

# The Stolen Word

by

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# The Stolen Word

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## Chapter One

### Floating Castles and Mischief

Being just shy of a thousand years old isn't as fun as one might imagine. Especially when one isn't considered to be a full grown adult until they their twelve-hundredth birthday. Ciara, a nine-hundred-and-eighty-three year old member of the Aes Sidhe, has lived long enough to see eleven generations of stewards come through the portal between her world and the world above. Despite the warnings of the Elders, Ciara has made friends with almost every son or daughter of the McKenna clan. There were a few of them that were too stubborn to make friends with Ciara, in spite of her best efforts, but most were happy just to have someone to get into other worldly mischief with while they were still young. It was always difficult for Ciara to watch her friend get old and pass on, but that never stopped her from trying to become friends with each subsequent generation that came through the portal. In total, she has seen nine generations of them have their ashes scattered to the six winds of Linderá.

The latest generation of stewards consists of a brother and sister, Faolan and Niamh McKenna. Ciara has a brother of her own, Daegan. Having to share a room with a sibling for sixteen to eighteen years is enough to drive most siblings to the brink of madness, but for Ciara and Daegan the past seven-hundred years or so have been quite pleasant—all things considered. Every hundred years, almost like clockwork, the two of them will go through a brief period of time where they refuse to speak to each other, but their vows of silence have never made it to the twenty year mark thus far.

With every new generation of McKenna to come through the portal, comes their fair share of strange new ideas, stories, and trends. While the council has done their best to limit the amount of influence that the world above has on Lindera, there are always a few ideas and concepts that can't be stopped from breaking through their paper-thin ban on chasing mortal fads. In the 1800's, a new concept called the 'horseless carriage' caused the Artificer's Guild to reconsider both personal and commercial transportation across all of Lindera. Another great leap in that avenue came about when Faolan's grandfather had shared the exciting and tragic details concerning the Hindenburg. While engineers in the world above had to make due with using a gas that was both lighter than air and flammable to make their balloons float, the Artificers in Ciara's village could use the same magic and technology that made their floating castle stay aloft.

After Faolan's father had told those same Artificers about a fictional series that followed the adventures of a gold clad captain who trekked across the stars, telling them about the crew's ability to transport people, equipment, and even livestock across vast distances with a thing called a "transporter pad," another leap in magical innovation happened, which caused the Airship bubble to burst.

By the time that Faolan was born, Wordsmiths and Artificers had figured out how to do the same with something was the shape and size of a typical business card. Despite having seen the members of the McKenna clan use their portal to go between their home in Dubhlinn and the village for several millennia, no one in the Artificer's or the Wordsmithing Guilds had ever thought to make use of that same sort of magic for the transport of people or goods within Lindera.

Even though the two guilds were happy and excited about embarking on such an endeavor, they knew that such a useful tool could be made to serve a more militaristic purpose as well. As such, they built in failsafes into their breakthrough in order to prevent rogue factions of Aes Sidhe and Fomorians from infiltrating places of importance. And because of such precautions, both Ciara and Daegan have been forced to hone other skills in order to sneak into the library, located in the floating castle, after hours, for the past one-hundred-and-fifty-two years.

According to Daegan, the best research materials were kept hidden in the private study nooks that belonged to the members of the Council of Elders. While it was true that Ciara would almost always ended up being interested in whatever Daegan would dig up on their little, moonlit expeditions—Ciara was in it for the thrill of it all. She always, absolutely always, got a rush from dodging guards, sneaking around in the shadows, and making use of her Affinity for Illusion Magic to take on the semblance of her least favorite Council Member; all the while, taking great pleasure in making him look like a clumsy sort of individual.

During their most recent expedition, on the night of the new moon, Ciara and Daegan knew that they wouldn't have to rely on her illusions, because there would be plenty of shadows for the two of them to hide in, but little did they know that they weren't the only ones who would be taking advantage of the absence of the moon's dim glow. As the two siblings made their climb up the cobblestone steps that wound up the hill from the edge of the village to the floating castle that hovers above its summit,

something was lurking in the shadows as they clawed their way up the sheer face of the cliffside that hugged the river bank.

While the silver towers and turrets of the castle look flashy and modern to anyone who pays Lindera a visit from the world above, the rest of the village looks rather rustic in comparison. Despite the handful of rapid developments that were influenced by the stories of their stewards from above, architectural styles have not changed much in the past thousand years, or so. Most families live in dwellings that could be best described as wattle and daub cottages with slate-tile roofs. The few businesses that lined the cobblestone streets of the village were typically made of stone and wood with the only exception being the Artificer's Guild House. It, much like the castle that floats above the hill in the northern part of town, is made out of metal and glass.

The village itself sits in the basin of a rather large ravine, nestled against the largest river in Lindera. The hillsides to the east and the north of the village, along with the curvature of the river, gives the village its waxing, crescent-moon shape. Three main roads run north and south through the village, one that runs along the river's edge and two that run in parallel and straight lines through the middle of town. Two roads also run east to west through the village, dividing the town into nine blocks. Living in one of the western most blocks of the village has proven quite beneficial on the nights when Ciara and Daegan decide to go sneaking about.

Ciara had always been thankful that she and her brother could use the constant babbling of the river to cover up the sound of the footsteps, thankful for having one less front to keep an eye on, and forever grateful that the both of them shared the Affinity for

Illusion Magic whenever the need should arise. Still, there were times, every-so-often, when Ciara had been jealous of her friends of the McKenna clan who, despite having been born in the land above and not being pure-blooded members of their ancient race, often ended up being born with the Affinity for Shape-Shifting Magic. If Ciara and her brother had been born with such an Affinity, they could have transformed into crows and they could have flown from their home near the river's edge and landed on the roof of any of the castle's turrets within five minutes time; however, that was not to be their lot in life.

While both of them possessed the raw ability to shape-shift, only those who had been born with that particular Affinity could ever hold their new shapes for longer than maybe two minutes. This meant that, with enough practice, Ciara and Daegan could take on the form of a small beast or an object of equivalent size to their own, should the need arise; however, unless there was no other way for them to survive, using their ability to cast illusions would allow them to avoid detection just as well and doing so would allow them to hide for an extended period of time. As long as they knew the appropriate words and learned the correct patterns for weaving the aethereal stands in order to complete the spells, Ciara or Daegan could look like anyone or anything. The only catch was that they wouldn't smell the same to one of their brothers or sisters whose senses were better developed than their own. Such details have gotten the both of them caught on more than one occasion. This was another reason that Ciara always suggested that they stick to the road nearest the river as the river's own natural mist of perfume tended to mask their



scent. And, in all truthfulness, they weren't the only two who knew to take advantage of this fact.

Having waited until the eleventh bell had rung out, Ciara and Daegan left their house under the cover of darkness. They used their best cloaks to cover the majority of their bodies. They both wove a spell to change the color of their attire from its usual bright and earthy tones to deep shades of blue. Ciara instructed Daegan to keep an eye on the houses to their right while she focused on the road ahead. The two of them slunk from tree to tree, from shadow to shadow, doing their best to keep from being seen. Daegan, having worked with the Artificer's Guild to install a series of devices that were similar to what Faolan might recognize as street lamps, knew how to avoid detection when they got the thinner portion of the road that led to the castle. Ciara, being the elder sibling, was used to being in charge most of the time, whenever they would get into mischief; however, in matters such as these, she knew that she could trust her brother's guidance.

Unlike the gas fueled lamps that inspired this particular innovation, these lamps did not flicker. They did, however, breathe. They would go from dim to bright in a pattern that made their light look like a slithering snake that, much like Sisyphus, would spent an entire night trying to make it to the top of the hill without ever getting there. As long as they timed it right, and they kept up a consistent pace, they could run from the bottom of the stairs to the first landing, chasing the dimness all the way up the cobblestone stairs. At each landing, they would have to hug the walls to avoid being caught in the next wave of bright light, but it would allow them to catch their breaths and wait for the next cycle to come around. Had Daegan not been focusing so intently on his counting, and had Ciara

not been so intent on listening to her brother's instructions, they might have noticed the six shadows that were making their way up the cliffside, not ten feet away from them.

By the time that they arrived at the third and final landing, the two of them needed to take an extended break. Ciara decided to take the risk and sat on the edge of the railing kept random Sidhe from falling off the sometimes slick stairs and into the swift moving water that waited for them at the bottom of the cliff. Ciara swung her legs over the side of the railing and let them dangle. Sitting this way made her feel like a little Sidhe again. She loved the feeling of the cool breeze on her face. She started kicking her legs back and forth in an idle fashion. As she did, at the end of her left foot's return, she managed to kick a small stone loose. The chunk of slate tumbled through the open air and just missed the head of one of the six shadowy figures who were closing the gap between themselves and the wayward siblings.

Daegan tapped Ciara on the shoulder and jerked his head in the general direction of the castle. Ciara hopped down from the railing and waited for her brother to give the signal. They both waited until the next gap in the sequence. When Daegan's mental countdown reached zero, he winked at his sister, and the two siblings made a mad dash for the top of the stairs. Being this high up meant that their footfalls made more noise than when they were at the bottom of the trail, but that was always a calculated risk that they just had to live with. With each step cleared, Ciara's heart pounded harder inside of her chest and her smile grew wider. She had never been good with sitting still.

Once they reached the top, they made a hard left to run along the back side of the lowest of the six towers. While the castle and most of its accompanying towers float quite

high above the top of the hill, the first tower sits rather low, allowing for easy access from the ground level. From here on out, there was little concern about being seen, but there was a concern about being heard. Unlike the cobblestone stairs that were cut into the hillside, the stairs up to the first tower were made of a sturdy, but flexible metal. Running up these stairs would cause their footfalls to ring out like a low-pitched bell. With this in mind, the both of them had to take the next leg of their journey at a more sluggish pace.

Climbing flight after flight of stairs that are suspended over nothing but open air can be quite unnerving for most people. Ciara almost always thinks back to the first time that Faolan went up to the floating castle with her whenever she make her way up the silver stairs.

“Are you sure I can’t just meet you up there,” Faolan had asked her as he cautiously tested the first step. “You know, I could just turn into a bird of some sort and just fly myself up there.”

Ciara had laughed at that remark, patted him on the back and said, “Yes, you could do that. But if you do,” she had paused then so that she might pass him on the wide stairwell. After she was a couple of stairs past him, she turned around and started again. “If you do, I’ll never let you live it down, you dirty yellow-billy.” She had smirked at him then, crossed her arms, and leaned against the railing, confident that she had called him something scathing enough that her friend would screw up the requisite courage to meet her challenge.

“It’s yellow—belly,” Faolan had said in reply, closing the distance between them. He tapped Ciara’s stomach with the back of his right hand and smiled. “Belly, not Billy.”

Once Ciara and her brother made their way into the first tower, passed the first couple of tower guards, and made their way into the library, Daegan took the lead again. Before they left that evening, he had told her about how he had finally figured out where Cormac, their High Chieftain, had hidden his private study nook among the stacks. Considering that the two of them had been born with the Affinity for becoming Wordsmiths, both of them were always on the look out for new words, new patterns, and new spells.

While it was often considered to be uncouth to steal words from their fellow Wordsmiths, nearly every one of them had committed the faux-pas at least once in their lifetime. The best of their order were often accused of being career plagiarists, but no one ever did much about it. Even though not many of the Aes Sidhe have ever heard the saying regarding what not to do in glass houses, they have a saying of their own that communicates the same basic message.

After three minutes of weaving their way through the stacks, Ciara noticed that they had passed a few of the shelves more than once. “Are you lost, brother mine,” she whispered into Daegan’s ear.

“Not in the slightest, dear sister,” he replied with a wink. “It might seem quite odd to retrace our steps in such a way, but I promise it will be worth it.”

Ciara had always trusted her brother when it came to such things, but she wasn’t sure about this particular turn of events. She didn’t mind taking the scenic route in order to avoid being caught, but to backtrack so many times seemed strange and maybe even a little fool hardy. She might not have liked it, but she followed along, anyway.

Another minute passed by and they found themselves back where they had started from. Daegan stopped dead in his tracks and turned around to look at his sister's face. Her arms were crossed, her teeth were showing, and her eyebrow was raised in a dangerous arc.

“Seriously?” She asked in a hiss.

Before answering, Daegan jerked his head at the bookcase to his left. “Take a look over there, notice anything different?”

Ciara turned her head to her right, following her brothers suggestion. To her surprise, there was a faint outline of golden light escaping from around the edges of the case. “By Dagda’s beard,” she whispered, walking towards the bookcase without thinking. She reached out for the side of the shelves and Daegan stopped her.

“It won’t open without saying the correct words first.”

“Oh,” Ciara said, stepping back. She bowed and gestured towards the bookcase. “After you then, dear brother.”

Daegan bowed in return, “thank you.” He placed his left hand on the side of the case, and closed his eyes for a moment. Although Daegan knew the words that needed to be spoken, he had to focus his Affinity first as this spell required a decent amount of his reserves to cast. The first time he tried to open the door on his own, he nearly blacked out from the attempt. Now knowing how it would affect him, he knew to steady himself before trying again. “Depun enfui-jyu.”

Ciara watched as the light around the bookcase became brighter. It reacted to her brother’s words by tracing a line of light clockwise around the outside. When the line

completed its circuit, the bookshelf clicked and swung open by an inch or two. “I think I get it now,” she said, helping her brother pull the shelf open the rest of the way. “The reason we had to walk around this place in circles like that was in order to weave a pattern in the aethereal threads before the words themselves would work, right?”

“That’s correct,” Daegan said, stepping aside so that his sister might have the honour of going in first. “It’s such a long pattern to weave that most people probably just assume that Cormac is aimlessly wandering about in the stacks and that’s what is the most brilliant thing about it all.”

“It’s certainly impressive,” Ciara said, taking a seat in the only available chair in the small room. “Even if the words are so simple.”

“I know,” Daegan said, pulling the bookcase closed behind him, stopping short of pulling it all the way shut. “To think that the secret password was essentially, door open.”

Ciara sat in the chair and looked at a number of things that were hung on the walls, placed on the shelves, and stacked on top of the desk. Nothing really piqued her interest. Most everything was written in Cormac’s private cypher. Seeing as how it was an open secret that other Wordsmiths might steal the words that their colleagues have discovered for themselves, it had long since become a common practice to create personal cyphers with which to hide one’s collection of words.

Even though writing things down in a cypher helped, should the Wordsmith ever speak a word or phrase aloud, anyone within earshot could steal the words for themselves. This was how Daegan was able to figure out what the door’s secret phrase was, in the first place. He had followed Cormac around the library one day, tracking his

movements and interactions, looking for something that might lead him to Cormac's private study nook.

Now that Daegan had found it, had practiced weaving the appropriate pattern through the stacks, and had gotten used to the amount of energy that was required to open the door, he was free to explore the room at his leisure. Even if Ciara was bored, Daegan was thrilled to be in Cormac's study. He wasn't sure what anything said, thanks to the cypher, but that did not stop him from copying down everything he could manage to find into his own personal grimoire. Every Aes Sidhe possesses a grimoire, even if they don't keep it on their person at all times. Wordsmiths, on the other hand, were always overprotective of their grimoires. And so it came to be that most of them would lash their grimoires shut with leather straps and then seal them with an Artificer's lock. The most paranoid of the lot would, like Cormac and Daegan, would even commission special chains from their Artificer of choice that would allow them to secure their property to their belts.

"There must be over a hundred grimoires on these shelves," Daegan said with glee as he thumbed through a rather thick book made out of some sort of scaled hide. "I don't know what to liberate first."

Ciara giggled. She knew that her brother would spend the rest of his natural born life sneaking into Cormac's study to liberate every word Cormac had ever committed to paper. "Just be careful, brother mine," Ciara warned, leaning forward in the chair, glaring at him all the while. "You wouldn't want to repeat of the Delilah Incident, would you?"

Daegan's face turned bright red. "You promised never to bring that up, ever again," he grumbled. "Still—point taken." Daegan turned away from his sister then and was about to put the green scaly book back on the shelf when his grip became slack and his mouth went dry. Neither he or his sister had been paying attention to anything other than what was in the room since they had opened the door and, in that moment, Daegan had come to realize that the door was standing wide open. "Cac," he hissed under his breath.

Standing in front of the door was a seven foot tall beast of a man. His skin was covered in thick red fur, the tips of his fingers ended in black talons, and his nose resembled that of a dog's or a sheep's. Fangs protruded from lower lip, his eyes were red, and he had what looked like the tail of mule that was swaying in what Daegan assumed to be an agitated manner. A Fomorian had made its way into the library and he wasn't alone.

The furry red monster punched Daegan in the gut, causing him to groan as all of the air was expelled from his stomach and lungs. Ciara, having seen the beast-man for herself, threw up her right hand and cast a spell that sent a concussive wave of force out from the palm of her hand. The Fomorian grunted and stumbled backward, but did not falter. He ducked out of the way and another Fomorian took his place, a snake looking devil with long arms. He grabbed Daegan, who was hunched over in pain, and flung him out of the way and into the arms of one of the other Fomorians. The snake-man hissed at Ciara and a green mist covered her face. She breathed it in without thinking and the world began to spin. She fell out of the chair and landed on the stone floor with a loud thunk. The first Fomorian entered the study nook, searched the shelves with purpose. He



rummaged through the shelves tossing things over his shoulders without care. Then, he found the book he was looking for, at least as far as Ciara could tell through the haziness that had enshrouded her vision. She heard a gruff voice saying, “take the whelp—he might be of use.” And with that they were gone and Ciara’s vision faded to black.

## Chapter Two

### Cold Floors and Sideways Glances

Ciara awoke to the sound of several gruff voices arguing about something. Her head ached and throbbed. It hurt worse than the time she was caught trying to win a drinking contest against the town drunk. She had gone round for round with him all night long. No matter how many flagons of mead they both drank, the lush never lost his composure. Little did Ciara know that her competition was cheating; otherwise, she probably would've won out of sheer force of will.

The first complete sentence that made any sense was short and terrifying. "Daegan is missing," one of the guards said to the blurry figure next to him.

"It's alright," the purple blur said to the guard. "You wouldn't have been able to do anything against that many of them. I am just glad that no one else got hurt."

"Cormac," Ciara asked, struggling to sit up straight.

"Ah, I see that you're finally awake," Cormac said, leaving the guard to come and join Ciara. "Here, let me help you up into the chair."

Ciara accepted the outstretched hand. She groaned and shook as she attempted to stand. Cormac, who wasn't all that stable himself, did his best to steady the young Sidhe. Cormac helped Ciara find the arms of the chair and let her slip into the chair with as much grace as he could muster, which is to say that he let her slide into the chair like he was dropping a sack of potatoes.

“Oof,” Ciara grunted, landing in the chair. She brushed the silver-blond strands of hair out of her face and smirked. “Good thing I’m still young; you might have cracked a hip if I had let you down so roughly.”

“Hardly,” Cormac said with a huff. “I am made of sterner stuff than you give me credit for, child.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Ciara said, turning her gaze to the guard who was standing at the door. “Were you the one who found me?”

“Yes,” the guard replied, stepping further into the room.

“Did you catch the things that infiltrated our walls,” Ciara asked, flashing her teeth and snarling as she spoke.

“No, ma’am,” the guard said, dropping both his shoulders and his gaze. “I wasn’t even aware of their presence until I saw them making their escape.”

Remorse flickered across Ciara’s countenance. She knew that she had let her guard down. It wasn’t her fault that the Fomorians had come and it wasn’t her fault that they had been able to sneak into the castle undetected, but that didn’t make her feel any better about the situation. Ciara dug her fingernails into the wood of the chair’s arm. “What happened to my brother,” Ciara asked, somehow finding the courage to put her own issues aside for the moment.

“Daegan was last seen being carried out of the castle, unconscious, but most likely alive,” the guard replied.

“Do you know why they took him,” Cormac asked, tapping his finger along the shaft of his walking-stick.

“All I know,” Ciara said, meeting Cormac’s gaze, “is that one of them said that ‘he might be of some use’—I think.” Ciara rubbed her arms and shook her head. She felt responsible. Daegan was useless in almost any battle scenario. He was always too focused on the little things to see the big picture. She knew better than to let her guard down. “Do you know what they took,” she asked, attempting to get her mind back on track.

Cormac sucked in a long breath, puffing out his chest before shaking his head and letting the air sputter back out through his tightened lips. “I am not certain, as of yet,” he said, gesturing with his walking-stick. “As you can see, almost everything in this room has been disturbed. Until I start putting things back where they belong, it’s hard to say—one way or another.”

“I suppose that’s true enough,” Ciara said, looking around the room for herself, allowing the last few moments before blacking out play through in her head. “Whatever it was,” she said as she stood before crossing the room. “I think it came from this shelf. I can’t say for certain as I was on the floor and my vision was too blurry to make out many details. The big, red-furry one was standing here,” she said, squaring up with the shelves. “He grabbed something from the middle of the shelf, I think. It was dark in color, maybe.”

“For not being able to see very well, you sure seem to be able to remember an awful lot of things,” the guard said, looking at Ciara with a sideways glance.

“Our Steward friend, Faolan—he taught me a few tricks over the past few years,” she said, taking two steps towards the guard. “Just because he taught me what to look for doesn’t mean I had anything to do with it.”

“I didn’t say that you did,” the guard said, crossing his arms. “since you mentioned it—I wonder how it is that they even knew to come to this room, or how to get in here. Even me and the other guards do not know how to open this door.”

“Does that sound like a safety concern to anyone else,” Ciara said, looking back at Cormac. “What if you were in here, all by yourself, and something were to happen to you?”

“Then I suppose that I would be sealed up within these walls, along with all of my secrets, wouldn’t I?” Cormac said, looking down his nose at her.

Ciara felt the sting of his barb, deep in her heart. It wasn’t the first time that the two of them had been caught rummaging about in the library after hours, but it was the first time that they were caught riffling through Cormac’s things. She went back to the chair then and sunk into its leather cushion as deep as it would allow. She rubbed her forehead and then sighed.

“The guard does have a point though,” Cormac said, letting his voice take on a more neutral tone. “How did they know where to find this room? I have taken great care in keeping its location a secret, after all.”

“To be honest,” Ciara said, forcing herself to look Cormac in the eyes. “I don’t know how they knew where to look, but I won’t lie to you—Daegan and I left the door

open, just a little, because we didn't know if you had put a charm on the door in order to keep the door locked from the inside while you were in here."

Cormac shrugged and walked towards the shelf that Ciara had previously mentioned. He ran his fingers along the edge of it, feeling the grit and texture of the ancient wood. He made a mental note that his shelves needed a new coat of polish and he examined the spines of his journals, looking to see what remained. "You were right to leave the door open, I suppose," Cormac said, bringing his fingers to a halt in the place where he noticed a visible gap. "I had put a charm on the door. You were correct in assuming as much."

Ciara felt a little relieved. She knew that she wasn't off the hook by any measure, but at least she knew that she and her brother had been right. "I honestly don't know why you'd do that though, considering how hard it is to open this door in the first place."

"I have my reasons," Cormac said, turning towards Ciara long enough for her to see him smirking. "Which one of you figured out how to get in here, anyway?"

"Daegan, of course."

"I suspected as much," Cormac said, turning to face the guard. "You may leave, I will handle this matter from here on out. Alert the rest of the council that we have had a breech and have them gather at the Circle of Masters, first thing in the morning."

"Yes, of course," the guard said before turning on his heel to exit the room.

"Are we going to be in trouble," Ciara said, biting her lower lip with worry.

"If your brother ever makes it back to us alive, he might be."

"Why only him," Ciara asked.

“Because you will have paid your penance by then, already,” Cormac said, gripping his walking-stick in a menacing fashion.

Cormac spent the next few hours with Ciara in his office, located outside of the room where the council was set to meet. They talked and they ate, snacking on a plate of fruits and cheeses. Ciara explained how Daegan had figured out how to enter Cormac’s study. She told him that they hadn’t meant to do anything outside of studying their mentor’s work and that Daegan had spent most of his time copying down things from Cormac’s journals. She neglected to tell him that she was sitting idle and doing nothing while her brother did all the work.

“The fact that the Fomorians seemingly knew how to get into the room still bothers me,” Cormac said, picking through the fruit on the plate, hoping to find one last grape. “I have my suspicions, of course; however, I dare not voice them outside of this room. I do not wish to tip my hand prematurely.”

“Are you thinking that someone from the council was involved,” Ciara asked, shifting about in her chair.

“That would be the obvious concern,” Cormac said, uncovering the coveted piece of fruit. He plopped it into his mouth and relished its sweetness. “While I can imagine there being a traitor in our midst,” Cormac paused, turning to face Ciara. “I fear that the infiltration might be much worse than a singular rogue agent. It’s too early to tell, at this moment.”

Ciara shifted in her chair, she was nervous about the council meeting to discuss her and her brother's blunder. She knew that not everyone in the council would be as forgiving as Cormac. Her punishment was to catalog and reorganize the contents of the shelves in Cormac's private study, after having emptied all of them and giving them all a fresh coat of polish.

"Are you worried about your brother," Cormac asked.

"Yes," Ciara said, turning her gaze to meet his. "I know that Daegan can take care of himself. I also know that the Fomorians who took him seemed to need him for something. I just don't know what that something could be and it bothers me." She sighed then, taking a moment to let her mind wander, to let it explore the possibilities.

A small band of Fomorians had been responsible for killing both of their parent's when the two of them were still in their second century. She knew that it wasn't an accident that killed her parents, but she also knew that they weren't the intended targets of the bombing that claimed their lives. For a second time in her life, Ciara's family had become the victim of bad timing. And, for a second time in her life, she felt powerless to stop it.

"After we talk to the council," Cormac said, holding out his hand for hers. "We can attempt to do something about bringing your brother home. Do not forget that we have other resources that we can use to our advantage in this situation."

Ciara took the hand of her mentor and gave it a firm squeeze. "Are you suggesting that we use him," she asked, a smile creeping into the corner of her eye.

"Indeed, I am," Cormac said with a wink.



“Are you sure that will be wise,” she asked. “The council haven’t been fond of him as of late.”

“You leave the council to me, my child; you go and fetch your friend.”

## Chapter Three

### Espresso Shots and Pool Sticks

Across the dimensional divide, nestled against the Tolka river, a stone's throw away from the Botanic Gardens, there is a café that used to be a pub, once upon a time. The building and the property have been owned by the McKenna family for as long as anybody can remember. Up until recently, in the grand scheme of things, the building had been a pub with a steady clientele, serving pints of the black stuff to Dublin locals for the past seventy-five years. After the turn of the millennium, Gregory McKenna passed ownership of the pub onto his two children, Faolan and Niamh.

Faolan would have been happy to keep running the pub the way that his father had for the past forty-two years, but Niamh had other plans in mind. Together they scraped up enough capital for a remodeling of the space and they turned it into a coffee bar with a full service kitchen for breakfast and lunch. After ten years of success, Faolan had to admit that his sister had been right, all along.

Itching to have something to call his own, Faolan had turned what used to be the pool parlor in the back of the pub into a 'new-age' store. He stocked it with books, candles, incense, and other raw materials for spell-work. While the kind of magic that his family has possessed throughout the ages has all but died out in modern times, a new wave of self-proclaimed shamans and mystics had begun to crop up over the past few decades.

Some of the McKenna magic had always required particular components, crystals and the like, for example; so, it seemed perfectly natural to Faolan to stock-up on those things in bulk. Not only would it be cheaper, but it would give them a good excuse if anyone ever examined their weekly coffee and herbs deliveries too closely.

For the past three years, Faolan's small-scale occult shop had gained a reputation for being one of the latest hipster trends that the locals scoffed at and ignored. Even still, the Purple Cauldron had gained a dedicated cult following among the nearby college crowd. Many of the late-stage teenagers and twenty-somethings would come in for their caffeine fix and then some would be seduced by the allure of finding yet another way to make their traditionalist-parents nervous. Many soon began to hang out in Faolan's shop, buying crystals, getting tarot readings, or riffling through spell books in search of a spell to make one of their ex-lovers jealous—among other cliché things.

There was even a small group of them that became convinced that some of the herbs behind the counter might make them high. Faolan did his best to dissuade them from eating or smoking their purchases, but once they left the shop there was little that he could do to stop them.

On good days, Faolan and Niamh would wake up in their separate lofts, some time just after dawn, and they would both get into their respective showers. Faolan would sing along to everything from Frank Sinatra to Freddie Mercury, while his sister would just lip-sync to the soulful sounds of the sixties. Once they had gotten dressed for the day, they would meet downstairs to share breakfast in Niamh's office.

Rowan, their head chef and childhood friend, along with his wife Eibhlín, would have already been up for two or three hours by that time. Every morning, except for Sunday's, the two of them would make a big breakfast for the live-in café staff. Each of them would file through the kitchen, at some point, and they would each grab a plate and fill it with whatever Rowan had decided to make that day.

On Monday's, the go-to-meal was a buffet styled breakfast. Rowan would make all the fixings for a Full-Irish, a dish that is typically comprised of fried bacon, black and white pudding, baked beans, fried tomatoes and mushrooms, eggs, and a hefty serving of bubble and squeak—served with toast and coffee or tea to drink.

And, on the morning that Daegan had gone missing, Rowan made the same breakfast as he did on any other Monday. But, by the time that Faolan, Niamh, and the rest of the staff had all come downstairs to eat, an usual guest had arrived. It wasn't a customer, hoping to get in an early breakfast before facing the wrath of their Monday morning classes. Nor was it some lost tourist from America, or from some other far-off time-zone, who was jet lagged and hungry. Just the same, the unannounced guest had come quite a long way, in a manner of speaking.

Faolan walked through the double-kitchen-doors, kicking them open with his foot, holding a hefty plate of breakfast in one hand and a steaming hot cup of coffee in the other. He passed through the narrow hallway between the kitchen and his sister's office and then he proceeded to place his platter onto her desk. He took a long sip of his black coffee, savoring the strong blend of hazelnut and dark roast that was Niamh's custom house blend. After he was done taking his first sip of the day, he looked at his sister

behind her desk and looked at the other person sitting in one of the two chairs opposite her. He took note of the serious look on his sister's face, the seething anger that burned behind her eyes, the subtle redness of her cheeks, and the tightness of her lips.

He then turned his attention to the tall, thin, white-haired woman across from her. She had the same redness in her cheeks, but the emotion that Faolan saw behind her eyes was not anger, so much as it was sadness with just a hint of guilt for colour.

"Please tell me no-one died," Faolan said, taking another sip of his coffee. "I don't know if I can handle a death in the family before I've had my breakfast."

Ciara, sitting up straight in her chair, flashed Faolan a shrewd look. "No, no-one is dead—yet," she said before settling back into her chair.

"Yet," Faolan said, making it a question with a subtle lilt in his voice.

"Daegan has gone missing," Niamh said, her rage reaching near fever-pitch. She gritted her teeth, shook her head, and huffed. "No, to be more accurate, he was kidnapped."

Faolan whistled. "Yo," he said in one, elongated syllable—a habit he had inherited from his grandfather. "I take it from the look on your face that you were there when it happened, Ciara?"

"Yes," she said, her face and her dagger-like ears turning a brighter shade of red.

"Do we know who did it," Faolan asked, then reconsidered his choice of words. "Like, have we ever dealt with them before?"

"Not as far as she can tell," Niamh said, doing her best to stay calm. "All was know is that it was likely a group of Fomorians."

While Faolan sat and ate his breakfast, sitting at the edge of Niamh's desk, Ciara recounted the previous night's events. She told them both about how it was a normal evening for Ciara and her brother, sneaking into the library and trying to get a leg up on their fellow Wordsmiths. She explained that Daegan had found a way into Cormac's study and that, after having spent a few hours in there, two Fomorians attacked Daegan and her.

Faolan listened, making note of the facts at hand. He picked up on the fact that there were more people outside of the study beyond the two who attacked his friends, including one that had commanded that they take Daegan along with them.

Being a McKenna and a Steward of the Gates, had its perks. Both Faolan and Niamh had been invited into Cormac's private study once before. Niamh, who had always been better at sleight of hand than Faolan, had managed to swipe several pieces of Cormac's favorite candies. Faolan, by contrast, was always better at seeing the little details that most other people would tend to overlook. Unlike the Aes Sidhe, being among the few remaining descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann meant that their Affinities were not as prone to being passed down from generation to generation in a static fashion.

Faolan had been born with the Affinity for shape-shifting and tracking. His senses were keener than most and he had a knack for mapping things in his head. As a child, whenever he got bored, he would attempt to walk from his room, upstairs, down to the kitchen while blindfolded. He did his best to let his nose, his ears, and his mental map guide him. The more he did it, the better he got at it. So, in a similar fashion, Faolan sat

there with his eyes shut, walking himself through the stacks. He imagined the scenario in his memory of the castle's library, adding in the new data that his friend was relaying to him. A lot of things made sense with what he knew of the location and what he knew of the encounter that Ciara had described, but Faolan knew that first hand knowledge would serve him better.

After Ciara had finished telling him everything that she knew, up until that point in time, Faolan opened his eyes and shook his head. He knew what to do next.

"Even if the council won't like it," he said while rubbing the bridge of his nose between his index finger and thumb. "You were right to come and ask us for our help. If we can track down the few people who manage to slip through the cracks and into the land above, surely we can do the same thing to track down one of your own—right?"

"That is what Cormac thinks," Ciara said while rubbing her palms down the front of her legs, smoothing out the lines of her shirt. "However, both Cormac and I worry that the council will try to block this move. Over the past few decades, they have become increasingly wary of outside interference."

"And yet, they still expect us to uphold our end of the bargain by catching the runaways for them," Niamh said, her voice straining as she attempted to refrain from yelling. "Typical—just abso-freaking-lutely typical."

Faolan, doing his best to keep things from devolving into a tirade, touched his sister on the shoulder. He knew how she felt about their arrangement with the council. He had done everything in his power to take on the responsibility of that agreement himself. He hadn't minded being a bounty-hunter of sorts. It was one of the few things that both

he and his father had enjoyed doing together. Niamh, by contrast, hated the idea of chasing down people. And while Niamh had never fully explained to her brother why she felt that way, he respected his sister's desire to live as close to a normal life as possible and he did his best to keep her out of it.

"Sorry," Niamh said, sighing and rubbing her forehead. "I just get so worked up about this kind of thing—y'know?"

"Yeah, I do," Faolan said, rubbing her shoulder and doing his best to comfort her.

"You know," Niamh started to say, half smirking and half snarling. "If this location wasn't so good, not to mention rent free, I would so move the café somewhere else just so I wouldn't have to worry about monsters and Sidhe popping up in our basement at random."

"Oh, come on," Faolan said with a smile, "it could be much worse; they could be popping out into your closet, instead."

"Don't even joke like that," Niamh said through clenched teeth, brandishing her forefinger as though it were a weapon.

Ciara laughed. It was a bright and cheerful laugh. Despite being almost one-thousand-years-old, her laugh still reminded Faolan of a child's laugh. Faolan always assumed that it had something to do with the way that the Aes Sidhe aged. Even though Ciara was well over nine-hundred years old, she still possessed a body that resembled a typical sixteen-year-old, human girl. Though, her height, her white hair, and her long and pointed ears would definitely mark her as being different from the average Irish-teenager,



her face and her eyes could lull anyone into thinking that she was little more than a wee-babe. “Has Aine ever forgiven you for making that portal in your closet?”

“Seeing as how only the two of us have ever made use of it, I’d say that I’m in the clear thus far,” Faolan said, picking up his coffee mug from the desk. He cupped the mug in between his hands, rolling it back and forth. He gazed into the empty bottom of the vessel, watching as the last few beads of his favorite vice circled the edge of the mug. “Anybody else want a refill?”

Faolan collected everyone’s coffee cups and went into the kitchen. He passed through the double doors to find Rowan and Eibhlín busy with the early morning rush. The two of them had already been partners for years by the time that Niamh invited them to work at the café. Faolan watched as the two of them danced from station to station. Rowan would go to flip an omelet and Eibhlín would be waiting for him with a plate to put it on. They moved from plate to plate, meal to meal in perfect synchronicity. Whenever Aine would call out a new order, Rowan would repeat the order back to her and Eibhlín would begin pulling ingredients and other containers. As Eibhlín began lining up the different vegetables, herbs, spices, and other fresh ingredients, Rowan would pull the meats, eggs, and sauces from the refrigerator. Without question the kitchen was their domain. Everyone else in the café knew better than to get in their way, for fear of interrupting their flow.

After they were first hired on and having then worked in the newly remodeled kitchen for two weeks, Rowan had figured out every place where the feng shui flowed in a less than optimal way and rearranged appliances, stations, and utensils in order correct

it. The first thing that he moved was the employee coffee station. Rowan knew that everyone else would want coffee that they could grab at their leisure, so he put it out of his working environment and put it on a station at the back of the kitchen, next to the stairs that led up into the apartments above. Faolan and Niamh were grateful for this arrangement as it allowed them to watch the kitchen, the back door, and the front door, via the serving window, all in one central location.

As Faolan watched the culinary couple working, he took his time with refilling the coffee cups. He enjoyed watching people move together in such a manner. Aine, every time that she would come to the window would blow Faolan a kiss before calling out an order. *Another good reason to hang out at the coffee station*, Faolan thought to himself as he smiled back at his love. He returned her gesture only for Rowan to stop cooking a plate of eggies in a basket, for a brief moment.

“Why, Faolan,” Rowan said in a mocking tone of voice. “I didn’t know you cared.”

“Oh piss it,” Faolan replied, over acting in kind. “I didn’t want you to find out like this—I had such plans.”

Rowan fanned himself with a wide spatula, batted his eyes and pretended to blush. “Well, it’s too late now, big boy—the cat’s out of the bag.”

Eibhlínhin smacked Rowan on his backside and gripped it tight. “This piece of man-candy is mine, boy-o. Go find your own. And you,” Eibhlínhin said, turning to face her lover. “Get back to work before your egg burns.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rowan replied, flipping the hollowed out toast and egg over in the pan.

Aine snorted and laughed before returning to her duties. “Y’all are weird, but I love you anyways.”

While Faolan and Rowan had grown up together as friends and cousins, Eibhlín was an outsider when she first arrived, Aine was as well; but it did not take long for either of them to find their footing. Eibhlín was not a descendant of the Tuatha Dé Danann, like Faolan, Niamh, and Rowan were, but she had inherited a magic all her own. The magic that her family had practiced for the past few centuries was a type of magic that had to be learned, so it could not be passed down through blood like an Affinity could among the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Aes Sidhe.

Aine, having grown up in a different part of Ireland altogether, had only recently met Faolan and his weird, magical family. She grew up not knowing anything about Fomorians, the Tuatha Dé Danann, or the Aes Sidhe apart from the myths and legends that had been recounted within the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, or *The Book of Invasions*, as it is sometimes called. Aine never could have guessed that most of those myths might have been true, nor could she have imagined that there was another world that existed beneath the Emerald Isle, itself. Still, having been the kind of child who grew up reading every fantasy novel that she could get her hands on, Aine did not blink when she found out the truth.

Faolan felt that he had been lucky to have such a tight-knit family to work and live with. And though they did not get to see them as often, Faolan and Niamh both had

come to consider Ciara and Daegan family as well. Now, with Daegan having been kidnapped, Faolan wasn't sure what to tell the rest of the family. He grimaced at the coffee cups as he filled two of them with sugar and milk. Faolan knew that he would have to leave with Ciara in order to help find her brother and he knew that he might end up leaving everyone else behind to hold the fort while he was gone, but what worried him most was how unprepared he felt.

Every time that he looked at Rowan, he didn't just see an excellent Chef; he also saw a brother in arms. The pink and ragged scars on his forearms weren't from mishaps at the grill, save for a few exceptions—they were from fighting alongside Faolan for the past few years as a Steward of the Gates. The faint and all-but-faded line above Eibhlín's right eye wasn't from some mistake made in the dojo where Rowan and she sparred; it was from the time that a Fomorian caught her by surprise just outside of Johnstown Park, near Glasnevin. Even Aine, who possessed no inherent magical talent of her own, had learned from Niamh how to use a form of occularmancy to see through the other team member's eyes to help them plan and strategize their movements and actions while they were out in the field, chasing down targets. She always teased Faolan, saying that her years of playing Strategy Role-Playing Games had paid off.

The possibility of having to go into the field alone with Ciara made him unsure of his ability to bring Daegan home. Faolan cursed at himself as he walked back into Niamh's office with the coffee. He had grown so dependent on his family and their skills that he wasn't sure how to handle the situation. He had helped Ciara do things in Lindera before, so he knew that he would have to alter his spells and his approach to using his

Affinity while there, but he wasn't sure if he was still good enough to work without Aine's voice in the back of his head warning him of dangers that he couldn't see. He didn't know if he could fight in tandem with Ciara the way that he could with Rowan or Eibhlín.

Faolan set the other two coffee mugs down on the desk, while holding onto his own. He then leaned against the doorframe, sipping at his coffee. He rolled the mug back and forth in his hands, watching the black liquid ripple inside. He fought to keep his expression as blank as possible.

"Penny for your thoughts," Ciara asked before claiming her own cup.

"It's nothing," Faolan said. He ran his fingers through his hair and then he gulped down his coffee.

"I know that's a lie," Ciara said, standing. She put down her cup, walked over to her friend, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Talk to me."

Faolan looked at her, looked over at Niamh, and then sighed. "I'm worried about the two of us going into this blind," he said, looking into Ciara's icy-blue eyes. They had always reminded him of his sister's eyes. That particular shade of blue was a trait shared by those who had the same Affinity as Ciara and Niamh. Not being an Aes Sidhe, Niamh's eyes weren't as bright as Ciara's, but they were close.

"I can tell that it's more than just that, Faolan," she said, letting her hand slide off of his shoulder.

He could feel her eyes scanning his face. He knew what she was doing; she was trying to read him, just like he had taught her to do. He had been tapping his foot until he

noticed what she was doing. He could see her expression as she pieced it all together in her head. He held his breath and closed his eyes.

“You’re not just worried,” Ciara said, stepping back from him. “You’re terrified.”

Faolan let go of the breath that he had been holding and opened his eyes. He flashed a dirty look her way. “You know,” Faolan said, pulling away from the doorframe. “There are some days that I regret teaching you how to do that.”

## Chapter Four

### Cave of Wander

Somewhere on the western banks of the Black River, about half a day's march from the village, Daegan came to. His head swayed from side to side and his stomach ached. The pain was two-fold; one pain was the dull ache of hunger while the other was a sharp pain. As Daegan regained his senses, he began to understand what was causing the second pain—a pointed shoulder rubbing into his gut.

With every step, the pain shifted. Daegan voiced his discomfort with a grunt after the Fomorian carrying him stumbled over a large rock in the path. The Fomorian behind Daegan snickered and told him to shut his mouth.

“Gladly,” Daegan managed to say, “if only I could shut my nose to save me from your stench.”

At this remark, the Fomorian struck Daegan across the face.

The pain in his face turned off the pain in his stomach, leaving Daegan to wonder which would have been worse, in the long run. Daegan spat a small dollop of blood onto the ground and kept his mouth shut.

“Shooting off your mouth isn’t the way to make friends,” Cormac’s voice echoed in Daegan’s head.

The memory of an altercation that occurred during his first year at the Wordsmith’s Academy played out in his memory. “Sometimes,” Cormac’s voice continued to say, “the truth is not the best thing to advertise.”

*Probably the best advise he's ever given me, Daegan thought to himself. Too bad I only seem to remember it after it's already too late.*

Daegan listened to the other Fomorian as they spoke to one another in their native tongue. He caught a few words and phrases, here and there, that he knew. At times, he felt as though he was learning a few new words based on context clues and body language, but nothing proved to be helpful.

One word stuck out to him though, Drega. Daegan thought back to his time at the Academy and his stomach turned once he remembered where he had the word before. "Drega," he barked at the Fomorian whose belly bounced at eye level. The confusion was plain in Daegan's eyes. "Who is going to be killed? Do you mean that you're going to kill me?"

"Do you speak the old tongue," someone out of sight asked.

The new voice sounded strange to Daegan. It did not sound like any Fomorian that he had ever encountered. The tone of it was musical, somehow. Most Fomorians have rough sounding voices whenever they speak in the common tongue. Some hiss, some growl, and others just sound as though their vocal cords had been run through a meat grinder. It often came down to the shape of their mouths, Daegan had always reasoned.

A slender, yet strong looking hand pushed the fat, green skinned Fomorian out of eyesight. A tall and thin Sidhe came into view then. "How much have you understood?"

Daegan did his best to meet the Sidhe's eyes, but he could not crane his neck high enough. All he managed to see was the thick, padded armor that adorned his chest. "Only



bits and pieces—honestly,” he said, letting his head flop back down, giving into gravity. “A friend of mine used to whisper that word, Drega, under his breath a lot whenever someone made him angry. One day, he screamed it at me when he tried to take my head off.”

“Oh, dear me,” the Sidhe said, feigning a sympathetic tone of voice. “I thought that it was quite difficult to behead one of the Aes Sidhe—given the fact that you’re all supposedly immortal and all of that.”

“Forgive me,” Daegan said. “I thought you to be one of us; are you not a Sidhe?” Daegan tried to meet his gaze once again.

The tall figure stooped down then, making his face easier to see. “Not quite,” he said. He let Daegan take it all in for a moment before continuing, “as you can probably see for yourself, I am not a pure blooded Sidhe.”

“You’re a Brésling,” Daegan said, looking at him, his eyes dashing from feature to feature. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.” The tall and thin figure stood erect once more, obscuring his face from Daegan’s vision. “Put the boy down—He can walk on his own from here on in.”

Daegan walked with the seven Fomorians for another half an hour before they turned off of the path and walked through the bushes towards a water fall. A thinner, less visible path had been cut into the grass and undergrowth that lead to the rocks at the base of it. As he approached the cascade, Daegan could see that they were headed for a hallow that was hidden by the water.

*Clever*, Daegan thought. He did his best to make sense of where he was, but nothing looked familiar. Ciara and their friends had ventured far from home, but Daegan had never felt the urge to do so. All that he knew was that he was near the Black River. *These little beauties*, Daegan thought to himself as he knelt down to pick a flower that blossomed near the river-bed, *these are a dead give away*.

The fat Fomorian jabbed him in the ribs with the tip of his sheathed sword. “You can smell the flowers later.”

“Yes,” Daegan grunted. “Of course.” His patience was growing thin with this creature. He followed his captors into the cave behind the waterfall and found himself a nice corner to rest in.

While Daegan, himself, had not been walking for all that long, he could imagine that the Fomorians hadn’t stopped marching since they left the village. This was the first time Daegan was given to size up everyone in the group. He looked around at the lot of them; he wanted to know who he might be up against in a fight, should he make an escape attempt. Near the mouth of the cave, two large Fomorians sat on rocks. They were both quite tall, about twice his own height, Daegan figured. The two of them were slumped low, trying their best not to scrape the tops of their heads against the sharp points that hung from the roof of the cave. They were, without a doubt, the muscle of the group. Their faces were twisted and ugly, covered in dirt, boils, and random tufts of hair. They did not possess any animal-like features, but the colour of their skin was not the pale white common among most of the Aes Sidhe. They weren’t a tan colour like some of the Sidhe that had the shape-shifting Affinity. One was blue and the other was green. The

green one, the one that had been in front of his face for the better part of the journey, winked at Daegan. It made him uncomfortable.

There were four other Fomorian scattered around the cave. Daegan immediately recognized the reptilian figure that had been spraying him ever since their encounter in the tower. He looked into that scaly face and stared at him. Daegan could feel the anger and embarrassment churning within his stomach. He closed his eyes, shook his head, and tried to focus on everyone else in the room.

He looked up again at the other three figures that were closest to him. One had features in common with a bull, another had features that made him look like a mule, and the last of them looked as though he shared features with many creatures—some of which Daegan was not immediately familiar with. His lower canine teeth protruded out from behind his bottom lip like two sharpened spear heads. The thing was covered in red fur and his ears, along with the palms of his hands, were smooth as Daegan's own skin, but they were a reddish-pink colour.

In the back of the cave, somewhat closer to him than the rest of the figures were, a seventh being sat reclined on a large stone that was smooth and round with wear. His skin was flawless. The colour looked like warm milk that had been mixed with honey. Daegan imagined that it would appear to glow with a golden sheen if they had been standing out in the direct light from the sun. The reclining figure was fit and toned. His muscles were well defined and his face was rather fetching. The oval shape of his head was framed by a mane of flowing red hair. If it weren't for the eyes, Daegan would have easily mistaken

him for a human or a Sidhe. The eyes, which were a dark colour with gold speckled and streaked throughout, marked him as a Brésling.

“I don’t remember seeing you in the tower,” Daegan said, addressing the reclining figure.

“Your memory serves you well,” the Brésling said, leaning forward. He placed his elbows on top of his thighs, just above the knees, and allowed his head to rest on top of his folded hands. “I prefer not to get my hands dirty, if at all possible.”

“I see,” Daegan said, allowing himself to echo the other’s body language. He tried to play dumb. “I don’t suppose you’d be so kind as to tell me why you brought me along? I know what you stole from the tower, a book, but I am uncertain as to the reason why you felt I might be of any use to you.”

The Brésling laughed. It was a soft but warm laugh—the kind of laugh that would warm somebody’s heart on the coldest day of their life. Considering the circumstances, the warmth of the laugh had the adverse effect. Rather than soothing Daegan’s heart and mind, it caused both of them to feel as though ice coursed through his veins.

“Although some of my friends might appear to be simple creatures, and the two out front certainly are, I am quite certain that you will come to find that they are all rather quick witted. As such, when Gramble over there saw you translating your master’s ciphers—he knew immediately to bring you along.”

“Ah,” Daegan said, hanging his head. “I suppose my own cleverness is my downfall, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be too sure, my dear boy,” the Brésling said as he stood. “It might serve as your last saving grace, provided that you use it for my benefit.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Well,” the Brésling said, pausing in order to close the gap between the two of them. He then knelt in front of Daegan, letting his left elbow come to rest on his knee, and spoke to his captive in a hushed tone of voice. “Let us just say that while my two friends out front are not the shiniest of implements found in an Artificer’s tool chest, but they might certainly be described as the most blunt and forceful of them.”

Daegan nodded. He knew that this was not the kind of situation that he was capable of talking himself out of. “So, allow me to see if I have a firm grasp of the situation. You wish for me to help you decipher something from that book. And then, I suppose, you will want me to help you figure out how to use whatever it is that I uncover for you. Is this correct?”

The Brésling rubbed his chin and smiled. “Yes,” he locked eyes with Daegan’s. “You’re not wrong, on any account. But I might yet find another use for you.”

He tilted his head and tried to read the expression of the Brésling. Though the Brésling seemed quite pleased with himself, Daegan could not glean anything else from him. “What else could he want with me,” he thought to himself.

“For the time being,” the Brésling said, “recover your strength—we have quite a couple days worth of marching to do before we get to where we are going.” He walked over to Gramble and told him to keep watch.

## Chapter Five

### *How do you get dragon's blood anyway?*

Faolan knew that leaving as soon as possible was in their best interest, but he also knew that if they left without being properly outfitted for the journey ahead that it could prove to be disastrous. Before heading into the store room that the café and the Purple Cauldron shared, Faolan had handed out everyone's marching orders. He told Aine to flip the open sign over, he told Rowan and Eibhlín to make enough rations for three weeks, for as many as four people, and he told Niamh and Ciara to grab three go-bags from the lockers on the second floor.

Once he was satisfied that everyone knew what they were to do, Faolan snuck off to the store room. He made a list of all the things that they might need for such a journey: Affinity Crystals, raw spell components, paper maps of Lindera drawn by Faolan's grandfather, pencils and erasers, rope, and all of the other accoutrements associated with a long hiking trip. From under a false bottom, hidden in one of Faolan's desk drawers, he retrieved a small, leather-bound book.

The pages were covered in different ciphers of all kinds. The letters, drawings, and other scribbles had been penned by many hands over the generations. Faolan was given the book by his father, though he was instructed to share it and its contents with his sister, of course. Between the two of them, they had added just shy of twenty new pages worth of words and spells to the family grimoire. Niamh, being the more organized one of the pair, had taken it upon herself to reconstruct the grimoire, digitally. Whereas

Faolan, on the other hand, liked the feeling of the book in his hand. He could see how the digital replication might be easier to search through at a moment's notice, but Faolan had always felt that it was hard to replicate the thinginess of things in a computer.

Faolan ran his hands and fingers over the coffee stained leather, feeling every scrape and scratch. He smelled the binding of the book and the pages, letting the aroma of pipe tobacco, leather, herbs, and flowers settle in his nasal passages. The smell of this book always made Faolan think of his grandfather. Faolan had always loved the way his grandfather's tobacco smelled. The vanilla and clove notes were the strongest, but there was a subtle hint of black-berry and whiskey that lingered after the more proud notes had faded.

Stowing the book in his breast pocket with love and care, Faolan prepared the rest of his things for the journey. He grabbed his favorite pocket knife from the pencil drawer of his desk. He loaded and holstered a hefty revolver under his right arm. He turned around and faced the wall behind his desk and pulled down a short sword from its decorative wall-mount and slung the sword belt around his waist, making sure that the sword fell against his left hip in the appropriate manner.

Faolan did a final pat down of his person, running down the list of items that he had stored in his various pockets. *Wallet, watch, keys, knife, gun, sword, and grimoire*, he thought to himself. His left hand lingered on the book. He thought about how his grandfather would go on walkabout from time to time. Faolan, without fail, could remember his grandfather's number one rule about such trips—"never leave home without your pipe and tobacco."

Faolan smiled and decided that maybe he would allow himself to indulge in the habit this one time. *After all, who knows when I'll be coming home again, right?* Faolan opened one last drawer in his desk and found a long and thin zippered pouch. The pouch was the same coffee stained leather as the book. The golden zipper had thick teeth to it and the head of it was a fat piece of steel that had been brassed to give it the same golden colour as the zipper. He placed the pouch in the opposite breast pocket of his jacket and went to rejoin the rest of the group, trying his best not to drop any of the boxes and bags he had spent the past half-hour collecting.



## Chapter Six

### *Close Only Counts in Horseshoes & Hand Grenades*

Ciara sat in her chair, bouncing her leg while Faolan and company gathered up the necessary gear for their journey. She bounced her leg so hard that she caused the picture frame on Niamh's desk to skitter across the sheet of glass that covered the red oak. As her mind began to wander, Ciara bit at her bottom lip and made a soft suckling noise. She felt a coldness and a dampness that was not her own.

Just beyond the sounds of spoons scraping and banging against the insides of pots and pans, she heard water dashing against stone. The sheer volume of it made the room around her melt into silence. Ciara embraced the flow and let the sensations wash over her. At the edge of her mind, a thread tugged and pulled at her attention.

"Ciara," Faolan called out in a firm tone of voice. "Are you with us?"

She could feel someone tapping her on the shoulder. The thread pulled taut and then snapped. Ciara's body jolted. "Sorry," she said, shaking her head and blinking her eyes. "My mind wandered off there for a minute."

"No worries, love." Faolan said, letting his hand rest on her shoulder. "Did you have pleasant dreams?"

"I can't say for certain," Ciara said, pausing to replay the vision in her head. "But I think that Daegan was trying to reach out to me."

“That could prove useful,” Niamh said. She slumped back in her chair and crossed her legs. “I didn’t know that you and your brother shared that kind of connection. How strong is it?”

“I don’t know,” Ciara replied. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen things—heard things. Usually it’s more like colours and feelings. Cormac taught us how to use a similar technique.”

“Well, if he drops us another line like that, be sure to let us know,” Faolan said.

Ciara nodded her head. She stood and looked around the room, taking note of what things had been gathered up thus far. By her count, there was enough supplies for three people, enough weaponry for two people, two tents, and three bed-rolls. “I know I drifted off for a moment there, but am I correct in assuming that only one other person will be joining us, Faolan?”

“Yep,” Aine said, stepping forward from around the corner of the office door. “It’s just you, me, and the wolfie makes three.”

Ciara smiled. She had always been fond of Aine, ever since they had first met. Something about her playfulness and directness always pleased Ciara. She could feel the corners of her mouth struggling against the smile. Before too long, she gave in. “Are you sure that it’s going to be safe for Aine to be coming along?”

“I’ll be fine, thank you very much,” Aine quipped, pointing her forefinger at her own face. “I know I might not look like much, but being fun-sized has its advantages, wouldn’t you know?”

“I haven’t a doubt about that,” Ciara said, doing her best to keep a straight face.

“After all, Leprechauns are only a meter tall and they pack quite a wallop.”

“But stature isn’t your major concern, is it?” Faolan asked, scratching at his beard.

“You’re worried about her not having a lot of magic to work with, right?”

“Well, don’t you worry about that,” Aine said, unzipping her long, leather jacket.

“Feast your eyes on these beauties.” As her jacket fell open, Aine pulled it wide revealing a large collection of gems hanging from her belt. Each of the gems sparkled and gleamed in the low light of Niamh’s office.

“Are those what I think they are,” Ciara said, gawking at Aine’s belt line in disbelief.

“They certainly are,” Faolan said, beaming with pride. “I’ve been working for a long time to perfect them and I think that they are ready for a field test.”

Ciara reached out with her left hand and touched the gem nearest Aine’s belt buckle. It was cold to the touch, despite its bright red colour. “Are they modeled after my Affinity?”

“As I have come to understand it?” Aine asked, giving Faolan a wink. “They should make it so that even I can give you a run for your money.”

“Really now,” Ciara said, curling the corner of her lip and narrowing her eyes into tight slits. “We’ll just have to see about that.”

“Anyway,” Faolan said as he stepped in between the two girls, “I think it’s about high-time that we get out of here and go see how the council is doing, don’t you?”

“Yes, let’s.” Ciara said, keeping her eyes on Aine.

Ciara felt another wave of anxiety wash over her as they descended. The cold touch of the stone walls and the hollow echo of boot leather against granite did not enhance her flagging sense of calm. As she and her companions spiraled down the last few steps into the chamber that housed the gateway between the land above and the land below, Ciara saw a bright light flash behind her eyes. The damp feeling of being somewhere wet gave way to feeling hot and muggy. Ciara slumped against the stone pillar at the center of the stair case and let the sack of equipment at her back slide towards the floor.

Aine, without thinking, reached out and caught the canvas bag. “Are you alright, lass?”

“I’m fine,” Ciara said, letting Aine take the bag away from her. She lowered her tall and lanky frame down onto the step just behind her feet. “I just felt a little dizzy. I think Daegan was trying to reach out again to let me know that they were moving him.”

“What did you get this time,” Faolan asked, turning on his heel to face Ciara. “Anything new?”

“Not much,” she replied. She ran her hand across her brow, half expecting it to be slick with sweat. Much to her surprise, her forehead was cool and dry. “Wherever he is, the sun is up and the air feels close. That is all that I could make out this time.”

“Sadly, that could be just about anywhere in Lindera,” Faolan said, offering his hand to Ciara.

“At this time of year,” she said as she stood, ignoring Faolan’s outstretched hand. “You are probably right.” Ciara reclaimed her bag from Aine and motioned for the group to resume their final descent into the chamber.

As they entered the room that housed the gateway, several crystalline light fixtures breathed to life. The gray stones that made up the floor glistened and reflected the pale cerulean glow of the fixtures that encircled the room. At its center was the gateway itself. Ciara had always admired its craftsmanship. She was not around to see it built, but she always loved its curves and its carefully sculpted knot work.

Standing next to the three-meter-tall oval, Ciara ran her free hand over the smooth metal. It was warm to the touch. It was not hot like a scolding iron ingot of steel freshly plucked from the forge, but rather it felt warm as though it were a living thing. Ciara traced one of the silver threads as it wove itself in and out of other threads using her index finger.

“It’s so strange,” Ciara said, pulling her hand away from the gateway. She turned to face her friends and smiled. “It’s so strange that such an intricate piece of magical machinery could fit into such a small ring of metal.”

“It sure is something,” Faolan said, running his own hand around the edge of the metal ring. “Are you ready to go back home?”

Ciara nodded her head and closed her eyes. “Manannan Mac Lir, join your magic with mine; let us walk the way in between worlds together.” Ciara reached out with both of her hands and gripped the sides of the ring and took a deep breath. She then, using both hands, began to weave invisible threads within the boundaries of the ring. She

twisted her fingers this way and that, pouring some of her aether into the network of magical threads that the Artificiers had placed within the mechanism. As she did, the ring began to blossom with light. Pale greens and blues, chased by light oranges and yellows, worked their way around the portal. “Let the gate be open.”

After saying the final incantation, Ciara took a step back from the gateway. A distant thrumming pulled at her heart strings. She watched Aine and Faolan reach for their chests, she knew that they felt the pull as well. As the thrumming became stronger and louder within their blood, the lights in the chamber began to pulsate.

“What’s happening,” Aine asked, holding her right hand to her heart.”

“Our hearts have to beat as one in order for the magic to work,” Faolan explained. He took Aine’s free hand and began to squeeze it in time with the rhythm of the lights. “Because the aether flowing through the portal has its own heartbeat, ours have to be sympathetic to that rhythm.”

“That’s a pretty simplified version of it, but I suppose it will suffice for now,” Ciara added as she took Faolan’s other hand. “Are the both of you ready?” Ciara waited until both of them nodded. Then, after taking a deep breath, Ciara took the first step into the portal, pulling Faolan and Aine through the gateway with her.

## Chapter Seven

### My Gut Has Shit for Brains

Faolan felt the familiar twist in his stomach as he stepped through the portal. He felt as though a large fishing hook had been hiding in his belly, waiting to be reeled in by unseen hands on the other end of an invisible line. Every time that he had ever stepped across the threshold between one world and the next Faolan always felt as though that unseen hand decided to set the hook and then give the line a decisive yank, pulling him until he breached the barrier.

As soon as his feet felt the firmness of solid ground again, Faolan could feel the lethargic side effects of traveling this way start to weigh on him. Breathing felt next to impossible, his vision was blurred, and his legs felt as though they were made of rubber poles that were attached to lead weights. By the time he had regained his composure, Faolan felt a twinge of guilt for not having warned Aine to take a big breath and hold it before stepping through.

“You doing alright over there, love?” Faolan asked, squeezing Aine’s hand in his.

She squeezed back, hard. She was wheezing and she looked as though she were circling the drain while she tried to figure out how to regain her equilibrium. “Cac,” Aine said, half-shouting the word between ragged breaths. “You weren’t kidding—that really does feel like a mule kicked you in the lungs.”

“Is that what it feels like for the rest of you,” Ciara said.

Faolan could tell that she was doing her best to pretend that she was anything but affected by the journey, but he also could tell that she was just trying to get a rise out of Aine, just like usual. “Oh come off it, Ciara.” Faolan said, shaking her hand in his. “If you weren’t as shaken as the rest of us, you wouldn’t still be holding onto mi’ hand.”

Ciara visibly blushed. “Oh, I’m sorry.” Ciara said, pulling away from Faolan. “I just thought you’d find having two hands to hold twice as comforting. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to reach out to Cormac and let him know that we have arrived.”

“That won’t be necessary,” a grizzled voice said from behind them.

Faolan whipped around, drawing his sword from his belt. “Who’s there,” he asked as he brandished his weapon at the shadows that hung beneath the trees. Faolan twisted the fingers of his left hand and made a rather peculiar set of tight gestures and spoke a single word under his breath. A tickle emanated from behind his eyes, spreading forward until both of them felt heavy. As the feeling spread, the shadows under the trees began to recede. Two yellow orbs floated in the air. Within a few seconds, the orbs weren’t the only things that were revealed by the spell. A face and a form began to emerge from the darkness. “Geebus,” Faolan exclaimed, sheathing his blade. “Duncan, my old son—I nearly sliced you to ribbons. What are you doing here, waiting in the shadows like that?”

“Waiting for the lot of you,” Duncan said, slinking forward into the soft light of mid-day. “Isn’t that obvious?”

“One supposes so,” Ciara said, turning to face away from Duncan. “Have you been here since I left?”



“Yes, I have, as per Cormac’s instructions.” Duncan bowed his head towards Ciara and her traveling companions. “I took the liberty of informing him of your return as soon as the gateway opened.”

“Thank you kindly,” Aine said, looking him over from head to toe. “You look different from Ciara and Daegan.”

Faolan chuckled to himself. He stepped to one side and looked at Ciara and Duncan, side by side. Ciara had white hair, while Duncan had black-blue hair. Ciara was tall and spindly compared to Duncan who was on the short side. He was also more stout looking than her. While her skin was pale and smooth, akin to the complexion of a porcelain doll, Duncan’s skin was rough looking. He was much more tan than anybody else in the group and he sported a rather scruffy looking five o’clock shadow, something that Daegan seemed incapable of ever growing, by contrast. “Well, our man Duncan here is one of the finest trackers in this neck of the woods. Which means that he is also one of the Conroicht. His Affinity allows him to shape shift like I do.”

“Conroicht,” Aine asked. Her voice trembled as she repeated the word with a thick northern accent. She wrapped her arms around Faolan’s left arm and stood behind him. “Does that mean he’s a werewolf?”

Ciara giggled. She turned back to face the group and patted Aine on the shoulder. “He’s not one of those creatures from those dreadful movies that Rowan watches.” Ciara gestured with her open hand at Duncan and lifted her head with pride. “His clan is named after the first of their kind who did take on the form of a Faol by wearing a special pelt;

however, Duncan, like all of his kin, can take on almost any animal form that he chooses.”

“My favorite,” Duncan said with a grin, “is a small and weasely bugger. I think you call them ‘ferrets,’ isn’t that so? I love their little masks—it makes them look sneaky.”

“Oh,” Aine said, loosening her grip on Faolan’s arm. “That’s kind of cool.”

“It seems so odd that you’d be afraid of me, wee one; you are dating this fur-ball, ain’t ya?”

“I know,” Aine said, trying to hide her blush. “It’s silly, but that name has always given me chills. I’ve heard stories about their ferociousness on the battle field. My wolfie is nice and gentle.”

“Is he now?” Duncan asked, sizing Faolan up. “Has this little lady tamed the wild beast, then—has she made you her little pup?”

“Something like that,” Ciara said, giving Aine a knowing wink. “Are we to meet Cormac in the Castle?”

“No, m’ lady,” Duncan said in a more formal tone of voice. “The council is convening in the Great Hall, here in the village.”

Faolan huffed and scratched at his beard. “They must be anxious if they bothered to leave their ivory tower to come down here and mix with the common folk.”

“Their tower is silvery, sir,” Duncan said, pointing at the floating spires that surround the main body of the floating castle. “Not white.”

“Oh for the love of—” Faolan spat. “It’s an expression, Duncan.” Faolan gestured in the direction of the village with his free hand. “Allons-y.”

“D’accord, mon ami,” Duncan replied. He sprinted ahead a few meters and then leapt into the air. A silvery flash of light erupted from beneath his skin and in its wake a crow appeared.

“Show off,” Aine said, sticking her tongue out at Duncan as he flapped away from the group and towards the Great Hall.

After following Duncan’s flight path for several minutes, the group was lead to the Great Hall. A rustic, yet stately looking building by modern standards. The hall was built to resemble Viking long houses. The walls were made of wattle and daub, the floors were a sturdy hardwood, and the door was made of the same peculiar metal that the gateway had been constructed. Two of Duncan’s clan guarded the doors. Each of them were garbed in the colours of the Council Guards, a bright honey-gold tunic along with matching black shirt and pants. As the foursome approached the door, one of the guards told them to stop.

“The two councilman present have requested to speak with Mr. McKenna in private,” the guard said, holding his hand out at chest level.

“Why?” Ciara demanded.

“I am not privy to such details, m’ lady.” The guard met her gaze with a smug look. “I’m just doing what I’m told.”

“It’s okay, Ciara.” Faolan said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll take care of this.” Faolan put down his gear and rubbed at the nape of his neck. He walked between the two guards and opened the door. He nodded to his companions and then entered the hall.

As Faolan closed the door behind him, a familiar voice called out to him.

“Come and join us by the fire,” Cormac said as he stood next to the mantle of the fireplace on Faolan’s left, poking at the fire with a bronzed fire poker.

“Chieftain Cormac,” Faolan said, turning to face the two councilman. “It’s good to see you again, old friend.”

“Please,” Cormac said, motioning for the young man to sit. “We have much to discuss.”

“I’m a little surprised that there are only two of you present,” Faolan said, taking his seat. He looked across aisle to see another councilman that he did not recognize. “I was told that the council wished to speak with me; naturally, I assumed that meant the whole council would be in attendance.”

“The council has more important things to do than to deliver messages to outsiders, Mr. McKenna,” the unknown councilman said, displaying an air of disinterest. “However, Chieftain Cormac felt that it would be an insult to your station if at least one of us weren’t allowed to deliver our determination regarding your involvement in the matter at hand.”

“I see,” Faolan said, turning his attention to Cormac who had returned to his own seat.

“The council has decided that your assistance is not going to be required at this time and that you are to return to the land above, immediately.” The councilman, having said his piece, waived Faolan away as though he were one of the castle footmen.

“Niall,” Cormac said, looking over the top glasses at his fellow councilman. “Don’t be rude to our guest.”

Councilman Niall scoffed and threw up his hand to dismiss the comment.

“What the hell do you mean you’re going to send us back?” Faolan barked at the councilman before him. A middle aged looking man with silver hair and a bent nose. “Ciara asked for our help in recovering her brother and we plan on doing everything we can to do just that.”

“I understand that she has gone against this council’s wishes and left Linder for the land above, without having received prior permission, and I am aware that she may have felt that you and your family could be of some service, Mr. McKenna,” the councilman paused to clean his glasses. He wiped them in between the folds of his long robe. As he polished the crystal lenses, the councilman continued in the same monotone voice of disinterest as he had started the conversation with. “The simple fact of the matter is that we do not require the help of outsiders in this delicate matter. Duncan, our most decorated conroicht, can track down one lost child with ease. Of this, I am certain.”

“I haven’t a single doubt in my mind, Councilman Niall, that Duncan could track Daegan.” Faolan said, walking towards the nearest window. He paused for just a moment while looking out at his friend, gathering his thoughts. “In fact, I’m concerned that he isn’t out there looking for Daegan as we speak. I know that Cormac told Ciara to come

for us, but that doesn't mean that you couldn't have also sent out a searching party of your own in the meantime."

Niall, having placed his glasses back into the pocket of his robes, began to rub at bridge of his nose with his thumb and middle finger while massaging his forehead with his index finger. "We have been over this already, Mr. McKenna," Niall said, his voice trailing after having said Faolan's family name for a third time. "The council does not feel as though it necessary to rush into things. This is yet another reason as to why your services are not required—you are said to lack patience and you lack foresight."

Faolan huffed at this. He recognized the type of massage that Niall was performing on himself. It was a form of pressure point therapy to relieve headaches. Faolan began to wonder if he was getting on Niall's nerves. Looking at the councilman, sitting there showing all the classic signs of boredom and disinterest, Faolan felt certain that the councilman was underestimating him and his ability to be diplomatic. "Councilman," Faolan said, in a humble and reverent tone. "Please forgive me—my dear friend has been kidnapped and I feel uneasy standing here, with my hands in my pockets, while his whereabouts are unknown to us. I understand how tenuous things are between the Aes Sidhe and the Fomorians, at present."

"Do you, now?" Councilman Niall said, sitting forward in his chair.

"Yes, I do." Faolan said, approaching the councilman in measured steps. "While the Fomorians, for the most part, are unhappy with the Aes Sidhe having the bulk of the political power in recent years, they have done their best to keep the balance between the two factions as best as they can. And I am also aware of a faction has formed among

them that are even more unhappy about the state of things—a faction that is actively working to destabilize the balance of power in an attempt to overtake the Aes Sidhe’s control of Linder. Considering the details surrounding Daegan’s kidnapping, wouldn’t you agree that it is likely that this faction is the one who is responsible for the break-in? And not the governing body of the Fomorians, themselves?”

“Yes, the council agrees with this assessment of the situation,” Niall said, waving his hand—as if he were dismissing the matter.

“Then it shouldn’t matter if an outsider is brought in to recover what was stolen, along with returning Daegan home safely,” Faolan said, stepping closer to Niall’s chair.

“My dear boy,” Niall said, chuckling—expressing the first sign of emotion since their conversation had begun. “It matters greatly.”

“How?”

“It matters because you do not speak for us,” Councilman Niall said, pausing after each of the last six words. “No matter how familiar or close you think you are to our people, you are not one of us. You do not speak for us,” the elderly Sidhe spat.

Faolan stopped in his tracks. He stood as tall as he could, making himself as sleek and slender as possible. He did his best to mimic the same cold and vacant tone that the councilman had been using. He began to examine his nails. With his left hand, which was hidden behind his back, Faolan began to twist and flex his fingers. He weaved the spell form that allowed him to manipulate his body in subtle ways. He focused on the index finger of his right hand.

As he began to speak, his nail grew longer, thicker, and turned black, resembling the claw of a wolf. “Who said that I would do any speaking? Certainly not me.”

Cormac, who had been waiting for Councilman Niall to run out of rope, chortled. “I have to say—I do so miss these sorts of passionate exchanges.”

“‘Passionate,’ you say?” Niall asked, turning to face his fellow councilman. “That is not the word I would use.”

“And that is precisely why you do not speak for the rest of us whenever we are dealing with the Fomorians, Councilman Niall.” Cormac grinned as he stared down Niall. He leaned forward, just a few centimeters, and looked at him over the top of his spectacles, again.

Faolan closed his fist in front of his mouth, hoping to stifle his laughter. He let his claw return to normal and returned to the seat that had been provided for him.

“Do you wish to contribute something, Chieftain Cormac?” Niall said, grinding his teeth.

“That, I do,” Cormac said, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “We have relied on the McKenna family to keep the charter that we made with the Milesians, all those centuries ago. They have proven to be a formidable force when we have asked them to be our eyes, our ears, and our fist when renegades breach the barrier between our worlds. They have done their best to keep the peace and maintain the balance of power in their own sphere of influence, haven’t they?”



“Yes, they have,” Niall said with a grimace, once again rubbing at the bridge of his nose. He sighed and responded with, “I still fail to see why we should involve them in this matter.”

“It was my private study that was robbed, as you well know.” Cormac said, waiting for Niall to respond.

“And?”

“—And I have discovered which book was taken from my library. Within its pages, there is a spell that would allow the Fomorians to construct their own gateway. They would be able to invade the land above, en masse.”

Faolan sat in his chair, drinking a flagon of mead, watching the colour drain from Niall’s face. A rare sight that pleased Faolan. “I didn’t think he could get any more white,” he thought to himself.

“You did not mention this to the rest of the council when you presented your arguments this morning,” Niall said, pounding his fist against the arm of his chair.

“I only discovered it before leaving the library to join you here.” Cormac leaned back in his chair and stroked his beard. “With this new information, wouldn’t you agree that it is within the McKenna family’s role as guardian of the gates to go after these people who have broken into our sanctum and made off with not only a book that might set them loose on the land above, but also one of the only two people who might be able to tell them how it works?”

“Maybe what you say is true,” Niall said, digging his nails into the arm of the chair again. “However, we both know that the Fomorians do not possess any Affinity that would allow them to do such a thing.”

“They might not, but all it would take is someone like Daegan to translate the book, and someone from the Artificer’s Guild to build it for them.” Cormac said.

“Very well,” Niall said. “Begin your mission, Mr. McKenna. Just try to keep your wits about you. And take Duncan with you, if you please. I would like at least one Sidhe present to represent our interests.”

“What about Ciara,” Faolan asked, confusion plainly displayed on his face. “Are you saying she doesn’t represent your interests?”

“No,” Niall said, his face softening. “As it is her brother that has been taken, I assume that she, most likely, would only be able to think of her familiar interests. And for that, I do not blame her.”

As Faolan left the Great Hall, he took a moment to pack his pipe. He pulled out the tobacco pouch from his left breast pocket, unzipped it, and filled the bowl of the pipe with the shredded leaves. Once the bowl was packed, he removed the long stem from pouch and attached the two pieces together. He then lit a match, he sipped at the stem until the tobacco came to life, and then he closed his eyes.

He stood there, outside the door of the hall, for a few minutes. He let the sounds of the village fill his ears, let the smells permeate his being, and he allowed himself to acclimate to the world around him. Faolan took in the sounds of children playing on the

cobblestone streets, the smell of the village baker making sweet bread, and he let the rhythms of life in the quiet village take root. All of Lindera was quieter than Dublin. Even standing in the heart of this village, Lindera's ancestral capital, at mid-day, the thrum of life was simpler than the quietest street in Dublin in the dead of night.

Smoking his grandfather's pipe was a zen-like act for Faolan. It gave him a simple task that he could focus on while giving him a simple pleasure. It allowed him to filter out the nervous energy that would otherwise keep him from being able to fully integrate himself into his surroundings. It had been months since Faolan had been in Lindera for an extended period of time and he wanted to prepare himself for it.

Faolan felt something tickle the edge of his attention. It felt like a strange stillness in the midst of a summer breeze. "Duncan," Faolan said, letting a long breath of white smoke. "Do you have any ideas about how to close the gap between us and the Fomorians?"

"I might," Duncan said with some hesitation. "The question is going to be whether or not it will work. I told everyone to meet us over at the supply house; are you ready for us to join them?"

"I suppose so," Faolan said, letting out another exaggerated puff of smoke. "Best not to the others waiting."

Faolan and his shape-shifting friend walked the short distance from the Great Hall over to the supply house, a building almost identical in size to the Great Hall. Rather than being a large gathering place, the supply house functioned as a place for people to store their goods while they were away on long journeys. As such, the whole affair had always

reminded Faolan of rural post-office, all that was missing was some aether powered device that told the customers which number was currently being served.

As the two of them approached, Faolan noticed that Ciara was holding a strange looking saddle. It was too small for a horse, but too large for a pony. Another notable difference from the standard saddle one might use for a horse was the fact that it looked more like a harness that St. Bernard's would wear during mountain rescue missions.

Aine was laughing and pointing at the saddle. She mimicked the movements of a coach driver while saying, "On Dancer on Prancer, On Duncan and on Faolan!"

"Wait a minute," Faolan said, stroking his beard. "I don't remember that part of story."

"Hello, Wolfie-boys," Aine said, rubbing the tears out her eyes. "Are you weady for your walkies?"

"Is she doing the baby-talk?" Duncan asked, jerking his thumb in Aine's general direction.

"I do believe she is, old-son," Faolan replied. "And I can't help but feel like it has something to do with this weird looking contraption that Ciara is holding; what in the nine is this damned thing, love?"

"Duncan didn't tell you," Ciara asked with a smirk.

"I don't think he told him," Aine said, covering her mouth with her sleeve, feigning surprise.

"Well," Ciara said, dropping the saddle down to waist level, "it appears that Duncan thought that we might enjoy a little dog an pony show, starring the two of you."

“I said no such thing,” Duncan said, his cheeks turning bright red.

“It’s okay, Duncan,” Faolan said, patting his friend on the shoulder. “I believe you—besides, I am pretty confident you don’t even know what a dog and pony show is in the first place.”

“That’s right!”

“So, what are they really for,” Faolan asked.

“Troop transport,” Duncan said.

“I don’t follow,” Faolan replied.

“Okay,” Duncan said, taking the harness from Ciara. “A long time ago, back before the ancestors of the Aes Sidhe and the Fomorians found a way to coexist in Lindera, wide scale wars were fought all across the land. Both sides of those conflicts fought to carve out some kind of territory to call their own. Back then, we were like you—Faolan—we were a part of the Tuatha Dé Danann. We had mastery over all kinds of magicks then, but we hadn’t yet become one with Lindera like we all are now; we hadn’t yet ascended into being the Aes Sidhe.

“When the Milesians forced us to live on the bottom half of the island, we were forced to leave all sorts of things behind. We were without livestock for a long time. We were without many practical things like carts and coaches. But, most importantly, we were without horses to pull those kinds of things. So, as you can imagine, moving warriors around to fight battles was a slow-going affair. After some time, our ancestors learned how to skin-walk like the Selkies do. Being able to take on the form of a seal might have been helpful for navigating rivers, but moving across large swaths of land

was still an issue. And that's when the Conroicht came up with an idea; some of them sacrificed their wolves so that they could make bigger wolf pelts."

"I think I get the idea," Faolan said. "They gave up their wolves so that they could make wolves big enough to ride into battle."

"Correct," Duncan said, a sour note hung in his voice as he did. "I can't imagine giving up the ability to change my form, let alone having to sacrifice half of my soul to do it."

"I feel ya," Faolan replied, stroking the leather of the harness. "So, are proposing that we try doing the same thing—taking on a dire-wolf-like form?"

"In so many words, yes."

"This is going to be painful," Faolan said.

"For you," Duncan said, "maybe. But for me—" the young Sidhe stopped mid-sentence and a brilliant flash of silvery light spilled out of him. When the light dissipated, a large wolf stood before the other three members of the party. He stretched his legs in the way that dogs do, one set of two at a time. He pranced around in small circle like a dressage pony on display.

"Impressive, old-son," Faolan said, giving his friend a small golf clap. "I doubt that I'll be able to ride you into battle though."

Duncan grumbled and walked out from under the awning of the supply house. He sat in the middle of a large patch of grass and closed his eyes. The same light as before began to swell up within Duncan's chest. But rather than come and go in a flash, the light pooled within the cauldron of power in his torso. Much like a pot filling with water in the

sink, if left unattended, the light began to pour out from his heart-cauldron and began to trickle outwards to his limbs and up into his head. As the light filled him, his shape began to grow and, in a few moments time, he was as big as a small horse.

“Show off,” Faolan grumbled. “Are all the supplies stowed away?”

“Yup,” Aine replied. “Everything has been checked in and we have our little wallets filled with tickets.”

“Alright, I guess it’s my turn, now.” Faolan took off his jacket and passed it over to Aine.

“Yay,” she smiled. “I call girlfriend rights.” She swung the coat around her person and it draped over her small frame like a sun dress. She twirled around in it and smiled.

Faolan chuckled to himself. He knelt and rested both of his hand in the grass. He dug his fingers into the dirt and let the aether flood into his limbs. He held the image of a dire-wolf firm in his mind. As the spell took form in his head, the aether began to take shape in his heart. He traced a spell knot into the grass, funneling excess power into it. A familiar pain traveled throughout his body. He could feel the muscles, the bones, and the sinews breaking and reforming. The aether dulled the pain some, but Faolan still felt as though his insides had been set ablaze.

Aine, watching from the edge of the grass, turned to Ciara and buried her face in Ciara’s chest. She wrapped her arms around her friend’s waist and squeezed as hard as she could. She knew that Faolan would live through the transformation, but that didn’t mean that she had to watch all of it.

In a few moment's time, Faolan was equal in size to furry friend. A sleek coat of auburn and blonde fur had grown to cover his entire body. The end of his spine lengthened into a tail and his features had been rearranged to match those of a canine, but his eyes retained their humanity. They were bright, kind, and full of everything that made Faolan the man that he was.

Aine stroked his face, pushing the fur around until it was no longer obstructing her view of his eyes. "There's my guy," she said. She kissed his forehead and pressed her face against his. She breathed in the scent of his fur, felt the softness of it with her finger tips, and she wrapped her arms around his thick neck. "Let me walk with you, let me see you, and let me touch your thoughts," she whispered as she reached out with her mind, searching for his.

Faolan's thoughts began to mingle with Aine's. "There's my girl," his voice spoke in the back of her mind.



## Chapter Eight

### Budding

Waking up with a jolt, Daegan smacked his head off of the cave wall. Gramble had kicked his foot, grumbling something about food. It had been quite some time since Daegan ate something last. His belly rumbled at the faint smell of bread.

The Brésling threw a small cloth bundle in Daegan's direction, hitting him in the stomach with a soft thump. "I hope you've regained your appetite," he said before tearing off another hunk of round loaf. "I know that my friend's toxic breath can leave you feeling sick for quite some time."

"I'll be alright," Daegan said, unwrapping the brown cloth bundle. The bread smelled fresh. It was round and it had just the right amount of crispness to the crust. It was covered in strong, but pleasing herbs and spices. "Thank you for the bread."

"Think nothing of it," the Brésling said in between bites. "Even in circumstances like these, there is no reason why we can't be civil."

"Civil, huh." Daegan muttered under his breath. He broke apart the bread and took his first bite. The taste was as strong as the smell, but there was something else under it all, something that he hadn't expected. His face felt flush and his eyes began to water. "Cac," he exclaimed as he fanned air into his open mouth.

"Oh," the Brésling said, wiping away a few crumbs from his lips. "Did I forget to mention that it might be a little on the spicy side?" He tossed an water skin at the young Sidhe.

Daegan caught the skin by the leather strap and poured some of the water into his mouth, being careful not to touch his lips to the skin. After downing several gulps of warm mead, the fire subsided. “What the hell was that?”

“That’s the seed of a rare flower that grows near our home,” the Brésling replied as he walked to retrieve the water skin. “It has a potent flavor that gives our food its signature bite.”

“Is that a fact?”

“If it is too much for you to handle, you can always pick out the middle and leave the crust for the animals.”

Daegan took a defiant bite out of the rest of the bread, took another swig of the mead and said nothing.

A few hours had passed since they had left the hollow behind the water fall. Daegan had never seen this part of the country side. He enjoyed the breath taking view of the mountains and valleys. They were not too dissimilar from the ones near his home, but there were a number of trees that Daegan had never seen in person before that piqued his interest.

He caught himself thinking, “If it weren’t for the kidnapping, this would be a fairly nice adventure into the deep woods.”

After a while, his feet began to ache from having walked for several hours. When they took their next break, Daegan removed his boots and began to rub his feet. The

muscles deep in his arches hurt the most. The uneven terrain had forced Daegan to bend and twist his feet in ways that he was unaccustomed to, having grown up in the town where everything was paved in cobble stone.

Daegan turned his mind to his sister. He wondered if his previous attempt to reach out to her in his dreamscape had been effective. Laying back against a nearby rock, he reached out with his mind once more. He focused on all of the little things that he knew about his sibling and he poured aether into the cauldron found at the crown of his head. Daegan let the chattering of the birds and the small talk of the Fomorians drop away, he pushed every sensation that he could, and he tried to focus on sifting through the greater aether stream that flowed through all of Linderia in order to find his sister's mind.

For a moment, he heard her voice. He caught a familiar scent on the wind. Daegan could smell beard oil that was Faolan's favorite blend, a subtle mix of bourbon and vanilla. The flow of his aether had begun to mingle with hers.

"Now," he thought to himself, "Here's hoping that she paid attention to Cormac's lessons regarding the study of trees and flowers." He focused on the strange trees with the yellow leaves that grew in the valley near where he was resting. He thought about flower that grew near the Black River, the weeping bells. Daegan tried to send as much information as he could. He flooded his mind with images of mountains and valleys. "Hopefully, now that she isn't in the land above, she will be able to see things more clearly."

"My, you have delicate looking feet," a voice said, cutting through the stillness of Daegan's mind.

“Excuse me,” Daegan nearly shrieking. His eyes popped open to find the Brésling looking down at him.

“Forgive me,” he replied. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Daegan sat up, pulled his knees to his chest, and hugged his legs while trying to cover his feet. “I’m a lot more than *startled* by you making such a comment about my feet. What kind of weirdo are you, anyway?”

“Again, please forgive me,” the Brésling said, squatting to meet Daegan’s gaze. “It’s been some time since I’ve seen a Sidhe and it took me by surprise to see how dainty your feet look compared to the rest of you—almost as if they wouldn’t be capable of keeping you upright.”

“Well, they handle that task just fine, thank you very much.” Daegan said as he pulled on his boots. He felt the warmth of his blush in his cheeks and he felt a violent urge to smack someone.

“Pout later, walk now,” Gramble said, pushing him from behind.

Daegan felt the urge to hit someone rising again. His nails dug into his palm. “Fuck it,” he muttered under his breath. Daegan took a few more steps forward, he took a long and deep breath, and then he spun around and sent his fist flying for Gramble’s stomach. The blow landed clean and straight. A soft crunch proceeded the pain. For a split second, Daegan almost thought he had hurt the beast. That was up until the feeling of dislocated joints caught up to his brain. “Cac!”

“Pout later, walk now,” Gramble repeated, chuckling.

“Apparently it’s not just your feet that are delicate,” the Brésling said with a smirk on his thin lips.

Daegan turned around and walked away, cursing under his breath.

## Chapter Nine

### By Fin, Fur, Or Feather

The pads of Faolan's feet ached and burned with every step he took. Faolan felt the harness pinching and chaffing against his fur. It had been quite a while since he had last pushed himself to hold another form for longer than an hour and doing so while encumbered with a passenger, even one as petite as Aine, made it harder. The wind rushing past his face felt good, though. Faolan loved running under the twilight sun.

Tree branches and twigs snapped under foot as Faolan and Duncan ran across the forest floor. They had been running for nearly two hours.

"Another ten minutes," Faolan thought to himself. "Then we will take a break."

The scent that they had been following along the Black River was still strong, but both Faolan and Duncan knew that it wouldn't last much longer. Even though he knew it would be hard for the both of them to run that far, that fast, Faolan insisted that they push themselves to the edge of their limits.

"Time is not our friend," Faolan had said, arguing with Duncan. "I know that holding our shapes that long is like trying to hold your breath for two hours, but we have to try."

Passing into a large, open grove of trees, Faolan decided it was time for a break. He dug his claws into the raw earth beneath his paws, letting out a short yip. His lungs, his muscles, and his mind burned. He winced as Aine pulled back on the harness. The

hempen rope and silk harness was made to fit a wolf that was about the size of a small pony, which was another issue that made it hard for his body to maintain the shape.

Faolan grunted as he felt Aine's weight shift above his spine. His ears twitched as he heard the soft thud of boots striking grassy earth. The muscles in his back and shoulders began to relax. Laying on his side, Faolan traced the ridges of the sub-dermal plate that had been implanted into the roof of his mouth with his tongue. As he licked the cool metal, his body shivered and quaked. The aether flowed through his body, causing the fur on his skin to retreat. It also made his bones pop and snap as they were broken and reformed into their appropriate shapes. Faolan gasped as the muscles spasmed as they released the form he had forced them to hold for the past two hours.

By the time his body had returned to its native shape, Faolan was exhausted from the change. He saw the water skin that Aine had placed in front of him. He grabbed it, unlaced it with his teeth, and shotgunned over half of its contents.

"Chug—chug—chug," Aine chanted while clapping.

"Very funny, love." Faolan wiped his mouth draw with the back of his hand. The skin felt smooth and supple, but even this gentle bit of friction burned as though he had just dragged salt through an open wound.

"How are you doing over there, boy-o," Duncan asked in between heaving breaths.

"Just fine, old son," Faolan said, puffing out his chest. "And you?"

Duncan tried to stand, stumbled, and landed flat on his arse. "I've been better, laddie," he winced. "Remind me—who's bright fecking idea was this again?"

Faolan chucked the water skin at his half naked friend. “Come off it, mate; you know we had to make up time.” Faolan rolled over onto his back and stared at the light of the twilight sun that filtered through the leaves. A breeze kicked up and blew across his skin. It burned the way an ice cube burns as it melts down your body on a hot summer day. The sensation was contradictory, but exhilarating none the less.

“I hope the two of you are going to be able to walk after this,” Ciara said, breaking the silence. “We could have brought horses, you know.”

“Where’s the fun in that,” Duncan said with a tone of dismay hanging thick in this throat.

“I think you just dug up these harnesses because you’ve got some perverse fetish about being tied up,” Ciara said, whipping the harness against her hand as though it were a flogger.

“You wish,” Duncan said before taking another swig from the water skin.

“No,” Aine said, standing over Duncan, hands on her hips. “I think there is something to this theory. I mean, just look at the punishment you’ve just put your body through—you’re clearly a masochist.”

“No sense in denying it,” Ciara said. “We wouldn’t believe you anyway.”

“Faolan,” Duncan cried, pointing a finger at the two women. “Tell them it’s not true.”

“Sorry, old son,” Faolan said, closing his eyes. “You’re on your own.”

Duncan threw the water skin back at his friend, pegging him in the gut. “Some friend you are.”



Faolan lay on the grass for the better part of an hour. His muscles still ached and burned, but his mind had begun to quiet. The gentle sway of the branches were mesmerizing. Faolan felt at ease while he lay there while Aine stroked his hair. He felt his body shiver as she pet his beard.

Faolan had been on the edge of sleep for the past ten minutes when he heard someone approaching. Ciara had gone off on a scouting mission while the boys rested up, so he imagined it was her returning.

“Is that you, Ciara,” Faolan asked.

“Faolan,” Aine said, her voice shaking. “It’s not Ciara.”

Faolan shot up like grasshopper. He grabbed for his sword, but his hand found nothing but air. “Cac,” he spat. He looked around the camp, whipping his head around.

Duncan got up on his feet, having been roused from his sleep. “Who’s there?”

Standing at the edge of the clearing was a small party of Fomorians. Two of them resembled each other, *likely brothers*, Faolan thought to himself. The third one was from a different clan altogether. While the brothers looked mostly human, despite their green skin and black eyes, the third one was far too small and far too furry to be from the same family. Her features resembled those of a door mouse. She wore clothes and walked on his hind legs. She stood about a meter tall, “rather large for a rodent,” Faolan said under his breath.

“What business have you here?” The voice was high pitched, though not at all shrill. “Quickly now, else I have my muscle here earn their pay.”

“We are tracking someone, a Sidhe who has been taken,” Duncan said, walking backwards towards Faolan and Aine.

“A Sidhe—who has been taken, eh?” The mouse’s tail swept up and down. The creature scratched under its chin and narrowed its eyes. “Sounds suspicious.”

“Don’t yer magic make ya hard to napkid,” the taller of the two Fomorians asked, chewing on the words before spitting them out.

“One would think,” Duncan said, turning his attention to the grumbling giant.

“I’m sorry,” Faolan said, taking a seat near Aine’s back pack. “You’ll have to forgive me, as I’m not often in this neck of the woods. Is there something special about this grove that I am missing?”

“No,” the mouse said, shaking its head. “The larger area that you find yourself in is not often traveled by your kin. And it also happens to be my family’s favorite hunting grounds.”

“Hunting?” Faolan said, looking back and forth between the mouse and Duncan. “Where I come from, mice are usually prey animals.”

The mouse’s cheeks blustered and puffed. It hopped across the grove floor in five, short jumps. Landing on Aine’s back pack with a pronounced thud, the mouse pointed a finger at Faolan and pressed the tip of its claw against the ball of Faolan’s nose. “I am no mere mouse, child.” The voice was shrill this time. Its yellow eyes darted back and forth as it tried to match Faolan’s gaze. “We are proud hunters and you have insulted my family by calling us—prey.” The mouse strained its voice as it stretched the enunciation of the last syllable.

“Again, my apologies.” Faolan breathed as softly as he could manage. He imagined that any sudden movement, even breathing too hard might be taken as a hostile action. “I’ve not seen your kin before; as I said previously, I’ve not been out this way before.”

“Yes,” the mouse said, sniffing the air around Faolan. “I can tell, now that I’m this close to you. You and that female over there are not Sidhe.”

“You’d think dating a boy who regularly takes on the form of a wolf would make you less sensitive to comments like that,” Aine said, pouting. “I can smell the human on you.’ Honestly, it’s a little hurtful.”

The mouse hopped over to Aine, taking its time as it moved. “Did you say, this boy turns into a wolf?” Its whiskers twitched and its tail swayed in a way that made it look skeptical.

“Yes,” Aine said, staring down the diminutive creature. “He’s quite good at it.”

“Really,” the mouse said, turning away from Aine to examine Faolan once more. “Are you one of the Conroicht?”

“No,” Faolan said. He reached out with his right hand and offered to shake hands with the creature. “My name is Faolan and I’m a member of the McKenna family.”

“Well, I’ll be,” the mouse said. It reached out and placed its paw in Faolan’s hand. “My name is Gráinne.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Faolan said, smiling. “You wouldn’t happened to have seen a rather large party of Fomorians pass through here recently, have you?”

“No,” the mouse said, shaking its head. “I’ve not been home in quite some time and have only arrived here this morning.”

“Damn,” Duncan said, taking up the water skin. He turned away from the mouse and made himself busy with other tasks. He called over his shoulder, “worth a shot, I suppose.”

“I could see if anyone in my family has seen anything, if that would be helpful to you.”

“That would be quite helpful,” Faolan said. He explained the situation to Gráinne and her two companions. He gave a complete description of Daegan and said that there were at least six Fomorians involved in the incident, if not more.

The mouse, having satisfied her curiosity, bid them a fond farewell and the party of three continued down river, in the direction where Faolan and company had come from.

“Now,” Faolan said, “where in the hell is Ciara?”

## Chapter Ten

### Back in a Flash

Ciara had suggested to her friends that she ought to scout ahead. She had argued that she should go alone, saying that it would be unwise to leave the boys alone while they recovered from their experience. In the end, the other three of them caved and let Ciara go it alone; however, as she lay on the cold floor of a cave that she had found, hidden behind a waterfall, she couldn't help but feel foolish.

Her body was wracked with pain. Her mind echoed with a mixture of laughter, shouting, and soft whimpering. Images of valleys and mountains flooded her psyche. She saw a wide swatch of pink flowers swaying in the wind. Her vision swirled and gave way to a field of trees. The neon-yellow leaves cast a golden light against the clouds. Ciara grabbed at her hair. She kicked her boots against the stone floor and twisted her body as the vision subsided.

As she lay there, her lungs burned as she took many, heaving breaths. She focused on the white noise generated by the waterfall. She forced her mind to quiet. Ciara repeated a mantra that she learned as a child. With each refrain, her breathing slowed. Her voice grew stronger, less shaken. After several minutes, Ciara felt safe enough to open her eyes once more.

"Better get up off the floor," she said to the empty air. She pushed her head and shoulders off the cold stone by digging her elbows into it. As her head lifted, the cave began to swim in her vision. "Cac." The edges of the cave grew darker, fuzzier. Ciara

could feel the blood draining from her head. She tried slowing her descent back to the floor, with great effort. She fought to keep her head from bouncing off of the granite. Her eyes touched the rough and cold surface first, sending a chill rippling throughout the rest of her body. She clenched her teeth and passed out.

While her body rested, Ciara's mind began to wander. She dreamed of a place that she had never seen before, a neon forest. The yellows, the greens, and the reds of the trees' leaves glowed against the twilight sky. Even though she knew that it was night time, the forest was illuminated so well that she could have easily mistaken it for mid-day. She smelled a strong spice on the wind. The taste of it stung the back of her palette as she sucked in a deep breath. She found the experience to be favorable, even if it was foreign to her.

Ciara followed the smell to a small campfire. Strange scents filled her nostrils as she approached. She knew them to be cooking smells. She knew them to be the smell of an animal's flesh being cooked over an open flame, mixed with aroma of herbs and spices being married by fire with fat and grease. Despite the fact that her mind was trying to convey to her how familiar these smells should be to her, she still felt as if the experience of smelling them was not her own.

Shadows danced and moved across the grass, opposite of her and the campfire. Ciara failed to make out any discernible shapes. They only registered as thick blobs of black that twisted back and forth in the dim light of the flames. Voices began to cut through the silence and Ciara began to feel ashamed of her body. She couldn't make out

any words, but something about the way in which they were said made her want to crawl into her bed and never leave it. She became self-conscious of everything about her body that did not love.

A twist of pain, hunger, and sadness settled into her stomach. She felt hate, anger, and disappointment burn behind her eyes.

“Why?” Ciara screamed, clutching her arms against her chest. “Why the fuck do you hate me?” Spittle flew off of her lips as she screamed again. The intensity of the embarrassment grew the longer she held onto it. “What is wrong with me,” Ciara whispered. “Why won’t you look at me the way I want you to?”

Ciara gasped and sobbed. Her world felt small, tight, and heavy. She felt cramped and she felt as though she might suffocate. Breaking through the darkness, a pair of deep brown eyes reflected the glimmer of the campfire. The eyes, speckled with bright gold flecks, shimmered as the face that they belonged to began to solidify in Ciara’s vision. He was beautiful, and yet—Ciara felt a cold chill run down her spine.

“Brésling,” she hissed.

A smile crept into the corners of his face. His eyes made the smile feel treacherous. *“Time to wake up, little one.”*

Ciara sat straight up. Sweat poured from her brow and stung her eyes. Without thinking, she rubbed them with the back of her hand, making it burn even more. Her body felt warm and the air felt cool. The evening sun was setting on the other side of the waterfall. Ciara tasted her pulse in her mouth. The sharp flavor of copper dried her mouth. She

licked her lips and found a split. Ciara was not thrilled with the pain the friction cause, but it helped to clear the cobwebs from the corners of her mind.

“Brésling,” she repeated to empty air. The word felt heavy in her mouth. “Why did I dream about a Brésling like that? Why did he make me feel so ashamed?”

“Ashamed of what,” a familiar voice asked.

“What in the nine?” Ciara shouted the words, scrambling to her feet.

“Are you okay,” Faolan asked as his head popped out from behind the outcropping of rocks at the mouth of the cave. “I’ve been searching everywhere for you.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of knocking?”

“Oh,” Faolan said, holding up his hands. “I’m sorry—I hadn’t realized that you claimed this damp, dank cave as your new boudoir.”

“Not what I meant, you ass,” Ciara swatted at her friend as she stormed passed him. “You scared the shit out of me.”

Faolan grimaced and then smiled. “At least I didn’t walk in on you naked, or something.”

“I swear to Danu,” Ciara said, gritting her teeth, turning to face her friend once again. “I will kick your teeth in.”

“Sorry,” Faolan said, taking a step back, holding his hands up again. “I was just trying to make you smile.”

“Now isn’t the time,” she hissed. Ciara screwed up her face and breathed in deep. She sighed, putting her hand on Faolan’s chest. “I’m sorry. I just had a terrible dream, right after having a vision so strong that it kicked my ass.”



“Daegan, again?”

Ciara nodded and rested her head against his chest for a moment. She breathed in the smell of the water fall, of the wet rocks and moss, and of the flowers that grew near the cave mouth. Her eyes popped open and she pushed away from Faolan. “The flowers —Daegan was showing me a field of Weeping Bells in my vision.”

Faolan cocked his head to the side. “Not sure which flowers those are, but don’t let me stop you.”

Ciara turned around and plucked a blossom straight off of its stem. She held it in her hand and wafted it under his nose. “These ones are Weeping Bells.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard to find to follow that scent.”

“There’s more,” Ciara said, turning on the ball of her foot. “I’ll tell you on the way. Let’s go.”

## Chapter Eleven

### Up to Speed

Ciara told Faolan about her vision on their way back to where Duncan and Aine waited for them. She walked him through the vision as best as she could. She told him about the neon yellow trees, the purple flowers, and the wide variety of images that Daegan had flooded her mind with. She told him that, if she understood what she saw, they followed the river until they came to the forest with the yellow trees. Then, as far as she knew, they seemed to head up the hillside to make camp in a place where she could see three rivers meet.

When the pair of them got back to the clearing, Ciara gave a condensed version of the story to Duncan while Faolan and Aine packed their things for the next leg of their journey. Ciara made mention of the three rivers and Duncan's eyes lit up.

"You're sure about this," he asked her.

"Out of everything that he showed me, the three things that I could see the most clearly were the weeping bells, the yellow trees, and the three rivers."

"That's good," he replied. He scratched the underside of his chin and chewed on his bottom lip. "I think have a good idea as to where that is from here, which means we won't have to rely on the scent of the flowers alone. Plus, if they did follow the river, that makes it easier for us to follow them."

"I was hoping that would be the case," Ciara replied.

“I know that it’s hard on you,” Duncan said, holding out his hand for hers, “but I’m glad that you are strong enough to relay these visions to us so that we can track their movements. I’d hate to see anything happen to him.”

Ciara nodded, taking Duncan’s hand in her own. “Thank you for your concern, but I think that he will be fine. They need him to read the book and they genuinely do not seem to be interested in doing him any harm—for the time being, anyway.”

Faolan and Aine packed all of their gear into their respective supply bags. So far, they had only been relying on the supplies that Ciara and Aine had been carrying on their backs, but Faolan could tell that they would soon have to pull out the larger bags and make camp. The clearing was a good place to rest, but it lacked a few key things that he would prefer to see in a campsite. It lacked visibility, for one thing. The dense forest and narrow trails meant that ambushes were a real concern, as they had already seen.

He worried about other things, too. Faolan had learned from his father that camping in Lindera held a number of dangers that were unique to the land below. The campsite had to be clear of faery circles, it should have at least some clovers growing in the grass for protection, and a litany of other random things that made Faolan’s head spin the first time his father ran through the list. As luck would have it though, Grand-Da’s Grimoire had a convenient cheat sheet in the back, a thing that both Faolan and his father were eternally grateful for.

Once everything was accounted for and stowed away, Faolan and Duncan made the necessary preparations to manifest the change again. As predicted, the second time

was easier than the first. Duncan was able to use his previous experience with the transformation to do it all in one step. For Faolan, the second time was far less painful as his muscle memory aided in the transition. The process even felt more streamlined somehow, which took him by surprise.

“Maybe my magick likes this form,” he thought to himself. “After all, it’s just a bigger version of the wolf that I tend to favor, right?”

After both of the boys had made the change, the two young women put the harnesses on them and they mounted up.

Faolan jerked his head towards the waterfall, indicating to Duncan that he could lead whenever he was ready. And with that, they were off, running low and fast through the underbrush.

For the better part of two hours, the pair of wolves ran along the shores of the Black River, heading towards where the three rivers met. The locals, unimaginatively, called the confluence “Trí Abhainn.” Duncan led the party well. Every now and again, he picked up the fading scent of Daegan and the Fomorians. Whenever he did, he would stop and make sure that they were heading the right way before they continued on.

As they rode, Aine and Faolan shared each other’s thoughts. Faolan did his best to entertain his mate with material that he had dreamed up in shower, practicing for an imaginary career as stand-up comedian. Stored in the back of his mind, Faolan had accumulated a large catalog of routines that he had dreamt up. They covered a wide variety of topics. Some were observational humour, others were semi-political in nature,

but the majority of the material that he had amassed fell into two categories: Dad Jokes and Dirty Jokes.

By the time that the four of them reached the edge of the neon forest with the yellow trees, Faolan was telling Aine his favorite joke which involved a man walking into a pub with an ostrich and a grumpy looking cat in tow. He was just about to finish the joke when Duncan came to an abrupt halt.

“I wonder what is going on,” Aine said.

Faolan replied, using their shared connection. “He smells blood.”

“Oh no,” Aine said, burying her face in the back of Faolan’s neck.

“You should probably loop in the others now.”

Once she collected herself, Aine jumped down from the saddle and walked over to Duncan. “I’m going to link our minds together, alright?”

Everyone agreed and Aine got to work weaving the spell together. Duncan and Faolan compared notes about what they smelled. It was fresh blood, but it did not smell like the blood of Sidhe.

“It smells like the blood is being carried along the river,” Duncan said.

“I agree,” Faolan replied, adding that he thought it was the blood of a prey animal.

“A stag maybe?”

“Could be,” Duncan said. “But we should probably proceed with caution.”

“How would you know the difference,” Aine chimed in.

“The way the blood tastes when you let the scent drift across your tongue,”

Duncan answered.

“Different levels of chemical, hormones, and other qualities are mixed together in different amounts based on the species of the creature,” Faolan added. “Fomorian blood has a weird taste to it that is different from most animal blood and Sidhe blood tastes like you licked a battery—it feels alive and electric somehow.”

“Huh,” Ciara said while shrugging. “I guess I never noticed that; I can’t tell you how many times I’ve bitten my own tongue while eating and drew blood, but I never really noticed anything like what you’ve described.”

“Well, your Affinity isn’t sense based,” Duncan said. “So, maybe you’d have to really focus on it before you would? I don’t know.”

The four of them discussed where to go next. Ciara did her best to walk through the vision again, noting that the only thing she could remember from here was that they should cross the river and go up the hill. They decided that it would be best to try and cross further upstream. After a few hours, it seemed as though there was no where good enough to cross and it was getting late. The group agreed to stop for the night and set up camp.

## Chapter Twelve

### A Big Black Birdie Gold Me

At the edge of camp, Duncan sat on a tree stump, scrawling letters across a sheet of parchment made from the skin of a deer. His nib scratched at the dry sheet, making small noises that were drowned out by the crackling and popping of the logs in the fire pit. Long and thin lines of blood-red ink were twisted into strange, stuttering shapes.

Duncan had taken first watch as it would give him time to write his report. Using a cypher that only the Conroicht used when speaking to members of the council, Duncan wrote a summary of the day's events. His descriptions of the things that had transpired were short bursts of formal speech. He wrote things like, "the subject experienced a strong vision that left the subject unconscious, if her account of the event is to be believed."

With every new line, Duncan paused to consider how best to truncate his recollection of the day into bite-sized pieces. He also did his best not to mention anyone by name. Ciara became "the subject." Faolan became "the out-dweller," which was a term that the Aes Sidhe typically used to describe the Fomorians and other outside influences that might interfere with their observation of any given Sabbath or Esbat.

Aine, in contrast, was referred to as "the kind one." While the bulk of his report was concerned with his other two companions, Duncan made certain to include his observations of everything that Aine had said and done. He even copied down the remarks that she directed at Gráinne, verbatim. This was the only portion of his reportage

that was not written in such a clinical fashion. Here, in his retelling of Aine's actions and utterances, Duncan spared no details.

He described her physical appearance, the conditioning of her body, her reactions to different environmental and interpersonal stimulation, and the quality of her voice. "The kind one speaks as though she were an older child, at times. She is easily amused, easily offended—or so it would seem—as she is also quick to recover from any perceived slight. She appears to have lived a life that has been devoid of true tragedy and yet I cannot help but imagine that she is somehow being deceptive, as if her public face is a facade that hides deeper thoughts and feelings. When she spoke with the Lady Gráinne, your daughter, the kind one used pain and personal shame as a source from which she could sublimate humor in order to de-escalate a potentially violent situation."

After he had recorded his observations about Aine, Duncan paused to consider the appropriateness of his own personal thoughts regarding the matter; it was not his duty to speculate. He stroked the edges of the parchment and swept away loose shavings with the back of his hand. The sound of his skin dragging across the dry page reminded him of brushing down a horse's coat with a stiff brush. The texture of it was rougher, the pitch of the sound was dryer, but it soothed his mind just the same. He took up his quill again, dipped it in the inkwell, and he jotted down a single sentence. "The kind one may prove to be cause for concern, after all."

Fearing that further opinions on the matter might not be welcome, Duncan decided to move onto a different topic. He made a notation regarding their current position. He gave a summary of their intended course of action for the next day and he



did his best to estimate where the trail was likely to lead them from there. Once he had completed his report, Duncan wiped the nib of his quill against the grass under his feet before putting it away in his bag. He put the lid back on top of the inkwell and screwed it shut. He placed the bottle back into his bag, next to the quill, and then withdrew a small block of red wax from the same pocket.

He held the wax in his left hand and, with his right hand, he twisted his fingers around a small, invisible knot. He muttered under his breath, “*lasair mhúsailte*.” From behind his eyes, Duncan felt a twinge of heat that moved like liquid fire down his neck, down his spine, and into the cauldron of power that sits in his torso. Then the sensation intensified as it rose up from the bottom of his lungs into his heart. He could feel it throb outwards from his heart, down his right arm, and into the tip of his index finger. Once the sensation welled up there, Duncan blew a soft and long breath across the pad of his finger, causing a small flame to rip and roar into existence. A yellow-orange light danced and flickered not more than two centimeters above his fingernail. He held it up, under the bottom end of the block of wax, and let it drip into a small puddle on the rolled up piece of parchment that lay in his lap. Once enough had collected there, he balled up his fist and extinguished the flame.

Before the wax could solidify, Duncan pressed his right thumb into the wax, sealing it. He sucked in a quick and sharp breath as the molten wax filled the cracks, ridges, and cuts found on the bottom of his thumb with pain. He rolled his thumb off of the wax, inspected the mark that he made, and found it to be satisfactory. The mark that

had been carved into the flesh of his thumb was clear and well delineated, meaning that the document had been properly sealed, ready for delivery to the council.

He placed the report into his bag and tied a small ribbon around the closure, marking it as official business of the council, and then he produced a small piece of parchment from his shirt pocket that was no bigger than gift tag. The parchment had silver ink, in the shape of a complicated knot, printed on it. Duncan secured the tag to the ribbon and then tore it in two. As he did, a silver ribbon of aether wove its way in a knot work pattern beneath his bag. When the pattern was complete, the small leather satchel disappeared from sight in a bright flash of silver light. There was a short, but flat sounding pop that accompanied the flash. Duncan stood and surveyed the campsite in a singular, smooth motion. Once he was satisfied that no one had been disturbed by the spell, Duncan walked over to Faolan and nudged him with his foot.

“Rise and shine, fuzz-ball,” he said. “It’s your turn to take watch.”

Faolan groaned and stretched. “Just five more minutes, you bastard—I was just about to catch the biggest buck you’ve ever seen.”

“No,” Duncan grunted, settling down into his blanket. “Get up, now.”

“Fine,” Faolan grumbled. “You’re no fun.”

“Yeah,” Aine said. “No fun.” She rolled over and searched for something warm and thick to snuggle. Once her fingers found Faolan’s pillow, she scooped it up into her arms and buried her face in it. She snored and bit the pillow.

“Does she do that to you in her sleep?” Duncan asked, pointing at Aine.

“Oh yeah.” Faolan pulled the collar of his shirt to one side to reveal small, pink indentations along his neck.

“And here I thought she was the kind one of the bunch,” Duncan said. He stared at Aine for a moment or two, slick in cold-sweat. His mind raced. *Had she been awake this whole time*, he thought to himself. Duncan watched as she punched the pillow into a more pleasing shape. She smiled and nuzzled the pillow once more, which made Duncan brush the thought aside. He decided that it would be best not to dwell on it for much longer as sleep tugged on his eyelids. He yawned and rolled over, away from her and towards Ciara. He watched as the shapeless mass of blankets rose and fell with her breaths. Duncan smiled and closed his eyes.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Trí Abhainn

The next morning, the two wolves ran for few hours before reaching Trí Abhainn. Duncan suggested that the tallest Fomorian probably carried the rest of them across the river on his shoulders, making their crossing easier.

“Do you think that we could swim it,” Faolan asked.

“Probably,” Duncan surmised. “The current isn’t particularly strong. We would just have to keep a constant pace. As long as we do that and let the river carry us a little, we will get across. We might end up down river a little, but we won’t get as tired if we let the river do some of the work.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ciara said.

“Yeah—let’s do it,” Aine added.

The two girls got off of their furry companions, double checked the security of the harnesses, and tightened up their belts and packs. They stowed anything that they did not want to get wet and sent it away to the supply house, along with a note requesting a dry change of clothes, and then they saddled up once again.

Duncan charged in first. As soon as his full body was close to being submerged, his voice rang clear throughout the connection that Aine had established. “Cac! That’s really cold!”

Faolan slipped into the water with a little more grace than his friend and called back across the mental bridge, “Oh, please—this is almost as warm as bathwater.”

“Maybe your bathwater,” Aine cried out. “Which is why I prefer taking showers alone, by the way.”

Faolan mentally shrugged off the comment and kept on swimming. He followed behind Duncan and he made sure to do as Duncan suggested by letting the river do some of the work. The river was quite wide by where the three rivers met but, as luck would have it, the Black River flowed downstream from the confluence of the other two rivers, rather than into the swirling mess that was the Trí Abhainn. Still, with all the water from the whirlpool emptying into a single river meant that the current was steady and that the width of the river was not to be taken lightly.

About two minutes into their crossing, Faolan noticed that something seemed to be going wrong with his two friends ahead of him.

Ciara did not enjoy the cold water. As they crossed, she dug her fingers into the fur underneath the saddle until the skin above her knuckles turned a shade of white so pale that it might as well have been transparent. The cold only made her hands shake more. As she gripped the fur and leather with all of her might, Ciara began to have flash backs to a time when she went for a swim in the river near their house.

Ciara, along with her brother and Duncan, had all decided to go for a dip in order to cool off after a sweltering day of training with Cormac and his personal guard—Duncan’s father, Gerard. The heat of the day had warmed the Black River and made it quite pleasant. The three children played in the shallow end of the river where most of the village bathed in the warmer months, but Duncan insisted on going deeper and deeper.

“Come back, you idiot,” Ciara had shouted at her friend. “You don’t want the river to carry you away, do you?”

“Oh, c’mon!” Duncan shouted back. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little challenge.” Growing up together, the three of them knew what buttons to press in order to get each other to do things that they didn’t want to do. Duncan knew that Ciara was competitive, so he knew to call out to her sense of adventure. “C’mon,” he called again. “The water’s fi—”

Ciara watched as her friend’s head disappear beneath the surface. She saw his hands flailing about before they too were dragged beneath the soft waves of the river. Panic, like a bolt of lightning striking a tree, shot through her body. Every muscle in her body burned with pain as she dove into the water, swimming with every ounce of her strength towards her friend. Her mind kept screaming, *Go back to the shore, you moron!* And yet, her body moved.

Daegan, who was still closer to the shore, called out for her to come back; and yet, her body moved.

Ciara could barely breathe and yet, her body moved.

“Come back!”

Her body moved.

Laughter burst through the pain and the shock. “Had you going, didn’t I?” Duncan’s face beamed with pride.

“You absolute lunatic,” Ciara screamed as she weaved a small spell knot capable of blasting Duncan in the face with a torrent of water.

The water swelled and then gushed upwards like a miniature geyser, directly below Duncan's chin. Even this didn't drown out his laughter, but something did.

Closer to shore, Daegan was being dragged out of the water by Cormac. Something had gone wrong. Both Ciara and Duncan swam for shore as fast as their bodies would allow.

Ciara's mind locked onto this portion of the memory and would not let it go. Her heart raced and her grip tightened around the saddle, pulling fur with it, causing Duncan, still in his wolf form, to yip. Ciara did not hear the yip. Her mind was too busy chasing after Daegan. The harder she swam after him in the memory, the further away his tiny body seemed. Her mind would not let him go.

"Ciara," Duncan screamed across their shared connection. "Let it go!"

Across the vast distance, Daegan felt a strange twist in his gut. A familiar pain of guilt, shock, and horror struck him. The sensation sent him reeling forward. He tripped and fell, buckling over into a heap just in front of the Brésling.

"Get up," the gruff Fomorian grumbled. "Walk now, cry later."

"Wait," the Brésling said, holding up his hand and kneeling down. He looked over the young Sidhe's body and reached out to feel his forehead. The skin was cold and wet, clammy. He could feel the tension building up in the Sidhe's body. He watched as foam began to appear at the edges of Daegan's mouth. "I think something is seriously wrong," the Brésling said. "Pick him up, but be careful—we need him. Let's get him to the healer at Ráthmór."

“P-p-painted Ci-ci-city,” Daegan muttered as he was being hoisted into the air by the large Fomorian.

Now safely across to the other side of the River, Faolan and company watched over their friend as she shook and quaked in the tall grass.

“What the hell is going on?” Duncan shrieked.

“I don’t know,” Faolan said.

“She’s having a seizure, I think,” Aine said, holding Ciara’s head in her lap. “We should keep her on her side, keep her wrapped up, and just let her ride it out. Or, at least that’s what those medical drama’s on the Tele say to do.”

“Okay,” Faolan said. He began to pace, a bad habit he picked up from his mother.

Duncan clenched his teeth and tried to stifle a scream. “I hate being helpless. I hate not being able to help, I mean.”

“I know, it’s frustrating,” Aine said. “Welcome to my world.”

The three of them watched as their friend began to come ‘round. She gasped for air, coughed up a little bit of river water, and scrambled to sit up.

“Easy, love—easy,” Faolan said.

“It’s okay, hun.” Aine said, trying to calm the flailing Sidhe in her lap. “I’ve got you.”

“Daegan,” Ciara managed to say. “I think he’s going to the Painted City.”

“Is that what happened?” Duncan asked, crawling towards her. “You had some kind of weird vision that made you freak out like that?”



“Maybe,” she replied while trying to collect herself. “It felt different this time. Like maybe I started it? I don’t know—I was having flashbacks to that time in the river where you pretended to drown,” she said, pausing to kick Duncan in the shin. “Still mad at you for doing that, by the way.”

“Fair play,” Duncan said.

“Anyway,” Ciara continued. “After that, I could see Daegan, or maybe I could see what he was seeing—that might be more accurate. Anyway, he fell over and started act all strange. The next thing I could see was the Brésling leaning over me—I mean, over Daegan—saying something about going to the Painted City.”

“That’s good,” Duncan said. “I mean, it’s awful that both of you are going through this in order for us to keep tabs on where your brother is going, but I think that we can get there in pretty good time if we just keep on ridding. And having a definite destination in mind will help a lot.”

“I can’t keep going,” Ciara said. “I need a little while to rest, get changed, and get food in me after all of that.”

“Okay,” Faolan said, “but let’s walk a little further up stream first so that we aren’t so exposed.”

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Blood Runs Through It

Ciara knew for a fact that Daegan was headed for Ráthmór. The city was about a day and half's worth of walking, but Ciara was hopeful that they could reach it by nightfall, provided that Duncan and Faolan could maintain their current pace. So far, they had taken regular breaks, they kept hydrated, and they ate lighter meals. However, after nearly drowning, something had to give.

At Faolan's request, they stopped at the edge of a hillside where a bend in the river met with a decent sized waterfall. The tree line provided sufficient cover and the water was fresh smelling.

Once the boys had returned to their normal forms, Ciara opened a small pocket located on the front of her hip-holster, she withdrew from it a small tag with gold lettering and knot work on it, and she tore it in half. After a brief flash of golden light, the group's supplies were deposited on the ground.

"I am so bloody happy that I don't have to carry all of that garbage on my back," Faolan said, pointing at the supplies.

"Same," Duncan replied. "Even though it's getting easier to do, I think it would take us both a couple week of conditioning to be able to carry that load."

"Well, maybe it would take you a couple of weeks," Faolan snickered.

"Nope," Duncan replied, rubbing his forearms. "Not taking the bait on that one—you can't make me."

“Fair enough,” Faolan said.

Ciara inspected the equipment. Everything appeared to be in order, save for one thing—the element that gives life. “You two take a load off, Aine and I are going to go get some water to cook with,” Ciara said, picking up a large water-skin from the collection of cooking gear.

“After we get changed,” Aine said, wringing out her shirt.

“Well, duh.” Ciara teased.

Once the two of them were dry and changed, Ciara and Aine walked for a few minutes, following the bend in the river towards the water fall. They talked about some of the interesting things that they had seen along the way. Aine was fascinated with the brightly coloured flowers and trees that had blooms and leaves that were alien looking to her.

“Most trees have green leaves, up until Autumn that is,” Aine said. “Have you ever been top-side when the leaves change?”

“Sadly, no.” Ciara replied. “I never have been. You really don’t have purple trees in the land above?”

“No,” Aine said, tapping her index finger against her bottom lip as she thought. “The only ones I can think of are some of the trees that are native to Japan. They have some really pretty cherry trees that have pink and purple blossoms.”

“Interesting,” Ciara said. “Is Japan a city in the land above?”

“No, it’s a country.”

“Oh, I see.” Ciara replied. As they walked, Ciara had been keeping an eye on the upper ridge. As they approached the water fall Ciara saw something that worried her. She held her hand up, signaling for Aine to stop. The two women came to an abrupt halt, just thirty meters shy of the waterfall. “Do you see that?” Ciara pointed at a small figure hunched over at the edge of the water.

“Yeah,” Aine said. “What is it?”

“I think it’s a Red Cap.”

“Cac,” Aine cursed under her breath. “Ain’t them those blood thirsty goblins that —”

“Dye their caps red with blood,” Ciara said, cutting off Aine mid-stream. “The very same. As long as we back away slowly, we should be fine. I don’t think it’s seen us yet.”

“Maybe that’s the reason the boys smelled blood yesterday?”

“You might be right on the money,” Ciara said, watching the small, green figure scrubbing its cap in the river. She lowered her body, making it harder to spot and easier to retreat without making a sound. She kept her hand on her blade, just in case the wind should change. Ciara focused on her breathing, her footsteps, and the Red Cap’s movements.

The only thing that she wasn’t focused on was Aine. Ciara hadn’t noticed where Aine was going. Had she glanced over her shoulder, even once, she would have seen the gopher hole. Instead, she heard, and felt, Aine yip as she fell backwards over the hole, pulling Ciara down with her.

As she scrambled to regain her footing, Ciara saw that the Red Cap had taken notice of Aine's misstep. It donned his soaking wet cap, barred its crooked yellow teeth, and smiled—the hunt had begun. She watched the creature jump down from the top of the ridge, closing a third of the distance between them in a single leap. Ciara felt a twist in her gut. For the first time, in a long time, she was unprepared for a fight and that feeling scared her. Her hands shook as she drew forth her sword. Even though she had used the blade for the past century, it felt heavy in her hands. Her mouth went dry and her heart raced. As the Red Cap ran towards them, with its cap swinging like a tail behind it, Ciara began to panic.

She could hear the distant thundering of the goblin's foot falls. Her stomach twisted again. Ciara summoned up her courage and her resolve and clenched her teeth. She twisted her fingers around the first spell-knot she ever learned from Cormac. It's shape was simple and, by now—after nearly six hundred years—the shape had become second nature. Just as she was about finish the knot, a peculiar light flashed behind her.

Ciara watched as a bolt of blue energy tore through the empty air. It shot, in a straight-line, towards the Red Cap and collided with it. The force of the impact sent the goblin reeling backwards, head over heels.

“Cac,” Ciara said, letting the aether fizzle out from in between her fingers. “The hell was that?”

“One of Faolan's little gifts,” Aine said with a wink. “Come on, get up. I don't think that's going to do much more than piss it off.”

“Right,” Ciara said. She regained her footing then and shook her head.

Just as Aine had predicted the Red Cap was down, but not out for the count. It scrambled back up and grabbed a large horn from its belt and blew a long, sour note. Several red heads appeared above the horizon. Within a minute, nine Red Caps were gathered at the base of the waterfall.

“Well,” Ciara said, pointing at the goblins with the tip of her sword. “You were right; you pissed him off.”

“Oh,” Aine said. “How can you tell?”

“Simple,” Ciara replied. “Red Caps don’t like sharing the credit for a kill, less blood for them to stain their caps with that way. And you managed to make the damned thing call its friends for help.”

“Do you not have sarcasm down here?”

“We do,” Ciara said, snickering. “I just wanted you to know how well and truly screwed we might be.”

“Oh, just shut up and fight.”

The two women fought with all of their hearts. Ciara, being the more experienced fighter, took point. Aine, took on the role of support. Standing behind Ciara, Aine couldn’t see what was directly in front of her friend, but she knew that she wouldn’t have to—Ciara would take care of anything that got close enough to feel the bite of her steel. Aine’s job was to play crowd control, to keep them scattered enough to avoid the inevitability of a doggy-pile.

Reviewing her options, Aine ran her fingers across the holstered crystals. *“The blue ones are for blasting enemies with a concussive force. Red for fire, yellow for lightning, green for manipulating vines and branches, and a black crystal for ‘dire emergencies.’”*

She selected a green crystal from her belt, held it in her right hand, and she concentrated on the effect that she desired. Aine closed her eyes and joined her magick with Ciara’s. “I’m going to use your eyes to help take care of things,” she told her friend.

“Noted,” Ciara said, kicking a Red Cap in the chin with the heel of her boot.

Aine counted the number of external threats and plotted their positions in her mind-scape. She knelt down and touched the grass with her left hand. She dug her fingers into the soil and let her senses flow into the earth. The crystal in her right hand began to glow as she connected with the roots below. She imagined them bursting through the ground and strangling the two Red Caps on Ciara’s left. Thin and wiry roots sprang forth from the ground and wrapped themselves around the goblins’ necks. She watched as Ciara ran another one through with her blade. As he slumped forward onto Ciara’s shoulder, Aine saw another one running towards them.

Responding to her command, a nearby tree branch whipped the on-comer across the face. Aine then pictured the branch splitting into five, finger like branches that shot through the goblin’s abdomen. Within an instant, the sound of a thick tree limb splintering cut through the guttural grumbings of the Red Caps was heard, followed by a shriek of pure agony.

After pushing another root through the soil to trip up a nearby goblin, Aine could feel the crystal in her hand growing cold. “Almost out of juice,” she said.

In the distance, Faolan and Duncan appeared from behind the bend in the river. Duncan drew forth his bow and knocked an arrow while Faolan pulled a blue crystal out of his pocket. Duncan aimed down the shaft, lined up his shot, and loosed the arrow. It flew, straight and true, piercing a Red Cap through the hand, causing it to drop her club.

Once he was sure that the way was clear, Faolan turned his back to the battle, pointed the crystal at the ground, and funneled as much aether into it as he dared. The resulting cascade of blue energy pummeled the ground beneath his feet, sending Faolan sky ward. He shot fifteen meters upwards and ten meters towards the fighting. While in the air, Faolan changed his orientation so that he would land with both feet planted in the back of one of the Red Caps.

The Goblin’s scream drowned out all other sounds as the creature’s spine shattered beneath the weight of the impact.

Faolan rolled as the body beneath him fell. He tucked his knees into his chest and let the inertia carry him into a somersault and into a kneeling position. He flooded his arms with aether and traced a simple knot with both hands. Blue light rippled down his forearms and a pair of daggers appeared in his open hands. As soon as he felt the weight of his weapons, he gripped the blades and plunged one into the next Red Cap’s stomach.

“So nice of you join us,” Ciara said, huffing. “Your mate is doing quite well for herself; I’m impressed.”



“Thank you,” Faolan said as he stood. “But all the credit goes to her and Niamh. The two of them have been working hard on teaching Aine how to use those beauties.”

A strange sensation crept up Ciara’s spine. It felt as though a muscle were twitching, being pulled by an invisible thread. “Behind you,” Aine’s voice sounded inside of Ciara’s head. She nodded at Faolan and then ducked.

Faolan flung a dagger over Ciara’s lowered head and nailed a Red Cap in the chest, mid-stride, as it was lunging for a sneak attack. Faolan watched as the goblin clutched at its wound, dropping its hammer on the ground.

Ciara turned and kicked the blade deeper into the its chest, knocking it flat. “Anybody else want some,” she cried out.

Of the nine Red Caps that had joined the battle, three were dead, one was paralyzed, and two were on the verge of being strangled to death by tree roots. The remaining three decided to cut their losses. They cut their two friends loose and ran down stream, away from the encampment.

Duncan walked over to the Red Cap that Faolan had crushed. He whispered into its ear a solemn prayer. “May your body feed the earth, may your spirit feed the aether, and may your next life be better than this one.”

The Red Cap nodded. “Thank you,” it said, in its native tongue, through gritted teeth.

Duncan closed his eyes and drew his knife across the poor creature’s neck, granting it a quick death. “You really shouldn’t leave your prey to suffer like that, Faolan.”

“I know,” Faolan replied. “I appreciate you giving him the coup de grâce.”

“The what now?” Duncan asked.

“Sorry,” Faolan said, shaking his head. “It’s french. Loosely translated, it means ‘blow of mercy.’”

“Good name for it,” Duncan said as he wiped the blood off of his knife in the grass.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Around the Campfire

Having dispatched the group of Red Caps, almost everyone headed for the camp site. Ciara was famished after fighting, Aine felt drained, and Faolan was keen on getting some rest. Duncan, on the other hand, opted to stay behind and burn the bodies of the fallen Red Caps.

“A good hunter always pays his respects to his fallen prey,” he had said before waving his companions on.

Once the party arrived back at camp, they were greeted by a tall and slender man. He was sitting on a stump, treating himself to an apple. His hair was grey, his eyes were dark, and his beard was quite long. He wore traveler’s clothes, a long blue cloak, and he carried with him a tall stave.

“Hail, friends.” The man cried out as the group appeared. “Are you the party who belongs to this camp?”

Faolan rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. He replied. “Indeed, we are—Céad míle fáitle.”

“Wonderful,” the man said. “I hope you do not mind, I helped myself to this stump and lit a fire—these old bones are not what they used to be.”

“You are most welcome, friend.” Ciara said. “We are always willing to entertain one of our elders.”

“Excellent,” the man proclaimed. He motioned for everyone to join him. “Please accept my humble offering of these fresh apples in exchange for your company.” He pulled open a small sack and showed a wide variety of apples to them. “It might not seem like much, but it is the most I have to offer.”

“That’s alright,” Aine said, picking up a red and gold from the sack. “I love apples!”

For a time, the group rested. They fed themselves and their guest. Ciara made sure to leave a plate of food near the fire to keep warm for Duncan. She arranged the plate with all of his favorites and poured a mug of hot cider. She placed the mug on the side of the fire, near his plate, being careful to avoid direct heat. Ciara busied herself with hosting duties while Aine and the elderly traveler told each other humorous anecdotes.

Faolan helped Ciara with making their guest feel welcome. He had prepared the drinks, he had helped prep the food, and as the meal began to wind down, Faolan sat back to enjoy the stranger’s company. He listened to the man’s stories, he examined his face, and watched the man’s hands as he pantomimed exciting details from his adventures. His body moved with the echoes of grace. His strokes were swift and strong as he swung his stave around like a long sword. Although he seemed to tire after some exertion, the man did not appear to have slowed much in his old age. After all the chores were done, Faolan rummaged through his bag and found his pipe. He took the small leather pouch out of his bag, unzipped the tobacco side, and breathed in the aroma of cloves, vanilla, and whiskey. He zipped shut the case, turned it over and unzipped the other side. Inside, Faolan found the stem and bowl of his pipe. During travel, as his grandfather had advised

him, Faolan always made sure to disassemble the heirloom. He pulled out the bowl first, a fat and round piece of briar wood that had been shaped to resemble a large and pointed tooth. Then he pulled out the long, churchwarden stem. It was made of bone with a fishtail bit. He blew air through the bit, making sure it was clear of debris. He then repeated this action with the bowl before assembling to two pieces.

Faolan returned to the campfire and sat down next to their guest and filled his pipe with tobacco. He tamped it down with the tamping tool that was stored in the pouch. He added a second layer of tobacco and then, with the pad of his thumb, he smoothed out the fibers at the top by turning the pipe between his thumb and middle finger, loosely packing the shredded leaves.

The stranger smiled at the sight of the pipe. "That's a good lad," he said. "Would you mind sharing some of your leaf with me?"

"Help yourself," Faolan said, handing the pouch over to the elderly Sidhe. Faolan watched as their guest packed his pipe. Once the stranger was done, Faolan flicked open his lighter and puffed until the tobacco glowed under its own power. He offered it to the stranger, who turned it down.

The elderly Sidhe traced a red line of aether in the air and a small flame erupted into being at the end of his pipe. He sipped at the end of the stem, drawing air and fire into the bowl. A couple of seconds later, the tobacco leaves were lit.

"That's a nifty trick," Faolan said, smoke leaking out from around the edges of his lips.

"Beats having to carry around matches," the stranger replied with a smile.

While Faolan and company entertained their guest, Duncan stacked the bodies of the Red Caps together. He kept them away from the river bank and away from the tree line. He laid their bodies down in a row, making sure to treat the lifeless husks with as much respect as possible. Once all of them were gathered together in a line, Duncan walked into the edge of the nearby forest and began to gather kindling and large branches. He selected his materials carefully as he was not interested in having to do this task more than once. He reasoned that this was going to be enough of a set back as it was.

After finding the appropriate amount of kindling and branches for the funeral pyre, Duncan began to hack apart fallen tree limbs and medium-sized tree trunks. Although he felt as though he should make haste, Duncan still endeavored to find at least one branch from each of the nine sacred trees to burn along with the bodies. Ash he found easily enough, as they are Lindera's primary source of hardwood. Apple, another prominent tree in Lindera, was also easy to find. Some of the others took time, but Duncan did not have to go too deep into the woods in order to find what he was looking for. The only tree that Duncan knew would be difficult to find was a yew tree. For whatever reason, lack of nutrients in the soil, lack of appropriate levels of sun-light, etc., etc. — the yew tree did not flourish in Lindera as much as the other trees. Meaning that yew trees often had to be harvested in the land above and imported in times when the need for them was great.

Among the Aes Sidhe, the yew tree was the most sacred, because it was said to be a tree that would allow them to safely pass from one world to the next. Even though these

Red Caps had fallen in battle as enemies, Duncan felt that safe passage to Summerland was owed to them just the same.

Knowing that death was always a possibility, Duncan had decided to include a bundle of yew branches in his supplies. When all of the other necessities had been gathered, the young Sidhe opened the pouch that hung from his belt and pulled from it a small silver case. Engraved on its face were Duncan's initials, DG.

Faolan, some years ago, had given the business card holder to Duncan as a gift. He knew that Duncan would need something to carry his supply tags around with him and Faolan felt that this slender tin would fit the bill rather well.

The metal case had once been smooth and shiny, but the life of a Conroicht had always been a hard one. Despite Duncan's best efforts, the face of the sturdy metal case wore more lines than the ones that bore his name. Duncan ran his fingers across the deep and shallow scratches, feeling the cold ebb and flow of their depth, each line standing as testament to the years.

Duncan sighed as he opened the case. He pulled forth a supply tag from within and then closed the container. He returned the small hunk of silver-colored metal to his belt pouch and then tore the tag in half. The aether-infused ink flared-up, flashing the spellknot into life. A moment later, Duncan's supply bag appeared on the ground before him. He undid the straps and inspected the contents. Sitting atop the usual litany of fresh supplies was a piece of parchment, rolled into a leather scroll that was fastened shut with a purple ribbon.

The message contained within was brief and to the point. It read, "Report received. Continue to monitor the target with discretion. An agent will meet with you shortly. Keep an eye on 'the kind one,' as she may be affected by the change soon." The missive was unsigned, though the ribbon was signature enough as it designated the message as official business of the council.

Duncan, having read the letter, dislodged the parchment from the leather scroll and stuffed it into his pocket. He broke off one of the yew branches from the bundle found among his supplies and then he sent the bag back to the supply house. Now that he had all of necessary components for a proper funeral pyre, Duncan walked over to the mound of earth and wood and started the fire. He hastened to stack the bodies of the Red Caps onto the pyre before the fire grew to its full glory.

As the flames licked at the bodies, Duncan took out the note and studied it one more time. There was nothing on the back, nothing hidden in the corners, and nothing that was revealed by the heat of the fire. From this, he came to the conclusion that there was nothing further to be learned from the parchment. He crumpled up the dry sheet of animal hide and threw it onto the pyre. As it landed, the ball of parchment rolled around as the heat from the fire expanded its fibers. The ball grew and then shrank as it was consumed by the flames.

Duncan set his sword down on the ground in front of the pyre. He got down on his knees and he began to pray. The words came naturally to him as they were the same words his father taught him to recite any time that they would hunt and kill prey. He anointed his sword with the oil that he found in his supply bag. He chanted the words of



his father again, but this time he swung his sword in wide arcs over the flames, much like a priest might swing a censur full of incense at mass. Thick lines of oil were flung from the tip of Duncan's blade that ignited before they could fall to the earth.

As he chanted, Duncan began to toss wooden staves onto the pyre, each of them about half a meter in length. He called out the names of the nine sacred woods as he tossed the corresponding staff into the flames. When he arrived at the final piece of wood, the branch of yew that he had found in his supply bag, he unsheathed the dagger at his belt and carved his name into the wood. Using the part of the blade closest to the hilt, Duncan hogged out solid chunks of material, creating the notches and lines for each of the Ogham letters. Once finished, Duncan brushed away, or blew away, any lingering shavings. He ran his fingers across the edges, feeling the letters with his finger tips. Satisfied that his name was clear and legible, Duncan recited the words of the prayer one last time and cast the branch of yew into the flames, thereby ensuring that Manannán mac Lir would know who sent the Red Caps onward to Summerland.

Duncan wiped his blade clean of oil, gathered up his things, and prepared to return to his friends. Before he left, Duncan paused, and watched the pyre for a moment. He closed his eyes and breathed deep. As he turned away, he said "May all my sins be remembered and may my kindnesses repay them."

## Chapter Sixteen

### Keeping the Faith

When Duncan arrived back at the camp, he found one person more than he had been expecting. Duncan tilted his head and looked the newcomer over. *Is this the agent*, he thought as he examined this stranger who was laughing and joking with his friends. *It could be, but something seems off.*

Duncan greeted the elderly Sidhe as tradition mandates, with kindness and hospitality. He offered up a small gift, a bottle of mead that he had instructed to be kept with his things. Duncan could tell by the way the stranger's eyes lit up that he was thankful for the gift.

"I don't drink alone, you understand," the stranger said, prying the bottle open. "Please, share a drink with me."

Everyone but Aine drank a glass of the mead. She passed, stating that it was too strong for her. "I can smell it from here," she said. "That'll knock me flat on mi' arse."

While the rest of the group was enjoying the company of the traveling Sidhe, Duncan was being mindful of what was being said. He took in every detail that the stranger offered up, weighing it in his mind. After ten minutes, he felt no closer to an answer.

*I just can't figure this guy out*, Duncan thought to himself. He walked away from the group, excusing himself for a moment to answer nature's call. *If he is the agent that*

*I'm supposed to meet up with, I have to imagine that he'd want to do so in private—right? Why risk exposing ourselves to the rest of the group like this?*

After coming back, Duncan tried to relax and just let things go, but his suspicion seemed to have won out. “So, tell me, good sir,” He said, trying to ease himself into the question. “Where are you coming from and where is it that you’re going?”

“Oh, dear me,” the Sidhe said. “Where are my manors? I’ve just come from Ráthmór, heading for a little town not far from Dagger’s Bend.”

“You’ve come from the Painted City,” Ciara blurted out.

“Yes,” the stranger replied, a look of confusion passed over his face. “Did I not just say that?”

“You might have seen my brother,” Ciara said. “I’m sorry. He’s been kidnapped by a large group of Fomorians, maybe as many as half a dozen of them.”

“Oh dear me,” the Sidhe said, once more. “No, I would have remembered such a large group of them traveling the road together. Though, I have to confess, I often don’t travel the main roads, myself.”

Ciara’s disappointment was written all over her face. Her shoulders slunk to the side, her head hung low with tiredness, and her eyes fell to the grass below and appeared to be fixed there. “Well, being an elder, I’m sure you feel safer traveling that way, I suppose.”

“It’s true,” the Sidhe replied. “Though, I do wish I had seen your brother and his captors.” The stranger rubbed his right arm, as if he were massaging a sore muscle. “I

know what it's like to lose someone close to you, to be concerned for their wellbeing. I wish I could be of more help."

"That's alright, mister." Aine said, taking his hand in hers. "You can't be everywhere at once."

The elderly Sidhe nodded and began to gather up his things. "Well, I hate to end things on such a sour note, but I really should be on my way."

"Yes," Faolan said, extending his hand to the old man. "We should be on our way as well. We are on our way to Ráthmór ourselves and we have a lot of ground to cover."

"Safe journey then, friends." The stranger said, shaking Faolan's hand. "It was nice to have met you all."

## Chapter Seventeen

### *Pop Goes the Weasel*

When the Painted City came into view, Daegan found himself fascinated with the art and architecture of Ráthmór. As they approached the edge of town, the Brésling instructed him to hide his face beneath his hood.

“Why in the nine would I do such a thing,” Daegan asked, bringing the line of people to a halt.

“Because the Master told you to, that’s why,” the snake man hissed in Daegan’s ear.

*The Master, huh?* Daegan thought to himself, pulling his hood up and over his head.

Daegan followed along behind the Brésling, ducking under low hanging shingles and drain pipes as they walked around the city wall. They hugged the outside wall, heading toward the eastern side of town, until they found a rather large crack in the stone barrier that had been built around the perimeter. The wall itself was made giant granite slabs that had been polished to a near mirror-like shine, but the area around the crack was rough and uncut. The edges of the walls were sloppy with spackle and mortar. Even the ground around the ugly portion of the wall was uneven and unkempt.

“What happened here,” Daegan asked.

“Some crackpot Wordsmith blew up a section of the wall fifty some years ago,” the Brésling answered. “Apparently, they did not know how the original city designer made the outer walls, so they just tried to do their best.”

“I see,” Daegan said, running his hand along the uncut stone. “It would appear as though they forgot measure twice.”

“Hmm?” The Brésling paused. He was unfamiliar with the phrase.

“I meant that they cut the stone without making sure to leave enough room for error,” Daegan explained.

“Oh, I see,” the Brésling said, titling his head to the side and flashing Daegan a quick smile. “I don’t believe that was the case; I believe that it was more of a money issue.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’ll see when we get inside,” the Brésling said, stepping to the side of the crack and waving his captive through.

As Daegan stepped through the crack in the wall, he could see that he was in the middle of a slum. The buildings that crowded around the crack were made from mismatched boards and they were hammered together with bent nails. Some of the buildings were not nailed together, but were strung together with bits of wire or leather. The beautiful artwork that Daegan saw everywhere else, as they approached the city, was not present here. All the stone walls were a dull gray without a single trace of the magic lines that lit up the rest of the town.

“What is this place,” Daegan asked.

“This is the Bruscar Slum,” the Brésling said. “Welcome to the place of my birth.”

“You were born here,” Daegan asked, puzzled by the Brésling’s remark. “I thought only the Sidhe lived in the Painted City.”

“That was true, once upon a time,” the big one said. “But several decades ago, we Fomorians were brought in to help rebuild this part of town.”

“Yes,” the Brésling said, his mouth twisted with anguish. “Tempted with the prospect of finding a place to call home, a place where we might grow and prosper, we were lured here by the chieftain.” As they walked through the narrow and crooked streets of Bruscar, the Brésling continued telling Daegan about how the slums came to be. “At first, this place was something of a tent city, a temporary place for the workers to sleep while they worked to repair the wall and the buildings. Originally, they were told that the work would take as much as two years to complete. My parents, both of them being Bréslings themselves, worried that they wouldn’t be accepted here, but they took the risk and moved here anyway—three years after the work had started. By then, the tent city had grown into an improvised housing district. The workers had used whatever was broken or left-over in order to make something sturdier than canvas that could be blown away by a stiff breeze.”

“Seems reasonable enough,” Daegan said.

“My parents certainly thought so,” the Brésling replied before going on. “And, for a time, after they moved here, things went rather well. Small businesses began to crop up all over Bruscar, things that we needed like a nursery, a couple of pubs, and a place for us to treat our wounded. Construction is a risky business, after all.” The Brésling went on

for a bit, telling Daegan how the chieftain tried to keep things peaceful and pleasant between everyone within the city's walls, but when the project seemed to drag on for far too long things took a turn for the worse.

"For a project that was supposed to take all of two years, I can see how people might feel like something was up when seven years had come and gone," Daegan commented.

"True," the Brésling conceded, "but the workers weren't all to blame in this—the townsfolk had their part in it as well. The ones who weren't ready to share their beautiful city with us lowly born mongrels and monsters sabotaged important structures as soon as they were completed, or as they were nearing completion, in some cases. They always targeted the places that were built by our hands, sometimes while the workers were still inside."

"That's how his parents died," the big one said.

"Oh, dear." Daegan said, stopping in his tracks.

The Brésling was pissed. His face was bright red and his hand was balled into a fist. "I wasn't going to tell him that part, you idiot."

"Sorry, M-master."

"Don't be sorry, be better," he chastised the large Fomorian.

Daegan felt a pain of sympathy sink into his heart. "I know what it's like to lose your parents. I don't know how long Bréslings are supposed to live, but we Aes Sidhe are functionally immortal—if you don't kill us, we just go on forever. My parent died in a conflict with some Fomorians."



“I see,” the Brésling said. “So, you’ve understandably got some trust issues, I gather.”

“Yeah,” Daegan said, looking at the ground. “Plus the whole kidnapping thing isn’t really helping.”

“Kidnapping is such a strong word,” the Brésling said with a smile. “Maybe we could agree on *recruiting*?”

“I still don’t know what you want me for, apart from the obvious,” he replied, pointing at the book that the Brésling kept in his bag.

“We can talk about that later, but let’s get that head of yours looked at first, shall we?”

The rest of the walk to the healer’s hovel went by in silence. Daegan thought about what he had been told. His captor, like himself, had lost his parents in the midst of a conflict between their races. Daegan assumed that it was likely that the Brésling had been raised by someone else, much like how he and his sister had been raised by Cormac.

Daegan’s sympathy deepened as he saw the kinds of lives the children in Bruscar lead. Tiny fomorian children and Brésling children were drinking out of barrels that collected rain water from dirty rooftops. They played with toys made from the disparate pieces of other, broken toys. Some of these creations were quite aesthetically pleasing, in Daegan’s opinion, he could tell that someone went to great lengths to make the toys look as though they had been intentionally made that way. But for every toy that looked that way, there were at least ten more that were just slapped together without care.

By the time that they reached the healer's home, Daegan felt sad. He was led into the small-one-room-dwelling by the Brésling and one of the Fomorian.

"Welcome home, Breccan," the old Brésling woman in the corner of the room said as they walked through the door.

"I really wish you would stop calling me by that name, you old hag."

"You're name is *Breccan*," Daegan said, stifling a giggle. "The great and terrible Breccan."

"Do you see what you've done," Breccan said, pointing at Daegan. "How am I ever going to strike fear into his heart now?"

"Oh why would you want to do that to such a nice boy?" The elderly Brésling asked, patting Daegan on the cheek.

"Never mind that," Breccan said, shrugging. "He needs examined as he fell over as we made our way here—foaming at the mouth and all that."

"Oh dear me," she said. "Well, let's have a look at you." The woman put on a strange pair of glasses with different colored lenses, six different ones in total. She flicked through each of them, one after the other, while rapidly blinking. "I see, I see," she kept on repeating after each lens came into view.

After a minute or two, she completed her examination, much to Daegan's relief. "So, do you think I'll live."

"Oh, most certainly, dearie." She said, patting him on the cheeks again. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"Nothing," Breccan said, startled. "You've got to be joking."

“No,” she said, wagging her finger at Breccan. “There *is* nothing wrong with him. Now. There *was* something wrong with him, though.” She went on to explain that the young Sidhe was the victim of a rather powerful mind-probe. “Someone, without permission, tried to break into this poor child’s skull and scoop out his memories. Did you have something to do with this, Breccan?”

“No,” he replied. “I may have aggressively recruited him—”

“Kidnapped,” Daegan corrected.

“But I certainly did not have someone try to force their way into his mind.”

“Well, you had best be careful dearie,” she warned Daegan. “You had better steel your mind, should they try to do it again.”

Daegan’s heart sank. His face went pale and his skin felt cold. “Thank you, ma’am—I’ll try,” he said before walking away to the sit by the fire. He dug his fingers into the wooden arm of the chair until it hurt. He thought to himself, *has that been happening to Ciara, too?*

Daegan sat for an hour, going over things in his mind. He was concerned about the possibility that he was doing permanent damage to his sister by trying to keep her in the loop the way that he had been. He sat in the rickety chair by the fire, chewing on his fingertips, reviewing everything he had been taught by Cormac about the *bualadh le chéile san intinn*. He remembered that Cormac had always stressed the concern about using the technique without both people consenting to it, but Daegan had always assumed

that it was because it could be a violation of the other person's privacy, not that it could have physical or mental side-effects like the ones that he had experienced.

Anytime that the two of them had joined their minds in the past, they were in the same room. Consent wasn't as much of a concern then as both of them had made their intentions clear.

*Why didn't Cormac tell us what would happen?* Daegan thought to himself. He wondered if Cormac felt that by teaching them to always respect the other participant of the joining that maybe he wouldn't have to explain the reasons why. *Maybe he thought it was like the Brehon; if there was a law against it, the Brehon probably guessed that it would go without saying or without explaining. No one ever had to tell me why killing, raping, and stealing was bad, right?* Daegan pondered the implications of this line of thinking without interruption, but also without notice of the other conversations happening in the room.

While Daegan tortured himself over the possibility of having hurt his sister, Breccan and his companions discussed what to do next. They had decided that staying in town was a necessity, but not everyone was convinced that it was worth it to keep their captive alive.

"We don't even know if the child can read the book," the snake-man said.

"He could read other books in that study," Gramble replied.

"I'm sorry, Vangelis," Breccan said. "I'm with Gramble on this one."

The snake-man hissed in response. "With all due respect, Master—"

“That’s enough Vangelis,” Breccan said, pointing a finger at his friend. “We need him and that is final.”

“S-ssay what you want, Master,” Vangelis hissed. “But at the first sign that he is no longer of use, I will kill him.”

Breccan stood and leaned over the table. “You will do nothing until I say otherwise,” he said. “Or I will skin you alive and nail your scaly hide to my door as a warning to the others, Tuigtear?”

“Tuigtear, my Master.”

## Chapter Eighteen

### Drunken Delights

The rest of the journey to the Ráthmór was uneventful. Faolan, for one, felt relieved that they were able to make it to town without meeting further resistance or any other complications. Running uphill, for as long as they did, had slowed them down more than either Faolan or Duncan had imagined it would, but they had managed to reach the city before the gates closed for the night.

“I suppose we should probably stop before we go in and change back into our regular forms,” Faolan said, using the shared connection. “It would probably look odd if we rolled up into town looking like this.”

“Rolled up?” Ciara repeated. “What a weird turn of phrase—we don’t have a cart, or anything with wheels for that matter.”

Aine giggled, aloud. “It’s just an expression that Faolan learned from watching American Television.”

“They were movies, actually, but point taken.”

Duncan snickered, which sounded more like snorting while in his wolf form. “You’re probably right, though. As I said, this used to be the way we carried soldiers around during times of war. I doubt it would look good for us to give them the impression that an army was descending upon them.”

After the two wolves regained their original shapes, they attached tags to the saddles and harnesses and sent them back to the supply house, along with a few other

things that they would not be needed once they found lodging for the night. Both Faolan and Duncan felt happy to be back on two legs. They rested for a bit, sitting on stumps that surrounded a decent sized stable that had been erected just outside the city gates, and they discussed their plans for the evening.

“I know of a tavern that has accommodations on the eastern side of town,” Duncan said, jerking his thumb in the establishment’s general direction. “Good rates, used by Conroicht, and it’s just far enough off the beaten path that we’re not likely to be seen.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Faolan said. “I wonder how we’re going to be able to find Daegan in the middle of a city like this, though.” He sniffed the air and then shook his head like a dog trying to shake off water after a bath. “The whole city is a fragrant mess.”

Ciara tried to take in the scent the way her two friends did, she breathed deep and let the smells wash over her, but all she could smell were the nearby horses and the other less pleasant smells associated with stables. “I guess us girls will just have to take your word for it.”

“Yeah,” Aine chimed in. “All I can smell are—”

“The horses,” the two girls said in unison.

“Did the council give us any money for this trip,” Duncan asked, tapping his finger to his lips. “I hadn’t thought to ask about it, seeing as how we were most likely to rough it this time.”

“I didn’t think to ask them either,” Faolan admitted.

“Dagda’s beard,” Ciara scoffed. “What in the nine would you do without me,” she asked while digging into the holster that rested on her hip. She produced a small leather purse and tossed it to Duncan. “That ought to do it.”

“I should say so,” he said in reply. “There is more than enough for the four of us to stay here for upwards of a month.”

“I didn’t know you were rich,” Aine said, making goo-gley eyes at her.

“I’m not—Cormac slipped me some money for expenses.”

“Remind me to thank him, later.” Duncan said, counting the coins.

According to Aine, *The Seven Bells* looked less like a tavern, from the outside, and more like once grand home that was in desperate need of some “T.L.C.”

“I bet it’s got some great bones,” she said, pointing at the different features of the construction.

“And look at who’s been watching too much tele, now.” Faolan said, poking his mate in her belly.

“Oh, shut up.” She said, batting his finger away. “With a solid coat of paint, some new shutters, and a new roof—this place would be beautiful.”

The four of them went in the front door and they were treated by a small leprechaun, sitting on a stool. “May we help you?”

Aine jumped. Not only had she not seen him, she also did not expect such a deep and scratchy voice to come from such a tiny creature. “Oh, hello! This is a lovely establishment that you have here.”



The leprechaun scoffed. “It’s not nice to make fun of other people’s misfortunes, you know.”

“No,” Aine said, taking three steps towards the diminutive figure draped in green attire. “I really mean it! Sure, it looks a little rough around the edges, but this place has great bones.”

The leprechaun took out a dagger from sheath hidden under his coat, “who told you about the bones? Was it that lippy blacksmith? Oh, I bet it was.”

“H-huh?” Aine said, taking one step back. “Did you think I meant actual bones?” Aine burst out laughing.

Duncan put his finger on the tip of the blade and pushed it down towards the floor in a slow, careful motion. “She means to say that the home is well built and still possesses potential.”

“Oh,” the leprechaun said, withdrawing his blade. “Never mind then. How can we help?”

Aine, having recovered from her outburst, motioned for the leprechaun to bend his ear her way. “My friends and I are looking for food, drink, and a couple of rooms; but, if I’m lucky, maybe I could get a grand-tour of the place later?”

“Is that a leprechaun joke?” He asked, twisting his face into an ugly shape.

“H-huh?” Aine said, taking a moment to think her words over again. “Oh! No, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“It’s okay,” the little Sidhe said, “I was just teasing ya. Do you need four rooms, or are the lot of you getting cozy tonight?”

“Two rooms should be sufficient, thank you.” Ciara said, flashing a knowing and disapproving look the leprechaun’s way.

“Very good,” he said. “Why don’t the lot of you belly up to the bar and I’ll have our bar maid take care of you from there.” He motioned to the young woman behind the bar and shouted something in the old tongue. He held up four fingers and clapped his hand twice.

Across the room, the young woman nodded twice and then patted the bar top while waving them over. “Please, come and sit!” The woman hurried around behind the bar, filling drink orders and fetching empty plates and glasses. She made a quick trip back into the kitchen dropping off empties and then she returned with two large bowls full of warmed bread. “Here, start with this and I’ll be back to talk to you about something more substantial, m’kay?”

Aine put her nose right above the bread and sniffed. It smelled warm, sweet, and a little spicy. “M-hmm,” she sighed with delight. “This smells like Rowan’s Jalapeño jelly.”

“It does,” Faolan said, picking up a small round-loaf for himself. “It doesn’t taste quite the same, but it’s really good.”

Ciara sniffed the bread, thinking that it smelled somewhat familiar. She tasted it and the feeling of familiarity grew. “This is so weird,” she said, scowling at the bread.

“Oh, honey,” the woman behind the bar said. “Is it too spicy for you? I can get something more mild if you like.”

“No, thank you,” Ciara said, taking another bite. “I like it, but for some reason I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve had it before.”

“Have you been to the Painted City before?”

“No,” Ciara said, finishing off her loaf. “What’s weirder yet, is that I get the feeling like I didn’t like the taste of this bread. I love spicy food it’s my brother that—doesn’t—like—spicy.”

“Do you think Daegan’s been here?” Aine asked, taking two more loafs of bread for herself.

“I don’t know.” Ciara replied. “Excuse me, miss? Is your kitchen the only place that makes this bread?”

The woman behind the bar thought for a moment and then said, “I think we are the only ones who make this variety of bread, but the spices that give it that bite are in almost everyone’s kitchen in the city; it’s quite common.”

“Damn,” Ciara said, slumping down onto the barstool. “Still, I’m pretty sure that this exact flavor, the sweet and the spicy flavor of this bread, is what seems so familiar.”

“Well, I know that the woman who does all of our baking takes baskets of the stuff down into the Bruscar, every other day.” The young woman said. “Could be that someone from there traveled out your way and they took some of her bread with her?”

“The garbage?” Aine asked. “You mean she throws it away?”

“Oh,” the young woman said, realizing her omission. “The Bruscar is what we call the slums. And it’s more like ‘the discarded,’ rather than the garbage—trust me, when you see the Bruscar, you’ll see what I mean.”

“I didn’t know that this city had a slum district,” Duncan said, looking over the menu.

“It’s something we’re not proud of, but it’s a fairly new development—if you consider fifty years ago to be recent.”

Faolan scratched his beard in thought. “Who lives in the slums?”

“Most of the people who live down there are either Fomorians or Bréslings like me.”

Ciara grabbed Duncan by the arm and squeezed. “I think we need to check this place out.”

After everyone was fed and the rooms were found, Duncan excused himself to get some fresh air. He walked back down the hallway from where their rooms were located. He stopped at the top of the grand staircase and looked over the large foyer and drawing room that had been converted into a bar and dinning area. Activity bustled throughout the tavern. Some of the patrons were singing and dancing near the fire place. Others were engaged in furious debates at the bar, sloshing drinks all over the hardwood floors. The Brésling who served drinks was still running about the place at full tilt, only stopping whenever a flagon of beer or a wayward punch was thrown in her direction.

Duncan took stock of everything that he saw, the kinds of people who were gathered there, the kinds of games being played in the back of the dinning hall, the drinks and foods being ordered, and so on. He noticed that there were a few Fomorians hanging around in the darker corners of the tavern, most of them looked as though they could pass for being a Sidhe, if it weren’t for a few key features that stood out as dead give-aways. One had eyes that were two different colours, neither of which were typical for Sidhe,

and both had slits for pupils. Another had horns growing out of his head, much like a stag might.

For twenty minutes, Duncan stood there, leaning over the banister. He watched and listened the way a Conroicht is trained. He took in everything he could about the current affairs of the city, everything about the kinds of people who lived within its walls, and the external threats without. In half an hour's time, he had learned that the town's population was made up of about seventy-five percent Aes Sidhe, twenty or so percent Fomorian, and the remainder of the population was made up of Bréslings. While this tavern was close enough to the Bruscar to attract some patrons from the slums, the majority of the patrons were Sidhe.

Almost every kind of Aes Sidhe was present as well. Duncan could spot, with ease, several members of the Artificer's guild. The hammers dangling around their necks and the leathery skin that helped them with their blacksmithing made them easy marks. A couple of patrons were showing each other illusion magicks that they had designed as parlor tricks, which meant that it was likely that they were from the Wordsmith guild. Near the fire place, a tall and plump looking Sidhe sat across from a thin, gangly looking Fomorian. Her skin was green and blue, her eyes were a solid color with two black pits for pupils, and her hair had been braided together with wheat stalks; Duncan pegged her as a member of the Cothaigh Sochaí.

He saw a few different members of his own guild there as well, but they likely were on assignment and he knew not to interfere with them. Only two of the six guilds seemed to be absent, the Cneasaí Cuallacht and the Scrios Amach. The later of which he

did not suspect to see in any city, even one as inclusive as Ráthmór. Duncan knew that it was common for the different guilds to mingle together whenever they had down time, but this tavern seemed even more diverse than what was typical in his own village. To some degree, this made him feel proud to see so many people from so many walks of life being friendly and welcoming; however, his training also made him leery, as he did not know to navigate this many social circles with grace. In the end, Duncan decided that going unnoticed was probably the best way to gain information, rather than asking direct questions.

Once he felt as though he had gained all intel that he could from just standing in the stairwell, Duncan moved to the bar. He walked down the stairs, danced past a few drunks who were passed out at the bottom of the steps, and weaved his way through the crowd so that he could take up residence on a stool near the wall that was shared between the bar and the dinning hall. He ordered a drink, a flagon of ale, and turned his back to the bar. He leaned against the counter and nursed his beverage while taking in the crowd.

Two of the Artificer's Guild came up to the bar and ordered food and drink for their table.

"Can you believe the delays we've been having to put up with lately?" The taller of the two Artificers said.

"Tell me about it," the shorter one replied, tossing a few coins onto the bar. "I know that this project has been going on for nearly fifty years, but you'd think that they'd want to see it finished rather than paying us to sit on our asses, twirling about on our thumbs."

“I don’t care about them paying me to sit around,” the tall one said, punctuating his rebuttal by pounding back a shot of something that smelled like blackroot. “I’ll gladly take a paid vacation, but what bothers me is that the very same day that they start screaming at us to get back to work, is the same day that some damned moron blows apart another building.”

“I know,” the short one said. “It’s almost like someone is doing it on purpose.”

“You know what I heard,” the tall one said, leaning closer to his compatriot. “I heard that it is someone from the Wordsmith Guild, employed by the city council, that keeps doing this.”

“No way,” the other one said, stepping back in astonishment. “Just one of them scrawny bookworms is doing all of that damage?”

“That’s what I hear.”

“If you had told me it was one of the Scrios, that I would believe.”

The taller one of the two slapped the drink right out of his friend’s hand, shattering the glass on the floor. “Don’t you ever say their name around me, ever again—Tuigtear?”

“What in the nine is wrong with you?” The short one said, puffing his chest out.

Duncan, who was sat next to them, stood up and clamped his meaty paws on both of their shoulders.

“Hey there, friends.” He paused to flash them both a warm smile. “Don’t you know that’s a crime?”

“A crime?” The short one asked.

“Yeah,” Duncan said, giving him a wink. “It’s down right criminal to drop your beer like that. A truly detestable waste of good brew. Why don’t I buy you another?”

“Thank you,” said the taller one. “Buying me one, too—I hope.”

“Naturally,” Duncan said, flashing him another warm smile. *So much for just listening*, he thought to himself as he flagged down the Brésling.

After spending another hour or so drinking with his new found friends, Duncan retired to his room. Ciara was fast asleep on her bed. He went out onto the balcony and looked around for any onlookers. He closed the door behind him and opened his metal tin of supply tags. He ripped one of the tags in two, releasing a flash of aether. His bag appeared on the balcony a moment later.

Duncan inspected the contents of his bag, looking for his quill pen and ink. Hidden in a compartment where he stored his ink, there was a small purple bag, tied shut with golden strands of hemp. The bag contained a small gemstone that was warm to the touch. It was a curious shape and it had a spell knot engraved in it’s surface. The stone was red in colour and it thrummed with aether. Duncan turned the stone over in his hand a few times and deposited it into his pocket. Along with the gem, there was a note. The parchment was little more than a scrap with only a few words scrawled across it’s surface. It read, “Keep this at hand, the agent will find you soon.”

Duncan examined the note for any hidden instructions. Finding none, he burned the parchment and let the wind carry the ashes away. He pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment of his own and sat on the balcony. He began to record the events that followed



his last report. In brief, coded language he told his superior that things were proceeding according to plan. He made mention of the incident that led them to believe that the captive was heading for Ráthmór. He made note of the how the target appeared to have appeared to have initiated the contact this time around and how it may have resulted in her near drowning in the Black River.

Duncan thought back to the last missive he received. “Keep an eye on ‘the kind one,’” the note had read. He reviewed her behavior and her demeanor over the course of their journey. In two days’ time, he had not noticed anything that he classified as cause for concern. The only thing that stood out as strange was her lack of reaction to the dagger being pulled on her by the leprechaun.

*How strange,* he thought to himself, rubbing his thumb over the edge of the parchment. *Did she not consider him a threat? Or was it her child-like sense of wonder that prevented her from seeing him as anything but a friend?*

Duncan made note of the interaction between the two of them in his report, leaving out any detail that did not appear to be relevant. He had been careful to describe anything that seemed different about her appearance, which wasn’t much of anything at all. She was still short, she was still near-sighted, and she was still bouncy. He made mention of the fact that her eyes remained the same colour, of how her hair hadn’t changed colour, and of how her skin seemed to be the same pallor that it was when she arrived.

For a brief amount of time, Duncan closed his eyes and tried to remember any other possible details about her body, about her appearance, or about her behavior that

seemed new or altered. All that he could remember was her playfulness and her naïveté. Her smile was warm and inviting. Her teeth were weirdly white in his opinion, but so were Faolan's. He replayed a memory of how she looked as she spoke to the leprechaun in his mind. He payed close attention to how she adjusted her hair. He watched her left hand push hair back and away from her eyes that had fallen loose from under the brim of her hat. Duncan tried to remember if there was anything different about her fingers. *Was that it?* He thought. *Is it her fingers that I'm remembering here? Is that what might have been different?*

The nails were still rounded, painted and chipped, much as one would expect after having been in battle as of late, but nothing else appeared out of the ordinary, to him.

*She pushed her bangs back, up and over her ear*—he gasped and opened his eyes. The realization struck him dumb and speechless. He mimicked the gesture himself, he pulled his long hair back over his own ear, feeling the tickling sensation of his finger dragging across the taut skin of his ear. *Did she have pointed ears?* He asked himself.

The drunken feeling tugged at his eyelids. He regretted drinking as much as he had even more than he had before. His memory was not as sharp or as clear as he would have liked. He finished his report and made no mention of his thoughts about Aine's ears being pointed. He knew that if he reported supposition, rather than fact, it would be a waste of both his and his superior's time. He sent the report back to the supply house, wrapped in a purple ribbon, and sealed with his thumb print, just as he had done before.

Duncan stood, brushed off the dirt from his clothes, and then he felt the gemstone in his pocket. He reasoned that it was a bad idea to leave it in his pocket for the night and

went to the bedside table, next to his bed. He deposited the stone in the draw and turned in for the night, thankful for a soft bed after having slept on the hard ground the previous night.

At breakfast, in the dinning hall, Duncan relayed the information that he had gathered about the town. He told them that the city seemed to accept anyone and everyone within the city walls, but the Fomorians and Bréslings that called the Painted City home all seemed to be housed within the Bruscar slums. “Two rather talkative Sidhe from the Artificer’s Guild told me that a bulk of their labor force comes from Bruscar.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Ciara said, shoveling eggs and potatoes into her mouth.

“I get the impression that the project that they are working on is a huge money pit,” Duncan said, pouring himself some coffee. “Apparently, the bulk of the people living in Bruscar came here looking for work and a place to live. Over the past fifty years or so, a small but steady population has been growing inside the Bruscar, despite the overall footprint of the slums slowly shrinking over time.”

“Wait,” Aine said, looking confused. “If more people are coming into the Bruscar, how is the size it getting smaller? Wouldn’t it grow bigger?”

“You’d think that, but the original mandate of the project was to rebuild that part of the city after some massive explosion happened there; however, the reason that the project remains largely unfinished today, fifty some years later, is the fact that buildings keep getting blown up.”

“Wow,” Aine said, holding a sausage in between her fingers. “What a drag that must be, doing all of that work only to have someone else just blow it up as soon as it’s done.”

Faolan sat back in his chair and scratched at his beard. “If the whole thing keeps getting blown up, then why the hell do they want to keep it going? Why don’t they just stop and leave that part of the city like it is? After fifty years, you’d think that they would be acclimated to the situation.”

“Pride,” Ciara said. “I think it’s as simple as that. Not every building gets blown up, right? If the slums are steadily shrinking, that must mean that some progress is being made, yes?”

“Definitely,” Duncan said. “The only places that seem to get blown up are the places that the inhabitants of the Bruscar are set to move into, it would seem.”

“That,” Faolan said, trailing off for a moment while rolling his empty mug between his hands. “That makes a lot more sense now. The buildings that are being blown up are the ones that represent not just physical progress, but civic progress as well. Somebody doesn’t seem to want the Bruscar’s inhabitants to move up to a higher social class.”

“Not only that,” Duncan added. “But I would wager that those same people might be the ones who are trying to keep the Artificer’s Guild paid during the delays and the other times that the work dries up.”

“Makes sense,” Faolan said, pouring himself another cup of coffee. “I’m surprised that the coffee is so good here.”

“Yeah,” Aine said, holding out her cup for her lover to fill it. “I know that Faolan’s great grandfather helped import the coffee plants that grow here now, but I can’t believe how well they’ve done.”

“Well, our Cothaigh are good at what they do,” Ciara said. “They took the few plants that Sean brought and turned them into several new varieties.”

“Yummy,” Aine said, cooing with delight. “Maybe we should start selling this in the café; what do you think babe?”

“I would, but the council has some really strict ideas about exporting things like that to the land above.” Faolan said. “Truth of the matter is, for as much as they are happy to have us bring stuff down here, as long as it isn’t technology based, they really don’t want to see anything go back up top.”

“Maybe they’re still mad about the whole ordeal with the Milesians?” Aine offered up.

“Maybe,” Faolan said, tilting his head to one side. “Truth of the matter is, almost no one in the land above even thinks that the events of the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* are anything more than a myth. Sure some people’s grandparents claim to have seen a leprechaun or a banshee, but almost no one thinks that Ireland really was settled by the six invaders.”

“Seven,” Ciara corrected.

“Seven?” Faolan repeated. “Oh, if you’re counting the Vikings, they came much later and they didn’t settle a damned thing. Stirred it up, more like.”

“I’m still pissed that those monks just had to add their god to everything,” Duncan said.

“Yeah—well, that’s another debate for another day.” Faolan said, waving the comment aside. “We should probably go and explore the Bruscar before it gets much later.”

“Why don’t you guys go ahead,” Duncan said before downing the last of his coffee. “I forgot something in my room. I’ll catch up with you in a minute.”

## Chapter Nineteen

### Agent in the Walls

Duncan returned to the room that he and Ciara shared. He unlocked the door, stepped inside, and locked the door behind him. He went over to the draw where he had put the gemstone away for safe keeping. When he opened the draw, it was empty.

“Cac,” he cursed, under his breath.

“Looking for something?” A voice called from the balcony.

“Lady Gráinne,” Duncan said, turning to greet his guest. He took three steps toward the balcony and then he knelt, holding his right hand over his heart. “I had no idea that the Council would send you along as their messenger.”

“They didn’t,” Gráinne replied. “I insisted.” She relayed to him the story of how she went back to the capital to see her father, as was customary for this time of year. Once she arrived at their home, Gráinne asked about the kidnapping, as she had promised Faolan and company that she would, only to discover that her father had been a part of the conversation that led to the party being dispatched into the field.

“I wasn’t there when Faolan and your father spoke, but I imagine that he had some passionate things to say about the ordeal,” Duncan said.

“That he did,” Gráinne replied, a wry smile appearing at the corner of her tiny, mousy face. “He told me that other members of the council were concerned about sending anyone after Daegan and the people responsible for his capture, but once the

details of the entire incident came to light—well, my father knew that action was paramount.”

“I have to agree,” Duncan said, leaning back on the foot of the bed. “Knowing that a grimoire that belonged to a member of the council had been stolen by an extremist band of Fomorians begs for retaliation. There is one thing that concerns me, though—something that I’ve neglected to report up until now.”

“Oh,” Gráinne said, resting her hand on her sword’s pommel. “Do tell.”

“Well, it appears as though there may be a Brésling in charge of the operation.”

“A Brésling?” Gráinne repeated.

“Yes,” Duncan said, dropping his gaze.

“Do you think it could be—“

“I honestly do not know, at this time.” Duncan said, meeting Lady Gráinne’s gaze once more.

“Very well,” she said, letting go of her sword. “Determine if the culprit is indeed Breccan and report back to me, at once.”

“Should we tell your father about this?”

“No,” Gráinne commanded. “If Breccan is the person responsible for your friend’s disappearance, then I wish to deal with him, myself.”

“As you wish, my Lady.” Duncan said before taking a knee once again.

“Here,” she said. “Take these and use them to report your findings to me.” She produced from her belt pouch a small stack of tags that bore her personal markings.

Duncan nodded and took them as ordered.



“By the way,” Gráinne said. “I wish to thank you for your discretion in the woods.”

“Think nothing of it,” Duncan replied. “May the Dagda watch over you, my Lady.”

“And you as well, my dear friend.” She said, patting him on the shoulder. “May we soon bring that murderous bastard to justice, and may we soon have our vengeance.”

Duncan rejoined the party a few minutes after Lady Gráinne left. She had instructed him to keep the gemstone on his person from then on, just in case she should need to find him. He did his best to hide the stone in his small traveling bag—after all, it would have been a lot to explain if anyone managed to see the glowing stone that appeared to breathe with aether.

Ráthmór was a lot bigger than anyone in the party had imagined when looking at it from a distance. Duncan, having known other Conroicht that had been sent there in the past, had heard that it was big, but seeing it for himself was something else entirely. Ciara had never visited the city before, either; however, she had seen a map in Cormac’s office once that she felt did not do the scope of the city justice as she walked through its wide cobblestone streets. Aine, much like a child being taken on a field trip, bounced up and down as she pointed at all the buildings that interested her.

“When I get back home, I want to build that one on the computer,” Aine told Faolan as they walked past a tall spire that glowed with white lines of aether that had been painted on its face.

“You’ve said that about a hundred times since we started looking around,” Faolan said in reply. “Maybe, after all is said and done, we can spend a couple days here and we can sketch some of these so that you won’t forget what everything looks like.”

“Can we?” Aine cooed.

“Sure—anything for you, mo anom cara.” Faolan said.

“I’d tell you two to get a room, but that seems a little redundant at this point,” Ciara joked.

Duncan lead the group through the city streets, following the directions that the Brésling at the bar gave him the previous night. Even though the tavern was close to the eastern side of town, the Bruscar were still another fifteen minutes away. With every twist and turn of the streets, it became increasingly obvious as to why the slums had been named the discarded. More and more of the buildings seemed to be made out of mismatched components, materials that were not the same size or colour had been thrown together in a slap-dash attempt to make walls, doors, and roofs.

“It reminds me of a homeless village I once saw on the tele,” Aine commented.

“The one they built in the abandoned mall?” Faolan asked.

Aine nodded, pulling him closer and wrapping her arms around his.

“Even after you telling us about it, I still can’t wrap my head around it, having now seen it with my own eyes.” Ciara said, looking around.

Duncan nodded and sighed. “Yeah, I got the impression that it was pretty bad from those two artificers, but I just can’t believe that the city council would let things get this bad.”

All around the party, the streets were full of people that looked as though they suffered from malnutrition. Some of the children, though energetic in their play, looked as though they were skeletons, wrapped in tattered clothing, that had been set loose in the streets to play with their hurley sticks.

“It’s pretty clear that not everyone is being well-kept like our friend at the tavern,” Ciara pointed out.

“I suppose that, given what we talked about at breakfast, not everyone can get enough work to feed their families,” Faolan said. “Probably only the ones who can pass for Sidhe or the ones that are big enough for construction get work.”

Ciara’s face tightened. She clenched her fists and she held back a growl. “Some Fomorians deserve this, maybe even worse than this, but do the children?”

“I know how you feel,” Duncan said, resting his hand on her shoulder. “Some of them have done horrible, unspeakable things—but that doesn’t mean that all of them are bad.”

“Of course,” Ciara said, softening. “Still, I feel for these children. It’s not like there is a food shortage, or a drought. We have had good crops for decades now.”

“Ha!” A voice from a nearby doorway called. “Shows what you know.”

“Excuse me?” Ciara said.

The person that the voice belonged to was a tall, wafer-thin woman. She was a Brésling, a savage looking beauty that seemed to have withered from starvation. Some of her teeth were missing, her hair was a mess, and the skin around her eyes was red and sunken in. She took two steps off of her porch and pulled her blanket tight around her

narrow frame. She looked Ciara up and down before continuing. “You lot may have had good crops, but the rest of us, here in the Bruscar? We’ve had nothing but bad luck. We’re not allowed to work as much as we’d like, we can’t afford the good stuff at the market, and most of us eat the crap that other folks throw away.”

“Kind of like the way you take left overs from construction sites to build your homes, I would imagine,” Faolan said.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“So it’s not that you’ve got a food shortage in the area, just a shortage of money,” Ciara said.

“Oh it’s more than just a shortage,” the Brésling said. “It’s a willful plot by the city council to starve us to death.”

“We wouldn’t know anything about that,” Duncan said.

“Clearly,” the woman said, cutting him off. “Just the fact that you’re down here at all, and the fact that those two have round ears, tell me everything I need to know about you lot. You’re just a bunch of damned tourists, hoping to get a glimpse of the cheap side of town.”

“No, ma’am—” Aine attempted to say.

“Don’t you *Ma’am* me, human.” The woman said, curling her upper lip into a snarl. She spat at Aine’s feet. “Take a good look. Take a long, hard look at the filth that you and your kind has done to us—both of your kinds. And, when you’ve had your fill, why don’t you run back to your rich houses and drink yourselves sick, happy that it isn’t you living this life.”

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry,” Aine said, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

“Save your tears, round ears.” The Brésling said. “We don’t need them.” And with that, she stormed off and slammed her door shut, shaking the whole front of her home as she did.

Aine buried her face in Faolan’s chest and hugged him tight.

Ciara balled up her fist and shook her head.

Faolan held Aine close and kissed her forehead. “Let’s get going,” he suggested.

“I don’t want to be here when that lady gets her second wind.”

Duncan nodded and lead them further into the slums with his head hung low.

## Chapter Twenty

### Take a Walk on the Wild Side

Daegan spent the night tossing and turning in his cot. All but the two tallest Fomorians had come inside the old woman's home and had spent the night scattered about on their own cots. The outside was as poorly constructed as the rest of the homes Daegan had seen in the Bruscar, but the back wall appeared to have once been a part of a more sturdy building, once upon a time. It was built of brick and clay. The mantle of the fireplace was a hand-crafted work of art and the small closet that held the healer's supplies was closed off from the rest of the room by a hefty door made of ash and steel.

After having been fed by the kind woman, a Brésling like Breccan, Daegan asked if he could be shown to the facilities.

"What's the matter, boy?" Gramble teased. "Are you too good to use the same bucket as the rest of us?"

"What?" Daegan asked, bewildered. "Surely, you must be joking. None of you really use a bucket do you?"

The Fomorians, and the healer, all laughed as Gramble kicked a clay pot across the floor in Daegan's direction.

The colour faded away from Daegan's face. "Can I at least get some privacy, then?"

Gramble erupted with laughter as he watched Daegan unbuckle his belt. “Alright, lad—stop.” The beastly Fomorian wiped the tears away from his eyes and picked up the pot. “No one uses this to piss in.”

“I do,” said the healer. “These old bones aren’t as quick as they used to be you know.”

Everyone, including Daegan, laughed.

The door swung open and in walked Breccan. “What’s going on,” he asked, looking from one face to the next. “Did I miss something?”

Gramble dropped the pot, causing it to shatter because he was laughing so hard.

After visiting what passed for a public latrine, Gramble and Breccan escorted Daegan to the market. They walked for five minutes, stopping every now and again to look for a replacement for the pot that Gramble had broken.

“I can’t believe she is making me buy her another one,” Gramble grumbled.

“Well, what can I say, other than she’s so poor that she doesn’t have a pot to piss in,” Breccan joked.

Daegan and Gramble both groaned at the Brésling’s attempt at humour.

“What?” Breccan asked, trying to hold back a smirk. “I thought it was clever.”

“If I thought that, for even one minute, I stood a chance against the lot of you in a fight,” Daegan said, turning to look the Brésling in the face. “I think I’d punch you for that joke, alone.”

Breccan made a face. “So much for the merits of a captive audience.”

Daegan snickered. “Dagda’s beard—I hate you for making me laugh at your dumb puns.”

“Master,” Gramble said, sounding quite serious. “Look.” Gramble pointed a clawed finger down the street to a foursome that was walking through the market.

“Cac,” Breccan said, cursing his bad luck.

“What—who is it?” Daegan said, trying to look past Gramble’s barrel chest.

From down the block, a familiar voice cried out. “Daegan!”

“Ciara?” Daegan said, pushing the large Fomorian aside with all of his might.

Breccan pulled a dagger from his belt and cut down the shopkeeper’s awning in an attempt to shield their escape. “Grab him,” he commanded.

“Sorry, kid.” Gramble said, hoisting him up over his shoulder.

“Oh for the love of the nine!” Daegan said, kicking and punching at whatever parts of Gramble’s anatomy he could reach.

The two of them, carrying Daegan in tow, made a break for the nearby alley way. Gramble, being a foot taller than Breccan, had to duck as they rounded the corner. His quick, swaying action caused Daegan to hit his head on the corner of the building.

Daegan’s vision blurred and his ears rang. “Cac, that hurt!”

Breccan followed behind Gramble kicking over barrels and boxes as they tore down the alley. “Don’t go back to the old hag’s place,” he commanded.

“Then where do you have in mind?” Gramble asked, turning down the next street they came to.



“Doesn’t matter,” Breccan said, knocking over a cart. “Just can’t lead them back there.”

The chase that broke out in the Bruscar Bazar wound its way through the back alleys and side streets of the slum. The two people who held Daegan captive did their best to lose their pursuers, but to no avail. Despite the commotion and the collateral damage that lay in their wake, Daegan’s four friends kept close to them.

As they ran, Ciara cast a number of spells that caused food carts and other various things that were littered about the streets to explode. She did her best, while running, to aim the complicated spells at the Brésling that she had seen in her dreams. Each time that she thought she was in line, Breccan would side step the spell, or he would duck down another street.

“We need a bird’s eye view,” Faolan called out. “Duncan, can you go high?”

“Naturally,” Duncan replied, breaking from the pack. He scaled a nearby stall and began climbing up the next one before jumping into the air. As he did, a bolt of silver light erupted outward from his body as he shifted into a raven.

“Is the connection still up,” Faolan asked Aine as he shielded his eyes from the flash.

“You betcha,” she replied, speaking to everyone through their shared mindscape.

“Good,” Faolan said. “Keep us advised, brother.”

“Looks like they made a left,” Duncan said, riding the prevailing winds upwards.

“It looks like there is a short cut, though. Ciara, take a left.”

“Right,” she replied and she ran down the narrow space between two rows of buildings.

Faolan and Aine continued the way that they had seen the Fomorian go, hoping to close them in from both sides.

Duncan watched from above, directing Ciara through the short cut, which consisted of narrow gaps where people must have ran out of material when building their homes. He focused on the Brésling, trying to get a clear look at his face. Taking on the form of a bird of prey was advantageous in this regard as it allowed him to have better, clearer vision than usual. He caught a glimpse of Breccan’s face as he looked over his shoulder. *It’s him—he’s the one!*

“Who’s the one?” Aine replied over the connection.

“Nothing,” Duncan said, repressing his subconscious once more. “I just recognized the smell from the Fomorian; he’s the one who was in the library, for sure.” Duncan knew that this much was true, but it still felt like a lie to him. His stomach turned.

“Whatever, man.” Faolan said. “Are we close to cutting them off?”

“Yes,” Duncan said, diving down to get a better view. “Ciara, turn right and draw your sword—now!”

Ciara did as she was told. She jumped out from the gap and held out her sword at chest height.

Gramble came skittering to a halt, almost falling backwards as he did.

“Give me back my brother, you bastard!”

Gramble winked at her, grabbed her blade with his bare hand and twisted it out of her hand. Blood dripped down the steel as he tossed it to the side. “Make me,” he snickered.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Ciara said as she weaved the last line of a spell behind her back. She looked down and winked as one of the cobble stones shot straight up into the Fomorian’s jaw, knocking him back. She followed it up with a heal kick to the chest, staggering him further.

“Careful, damn it!” Daegan shouted. “You might hit me!”

Behind Gramble, who was doing his best to scramble away from the fiery Sidhe, Breccan was fending off Faolan’s advance. He wielded two daggers against Faolan and his sword, demonstrating a familiarity with close quarters combat. He kept his footwork small, tight, and his movements minimal.

Faolan, by comparison, has always been something of a brawler. Despite being agile, quick, and handy with a blade—he preferred to randomize his strikes and footwork. He pressed the Brésling for every inch that he could steal. Faolan hammered away his opponent’s defenses, hoping to use sheer strength to his advantage.

Aine, who had taken a step back from the battle, hid behind a wall. “Duncan, let me use your eyes, please.”

“For you?” He crowed. “Anything.”

Aine closed her eyes and watched the battle from above. She guided Duncan’s attention so that she could see the things that she needed to in order to formulate a strategy. She watched the fight between Gramble and Ciara, she watched the back and

forth exchange between Breccan and Faolan, and she observed the surroundings. The commotion of the fight had drawn a large crowd.

“Damn it,” Aine cursed under her breath. “There isn’t much I can do to help from here. Unless—” she trailed off and opened her eyes. She felt around inside of her pouch and pulled out all of the crystals that she had. *A red one, a black one, and two blue ones*, she thought to herself. She selected the red one and hoped to do a better job than Ciara had when they were running.

“Faolan,” Duncan said over the connection. “Take a couple steps back.”

“Yeah, I saw what she was thinking.”

Aine took aim and poured her heart into the crystal.

As it began to glow in her hands, something came up behind her and punched her in the back, knocking the crystal loose. “Leave Mister Breccan alone,” a small boyish voice cried.

Aine winced in pain, dropping the crystal, but the spell had already completed. The energy poured out of the crystal, shooting a column of flame skyward.

Duncan dodged and shouted, “Watch it!”

Taking advantage of the distraction, Gramble kicked Ciara in the stomach, doubling her over.

Breccan, in a similar manner, pressed his luck and threw his cloak over Faolan’s head before turning to run. “Let’s get out of here while we can!”

“Right,” Gramble shouted.

As the pair of them escaped through the crowd, with Gramble still carrying Daegan on his shoulder, the onlookers began to throw refuse at the three outsiders. Chanting at them to leave.

Aine, Ciara, and Faolan decided to return to the tavern, for the time being.

“You keep on them,” Faolan said to Duncan over their shared connection. “Tell us where they go, old son.”

“Tuigtear,” Duncan said.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Hearth-Fire

Faolan and his two friends sat close to the fire, sipping at the drinks and licking their wounds. They had been in losing battles before, all of them, but this time something about the experience was different.

“I can’t believe random people turned on us like that,” Ciara said.

Faolan sighed and scratched at his beard. “I can, but that doesn’t mean that I like that feeling.”

“It kinda feels like we were picking on the hometown hero, or something.” Aine added in.

“You might be onto something there, hun.” Faolan said. “Hang on, just one second.” Faolan walked over to the bar.

The Brésling was cleaning up a spill one of the hung-over guests had made. “Yes,” she said. “Can I help you?”

“Do you know someone by the name of Breccan,” Faolan asked.

The young woman blushed and then retreated behind the bar. “I’ve heard of him, of course; however, I wouldn’t say that I know him.”

“What can you tell me about him,” Faolan pressed.

“Well,” the Brésling said, looking down at the bar. “He’s a handsome man, that’s for sure.”

“Is he?” Faolan said, leaning against the bar.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “Passionate, too. Poor dear lost his parents in the Bruscar—some kind of accident.”

“An accident,” Faolan said, making it more of a question than a statement. “I would have thought that they might have died in one of those explosions I’ve been hear about.”

“Oh that,” the Brésling hesitated. “Th-that would have been a good guess, but I hear that the two of them were walking home from the market when something fell on them.”

“So, how is it that he’s become so popular, then?” Faolan asked.

“Well, Mister Breccan has been working hard to make life in the Bruscar more tolerable.” She said. “He’s been fighting with the city council to get money to do things like build permanent homes for people there. He even stopped one kid from jumping off the roof of one of the taller buildings.”

“Seems like he’s quite the guy,” Faolan said, running his hand across the bar in an idle fashion. “Can you think of any reason why he might want to enlist an outsider’s help?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know anything about that,” she said as she put away glasses and mugs under the counter. “Most of the people in the Bruscar are a cagey bunch, not too trusting of strangers and all of that.”

“Thank you,” Faolan said, tossing a coin into the tip jar. “You’ve been quite helpful.” Faolan walked back over to the fire place and shared what he had learned

with his compatriots. He told them that Aine's comment about him being a local legend was right on the money.

"So, what do we do about that?" Ciara said, letting her hands fall into her lap. "It's going to be hard to get anyone to believe that the hero of the Bruscar kidnapped anybody."

"I don't know," Faolan said, shrugging. "Maybe we don't do anything."

"What do you mean, 'we don't do anything?'" Ciara shrieked. "Do we just let him take my brother and go home? With our tails between our ears?"

"Legs," Aine said.

"What?" Ciara said, turning to look at her.

"Tails between our legs," she added.

"Oh," Ciara said, nodding. "That does make more sense—but that's not the point."

"Yeah, sorry." Aine said, tucking her legs up under her, holding them tight.

"Look," Faolan said. "I'm not saying we give up on Daegan, I'm just saying that we don't try to work the crowd. Maybe we can just go around them."

"Work the crowd," Ciara mumbled.

"It means we—" Aine began.

"I know what it means, hun." Ciara said, patting her on the shoulder. "But it gave me an idea." Ciara explained to everyone that she thought it would be possible to go back into the Bruscar, disguised as Fomorians.



She focused her mind and wove a spell knot. The lines were rough in her mind, and the words were hard to remember, but as the spell completed Ciara's visage became blurry. A cloud of thin smoke enveloped her entire being. She then waved the smoke away with her newly formed paw. She did a little twirl and she smiled.

"That's pretty damned impressive," Aine said, clapping with the enthusiasm of a nine year old who had just seen a man pull a rabbit out of a hat for the first time.

"Not a bad idea," Faolan said, studying her work. "Too bad that I can't do the same thing. Not as quickly, at any rate. But what about this?" Faolan stepped back from the group and wove a quick spell knot with his left hand. His form shrank and he became hard to see through the shimmering flow of aether that surrounded his body. In a moment's time, where Faolan once was, there stood a house cat. Its fur was sleek, silky, and dark. Apart from the white patch under his chin, and the four white boots, Faolan had taken on the form of a black cat.

Aine pounced and scooped Faolan up in an instant. "I didn't know you could become a kitty, though I suppose I should have."

"Easy on the lovin's there, darling." Faolan said in a squeakier than usual voice.

"A talking cat," a voice called from around the corner. "I knows a bloke that would pay a lot of money for such a thing."

Ciara and Aine spun around to find the leprechaun who owns the tavern leaning against banister.

"I am not a talking cat," Faolan insisted.

“Oh, I know.” The leprechaun said, taking off his hat to reveal a thin patch of balding red hair beneath. “Doesn’t mean we couldn’t make us some extra scratch, if you know what I mean.”

Aine dropped Faolan and huffed a little, throwing up her arms. “Are puns an official language of this place, or is it just my luck?”

The leprechaun put his hat back on his head and disappeared from sight. “Humph,” he said. “Serves me right for mixing about with the common folk.”

“Neat trick,” Faolan whistled. Or at least he tried to. Being a cat it came out more like a chirp.

After some time, Duncan came to rest on the roof of another tavern, altogether. He was tired and thirsty after having flown around for well over an hour. He had spent most of his time changing shapes and forms in an attempt to keep himself from being spotted by his prey. In doing so, he had used up a great deal of his reserves of spare aether. Fortune seemed to have smiled upon him though as he discovered where home based appeared to be for the people who were holding Daegan captive.

Despite having been rather close to the location, initially, it appeared as though Breccan was doing his best to make sure that no one had followed them back home. However, what Breccan hadn’t accounted for was Duncan’s dogged determination and his ability to hold a shape for hours at a time.

Duncan returned to his native form, perched up on the roof across the street and three doors down from the hovel that the three of them went into several minutes ago.

Duncan summoned his supply bag and he dug through its contents for a water skin. In and among the supplies, he also found one of Faolan's Affinity Crystals.

This one was yellow in colour, said to be aligned to Duncan's Affinity.

"Aine can use this to do something like take on the form of a small animal," Faolan had said. "Or someone like you could use it to recharge your aether pool."

Duncan reflected on what Faolan had said about the crystal, knowing full well that his friend was confident in the crystal's ability to do exactly what he had said, but Duncan still remained unconvinced that it was worth trying. He tossed the crystal back into the bag and turned his attention back on the door.

He kept watch for the better part of an hour. No one had come and no one had gone. Duncan started to become nervous. He wondered if someone could have snuck past him the few times he looked the other way to take a drink, or maybe while he was relieving himself.

*Maybe I'm just getting bored,* he thought to himself as he stretched his legs and back.

While he was rolling his head around on his neck, Duncan caught something in the corner of his eye. The gemstone in his pocket was glowing brighter than usual. It was flashing, rapidly. He pulled the stone out of his pocket and cupped it in his hands, hoping to block out the light being emitted from within.

As his hands clasped around the gem, a voice cut through the silence. "Do you have confirmation that the Brésling in question is the one we were looking for?"

Duncan panicked and scrambled to his feet.

“Don’t worry—I’m not there,” Lady Gráinne’s voice echoed through his mindscape.

“Faolan,” Duncan thought out loud. “Are you still in range?”

“Oh,” Lady Gráinne said in a hushed tone. “Are we not alone in our own mind?”

No response came from Faolan, or from anyone else for that matter. The connection was quiet.

“Best not to risk it,” Gráinne said. She indicated that she could see into his mind if Duncan were to share an image with her.

Keeping with his original narrative of making a report to his friends, Duncan replayed the image of Breccan, the large red Fomorian, and Daegan entering the hovel.

“Message received,” Gráinne said. “I’ll make contact soon.”

As she said this, the gemstone went cold, the light resumed a subtle breathing effect, and Duncan could feel that his mind was no longer connected to it.

Shaking his head, Duncan shoved the stone back into his pocket, glad to be alone with his thoughts again. “It’s so damned weird having people just traipse through your head like it’s a damned pitch.”

Faolan and his friends were set to leave the tavern. They had a new plan, they had disguises, and they had a destination. The group turned the corner, at the end of the block, and came face to face with the Brésling who tends the bar. She was talking with a tall, scaly individual who was holding several packages of meat in waxed-paper wrappings.

“Hello,” Aine said from underneath her hood.

“Good afternoon,” the Brésling replied. “Hold on a moment.”

The three friends came to a halt.

“That is a lovely cat you have there,” the Brésling said, kneeling down to pet it.

“Why, thank you,” Aine said, trying to end the conversation quickly.

“It won’t work, you know.” The Brésling said, scratching Faolan under his furry chin.

“What do you mean,” Aine asked.

“Bréslings and Fomorian may not have Affinities in the same way that the Aes Sidhe do, but we know magic when we see it.”

“Some of us,” the snake-like Fomorian woman said, flicking her tongue. “Some of us can smell it, don’t you know?”

Faolan sat, like a proper cat might, and scratched at his ear with his hind leg. “So, you mean there is no reward for being convincing?” He asked before cleaning himself.

“I’m afraid not, little one.” The Fomorian said offering the cat a scrap of uncooked bacon.

Ciara let the illusion magic recede. “Is there something else we could try?”

“It’s hard to say,” the Brésling answered.

“Violence against our kin is so common in the Bruscar that we have become defensive against anyone who might pick a fight with us, s-sad to say.”

Faolan licked his chops, purring with contentment. “Perhaps we could make them come to us,” he said.

Aine stooped down to Faolan’s level and pinched his chubby side.

Faolan batted at Aine's hand, "What was that for?"

"You know purr-fectly well," she replied. She roughed up his fur by petting him backwards. "And that is for making me a part of your terribleness."

The Fomorian giggled, making a sound that sounded like an angry tea pot, spitting and hissing before coming to a boil.

Ignoring the squabbling couple, the Brésling turned to Ciara and said, "The furry one might have a point. The tavern is a meeting place with a reputation of neutrality. I might be able to broker a sit-down with Breccan."

"How did you—" Ciara sputtered.

"Oh, please." The Brésling said, waving the comment aside. "It's not like you lot are all that quiet and your Tuatha asked questions about him—it wasn't difficult to figure out who you wanted to talk to."

"Do you know where to find him?" Aine asked, standing once again.

"Yes," the Brésling replied. "If you'll take my order of provisions here back into the kitchen, I'll go and see if Mister Breccan is willing to speak with you."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Rickety Door

Breccan paced around the healer's hovel while Gramble sat in front of the fireplace. The tension in the air was palpable as Breccan muttered to himself under his breath. Daegan sat on the floor, his back to the fire place, hugging his knees. He was trying his best to figure out what Breccan was mumbling about, but Daegan's grip of the old-tongue was tenuous at best. A word or two, here and there, made sense to him. The gist of it sounded as though he might be trying to plan his next move, but Daegan was not convinced that his translation was correct.

It had been well over an hour since their toss and tumble in the marketplace ended. Daegan had watched a number of the Fomorians walk in and out of the hovel's door, all of them familiar. *Rotating shift, no doubt*—Daegan thought to himself as he watched the guards rotate once again. Watching Breccan pace reminded him of one of Faolan's stories about his mother.

Faolan had told him about how Lorna would talk to 'spirits' and 'devils' as she marched back and forth in the family den until she cut a threadbare path into the carpet.

*Hopefully, Breccan is just thinking out loud and isn't conversing with fiends,* Daegan thought as he watched on.

Someone rapped on the hovel's door, shaking the entire front wall of the dwelling as they did, which caused both Daegan and Gramble to jump.

“What is it?” Breccan called, halting his march mid-stride. He gripped at his daggers and trained his eyes on the door.

“A visitor, Master.”

“Send them in,” Breccan commanded. He glanced at Gramble and nodded his head towards the door.

Gramble stood, placed himself between Daegan and the door.

The door swung open and a pretty young thing walked in. Her hair was honey-brown and her eyes were the golden colour that marked her as a Brésling. “Mister Breccan,” she said as she stepped inside dinning area, allowing the Fomorian outside to close the door. “I have come on behalf of some people who have taken up residence at the Seven Bells.”

The young Brésling introduced herself as Siobhan. She sat at the table, sipping her tea while explaining that the party of four had come to the tavern seeking lodging and information regarding the possible whereabouts of a young Sidhe who was last seen coming to Ráthmór in the company of at least six Formorians.

“They hadn’t mentioned you, either by description or by name,” she said. “However, it soon became apparent to me that they might be talking about you.”

“I see,” Breccan said, running his index finger around the rim of his cup.

“After their encounter with you early this morning, three of them returned and sought further information. This time, they asked about you by name.”



Breccan nodded. "Yes, there was a Formorian child that tried to stand up for me this morning." He flashed a smile at Siobhan, "the young rascal told them to leave me alone, can you imagine?"

"What a brave little thing," Siobhan said.

"What did you tell them about me?"

"Nothing too particular," she said, sipping at her tea. "I told him that you've been something of a champion for those of us in the Bruscar, trying to make life better for our lot."

"I see," he said, nodding along. "Do go on."

"They originally thought about using illusion magic in an attempt to sneak about in the Bruscar whilst looking for you. I told them that was not likely to work and I offered to broker an audience with you on neutral ground."

"Ah," Breccan sighed. He gripped at his cup, stressing the wooden vessel in his hands.

"You do not have to entertain them, of course," Siobhan said, placing her hands on his and stroking them. "But they promised to keep the talks civil, should you feel so inclined to speak with them."

"Don't like it," Gramble said. "Seems risky."

Breccan held up his hand. "I thank you for your input, Gramble; however, I think that we might wish to continue to hear the young woman out. After all, we may be able to persuade them to leave us in peace."

“Unlikely,” Gramble said, stamping his foot as he rose to his feet. “We took this young man from his home, stole from their library, and broke quite a few of their things on the way out of town. How in the nine do you expect to talk them into just leaving us be?”

Breccan stood to meet his underling’s gaze. He met the Fomorian with equal fury in his eyes. “I respect your point of view, but you are coming very close to insubordination, Gramble.”

“Isn’t the point of having me around?” The red beast of a man said, pounding his chest with his meaty paw. “To make sure that you have a second opinion about things?”

“Indeed,” Breccan said, putting his hand on the Fomorian’s chest. “But I do not require you to tell me your opinion in such a way. Now, sit.” Breccan made it clear that he was making a request, but giving a command by shoving the beast back down into his chair, single-handedly.

Daegan, who had been watching the entire exchange from the opposite side of the room, turned away from the pair of them. His cheeks had gone red. *What is it about a strong man that seems so appealing*, he thought to himself as he poked at the logs in the fireplace with a poker.

“Please, gentlemen.” Siobhan said in a soothing tone of voice.

Breccan sat back down, turning to face their guest once more. “What is your opinion of the man? The bearded one, the Tuatha?”

“He seems pleasant,” she answered. “More importantly, though—he seems honest. I do not suspect that he is interested in anything but the safe return of the young Sidhe’s brother.”

Breccan nodded. “Very well,” he said. “We shall meet with him. If he is resonable enough to take you up on your offer of brokering a talk, rather than just ignoring your council, perhaps he can be resonable enough about leaving us in peace.”

Siobhan giggled and snorted, nearly spewing tea through her nose.

“Something the matter,” Breccan asked.

“I’m sorry,” she replied. “I just remembered something funny—it’s nothing of importance.”

Gramble pushed Daegan out in front of him, instructing him to walk.

“Oh, like you need to tell me, you lumbering lummo.”

“Don’t know what that is, but I don’t like the sound of it.” Gramble replied shoving Daegan forward again.

The four of them walked back to the Seven Bells. Siobhan led Breccan, Daegan, and Gramble through the twisting streets of the Bruscar while a small shadow followed them. Up in the sky, several meters behind them, Duncan rode the prevailing winds as a sparrow. He watched them and followed them as close as he dared.

Aine had contacted him, on behalf of the group and told him what was going on. “We are going to try and talk this out,” she had said, using the previously established link.

Duncan, much like Gramble, had his doubts about the success of the talks, however he did his best not to express them. “Tuigtear,” he had replied, before severing the connection.

As the four of them walked towards the Seven Bells, Duncan notice something else following the party. Running across the rooftops was a small and furry creature that resembled an oversized rodent. Duncan smiled. *Keeping tabs, are we?*

The return trip was short. Not being concerned with losing someone in the crowd made it possible for the party to take the most direct root, which is not a straight-line in the Bruscar, for those on foot. For those who flew over head, or for those who leapt from rooftop to rooftop, the journey required much less meandering. Having spent as much time as he had, flying over the Bruscar, Duncan came to appreciate the resourcefulness of its inhabitants. They had done, in his opinion, quite a fine job of making the best out of what was left-over—even if their street planning was a bit hodge-podge.

After watching the party of four enter the tavern from the front, Duncan decided that he would stand watch. He re-established the link with Aine and relayed his intentions to her. He roosted on a rooftop nearby, just down the street, and began to sing.

Inside the tavern, Faolan and his friends sat at the largest table in the dining area. They all remained seated as Breccan and his party entered the room.

“Welcome, and thank you for coming.” Faolan began. He gestured towards the open chairs, saying “please have a seat—we have much to discuss.”

“Thank you,” Breccan said.

Ciara did her best not to rush her brother. Faolan had advised her against making any sudden moves, before the group had arrived, so she patted the table, indicating to her brother that she would like him to sit next to her, at the head of the table. “Can he sit by me?”

“Of course,” Breccan said, waving Daegan over. Breccan instructed Gramble to stand in the corner of the room, behind Faolan. “I hope you don’t mind me being cautious.”

“Not at all, considering our altercation this morning.” Faolan said. He held his hand outstretched for Gramble to shake as he passed.

The Fomorian grunted and leaned against the wall.

“Alright, then.” Faolan commented, turning to face Breccan who stood behind the chair opposite Faolan. “Please, sit.”

“Very well,” the Brésling said, offering to shake hands with the Tuatha. “I take it that you’re a member of the McKenna clan.”

“Aye,” Faolan said, shaking the Brésling’s hand. “Though we prefer not to use that word these days.”

“Oh?” Breccan said. “Why not?”

“Long story short,” Aine said. “Some dumb people from another country have turned the word ‘clan’ into something of a taboo.”

“I see,” Breccan said, finally taking his seat. “I had no idea.”

“That’s alright,” Faolan said, gesturing for Siobhan to bring drinks for everyone. “We needn’t worry about the politics of the land above. Let us talk about more pressing matter, yes?”

“Indeed,” Breccan said.

“Allow me to first extend my sincerest apologies for this morning,” Faolan began. “We had no reason to assume anything but hostile intentions when your man turned to run, I hope you can understand.”

“Noted, but not accept—yet.”

“Fair play,” Faolan continued. “Secondly, I am bound by oath to tell you that I am not a representative of the Council, or of the city from which Daegan hails.”

Breccan hesitated to respond. He stroked his chin for a moment. “That is a rather official sounding declaration.”

“Aye,” Faolan replied. “And it is almost word-for-word what the Council instructed me to say, should a conversation such as this were to arise.”

“Really,” Breccan said, smirking. “Not very trusting of outsiders, are they?”

“No,” Faolan said. “They are a wee-bit dodgy about letting me work on their soil.”

“Their soil,” Breccan repeated, a subtle lilt in his voice made it sound like a question.

“Forgive me—I know that can be a sensitive issue among your kin.”

“It’s alright,” Breccan said, waving his hand. “Let us proceed.”

Siobhan had returned then, handing out drinks and round loaves of bread to everyone at the table. “Here we are, everyone. Enjoy.”

Aine took one of Faolan’s rolls and scarfed it down, claiming girlfriend rights.

Breccan smiled. “Your mate is quite a free spirit.”

“That she is,” Faolan said, taking a sip of the coffee that Siobhan had brought.

“Now, then—I am officially here as just a representative of this young lady.”

“That’s correct,” Ciara said. “I asked him to help me find my brother.”

Breccan nodded. “I take it you must be Ciara, then? Daegan made a passing mention of you on our way to Ráthmór.”

Ciara nodded back. “I am, indeed. I am relieved to see that you seemingly haven’t been too rough with him.”

“I have done my best to keep him from receiving much mistreatment while in my care, though I have to admit that his desire to defend himself has led to some repercussions along the way.”

“It’s true,” Daegan said. “Apart from the times that I acted up and took a swing at the big one over there,” he said, nodding at Gramble, “They have been quite civil.”

“Good,” Ciara said, running her fingers through her brother’s wild black hair.

“We would like to discuss terms for his release and, if at all possible, the return of the book that you stole from Chieftain Cormac’s private study,” Faolan said.

“Reasonable enough terms,” Breccan said, returning his attention to the man sitting across from him. “However, I must decline.”

“Isn’t there someway we can come to some kind of understanding?” Ciara pressed. “We really do not want to fight.”

“I have need of the boy,” Breccan said. “He knows the cypher that your Chieftain has used to encode the information contained within this book,” he said, pausing to withdraw the grimoire from his bag. He placed it on the table and then he clasped his hands together, resting atop the book.

“I have to admit,” Faolan said, sipping at his coffee. “I am curious as to what you intend to do with that.”

“I am told that your Chieftain had many secrets contained within his study,” Breccan said.

“Told by whom, exactly?” Ciara asked.

“I have my sources and I have assured them of their anonymity,” Breccan said before continuing. “I am also told that this book, in particular, holds the answers to several questions that I have.”

Faolan stood, slowly. “If you’ll permit me,” he said, opening his jacket wide to reveal a large inner pocket.

Breccan nodded, but kept his eyes trained on Faolan’s hands.

“I felt like I could do with a nice smoke,” Faolan said as he withdrew his pipe from his pocket. He sat back down, packed his pipe, and lit it. “Would you like some?” He offered, holding up the tobacco bag.

“No, thank you.” Breccan replied making a sour face. “I find the habit repulsive.”

“Oh,” Faolan said, waving away the smoke. “My apologies—I can stop.”



Breccan drank his coffee and told Faolan not to worry about it. He said that, “even if I don’t agree with it—I won’t stop you.”

Faolan nodded and continued. “What is it that you’re looking for within the book? Perhaps I can help you.”

“Even if you truly do not represent the Council, and I do have my doubts about that,” Breccan said, pointing his finger at Faolan. “I am still of the opinion that you are not to be trusted with such valuable information.” Breccan drew his eyes into a squint. He sat back and clasped his hand above the grimoire, once more. “I’m sure that you can understand.”

Faolan nodded.

Aine, who was in the middle of eating another round loaf, thrust her hand outward and gripped Faolan by the arm. “We’re about to have company,” she said.

As she finished speaking, a loud crashing noise came from outside the tavern door. Shouting could be heard from the other side of the thick oak.

Breccan nodded towards the door and Gramble complied with the silent order. Breccan hid the grimoire away and stood. “Woman,” he said, looking at Aine.

“Aine,” she replied. “Not woman.”

“Fine, Aine—What do you see?”

“A large group of people,” she answered, holding out nine fingers. “At least this many.”

As Gramble approached the door, it flung open and several people came spilling into the foyer. “Finally,” Gramble said. “Something to punch.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Insert Appropriate Pink Floyd Reference, Here.

Lady Gráinne watched from the rooftop as three Aes Sidhe kicked open the front door of the Seven Bells. Her nose twitched and her ears stood at attention. She was uncertain how to feel about the events that were unfolding before her. On the one hand, the person she swore revenge on was inside the tavern, and could very-well meet his end. On the other hand, people she considered friends were inside as well.

*Do I stand by and wait for an opportunity to strike arise, she thought to herself.*  
*Or do I sit here and do nothing and let the fight happen and not interfere?*

Three men had kicked down the door and had spilled into the foyer of the tavern. Two of them were cast back out, into the street. The third, as far as Gráinne could tell, was being carried out by a large red beast.

“Gramble,” she muttered under her breath, her tiny nails digging into the terracotta roof tiles. A cold chill shot up her arms as she gripped the edge of the roof, making her face twist up into a snarl.

Across the street, Gramble was throwing Sidhe around like they were rag dolls. One of the crowd tried setting him on fire, but as the Sidhe wove the spell into being, Gramble side-stepped the blast. The fire singed his fur as it past him by and spiraled into the tavern through the open door.

Faolan, who had jumped over the table as soon as Gramble left, pulled a small metal object out of his pouch and directed it at the column of flame. As he did, the flame turned towards him, like a snake making itself ready to strike. Faolan run his thumb across the edge of the object and aether pooled into the recesses of the carved knot that was embossed on the side. The fire was drawn towards the end of the thing in Faolan's hand, it funneled into a single stream of bright orange thread, and then it appeared to have been sucked into the object.

"That is an interesting device, Mr. McKenna." Breccan said.

"Oh, it gets better." Faolan said in reply. He turned the bottom side of the device anti-clockwise and gave it a pull.

A hidden chamber slide out from the bottom of the device and a red crystal, glowing with aether, was held within.

Faolan turned the device over in his palm, giving it a solid thwap against his open hand, dislodging the crystal from its chamber. He tossed it to Breccan. "That might come in handy," he said. "Point the smaller end at someone and say the elder tongue for fire. You'll only have one charge, but it will pack a wallop."

Breccan stared at the crystal in his hand with disbelief. *The sheer number of things I have witnessed in the span of a singular moment.* Breccan shook his head and returned the crystal to Faolan. "Thank you, but I will be fine on my own."

"Suit yourself, lad."

The fight that had started with little more than bar-brawl's worth of people ramped up into a full scale riot by time that the rest of Faolan's party joined in.

From her rooftop vantage point, Gráinne counted at least twenty-five people. "It's difficult to keep count if you keep milling about like that," she complained to no-one in particular.

In the distance, the shrill whistles of the City Guard could be heard. Smoke from smoldering carts and other various roadside objects rose towards the pale twilight of the afternoon sky. Sidhe were fighting with any Fomorian or Brésling that they could find, while the residents of the Bruscar attempted to close ranks around Breccan in an effort to protect him.

Faolan and Ciara were taking on anyone who came too close to the tavern, using their skills as close-combat fighters. The two of them swung their swords about as best as they could manage without hitting one another, parrying blows and redirecting the flow of the battle away from the door.

Daegan, who initially was paralyzed with fear, soon found himself throwing off basic, yet effective spell-bolts into the crowd. He knew more advanced spells, but in the heat of the moment—this was all his fear drenched mind could muster.

As an axe wielding Sidhe approached her brother, Ciara used a spell to unleash a concussive blast at the man's axe, knocking it out of his hand. "What do you say?" She quipped.

"I'm a researcher," Daegan called back as he kicked the Sidhe between the legs. "Not a soldier."

“I was looking for a ‘thank you,’ but that will do.” She said.

Gráinne watched from her perch as Duncan and Gramble tried to hold off the throng of newcomers. The two of them were blocking the entrance to the street. Duncan had changed into the form of a large bear and was standing on his hind legs, snapping and snarling as he swiped at people. Gramble was holding a large, oaken caber in his hands, barring people from flooding into the streets.

“Wise decision,” she remarked.

Aine sat alone in the bar. She was drinking tea with her eyes closed. In her mind scape, she pictured herself sitting in a large desk chair that was placed in front of a row of monitors. In each of them a live feed of the battle was being shown. Each of the three images represented one of her friend’s point of view. She watched them all, taking in the ebb and flow of the battle, offering advice when she could.

Her primary role in this fight was to advise how and when to move, but her secondary role was to watch the feeds for new threats. She focused on the screens flickering in her mind scape, looking for anything that felt unnoticed by the person whose viewpoint she was borrowing. In doing so, she noticed a small creature lurking on the edge of a nearby roof top.

“Faolan,” she said over the connection. “Do you see that?”

A familiar tugging sensation pulled Faolan’s attention to the rooftop. “Gráinne.”

Breccan kicked a nearby Aes Sidhe in the stomach, doubling him over. “What did you just say?”

“A friend of ours is here, watching the fight.” Faolan said, pointing at the roof.  
“Gráinne,” he called out.

“Cac,” she cursed under her breath. He fur stood on end.

“You!” Breccan bellowed. His face flushed red with anger. “Did you do this?”

“What the—” Faolan began to say.

Breccan turned one of his daggers over in his hand and threw it as hard as he could at Gráinne.

The nimble dormouse leaped out of the way of the blade. “I have nothing to do with this stupid mob,” she called back.

“Liar,” Breccan screamed. “And you,” he said, turning to face Faolan. “You must have set this whole thing up. You must be working with her.”

“Honestly,” Faolan interjected while blocking a dagger strike. “I’ve only met her once in my whole damned life.”

“Lies—nothing but lies!”

Daegan watched as Breccan turned on Faolan. *What the hell*, he thought as he stepped out of the way of a piece of wood shrapnel that was headed his way. *I thought we were getting along.*

The crowd around everyone was starting to die down. The City Guard was pulling people out of the fight, Duncan and Gramble were able to keep new people from filing into the small and crowded section of road that ran in front of the tavern, and Ciara had worked her way through most of the people near her.

Daegan tried to work his way through the crowd. He pushed, shoved, and kicked his way into the thick of things. “Gotta stop them from killing each other,” he said through clenched teeth.

Nearby, under the awning of a neighborhood shop, one of the rioters began to weave together a complicated spell. The aether that poured into the knot work glowed with a deep purple colour.

The spell knot caught Daegan’s eye, “A Scrios spell.” His heart sank, his stomach flipped, and his lungs felt as though they might collapse. Without thinking, his body moved. His muscles burned and his mind screamed. He knew that this was a stupid thing to do, but his body moved anyway. He jumped in the way of the spell and wove one of his own. His fingers moved on their own, his lips moved without being asked, and his voice, as soft as gentle breeze in spring, spoke the words.

From between his hands, a blue light flashed, sending a concussive column of aether barreling toward the Sidhe. The brunt of the blast landed square against the man’s chest, knocking him back, but the spell had run its course—the knot work was complete.

As the Sidhe fell, a wave of purple aether flowed out from the knot and a small line of explosions erupted along a linear path that lead from the man’s hands upwards at a forty-five degree angle, just missing Daegan’s head.

Pieces of wood, plaster, bricks, and shards of glasses hailed down on everyone in the street. The street facing facade of the nearby buildings fractured and splintered. The awning above Daegan and the Sidhe who cast the spell fell down on top of both of them.

Ciara fell to her knees screaming her brother’s name.

Breccan and Faolan stopped fighting.

Duncan and Gramble turned away from the crowd.

Whistles drowned out the clamor.

Aine covered her mouth.

Gráinne gasped.

Gramble rushed towards where Daegan lay under the awning. Breccan followed suit, jumping over the unconscious and those who were wallowing in pain. Faolan rushed towards Ciara. Aine trembled in place, focusing solely on what Faolan was seeing. She watched Gramble pick up the awning and toss it aside. She watched the building start to give, its structural integrity had begun to fail.

“Faolan,” Aine screamed.

“I see it,” he replied. Faolan said something to Ciara, something she did not hear.

“Wait here,” he said, leaving her to catch up to Breccan.

Gramble picked up Daegan and cradled him in his arms. As he stood, Gramble heard a thunderous crack; the main support beam of the storefront gave way. As the facade of the building began to crumble, Gramble hunched over and dove towards the wall and the street met.

A shower of bricks and timber, plaster, and glass, fell down on top of them, sending a cloud of dust and debris out in all directions.

Faolan took Breccan from behind, hugging the Brésling’s back against his chest.

“Easy there.”



Breccan screamed, “No!” The scream repeated as Breccan tried to break free. He pummeled Faolan’s right arm with the butt of his dagger. “Let me go!”

“Can’t let you do that, lad.”

“Let—me—go!” Breccan yelled. In a fit of desperation, he tried to grapple with Faolan’s midsection. He felt a crystal brush his hand. He took it from Faolan’s belt, placed the top of it against Faolan’s arm and spoke the word.

Pain rippled through Faolan’s flesh as a string of orange aether bubbled through his skin. Faolan let loose of Breccan, screaming in agony. His arm was burning, from the inside out. He grabbed for the device that he used for making crystals, but his hand shook so much he dropped it.

Aine, inside the tavern, channeled Faolan’s pain into the connection. Everyone else connected to her screamed and fell over grasping their right arm. Aine cried. It was a pain unlike any she had every felt in her lifetime. Her vision began to fade and her mind began to shut down. She gasped, fell forward onto the table, and passed out.

With the connection now severed, Ciara and Duncan were free of the pain and they were freed to move.

“Duncan,” Ciara yelled. “Get Daegan out of there!”

“Tuigtear,” he called back, pushing debris out of his way.

Ciara rushed over to Faolan and pulled him out of the way of the people who flooded the street from the Bruscar, shovels and other digging implements in hand. “What do I do now?”

Breccan tore at the rubble with his bare hands, mumbling to himself over and over again. “No, not again. No! Not again!”

Duncan and many others attempted to dig out the three people stuck under the remnants of the storefront. The City Guard busied themselves with hauling away the people who had caused the riot.

One of the rioters, being dragged away from the scene, blurted out something to the crowd. “Leave them! Those bastards got what they deserved!”

The nearest guard back handed the prisoner, knocking him unconscious. “You’ve done enough damage for one day.”

Gráinne jumped down from her perch, once the way was clear, and went over to Faolan and Ciara. She took hold of Faolan’s arm and flooded it with yellow aether.

Ciara looked on, saying “I didn’t know you were a Cneasaí”

“Most people don’t.”

“How can you do magic,” Ciara asked. “Aren’t you a Fomorian?”

“Not quite,” Gráinne said, still focusing on Faolan’s arm. “I’ve done my best to stop the bleeding and to stop the spread, but he might still lose his arm.”

“Over here,” one of the nearby Fomorians called out. She pointed at a lump of red fur that she had unearthed.

She was joined by others who began digging Gramble out of the rubble in earnest. They worked together over the next five minutes, digging through the debris and chucking timbers out of the way.

Breccan, who had been digging the hardest, was now standing to the side, frozen in fear. “Not again—please. Not again.”

As the bulk of the rubble was removed from Gramble’s still form, everyone held their breath.

“Stand aside,” Duncan said. He shaped his body into that of a bear, once more. With as much dexterity as the bulky paws of a bear could afford him, Duncan carefully lifted Gramble out of the debris and off of Daegan. He carried the limp body to a clearer space and laid him down on the cobblestone.

Breccan watched Daegan convulse on the ground, coughing and sputtering back into life. “Thank the gods,” he whispered. He turned to see if Gramble was moving yet. He watched as Duncan took on his normal form again, leaning over his friend and lieutenant. He stumbled over the bricks and fractured wood beams. “Is he—is he still alive?”

“He’s going to be fine, I think,” Duncan said, turning to face the Brésling.

“Thank the gods,” Breccan said, placing his hand on Duncan’s shoulder. “And thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Duncan said. With one quick jerk, Duncan nailed Breccan’s temple with his elbow. Without anger showing on his face, Duncan came up behind the Brésling and put him in a choke hold.

Breccan tried to fight, tried to speak, but soon passed out. The world went black and he fell into a heap at Duncan’s feet.

“I’d kill you, if I thought I could get away with it,” Duncan said, kneeling over the Brésling. He checked to make sure he was still breathing. Satisfied that he was, Duncan continued. “You’re going to have to answer for what you’ve done, but seeing as how your friend saved my friend—I think I can live with letting you rot in a cell.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Maxwell's Silver Appendage

In the days that followed the incident that happened in front of the Seven Bells, many meetings were held behind closed doors, the city streets were cleared of debris with the help of the residents of the Bruscar's help, and those who were injured during the riot were being tended to in the Painted City's best health care facility.

Cormac and Councilman Niall had arrived from their village. They had been called for by the head of Ráthmór's own City Council, Councilman Curran. Inside his personal chambers the three Sidhe met to speak about the second worst catastrophe to happen to the city in the past fifty years.

"As I have already explained," Niall droned on. "Mr, McKenna came here of his own accord."

"He was not acting, in any way, on behalf of the council," Curran asked.

"That is correct," Cormac affirmed. "We knew he was here, in Lindera, but we did not instruct him to do anything beyond taking care in finding his lost compatriot."

"I see," Curran said, sitting back in his chair. "Then I suppose it is little more than a coincidence that he was here at the time of the riot."

"As I have already said," Niall began, before being cut off.

"It's alright, Councilman—I understand your position and do not need to have you repeat yourself, once again." Curran said, rubbing his temples. "I cannot hold the man responsible for anything more than trying to defend himself and his friends."

“Thank you, kindly.” Cormac said, rising from his chair.

“Oh, we are far from done, however.” Curran said, making a gesture that made it clear that they were not to leave, just yet. “There is another matter that we must discuss.”

Across town, in the halls of the healthcare facility, Daegan sat in the hallway reading a book. It had been a long day already by that point and the slow process of de-encoding the text before him was beginning to take a toll on his mind.

“What do you think will happen with him,” Ciara said, breaking the silence.

“H-huh?” Daegan asked, confused. “Oh, with Breccan? I don’t know.”

“Do you suppose that they will hold him responsible for the riot?”

“I doubt it,” Daegan said. “From what I can tell, he has friends within the City Council, people who have helped him make improvements in the Bruscar before now. Chances are that they will just consider this whole thing an act of terrorism that was started by the group of people who have been blowing things up all over town.”

“I see,” Ciara said, letting her head come to rest against the wall behind her. “I don’t think I can ever forgive him for what he did to Faolan, though.”

“It’s hard to let him off the hook for that, I suppose.”

“You suppose,” Ciara said, her voice going shrill.

“Well, yeah,” Daegan said. “His parents died when a building collapsed on them, remember? He freaked out when it was happening to me and Gramble, right before his very eyes. When his parents died, he wasn’t around. He was lucky then, but now?”

“Now, he was forced to watch his best friend get crushed,” Ciara sighed. “I guess you’re right. In the heat of the moment, he did everything he could to try and save his friend. Still doesn’t get him off the hook in my book, though.”

“I know,” Daegan said, resting his head against hers.

“Why are you out here, in front of his room, anyway?”

“It’s hard to explain, but seeing him in the Bruscar, working with those children and hearing from everyone about how hard he’s been working, trying to make everyone’s lives better—” Daegan stopped, trailing off. He put down the book and closed his eyes. “The heart wants what it wants—I don’t know.”

“I see,” Ciara said, flashing back to her vision in the cave. She replayed the dream, in silence. *So, those feelings that I felt were his, after all.* She felt something shift around in her heart. *Strange—I feel better knowing that it wasn’t my feelings, but I can’t help but feel sad knowing that my brother is caught up in all of this.*

Aine lay on the side of Faolan’s bed, nestled against him. She was on the edge of sleep when the door creaked open.

“Is it okay if I come in,” Gráinne whispered.

“Yes, please.” Aine said, waving her in.

Gráinne hopped across the room and climbed up on the opposite edge of the bed, sitting with her back to the foot board of the bed. “How is he doing?”

“He’s doing alright,” Aine replied. “He’s been asleep since the procedure, though.”

“I’m told that it was quite an ordeal,” Gráinne said. “Being bonded to the arm probably hurt just as much as losing it.”

Aine hurried her face in Faolan’s chest. “I don’t want to think about that, please.”

“Oh,” Gráinne winced. “Sorry—I forgot that you lived through it, too.”

“It’s okay,” she replied. “It’ll get better, I hope.”

“I heard from my father that Duncan has gone to bring the rest of the family down to see Faolan.”

“That’s great,” Aine said, perking up. “I hope Faolan will wake up before they get here.”

“Me too.”

Aine yipped and jumped in the bed. “Ah!”

“What?” Gráinne said, jumping up and off of the bed with her hand on the hilt of her blade. “What is it?”

“I don’t know, something hard pinched my ass.”

“Sorry,” Faolan said. “Guess I don’t know my own strength, yet.”

“You little,” Aine started and stopped. “If you were in hospital already, I’d beat the crap out of you for scaring me like that.”

“Again, my apologies.” He said, winking at his love.

“How does the arm feel?” Gráinne asked, letting loose of her sword.

“Really weird,” Faolan answered. “Everything is cold and distant, kind of numb.”

“It will take time for your mind to adjust to the change, but the magic of Nuada’s silver arm is finely crafted.”



“Airgeadlámh,” Faolan said, barely more than a whisper. “How in the nine did you get a hold of this? I thought it was lost to history.”

“Being the daughter of a Chieftain has its perks,” Gráinne smirked.

“I still can’t believe that you’re Cormac’s daughter,” Aine said. “And how is it that you’ve come to look like that?”

“That, I’m afraid, is a story for another time.” Gráinne said, shrugging.

“Speaking of looks,” Faolan said, brushing away the hair from around Aine’s face. “What is with your ears? Do they look pointy to you, Gráinne.”

“Maybe,” she said, looking closer. “I don’t have anything to compare it to, sad to say.”

The three friends enjoyed themselves while Faolan recovered, laughing and talking about all the crazy things that had been going on since last they met. Before too long, the door opened again, this time bringing with it a deluge of family, friends, and well-wishes.

Rowan brought a hearty meal, enough to feed a small army.

Eibhlín brought desert.

And Niamh brought a few, small comforts from home. She placed a business card down on the ground, intertwined her fingers and let a drop of aether drip through the woven pattern she made with her hands. The blue light touched the card and a small cart appeared, replete with a full tea service. “Any one know where we can boil the kettle?”

“I’ll take care of that,” Gráinne said and she left the room.

As she hopped down the hallway, the voices and sounds of laughter faded. When she approached the cupboard that held serving utensils and other such supplies, Gráinne noticed someone standing at the end of the hall.

“Do you think this is over?” A familiar voice asked.

“For now,” Gráinne said. “It’s hard to say, Father.”

“I’m proud of you,” Cormac said. “I know it must be hard, coming this close to one of the people responsible for Diarmuid’s death, only to come up empty-handed.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she said, hopping closer to her father. “I might not be able to kill him, now that he is under lock and key, but that doesn’t mean that his story is over.”

“Just be careful, my child.”

“As always, Father.” Gráinne said, fetching a portable heating element from the nearby cupboard. “I had better get back, everyone’s waiting for tea.”

“Very well, I’ll be along in a moment.” Cormac said. He watched his daughter disappear into the room and he turned his attention back to the note in his hand.

“The target of the investigation remains safe and sound,” the note read. “The kind one does not appear to have undergone the change as of yet, but I will keep you apprised of any further developments. That is all, for now.” The note was unsigned, but it bore the mark of a Conroicht.

Cormac tore the mark in two and the missive burst into flame, burning up as it fell to the ground. “Message received,” he mumbled before leaving to join the party that was already underway.

## Epilogue

### Sweating Bullets

Breccan awoke in the dead of night, his face slack with sweat. His heart was racing and his mind was filled with visions. His left hand glowed with pain. He stared at the appendage, nothing appeared to be wrong, but something felt different. Looking his hand over, this time in the light that spilled through the glass of his window, a single point of orange light glinted in his eye.

“What in the nine,” he whispered.

A shard of the crystal he used on Faolan’s arm had been lodged under his skin.

Breccan pressed his thumb into the palm of his hand, trying to expel the shard much like one might with a splinter. The more he pushed, the more the wound burned. Before long, Breccan gave up; the pain was becoming too much to bare and he felt like he was pushing the shard further into his hand, rather than pushing it out.

“Do you still have the book,” a hushed voice called from the door.

“No,” Breccan said, flopping back down on his bed. “I think the young Sidhe took it with him, Councilman—“

“Shut your mouth, you damned fool.” The voice on the other side of the hissed.

“They can’t know that I’m involved. Just being here is risk enough.”

“My apologies, sir.”

“Don’t apologize, my child; don’t be sorry—be better.”

“Yes, sir.” Breccan answered.

“Did he have time to translate the book,” the hushed voice asked.

“No, but if I don’t miss my mark, he might be brought over to the cause, in the end.”

“Very good, my child—very good, indeed.”