair and chewed on it thoughtfully. “Maybe. Why do they want the book?”

Siobhan shrugged uncomfortably. “It doesn’t matter. We leverage it to get him to heal grandfather.”

“You really think we’ll find him?” She asked.

“Of course. I can track anything.”

“What about your new friends? We’ll have to tell them something.”

Siobhan nodded. “I may need your help to talk our way through this. You’re better at this part than me.”

A smile peaked through. “I can do that. What do they know about the book?”

Siobhan shrugged. “Connal’s clever. You should see what he calls an office. I’ve never seen so many books not in a library. I don’t know what’s in there about it. But they do know I left it with you two.”

Charity nodded and twirled a strand of hair absently. She moves a shoulder. “We’ll just say Grandfather had it. For them to find the book, they’ll have to find him.”

Siobhan thought about it and those piercing eyes. Siobhan didn’t know how to say this. It wasn’t like her. With no confidence in her voice, she said, “He’s really clever, Charity”

Charity’s eyebrows raised. “Are you saying you can’t lie to him?”

Siobhan shook her head fervantly but looked away. Was she saying that? “No, we just have to be careful. Ok? He’ll figure it out. We have to stick to the truth as close as we can.”

Charity looked at her intently. Siobhan thought she saw a hint of the smirk again.

“Whatever you say, sweetie.”

Siobhan cleared her throat, eager to move on. What are they doing now?”

Gathering supplies. I think they plan on heading down to Montrose next.

Siobhan nodded. “We’re going with them.”

“Connal might object.” Charity grinned at her. “He seemed quite worried.”

Siobhan gave her a look but otherwise ignored Charity's hint. "I heal fast. We're going with them."

#

For Charity, cuteness was a weapon. She was adorable and she knew it. It worked well for her and she didn't believe in taking gifts for granted.

When she dressed for the day, she chose a nice, cute dress. It showed off her curves and she liked the way it felt when she twirled. It helped lighten the knot in her stomach. However, at the last minute, Charity felt like something was off. She needed to be ready for something.

It wasn't the voice though, at least not directly. *She* 'd been quiet since the night the monster came.

Charity had left that part out with Siobhan. For some reason, *She* worried Siobhan.

She had warned Charity to prepare the villagers. When Charity got the warning, she knew better than to question it. The voice in her head was always right. When that beast came, they were ready and that gave them a chance.

She also knew Siobhan was coming. All they had to do was survive. Siobhan was coming.

And like always, the voice was right. She was so lucky.

When Charity got the urge to change outfits, she didn't question the feeling. She dressed in what felt appropriate. In this case, it was adventure attire. She put on tight brown breeches. She selected a white and billowy blouse that dipped a bit to show off her assets. She then strapped on her rapier and dagger. Charity gave herself a good check in her mirror. This was much better. She felt ready. She smiled to herself and and rushed off.

These village people were so simple. They toiled. They ate dinner with family and slept. She shuddered at the simple life. She preferred more adventure. Ever since her grandfather and Siobhan found her, Charity's life had been full. Plenty of wealthy marks to target, mischief to cause and then a new city to explore. Charity looked at the poor saps around her and pitied them.

Smiled charmingly at each as they passed though. She shrugged. They didn't seem to realize what they were missing.

Montrose should be more interesting. There she should find plenty of good targets. Alas,

something told her that time for such minor joys might be limited for awhile though. She sighed at the thought. then paused. Sometimes the voice could be subtle.

Charity arrived at the large gathering lodge where the group agreed was meant for dinner. The building was simply made with what looked like materials from the local forest. In her travels, it seemed most small villages had these community buildings. It They all seemed to have some community building to gather for important meetings, celebrations and to mourn.

As she entered, she quickly spotted Siobhan and their new friends sitting at a table in the back.

She started to walk over when her *Sight* hit her. It was something that happened from time to time. It was always unsettling and wasn't something she could control. The only person who knew about it was Siobhan.

When it occurred, she saw symbols and images superimposed on people. She couldn't always interpret what they meant but what she saw always turned out to be useful.

She looked at the table as the group ate quietly. Charity first noticed Rafe. He was drinking heavily out of a mug, as usual. Superimposed over him were thorns and vines wrapped all around him, moving and constricting. She could see his soul struggling with them and bleeding from the effort. As he bled, light spilled out of him with his blood.

He felt trapped. What trapped him and why it was hurting him, she couldn't tell. A shield hung over his head, floating and moving like a banner in a breeze.

Next Charity's attention moved to Randi. She stood quietly in the corner with her arms crossed. Her back leaned against the wall. Her posture appeared relaxed, but her eyes were alert. Randi scanned the room with the intense eyes of an eagle looking for a meal. All of Randi's

senses seemed to be ablaze, shooting out from her body and out of the shadows. She missed nothing.

Most disturbing was that something seemed to move under her skin. It pressed and bulged as if it were alive inside her. For a second a beast-like face and claws seemed to press out of her skin, trying to escape.

Randi winced and tightened her jaw. The beast was pushed back and her skin became as hard as stone. Only visible to her *Sight*, a single translucent tear fell from her face. Oddly enough, another shield floated over her head, its movement in unison to Rafe's.

Charity shuddered to herself before forcing herself to move on. Her eyes moved to Connal. Charity winced in pain. She almost had to shield her eyes from him. The brilliance of his aura was painfully bright. He radiated with untapped, raw power.

Inside he was groping for it. He knew it was there. How could not?! It looked like it could consume him. Yet all his efforts to grab it seemed pointless. He yearned for it. What would he do if he caught it? It could consume them all.

As Charity adjusted to the brightness she saw swirling dark mists surrounding him. They were kept at bay by the brightness of his life-force but they circled and swirled. They seemed to be looking for any opening to seep into his soul.

Lastly, was Siobhan. As always, superimposed over her face was the wolf. Charity smiled at it. The image always made her feel safe. It seemed so alone in its cage. Charity just wanted to hug it.

Though Siobhan herself appeared to be worried, the wolf seemed satisfied and comfortably alert. It was clear to Charity, who knew the wolf as well as she knew Siobhan, that

the wolf inside was happy and content.

It was enjoying itself immensely. The wolf, normally kept in a tight cage, spent the last few days free to hunt and make its mark on the world. Despite Siobhan's protests, part of her was deeply satisfied and yearned for more.

Surprisingly, hovering over Siobhan's head was also the image of Connal. He was shirtless and pulling on a rope in a tug of war with an image of Albin.

For Siobhan, men had never been more than an amusing distraction. She had appetites that mirrored the beast inside her but they were always like indulgent meals. They were devoured and forgotten. Something about Connal pulled her.

Interesting. Charity grinned to herself.

The small party was joined by the village leader, Bron. Bron was an older looking blacksmith. He was well muscled but looked worn and tired. His clothes, though recently cleaned, were stained from his daily work. Though he couldn't have been older than thirty, his body was weathered with the time spent in a hard life. Charity knew he had agreed to temporarily house them only because of gold Siobhan offered.

A deathly darker aura surrounded the surly man. Anger simmered there. It was deep and undirected. Charity shuddered slightly. Suddenly, just as she knew the sun would come up tomorrow, Charity knew the man wouldn't see the age of thirty-five.

He was wearing a medallion. The image on the medallion was a skeletal woman holding a black tinged rose.

The group sat quietly, lost in their own predicaments. Charity purposefully raised her mood and flounced her way over to the table and sat down beside Siobhan.

She casually laid her hand on Siobhan's and let some of her love for her ease through. Siobhan's face visibly relaxed and she smiled at her.

Charity grinning a big vapid smile. She looked around at the quiet group and said "So when do we leave?"

The reactions were predictable. Rafe sputtered in his ale and coughed down a swallow. Siobhan's brow furrowed.

It was Randi who spoke first. "You can go wherever you please. I'm getting Connal out of Athnia at first light." She tried to say it with a cold indifference, but it came out in a forceful burst.

Connal raised an eyebrow.

Rafe smirked. "I think Con will have something to say about that."

He gave Rafe a hard look.

Randi continued, staring right at Connal. "I don't care what he wants. I'll tie him up and lay him over his saddle if I have to. I'm getting him out of here."

Rafe laughed out loud, earning him a scowl from Randi. "You'll follow along with whatever mad idea he comes up with next." Rafe raised his mug to his scowling friend in front of him.

Connal ignored them both and looked at Bron. "We appreciate your community's hospitality."

Bron grunted, "I can't say we'll be sorry to see you leave. When we agreed to shelter the lass and her grandfather, we did so out of the good of our hearts." Charity smirked. Siobhan's gold helped. "We never thought of attracting such evil to us."

Siobhan broke in. "I never intended to get anyone hurt. I'm truly sorry."

Born grunted again. "Intentions aren't worth much, lady."

Connal scowled and said softly. "As I understand it, she paid you well. Then she risked her own life to save the lives of many here."

Bron's face flushed. He looked into Connal's eyes as if to argue, but fell suddenly silent. Charity grinned. Connal was such an assuming man. Large in frame but soft in nature. His mind seemed to dwell inward. It was easy to underestimate him. But those eyes. Charity stifled a giggle. His true power leaked out even to those without the *Sight*.

Bron swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

Rafe smiled pleasantly at the smith. "I think you can leave us. We have much to discuss."

It was a dismissal. Bron looked around the table and gritted his teeth. He knew he was out of his depth. He nodded curtly. He addressed Siobhan, "I sent for a local healer for the injured. I'll send him to check on you." He then rose and left the table.

"Such a pleasant man." Rafe commented sarcastically.

She watched with regret as the weathered man left the building. "You didn't have to do that. It was my fault."

Rafe moved a shoulder before taking another swallow and saying. "His attitude irked me and we have things we need to discuss."

Siobhan didn't look convinced. She shook her head. Then looked at Connal. "You promised to help heal my grandfather."

Rafe responded before Connal could. "Connal would actually need someone here to heal. I'm sorry, but the first priority is getting that book back. There is too much at stake."

Connal studied Siobhan for a moment. The look he gave her was thoughtful. There was a brief silence.

When he spoke, his voice was soft. "It's logical to assume those two are connected. I think for now, everyone's goals are aligned."

Charity quietly put her hand to her mouth.

Just like that Connal took away Siobhan's need to lie to him. Did he know? How could he?

All Siobhan had to do was nod. She held his eyes. Charity held her breath.

Randi interrupted, "Connal you're leaving Athnia. There's no reason for you to get involved in this. Athnia is too dangerous."

To Charity's *Sight*, the beast inside Randi swirled.

Connal broke eye contact with Siobhan to look at Randi. "I appreciate your concern, but I don't think this is something we can run from. Something larger is happening."

Randi gritted her teeth. "He'll kill you this time."

Connal smiled at her. "I'd like to see anyone get through you."

Charity saw a flash of irritation on Siobhan's face before she cooled it. "It's simple. I'll find my grandfather." Charity noticed she didn't mention the book. "When I do, I'll bring them both back here. After he's better, you can do whatever you want."

Rafe interjects. "That's a wonderful offer, but the task of finding the book is Connal's. My sister and I will help him. I don't mean to be rude, but I don't see what help you could be."

Randi growled at Rafe, "So you're going to turn him in?" Her arms were still crossed at her chest. They tightened as if to contain the violence within.

Rafe flinched, but didn't respond. He eyed her body posture, assessing his options. There was no fear in his eyes, only the tactical calculation of a soldier recognizing a threat.

"I'm not against Con leaving. If that's his choice, I'll do what I can to keep my brother off his back."

"He's only saying that because he knows you won't do it." Her eyes softened as she pleaded with Connal. "The best way to get you to do something is tell you not to do it. You need to leave." Then she turned back to Rafe with obvious disdain. "He is adept at courtly tricks."

Rafe flushed. For the first time, his discipline slipped. He growled at her. "I don't want him harmed any more than you. Not everyone can do whatever the Hades they want. If I knew they would harm him, I wouldn't let Connal near him."

Randi scoffed. "We both know the depths you'll plunge for 'family' and country. You've proven your loyalty many times."

Rafe jaw clinched, his hand twitched.

Connal broke in. "Enough!" He ran his hand through his hair. "I'm right here and I'm not quite the helpless fool either of you think. Let's take one step at a time."

Siobhan responded softly. "I'll find them both. I promise you."

Connal studied her. "Where did you find it before?"

Siobhan shook her head. "We need to know who has it now."

Connal eyebrows rose. "We have two leads. The Ceilte. Who have attacked us both and the Emperor."

Siobhan nodded. "There's a third. I met an Athena Church knight who was asking

questions about it.”

“The church knight? He was here at the time of the attack.” Connal said.

Rafe laughs. “So we’ve managed to get mixed up in the three largest powers in the kingdom.”

“It appears so.” Siobhan looked around the group. “So where do we start?”

Rafe scratched his beard. “My brother sent me to find Connal. That’s his play, right?”

Randi spoke quietly this time. “I’m sure he’d rather Connal not be the one to find it. He could have have sent someone to follow and snatch it once it popped up.”

Rafe nodded. “Still the Ceilte just attacked both us and Siobhan.”

Connal said. “We need to know more. We can’t create a decent theory without facts. The question now isn’t who has it but who will have the most information.”

Siobhan nodded. “The ones you call the Ceilte. I’ve had some dealings with a similar group but that was far from here. They act as if they are one group. Who are they?”

Connal answered. “In Athnia there are seven powerful families. Athnia is really a collection of smaller kingdoms, only recently joined in partnership.” Siobhan nodded. “Each family has its own army that they use to protect their interests. For centuries, they fought each other.”

“Since coming together, Athnia is talked about everywhere as a type of promised land.”

Connal nodded. “Well Athnia isn’t as unified as it may seem. All of those old animosities and trust issues still exist. With the need to seem unified they couldn’t use their personal armies to settle disputes.”

“They use these Ceilte. I can see that but who are they?”

Connal looked to Randi. “You can probably explain the nuance better than me.”

Randi’s eyes were cold. “The Ceilte are not one organized group. The head family of each providence have founded or partnered with their own group. The Ceilte of each family reflects that family. What the family of the providence wants out of the Ceilte has shaped the values and skills of that Ceilte group.”

Rafe added. “The Families have been feeding these groups. They’ve been growing them with their funding and missions.”

Randi said. “The Ceilte of the Glyndwr providence are mostly made up of former prostitutes, war victims, and orphans. They are most skilled in espionage and sabotage. The Epirus Ceilte are mostly sea pirates.”

“Though she likes to pretend otherwise, Randi and I are both Mac Alisters.”

Randi scowled at him. “The Mac Alister’s have partnered with powerful bands of brigands and thieves. They’ve used them almost exclusively as assassins. They’ve used them for maybe a century. They’ve become more organized and quite good at the skills they’ve been asked to use.”

Connal spoke. “My family, the Conri, use a group of monks of the Saint of Arduianna. They are called the Manaigh Sléibhe.”

Randi nodded. “Using monks is unique to the Conri.” Charity thought she heard a hint of sadness in her voice. “All of the Ceilte are independent from the House they partner with. Some of them have spread across both continents as a network of criminals, assassins and spies.”

“Here, they are all referred to as Ceilte.” Connal said.

Siobhan frowned in thought. “But the ones I talked to acted as if it was one group.”

Rafe looked locked eyes with Connal. With some concern, he added. “The ones we fought in the mountains had members from multiple groups.”

Randi objected. “The Ceilte never work together. They are cultures within themselves. They are protective and secretive of their ways.”

Siobhan looked at Connal. “Can we talk with Ceilte that your family works with?”

Connal looked at Randi but she stood quiet. “No. Their temple is too far away. It would take us weeks to get there.”

Siobhan looked at Rafe. “And your family has a connection?”

Rafe winced. “I don’t think I like where this is going.”

Connal said. “Siobhan, the Mac Alister Ceilte are the Drongadóir. They have built themselves into a large crime syndicate.”

Rafe gave a sad smile. “My family have never been reluctant to do whatever they can for power.”

“If you have experience with the Ceilte outside of Athnia, it was probably the Drongadóir.”

Charity finally spoke. Her voice quiet and worried. “Sweetie, they’ll know you for sure.”

Siobhan grinned. “Perfect. Where do we find them?”

Connal studied Siobhan. His gaze was penetrating and deep. “I don’t think I like where your head is going either.”

Siobhan raised her chin in defiance. “You don’t know me.” Her tone was full of challenge.

Connal met her gaze and held it. Siobhan’s eyes seemed to glow with increased intensity.

Charity's *Sight* could see sparks fly between them.

Connal held her gaze but shook his head. He didn't offer any additional arguments.

Rafe laughed and said, "He's too clever for his own good."

Charity jumped in to break the tension. "So where do we find them?"

Rafe responded. "There's a gambling house in Montrose. Several actually. They'll have an Idir there, a leader over their gangs in the region. The Idir will probably be at the wealthiest. It's called *The House with Life and Death Stakes*. Everyone just calls it '*The House*.'"

Siobhan asked. "Ominous. Do you know him? Who is this Idir?"

Rafe hesitated. "It's a she, actually." He looked at both Connal and Randi. "Her name is Doireann." Rafe smiled ruefully as he said it. Charity thought she saw a hint of a smirk flash across Randi's face. Connal winced.

"All three of you know her?" Charity asked.

Connal nodded. "Each providence has its own culture. Mine is very tribal and clan based. Rafe and Randi's is more political. She's from one of the lower houses."

Rafe explained. "He's being kind. The Docherty providence is full of scheming lower houses. They all vie for power and we are all taught political skills at a young age. We've all had dealings with Doireann."

"Spoken like a diplomat." Randi sneered. "She's tried to kill two of us and tried to seduce a third."

Charity grinned. "Which is which?"

Connal interrupted but Charity saw a hint of a blush. "It's not important. The important part is that she knows us."

Siobhan studied Connal for a second before shrugging. “I’ll head down to Montrose and have a chat with her.”

“I’m going with you.” Connal said.

“I would rather you didn’t.” Siobhan replied coldly.

“Too bad.” His voice was uncharacteristically firm. “I can get us into the gambling house without incident. I’ll approach her as representative from my house, looking to for a contract.. That should buy us some safety.”

Rafe objected. “Connal, you’re from a different house. The Ceilte would never work for the Conri.”

Connal raised a shoulder. “You asking for the book tells them either you’re not that close to your brother or you don’t have it. If they have it, it puts you in direct opposition.” Connal shrugged. “I’m a neutral party looking to make a contract. If they don’t know where it is, I’m the guy they’d want to partner with to help find it.” He said it as fact. “We just need to get in, ask some questions and get out. She’s a schemer. She won’t kill her chance to make connections with someone of my station.”

Silence. No one seemed to like the plan. Connal didn’t like Siobhan going but couldn’t stop her. Likewise Siobhan couldn’t stop Connal. Rafe and Randi could do nothing but watch helplessly.

Charity responded with a warm smile. “Great!” She looked around at the group. She locked arms with Rafe and Siobhan, beamed up at them. “I think this is going to be such a fun group!”

Chapter Five

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” Connal said to Siobhan as they walked down the streets of Montrose.

The two were alone except for the strangers walking past. They were in the wealthy part of the city. The streets were thinning of people as night approached. They were clean, well lit and well cared for. Carriages were seen frequently. No sign of beggars or the homeless. Siobhan knew they would be in other parts of the city. The wealthy didn’t like their view marred with the bluntness of reality.

She had no idea where Rafe and Randi went. When they arrived in the city the previous evening, both Rafe and Randi said they had some business to see to. She was confident they wouldn’t have left Connal’s side if he hadn’t asked them to.

Fine. She had her own plans. Charity would be there. Ready to back her up.

She looked over at Connal. They were both dressed in fine clothing. She in a black dress and Connal in a doublet. Connal’s shoulders strained the cut a bit but he looked good.

He walked with purpose but his thoughts seemed inward. She didn't think he was even aware he had spoken.

On the ride down the mountain, Siobhan gained a better understanding of Rafe and Randi protectiveness with Connal. He seemed a good man. His heart was in the right place. He was definitely clever but there was something about him. Was he always so distracted. So vulnerable?

Siobhan raised an eyebrow. "Bad feeling?" she asked.

"What? Are you feeling it too?" he asked.

No. He hadn't realized he had spoken. Siobhan shook her head. He was going to get himself killed.

"Maybe you should let me handle this." She offered.

Connal frowned. "No, no. I don't think that would work well. Especially if we're both having uneasy feelings about it."

Exasperated she tried to be more blunt. "Perhaps you'd feel better if you told me your plan."

"My plan?"

"Rafe and Randi just get tired of my company?" She asked it pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

He looked at her this time. His eyes were penetrating and confident. He smiled. "I can't imagine that." She knew he was trying to dodge the question.

Siobhan lips turned into a smile. "I can handle it. I've been told I'm a bit of a handful." And because she liked to make him blush, she leaned in and whispered. "that's why you have

two hands.”

It had the desired effect. His face turned a charming shade of pink and he stumbled.

Siobhan smirked. Then thought about where they were going and rolled her shoulders.

“You’re a bad idea Connal.” She said to him. Then whispered to herself. “You’re lucky I like bad ideas.”

Almost automatically Connal replied. “Anything worth doing always starts as a bad idea.” He then froze in shock at the implication of what he said. “I didn’t mean- I just.” He stumbled over his words and his face flamed red. “It’s a saying.” He finished helplessly.

Siobhan laughed, delighted. “It’s a good one.”

Connal smiled helplessly. “With most people, I know what they are going to say before they say it. With you, I can hardly keep up.”

Coming from someone who she thought was probably the cleverest person she’d ever met, that was quite the unintended compliment.

She didn’t know how to respond so she changed the subject. “You seem to be a guy who prefers books and experiments to fighting.” Connal nodded. “So how did all of this” she gestured to his size, “happen?”

“How did what happen?” He asked, confused.

“Connal, you’re built like ox. You didn’t get that way from sitting inside, reading books and playing with potions.”

Connal fidgeted with his cloak. “I don’t sleep well.”

Siobhan’s brow furrowed. She shook her head, not understanding.

He pointed to his head. “I can’t get this to shut up most days. My head and thoughts race.

The only way I can get to sleep is to tire out the rest of me.”

“So what do you?”

“Anything I can think of. I have a friend who lets me work on things in his forge. I cut firewood for people. I throw stones.” He shrugged. “Really whatever I can come up with.”

“That’s... odd.” She smiled to remove the sting of it.

Connal tugged at his doublet. “My life is spent in one long effort to escape from boredom. My head won’t stop thinking of things. Ideas, experiments, theories, plans.” He tapped his head. “It won’t shut up.”

She jumped on that. “So you do have a plan.”

He grimaced, realizing he walked into that. “I know these people.” He said.

It wasn’t a denial, she noted. *He doesn’t trust me.* She thought.

“You think I don’t I trust you.” He stated it as fact.

How did he do that? She grunted. “You’re keeping secrets. You’re not very good at it.”

Connal bit his cheek in thought.

“These people are dangerous, Siobhan.” Was all he said as way of explanation.

“More reason to let me handle it.”

“I want to make sure you get out alive.”

Siobhan burst out with a laugh. “What? You? Connal stop.”

She grabbed his muscled arm. *How was he so big?* She stopped them both and turned him to face her. She looked up into those piercing green eyes. They hit her as they did every time he looked at her. Her heart skipped a beat and for a second her thoughts were scrambled.

They stared in each others eyes. She swallowed. “I...” she shook herself. “I know what

I'm doing." She said it less forcefully than she intended.

"You don't trust me either." He said it with a hint of sadness.

She didn't. She realized. Neither did Randi or Rafe. No one really trusted him. He was so clever but so innocent. She stared up into his eyes and willed him to understand. "I was born to a harder life. I know what I can endure. Do you?"

He swallowed. "Maybe not." He paused. "But that doesn't mean that I can't help."

Siobhan shook her head. She didn't want that for him. When push comes to shove and daggers sought blood, she didn't know what he would do. Would he run? Would he panic? Would he tell them everything?

To keep him safe, she needed to do what Rafe and Randi couldn't. She needed to be honest with him. "Connal, you're a healer. A thinker. You're not a doer. You've spent years hiding in the mountains and didn't act. That tells me what I need to know. Let me go in and handle this."

He looked away and raked his hand through his hair. "You don't understand. No one ever does." He looked back at her. "I thought through every scenario, Siobhan. Every single one. Every move led to failure and others getting hurt." His eyes were earnest and pleading. "I analyzed the situation. I looked at every angle. There is a fine line between brave and stupid. The smart move was to wait."

She shook her head. "You can't plan and think your way through life. It's not a game of chess. Sometimes you have to just leap."

He paused and set his jaw. "Well, I'm taking a leap now."

"You're going to get us both killed." She said it softly.

Connal stepped into her. Impulsively, his hand cupped her face and she surprised herself by letting him. His soft voice denied the rigidity in his body. "You don't know this yet, but you need me." His eyes flashed, staring deep into hers, confident and stubborn. "I see you, Siobhan." He whispered.

She believed him. Looking into his eyes, she could believe he saw into her very soul. A near panic shot through her. Could he see the wolf through her eyes? Could he see her darkness?

Suddenly self-conscious and angry, "You're not gonna tell me who I am." She pushed at his thick chest, causing him to step back. "I'm gonna tell you who I am."

He shook his head. "I know what you're planning."

What did he know? A new fear spiked through her. "Connal." She growled a warning. "Don't get in my way."

He smiled his boyish grin. "I wouldn't dream of it."

She liked him but she would not let him stand in her way. Whatever he saw. Whatever she was. She would get her grandfather back. Whatever it took.

She glared up into the power of his eyes. "You are either on my side, by my side, or in my fucking way. Choose wisely."

His face grew serious. "I'm on your side." He looked like he wanted to touch her again, to move toward her. But he held still. "I have your back." he assured her.

Siobhan licked her lips as she stared up at him. Her body was humming. The wolf was awake but it wasn't anger that stirred it. Siobhan felt her breath quicken.

They stood in silence, oblivious of everything around them. Tension reverberated between them. They were both acutely aware of the space between them. It seemed a chasm but

closing it inevitable. Two powerful forces that were destined to crash together. What would be the consequences of that explosion? Would it be exquisite, devastating, redefining? She swallowed. Her heart beat fast. Anticipation? Fear?

She wasn't ready.

Connal read her again and broke the spell. "Has anyone ever told you, your eyes are fascinating when you're angry?" The boyish grin returned.

She blew out a breath as the tension left her. She rolled them for him and stifled a smile.

Cuteness was a her weakness, she thought. She could fight anger, arrogance but how did she fight cute?

Was he going to die because he was too cute for her to resist? *No. Because I won't let it happen.*

"Fine. Let's go. I think that's the place around at the corner."

"Oh" he looked confused and over to the building she referenced. "how do you know?"

"The two guards are a clue but the sign that reads '*Life and Death Stakes*' was the giveaway." *Saints help me.*

They approached. Siobhan pushed her doubts of Connal aside. *She would keep him safe.*

The two guards were dressed in nice doublets but they were brutes. Both were the size of Connal. At their sides were flashy and jeweled daggers.

"Password" one asked in a bored deep voice as they approached.

Connal stepped forward. "I'm Connal from the Clan Conri. I have business with Doireann." She had to give him credit. He pulled it off with confidence.

The thugs exchanged confused looks. "And who is this?" They asked of Siobhan.

They hadn't really devised a cover story. Part of Siobhan's plan was to be recognized. Connal thought quickly and didn't hesitate. "She's my escort." He said. The brute nodded.

"One moment." One of the thugs ducked inside.

Siobhan draped herself on Connal's arm to match the cover he created and whispered. "Escort?"

He gave a shrug. "It covers a lot options."

She chuckled softly. "In a place like this, it covers one." Connal's neck burned and Siobhan smirked.

The guard came back a few moments later. "The Mathair will see you." They stepped aside.

Connal, with Siobhan still on his arm, slipped into the doorway.

"Mathair?" Siobhan asked.

"It means mother. The Drongadóir are mostly matriarchal. Men do rise in ranks but its rare. The top of the organization is referred to as Bandia Mathair or goddess mother."

Siobhan nodded in appreciation. "Guess they aren't all bad."

Connal chuckled.

The *Life and Death Stakes* catered to the elite. Every one was dressed in fine doublets and expensive dresses. The floors were marble and polished to shine. Light music floated through the room. Siobhan's keen nose picked up several types of drug smoke in the air.

Different games were being played all along the room. Card games, dice games, bone games. Just about any civilized game you could imagine.

Siobhan noticed men and women dressed in all black placed in strategic locations

throughout. Their arms were covered but tattoos peaked out from their sleeves. She also noticed a symbol tattooed behind their ear. A black rose.

Their eyes were cold, observant. No weapons were visible but Siobhan could smell smoke and oil. She noticed bulges at their forearms that she recognized as daggers.

Servants of different gender floated around the room serving drinks. They were all dressed in tight, suggestive outfits. They played with the edges of decorum with a hint of brazen. They all wore thin, leather black collars on their necks.

“What’s with the collars?” Siobhan asked.

Connal cleared his throat. “It means they have services for hire.”

Siobhan nodded. “Useful. I had wondered if they were so matriarchal if they invested as much in the sex trade.”

Connal shrugged. “Money is money, I guess.” He said it in distaste.

“You’ve got something against prostitution? It’s a profession, like any other.”

Connal grimaced. “I’ve never um.. No. I don’t guess” he fumbled. “I don’t know that they have a choice.”

Siobhan frowned. “Slavery is legal in Athnia?”

Connal made a noncommittal sound. “Depends on the providence. In my families’ lands it is not. In the Docherty providence it is. It’s one of the reasons I was so opposed to Cyrus.”

“We’re not in the Docherty providence though.”

Connal shrugged. “The Emperor is from there. Montrose is in a small providence. They’re not about to anger the Mac Alisters.”

Siobhan rolled a shoulder. “That’s the way of the world. The powerful do what they

want.” In their travels, she’d seen it all.

“It shouldn’t be.” Connal’s tone was grim.

“Let’s stay focused. I don’t see anyone matching her description.”

“She’ll be on the lower floor. It will be for clients who want a bit more excitement and a little less veneer.”

They made their way downstairs. The lower level was under dim lighting which was no problem with Siobhan’s eyesight.

The servants wore a lot less there. Men were shirtless and in loin cloths. The women were adorned in transparent veils. The same black clad guards were placed throughout.

The crowd in the lower levels were a bit rowdier. The music here was louder, bawdier and more aggressive.

The bets were also extreme. Card and dice games still dotted the floor. Siobhan also noticed drinking games, blood letting games, dagger throwing, snake biting and several games around pain tolerance.

“Charming. No pit fights?” Siobhan asked.

“There she is.” Connal nodded toward a corner. Across the room was a raised dias full of lounge chairs. One was positioned centrally where it could see the room and its back against the wall. It was slightly elevated, a throne of cushions.

In the center was a short, sexy woman with long black hair. She was dressed in a two piece sleeveless dress. It was somewhere between a tight form fitting dress and a robe.

She lounged in the middle of a soft chair with servants on each side. One of the servants was man and the other was a woman. Both were impressive physical specimens with fake smiles,

eerily plastered on their faces. Three guards stood on the dias, casually watching the room.

Doireann was watching them with a cat's grin on her face. Her grin grew wider when saw them approaching. She waved them through her guards.

"Connal!" She cooed. "It's so good to see you again." She gestured toward the seats. "Please sit."

Connal sat across from her. Siobhan chose to stand. Doireann seemed to completely ignore her. It was a tactic Siobhan recognized.

Despite the environment, Doireann wasn't soft. Her dress didn't leave a lot to the imagination and everything shown was well muscled. Tattoos of dragons seemed to decorate her back and arms. They were intricate, detailed and expensive. She moved with a careful grace. Siobhan thought it the movement of a predator setting up its prey.

Doireann looked Connal up and down like a treat she was going to eat. Siobhan instantly disliked her. "You've gotten so big." She purred. "When did that happen?"

"Mountain air agrees with me." Gone was Connal's blushing and fumbling. His gaze was calculating and his tone was tinged with sadness. "You didn't escape your family after all. I'm sorry to hear that."

Doireann gave a cackling laugh. "Oh but I did. I found a new family. One perfect for outcasts like me."

Something in the woman's tone and energy were off. She didn't smell of drugs. Siobhan could hear her heart beating too rapidly with excitement. She couldn't quite place what was off.

Doireann leaned back in her chair as she looked at Connal. Her tongue darted out to lick her lips. "Does it still hurt?" She asked.

Connal studied her and took a moment before answering. “Only when it’s cold out. You came very close to ending me that night.”

Doireann lips pressed together in a slight grimace. “I felt wretched about it. You were being so kind.”

“I was hoping you’d get free. This” he gestured to the room around him. “Isn’t really what imagined.”

Doireann eyes lit up. “Better isn’t it?”

“If it makes you happy.”

She looked away. “Oh I am.”

Connal shook his head. “Do you want to know what I see? I see a beautiful, impeccably dressed woman who can’t stop biting her nails. I see a woman who is breathing too heavily. She is struggling to hide a headache behind her eyes because of her intolerance for all the noise and chaos around her.” Connal leaned forward to look her in the eye. “I see a woman whose eyes are cold and scarred from what she’s been asked to do.”

Her head snapped back around. “What you see?” Her voice rose and she leapt to her feet. “What you see! I remember that line.” She dropped to her knees in front of Connal and grabbed his face in her hand forcefully.

Siobhan had to clamp down the wolf inside to keep from leaping at her.

Doireann held him, her fingers white from the grip and looked up into his eyes. “You said we could escape. You said it didn’t have to happen.” She then kissed him forcefully, her hand making a fist in his hair. Connal didn’t fight it.

The wolf inside Siobhan growled fiercely. Control almost slipped.

Doireann finally let go and stood tall. “You were wrong, Connal. There is no escape from who we are.”

Connal wiped his mouth. He seemed unaffected by the woman’s sudden assault. “I came here to make a deal and see if we can help each other.”

Doireann laughed and stretched. She roamed her hands over her body. “Do you remember the night we spent together?” Siobhan jerked. “I think about it all the time” She closed her eyes. “I dream about it. That night. When we were alone in that tent. You said you could see me.”

Siobhan jerked at those words. Doireann opened her eyes and glared at him. “Well I see you, Connal.”

Connal was surprisingly calm. “We did try to escape. It just didn’t work. We couldn’t help each other then but we can now.”

“And you’re so kind to bring me such gifts.”she practically purred it.

Connal looked confused. “What gifts?” Connal shook his head to clear it.

“You silly!” She laughed. “Both of you.” Her eyes turned to Siobhan. She looked her up and down, her eyes smokey and hot. “So this is my replacement.” She purred the words.

Siobhan smirked. “Are we going to fight or make out, because I’m getting mixed signals here.”

Doireann edged up to Siobhan. She studied her closely, eyes darting over her face wildly. The woman wasn’t all there. The wolf snarled to be released.

Siobhan clenched her jaw. “Yeah this isn’t helping.” She quipped.

“They say you’re formidable.” She smiled.

“That sounds like a you problem.” Siobhan growled, not hiding the threat.

“Siobhan....” Siobhan’s eyes darted to Connal, who was holding his head. He tumbled to the floor.

Doireann cackled. “You care for him. Ooh that’s so delightful.”

In a flash, Siobhan had a hidden dagger at the women’s throat. Satisfaction was sweet when fear filled Doireann’s eyes. “I’m starting to envy people who’ve never met you. What did you do to him?”

The fear faded as a line of blood trickled down her neck. “Just a concoction he once showed me. Poisonous. Deadly within hours actually. It’s nothing that I can’t fix.” She grinned and looked pointedly down at the dagger at her throat. “Drop the knife.”

Siobhan growled. She hesitated. This wasn’t the plan. She looked at the guards that were now circling her.

“What’s it going to be, rival? My blood or his life?”

With a curse, Siobhan stepped back and dropped the dagger.

#

Siobhan's hands were bound by tight ropes over her head and she hung from the ceiling on some type of hook. Her feet were also bound and attached to a hook at the bottom.

Connal was in a chair in front of her. He was still unconscious and lashed to the chair. She was worried about him. But she could hear his breathing and it seemed normal. She needed to keep their attention on her. She didn't think he'd cope well with what they were likely planning.

They were in stone room with a moldy smell. After taking her weapons, Doireann's guards escorted them further underground and down a long hallway. She had no idea how deep they were now or how far from the gambling house.

The air was cool and moist. The walls held lots of wicked looking instruments. Siobhan avoided looking them fought against her own imagination on how they could be used. There was only a dim candlelight in the room.

Pain radiated from her shoulders as she hung like a sack of meat. She kept her muscles tensed against the rope. The wolf inside her paced and growled. It was all she could do to keep it under control. She hated waiting.

Connal shifted. She heard him take a sharp jerky breath as the pain in his wrists started to

break through the sleep of the drug. She watched him as he struggled to lift his head. He groaned awake. For some reason, that made her feel better.

Trying to keep her voice calm she said, “My hero. You’re finally awake.” Her tone was heavy with sarcasm.

Groggily he asked, “Why are you upset with me?”

Why was she so upset with him? she thought. “I didn’t want you here.”

Connal was confused. “If you wanted to do it differently, why didn’t you just stop her?”

“I didn’t plan on your ex kissing you unconscious.” She paused, realizing his choice of words. “Wait- did you know?”

Connal frowned. She could tell he held back his first thought. He thought it was obvious. *Son of a bitch.*

“You did know.” She accused. *Unbelievable.*

She could tell his head hurt. Absently, he said “She kept avoiding touching her face. She had a drink at her side that she hadn’t touched since we arrived. It didn’t have any lipstick stains and-“

Exasperated. “Ok ok. I get it.” She shifted her head to look at him. “Why didn’t *you* stop her then?”

“I thought you wanted this?”

Siobhan let out an explosive breath. She bit her tongue not to swear at him. “I didn’t tell you that.”

“No.” He paused. She could tell he was struggling to concentrate. He started to ramble quickly. “All I had to do was think of all the possible methods of getting the information. Then

take what I know of you. Take out the ones that didn't fit you. Isolate the ones that were the most direct, most physical, reckless-

“Ok! Stop.” She hated thinking she was predictable. .

They were both silent for moment and then, “Are you sure you want to do this?” He asked.

No. She wasn't. At all. “You just stay quiet when they get here.” The last thing she needed was for them to turn on him. She could take the pain but she didn't think she could take being responsible for him getting hurt.

As if on cue, the heavy wooden door opened and Doireann glided into the room. Her chin thrust up. Her shoulders were back.

Doireann had changed out of her dress and wore tight, dull black leathers. They were well worn. Siobhan supposed these were her work clothes. At her sides were daggers.

Doireann put on a sly smile as she entered. Her eyes went first to Connal. Her expression softened but quickly moved to Siobhan. Then they glittered with malice. *Wonderful. They came for information and the crazy bitch was treating it like a catfight.*

Doireann's voice was casual, “I am so glad we get this chance to talk. It's so noisy and crowded upstairs.”

“Doireann-“ Connal started but Siobhan swore inwardly and quickly interrupted.

“Hey hot stuff, wanna dance?” She wiggled her eyebrows.

It was lame but it worked. She needed the woman's attention on her.

Doireann bared her teeth at Siobhan in a cat eating grin. She pulled out a small knife. She swayed up to Siobhan. The wolf inside her wanted to growl at the threat.

“They say torture is wasteful.” Doireann tested the edge of the knife on her finger. “It’s unreliable for information.” She sucked the blood that spilled out. “I guess it depends on if information is your goal.”

Siobhan swallowed, eyeing the knife. She needed to escalate this. *Just do it*, she told herself. “I’d insult you, but then I’d have to explain it to you, so can we just get this started?”

Doireann fist shot out causing Siobhan’s head to snap back.

Siobhan shook it and licked blood from her lip. She muttered to herself sarcastically. “That’s better.”

Doireann then lunged in close with sudden intensity. She grabbed Siobhan by the ear and placed the knife’s edge to it. “I would like nothing better than to carve that pretty little face up.” Siobhan felt the blade cut in. Warm blood started to weep down her neck. Then she stopped. “But I’ve been asked not to leave visible marks.”

Siobhan forced a laugh. “That must be frustrating for you.”

“Not really.” She said in a flat voice. Doireann then proceeded to cut away at Siobhan’s dress. “I’ve never really enjoyed this sort of thing. It’s part of our training of course. We are taught to both receive and give. I hated it. But I’m going to do my best to make an exception with you.” She cut Siobhan’s dress until it hung on her in shreds. “We need some space to work here.”

Siobhan gritted her teeth but said “This hardly seems the time, sweet stuff. Maybe after you’ve showered.”

With her dress removed, Doireann placed the knife up to Siobhan’s skin, under her arm. Siobhan tensed. Doireann whispered in her ear. “This is for trying to take him from me.”

Stupid bitch, this isn't about some man. Doireann then proceeded to cut out a long strip of flesh. Agony flared through Siobhan as she cut. The wolf inside her howled. She intended to stifle a scream but couldn't. *The bitch is carving me up like a roast.* She cut it methodically down Siobhan's side from armpit to hip.

Connal turned his head and gritted his teeth but Siobhan barely noticed.

Doireann did notice. She grinned at Siobhan, triumphant. "See, he already can't look at you." She leaned in close and whispered. "Just wait until I'm done."

Her side still burning bright bolts of pain, Siobhan struggled to concentrate. They needed to get her asking questions. It was all pointless otherwise. Voice strained, Siobhan asked "Is there a question in here somewhere?"

Swallowing hard, Connal picked up the cue. "Doireann, we only came here to see if we could help each other."

She trailed her finger on Siobhan's bare flesh as she walked around to her other side. "Sure, Darling." She said to Connal without looking at him. "Do you know where the book is then?" She asked absently.

Then began to peel another strip of flesh from Siobhan's other side. Fresh agony burned through her. Again the wolf howled inside and Siobhan screamed. She felt a growl bubbling deep inside. She felt the wolf losing tolerance. Her control was slipping. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe it was a really bad idea. Charity were you close? A small, quiet growl leaked out. Siobhan squeezed her eyes shut to contain it.

Somewhere under the fire of pain, she acknowledged that they learned something. The Ceilte didn't have it.

Siobhan forced the question out between clinched lips. “We thought you could help us get it.” She could barely get it out.

“That would be a ‘no.’ So useless. There is one question, I’m supposed to ask that you might know.” She tapped the flat of the blade against her cheek. “Who is your grandfather?”

Wait, what? Siobhan was legitimately confused and the pain didn’t help. “Who?”

Doireann moved to her back, ripped more of her dress. She talked as she did. “The book and he were gone before our people could get in. They thought they saw the knight carry something out but not your grandfather. He was poisoned by *Biaist bhàs*. No one walks away from that.”

She then began to cut a fresh strip of flesh from Siobhan’s back. She peeled and cut it away from neck to butt. As she was peeling, Doireann asked again slowly. “Who...is... your grandfather?” Siobhan screamed again. As she screamed and her back burned, Siobhan wrenched her own thumb painfully, breaking it.

“I don’t know!” She barely managed to get it out. A hint of the wolf was in her voice. She couldn’t hold it much longer.

“Do we believe her, Darling?” Doireann asked Connal.

Connal seemed sick to his stomach. “Yes of course. Please, Doireann. Siobhan-

“Shut up, Connal.” Siobhan gasped out. Her vision was blurry. The wolf was raging inside. The pain started to fade. *No!* She mustn’t! She had to focus. Had to keep the wolf at bay. As she did so, the pain hit her again in a fresh wave of agony. Her body arched against the restraints again. The wolf snarled for release. Siobhan kept her eyes clamped shut. A quick look in her eyes would reveal everything now.

Doireann tapped the bloody blade against her own cheek again in thought. She casually walked from Siobhan's back to her front. She trailed her finger tips across Siobhan's skin, smearing the blood. "I don't think you could have traveled with him so long and not known." Doireann trailed the knife over Siobhan's neck, breasts and stomach, looking for her next target.

"I know something." Siobhan gasped out.

Doireann smiled. "Hmm doubtful. Maybe with some encouragement though...."

"No, please." Siobhan whispered. She couldn't hold it.

Doireann leaned in and whispered into her ear, "It doesn't matter what you know. This is just the beginning for us."

Siobhan's eyes flared open and the wolf snarled out in a voice not her own. "I know you're dead."

With that she slipped her dislocated thumb from the ropes over her head. She landed on her feet and Doireann fell back in shock.

The pain screamed through our shoulders and legs. It only fueled the wolf. Siobhan fought it for control.

Doireann lunged and slashed at Siobhan with the knife, screaming for her guards. Time seemed to crawl. Part of her watched the knife travel through the air with almost indifference. Siobhan caught her arm. Doireann struggled to free it but to no avail. Siobhan jerked her close and snatched the woman by the throat. Then lifted her. Control was thin. Doireann struggled. Pain beat at its walls.

The door opened with three thugs behind it. Siobhan threw Doireann against the wall. She clattered in a heap.

The first rushed in and thrust with his dagger. Siobhan parried it, flowed with it to carry it wide. Then stepped in and snapped a strike to his nose. She felt a satisfying crunch as she smashed it into his brain.

In the same movement she shouldered the dead man into the man behind him. Then she was in the hallway. One managed to slip in behind her. She hoped Connal could last until she finished the one in front of her.

This one didn't rush in. He squared up with her. His eyes calculating. Siobhan didn't have time to wait, she snapped a front kick for his face. He parried and stepped back but it allowed her to close the space. She was in. She snapped a rapid combination at him. She delivered a hard upper cut, followed by a strong hook. Her hands were too fast. The man fell with a quiet thud.

Siobhan quickly turned to check on Connal. The two were on the ground. Connal had managed to get the man's back and had him in a choke hold. The man was full of surprises.

Doireann was just starting to clear her head and get to her feet. Siobhan growled and advanced. She jerked her up by the hair with one hand and then used the other to get her by the throat again. She lifted her off her feet. This woman hurt her. This woman threatened to take what was hers. Siobhan growled and squeezed, watching her eyes begin to bulge.

Connal stood up, his man unconscious.

"Siobhan." He said it quietly. It was the sadness in his voice that caught her. His words "*I see you?*" Echoed in her mind. This was the side of herself that she didn't want him to see. This was really why she didn't want him to come along.

Embarrassment mixed with rage. Siobhan dropped her. "Tie her up." Siobhan said roughly. The pain was fading.

She looked at her wounds and watched them begin to close. Realizing she was now nearly naked, she looked back at Connal who was starting to tie up Doireann. “Wait.” She grinned. She nodded at Doireann “Strip first.”

#

Connal left the room first as Siobhan changed clothes. When she came out she found him waiting, their packs in his hands.

“Where did you find those?”

“In the next room. We need to hurry. We don’t know how long until someone decides to check on her.”

Siobhan was putting on all her daggers and looked up in surprise. “I don’t think we’re

getting out of here quietly.”

Connal winked at her. “This way.” Instead of going left of the room toward where they knew the exits were, they headed right.

“Where you going? Have you been here before?”

“Nope. But the hallway slants downward, slightly. We want to go down.” He was moving briskly.

“We do?”

He didn’t answer but sped up to a slight jog. The hallway was all stone. It was dark, dank and dimly lit. Heavy wooden doors dotted the hallway. Connal ignored them all, as if he knew exactly where he was going.

Finally they came to the end of the hall. Doors were on each side.

“I don’t think they come down this far often.” He said. Without checking the door or listening to see if anyone was inside, he moved to the door to his right and reached for it.

“Connal wait!”

Connal went in and looked back, puzzled.

The room was empty. No light.

“Did you know this room would be empty?” She asked.

Realization hit him.

“Oops.”

“Oops?” She groaned in frustration.

“What are we doing here? We’ve hit a dead end and lost valuable time.”

“Maybe.” Was all he said. He started scrambling through the his pack.

“Maybe?”

He didn't answer. Instead he pulled out two vials of liquid.

“What is that?”

“Our exit strategy. If my theory is right.”

Thinking of Rafe's mention of Connal's exploding barn. “What theory?”

“Just a minute. I'm thinking”. He then closed his eyes. A minute passed. Two.

Was he sleeping? Meditating? Frustration filled her. The wolf inside wasn't near satiated.

Her back burned and sides still burned.

She was seriously thinking of the logistics of hitting him over the head, carrying him out while fighting off the Ceilte above. He finally opened his eyes.

His shoulders suddenly drooped as if he had been carrying heavy weight.

He grinned. “It's here. I was right!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tunnels below us. The journals I read said that this city used to sit near an old volcano.”

“Volcano?” She didn't like where this going.

He raised his hands for her to wait. “Dormant one! It hasn't been active in generations.”

Her patience was heroic. She never realized that about herself but it truly was. “So?”

“So?” He asked obviously confused by her question.

“Connal, why do we care about an old volcano?”

He grinned a huge boyish grin. “Because below are empty lava tubes.”

“You want us to escape by exploring empty lava tubes?” She knew he was smart but was he also a little crazy?

“Yes.” He said, rummaging through his packs again.

“What yes?” She was having trouble keeping up with his thoughts now.

“What?” He asked.

“What are we doing!” She kneeled down next to him, winced at the pain from the cuts that were still healing and grabbed his hands in hers.

She could see his eyes were darting a wildly. His heart beat rapidly in her hands.

His thoughts were racing, she realized. He wasn't doing it on purpose. He wasn't being mysteriously obtuse. He was struggling keeping his thoughts focused. He was a genius. He was built like an ox but wasn't used to this. However in control he wanted to be, he was least in control over himself. Siobhan suddenly felt a kinship to him for that. She knew what that felt like.

She swallowed back her own impatience and calmed her expression. “I need you to calm down and explain to me your plan.”

He closed his eyes to settle before opening and answering. “Sorry too many thoughts.” He opened his eyes and met hers. “They compete for the same space in my head.”

Siobhan nodded. “Focus on talking me through it.” And hopefully keep us from blundering to our death.

“Rafe said the monster skirmishes at the border were getting closer and more frequent. You and Charity told me people were going missing in town. The monsters, missing people, Ceilte joining together- I don't think they are separate. Correlation is not causation but those are too many coincidences to ignore.”

“All I want to do is find my grandfather. I don't care about Athnia's troubles.”

“They are connected, Siobhan. I know it. I just don’t know how yet.”

“You’re not here just to help me escape. You’re here to get into those tunnels.”

Connal ran his hand through his hair. “Two birds, one stone. I’ve read ancient texts that talk of a city under this one. During the Wizard Wars, people needed a place to hide from it all. They built a city mixed in with the lava tubes.”

“And why do you think you’ll find answers there?”

“It’s a theory. Charity mentioned to me that people have been vanishing in the city. Rafe has talked about the monsters or creatures have been increasing in number at the border.”

“None of that points to an underground city.”

“Bron.”

“Bron?”

“He wore a medallion made out of black rock basalt.”

She remembered it. “Yes. The one with the skeleton woman holding a rose. Basalt?”

“Its a type of rock, formed from rapidly cooling lava. It’s not something you’d normally see them have in the mountains.”

“You think that old man has something to do with all of this?”

Connal rubbed the back of his neck. “It explains how the Ceilte found them in such a remote place.”

Siobhan felt like her head was spinning but she was putting it together. “Elder connects to the Ceilte and to the lava rock. Missing people connect to something close to the city. So underground city.”

Connal nodded. “It might be a long shot.”

Siobhan looked around the room. Ok, not crazy. “How do you know there are caves below us?”

Connal bit his lip and looked away. “I have ... gifts?”

“Gifts?” Her heart skipped a beat. “What type of gifts?”

“I can’t explain it well but I can send my thoughts around me. I can sense what’s there.”

“And you’ve seen a tunnel below us?”

“It’s not ‘see’ exactly but yes. There are lava tubes below us.”

She shook her head, thinking of Charity’s odd ‘gifts’ and her own. “So what’s in your bag.”

He grinned. “Explosives.”

“What? Connal, we’re deep underground.” She looked above them and thought of all the rock over their heads. He is crazy. She looked back at him.

He looked deep into her eyes and their power hit her again. A shiver ran through her. How does he do that?

He pulled out two vials. “I can control it.”

Siobhan thought again of the mountain of rock above them. She looked back at him, fear and doubt on her face.

“Do you trust me?” He was calmer now. The wildness had left. She looked directly into those deep green eyes and felt she could drown. Without thinking she whispered, “yes.”

He grinned and despite it all, her heart flipped.

Connal stood up and started examining the floor. He finally found a crevice he liked.

“You better stand outside.” He said.

Siobhan hesitated and but did as he asked. As she was walking, she saw him mix the vials and shake them and then dash out with her.

He pulled her behind the wall of the room. He quickly sat and closed his eyes.

She recognized it now as him doing something with his “gift.” Thinking of the vials and how vulnerable he looked with his eyes closed. Siobhan instinctively jerked him toward her. She put herself between him and the door and protectively covered his body with her own.

The world around her seemed to explode. The whole room shook with power of it. Dust, dirt, and rock blasted them. She felt herself bludgeoned with showering rock. She tensed her body around him and growled. She was sure he had killed them both. Her only thought was to protect him as best she could.

Seconds later it was over. She opened her eyes that she didn’t remember closing. Connal was grinning like a kid at a fair. “It worked! I directed the blast down!”

She decided not to comment. Her back told her he hadn’t directed it all. She looked up. He must have done something though because the ceiling seemed untouched.

She looked inside. In the floor was a hole. The diameter was a little larger than a wagon’s wheel. She got up and approached it. She was careful not to get too close to the edge. She looked down the hole. It was pitch dark. She grabbed a spare torch and dropped it down the hole.

He had managed to burrow a hole about 2 meters deep and below that hole was a cavern. The cavern itself looked to be about 8 feet high.

“We should hurry. I’m sure they heard that.” He got up to his feet slowly.

“Are you ok?”

Connal nodded. “Every time I use my abilities it takes something out of me.” He put his

hand to his head. “And leaves me with an awful headache. We should move. “

“Wait”. She went back and made sure they didn’t leave any tracks and she put out any lights down the hallway. In the dark that hole would be nearly impossible to see.

She returned to see him mixing something else with his vials.

She looked at him anxiously. “What are you mixing?” There was a slight alarm in her voice.

Connal grinned. He had a larger vial this time and was already shaking it. As he did so, it began to slowly give off a light blue-green glow.

“Just light. We don’t want to be roaming around deep caves with torchlight. All kinds of interesting gasses down there. This will last longer and not explode with the wrong gas.”

She looked down the hole. Deeper into the caves. The wolf inside her whined. Siobhan just nodded. “Let’s go.”

They were able to lower themselves down the hole without much problem. She went first and dropped the final few feet. She landed on her feet. He managed his body weight easily enough and but fell the final distance clumsily. She caught him.

He grinned his thanks. She shook her head. He was enjoying this too much.

Connal handed her a vial of the chemical creating light. She took it and handled carefully.

He grinned. “It’s harmless. Just light.”

He began exploring the tunnels. They were perfectly round and smooth. It looked like water had once flowed through it. The tunnel seemed to go north and south, perpendicular to the hallways above.

Siobhan felt their smooth surface with wonder. “What are these? I’ve never seen caves

like these.”

“Lava tubes. A lava tube is essentially a lava cave. These tubes carry magma from eruptions, usually out to the sea. As the lava cools, the walls of the lava tube form. You see these marks on the walls?” He pointed. They were edges that protruded from the wall.

Siobhan nodded.

“They mark the different depths the lava once flowed.”

“Lava? Like a volcano?”

Connal nodded. “Generations ago. It’s what is now Mount Brissim to the north of Montrose.”

The cave led in two different directions. “Ok which way is out?”

“I was unconscious when we were brought down here. Which way is north? North toward Brissim is where the city should be. South will probably lead to exit tunnels near the sea.”

“Then south gets us out faster.” She said thinking of Albin.

Connal paused from investigating the tunnels to look at her. “We need to see if we can figure out what’s going on.”

“I’m not trying to solve the world’s problems. I just want my grandfather back.”

“They’re taking kids, Siobhan. Whatever is doing this is taking people off the streets and that includes the children.”

“That’s not fair. Lots of people suffer everyday, including kids. That’s not my fault.”

“Just come with me and see. I think it’s all connected. The monsters, the Ceilte and the book.”

She hesitated. “Even if we can find this city, how are we going to find anything in it?”

“I’ve read some ancient texts with maps in them. I memorized them the night before we left.”

He memorized a map of a city in one night? She closed her eyes. Street children. Despite what she said, could she really turn her back on children?

Without opening her eyes she said “Sure.” A knot was in her throat. *I’m still coming grandfather. Wherever you are. Hang in there.*

She opened her eyes. “Which way is the city?” She pointed. “That way leads north.” She pointed down the other way. “That’s south.”

“In theory, the city should be to the north.’

“North it is.”

#

Siobhan looked down the long tunnel and saw darkness. Her eye sight in the dark was nearly as good as it was in the daylight but it still required light. Connal’s chemical light provided help but the tunnel still reached out into a black pit of unknown.

As they walked down the long, rocky tunnel, Siobhan was reminded of when she first left Charity and Albin. She was so sure it was what she needed to do.

She needed to know who she was. She needed to find a path that wasn’t about surviving

and petty thievery. She wanted more. Since she left every step seemed wrong. She felt this unseen tether, pulling her back to them. Now as she walked down this tunnel, she felt that tether pulling her. What was she doing?

Both Siobhan and Connal stayed quiet as they walked. Sound carried. They didn't know when the Celte would find their escape hole or what was in front of them.

Siobhan sniffed the air. Rock. It was all she could smell. No life. No water. Just rock. They continued their quiet march into the dark.

Siobhan stopped. Connal almost blundered into her. She sniffed the air. "Somethings up there." Her voice was quiet.

"Do you see something?"

She shook her head and sniffed again. "Something smells... dead."

"Dead?"

Siobhan pulled out a dagger and crept forward carefully.

She saw it before Connal did. The lava tube continued on but in the side of it was a large iron door. The floor at their feet grew smooth where it had been worked into a type of stone floor in front of the doorway.

They were 100 feet from it before Connal could see it. When he did, he grinned. "We did it."

Siobhan didn't answer. The wolf's hackles were up. The smell was behind the door. Whatever it was, the wolf didn't like it. It didn't smell like anything she'd smelled before. Sickening sweet Musty, sour and dank were mixed into the normal smells of death and carrion. Something about the smell was unnatural but mixed in was something vaguely familiar. Sage?

“Careful. Something is behind the door.”

Connal looked at her curiously.

“I smell something. It’s ... unnatural.”

Connal licked his lips. “The next clue to our mystery is behind that door.”

Siobhan nodded. The door was iron. All around it the stone was carved to meet the walls of the round tunnel. The door set in a large rectangle frame, all made of iron. No sign of rust or age were on it.

Siobhan approached it. She strained her senses for any sign of what was behind it. She heard nothing, only the odd sour stink.

The door was a good two feet taller than she was. She reached and jerked it open.

Yellow and orange torchlight flooded their tunnel. A narrow, stone hallway was within. It looked man made.

“A foyer?” Connal whispered in jest.

Siobhan waved him back. The wolf wasn’t satisfied. Something was wrong.

Along the walls were what looked to be statues of ancient warriors. They stood as if sleeping with their arms crossed at their chests.

Siobhan and Connal entered the room. The room had four exits, one on each of its four walls.

“What are these?” Connal asked to himself as he approached the statue. The wolf inside growled in response.

“They aren’t statues. They look like corpses but they’re too old to be this well kept.”

Connal got close to one, raising his light to investigate better.

Siobhan had to stop her instinct to grab him. He was right. They weren't statues. The smell she had been sensing was coming from them. The stench of it permeated the room.

"Connal step away. I don't like this."

Connal looked with a puzzled expression. He then closed his eyes. She realized what he was doing too late.

"No wait!"

Before she could act, the thing's eyes popped open. They were glazed with death but glowed with a dull red.

A hand snapped up and grabbed Connal by the throat. He gave out choking gasp. He grabbed at the arm. His muscles bulged but the arm didn't move.

Siobhan sprung to action. She slashed with her dagger, bringing her full strength to bear. It cut through the arm, severing it at the elbow.

Connal fell backwards. He still choked. He pulled at the arm, now stuck to his throat.

The thing turned its attention to Siobhan. It's face moved into a snarl. It slowly grabbed its sword that was standing by its side. The sword was huge and looked ancient.

Before he could bring it bear, Siobhan slashed across its throat. No blood spilled out, but black a icher oozed.

It seemed to completely ignore the wound. Siobhan slashed across its eyes hoping to blind it. She danced to the side.

It worked. It raised its sword and swung the ancient thing where she has been standing. It was off the wall now. It's back exposed. Siobhan slashed across its hamstring.

The thing made no sound at the wound, but the leg collapsed under it. It turned with great

difficulty and Siobhan danced to the side. She struck again at the other hamstring. It collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. It used its arms to begin turning to face where she was.

Siobhan took her dagger and jammed it through the back of its neck, severing its head. It fell still.

She heard Connal gasp behind her. She turned to see him getting up but his eyes were down the hallway.

“They’re all waking up. We need to get out of here”

The wolf growled inside her. Running was the last think she wanted to do.

Connal saw her intent but shook his head urgently. “There are too many. This way!” He dashed passed the moving creatures into one of the side hallways.

Siobhan swore and was forced to follow. Connal continued to sprint. He’d look back to see if she was still following and then sprinted through the next turn or doorway.

They didn’t stop. They didn’t talk. They just ran. They ran down hallway after hallway at near sprint. It was a maze of caves and tunnels. Siobhan was completely turned around. She didn’t know if the things they faced were now in front of them or behind them. She hoped Connal knew where he was going.

Finally he stopped. His chest heaving. “I think we lost them.”

She expected to see him terrified. She’d assume he was running in pure fear. But when she looked at him, his face was perfectly calm.

He was leaning back against a wall to catch his breath. His features were thoughtful and puzzled, not scared.

Siobhan’s breathing was coming out heavy but she wasn’t out of breath. The wolf inside

her raged. It wasn't satiated. It wanted to tear and rip into what was chasing them. That thing hurt him. The wolf wanted to confront those things head on. It raged inside her and pushed for her to go back. She closed her eyes to calm herself.

Finally she was able to ask, "What were those?"

Connal didn't answer.

"Connal, do you know what those were?"

"What?" He asked with a hint of irritation, as if she had just interrupted his reading. "Oh. No. I don't."

Siobhan rubbed her face. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Connal paused and frowned. She could see him having to back up and collect his thoughts. He gritted his teeth. He seemed to be having as much trouble controlling his thoughts as she did the wolf.

When he started talking, it was very fast and charging. "I'm thinking I wasn't ready for that. Some kind of undead I think? Those things were very old. They had to be created by magic. Were they created a long time ago? Were they created by old magic?" His thoughts spilled out like a runaway wagon. "Or something recent? Recent but using old corpses? Why? Magic has been nearly nonexistent for centuries. Why is it popping up so much now? There was a symbol on their chest that matched the one we saw on the elder. Are they connected to the Celte? or Rafe's monsters? Or the people's disappearances in Montrose? How many more are there?" He paused and looked at her. "Those were sentries, not guards."

"Sentries for whom?"

Connal shook his head. He closed his eyes and put his face in his hands. "Talking is too

slow. I need a minute.” He laid his head back on the wall behind him. His eyes darted behind the lids.

Siobhan growled in frustration. He wanted to think. She wanted to prowl and hunt. The wolf inside her paced restlessly. Fine. Let him think.

She opened her senses to their environment. They seemed to be in a man made room. It was a long rectangular room with curved edges. Two stone pillars were in the center. They seemed to be carved out of the rock itself, merging perfectly with the floor and ceiling above. The ceiling was two arm lengths above her head.

The smell she had sensed in the lava tube was everywhere. Undead? She smelled them now. Musty, sour and dank. Mixed into the smells of death and carrion.

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