

THE FIFTH CYCLE

A New Hero is Forged



DAN O'MAHONY

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The Fifth Cycle
A New Hero is Forged

Colin Caulfield
and the Irish Gods



Book One

Dan O'Mahony

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To all of the demigods in hiding out there.

Chapter One

It was that night, during my last hurling match, when all that destiny-nonsense started catching up to me.

What's hurling? Only the greatest sport ever. No, it's not that game where they sweep the ice with brushes. That's *curling*. Hurling is an Irish sport that's been around for over three thousand years. Back in the day, it was how warriors trained for battle. There were two teams, and each person carried a big ol' stick with a club-end called a hurley that you used to whack the ball — the sliotar — up and down the field.

Speaking of goals, I was only one away from breaking the record for most points scored in a match. Nothing was going to stop me. I ran flat-out down the field, balancing the sliotar on the end of my hurley the whole time.

Ma and Jenny were on the sidelines as usual, along with a bunch of the regulars from the pub Ma ran. They were all going mental, holding up signs and chanting, "Go Colin, go! Go Colin, go!"

The only quiet person in that crowd was Jenny, my little sister. Not that she wasn't enjoying herself. Throughout the whole match, I caught her big blue eyes watching me run up and down the field, standing as still as a stone and just as quiet. She was like that. Never overemotional. Always calm. Sometimes she'd giggle and grin for what looked like no reason at all — like she was in on some secret joke the rest of us didn't even have a clue about.

Two of the other team came rushing at me. I spotted a teammate of mine, Ricky. He was open and begging for the pass. I smirked. Nope. Not quite. I had a record to break. I bounced and smacked the sliotar almost straight up into the air. The two on the other team took their eyes off me to see where it might go. I dashed past them, leapt and caught the sliotar in my

left hand. A quick bounce off the grass. Then I caught it on the end of my hurley and kept running.

The crowd went nuts. The goal was up ahead. I could already see the fear in the goalie's eyes. Something snatched my foot. Someone had tripped me with their hurley. I landed face first and almost got trampled by some guys from both my team and the other team as they scrambled for the sliothar.

A big, ginger-haired kid on the other team laughed at me. It had to be him. It suddenly felt like everyone was looking at me and laughing. My face grew hot. A familiar switch flipped in my head. Next thing I knew I was sprinting for the big, ginger-haired kid.

I'd promised Coach Finlay, Ma — everyone — I wouldn't fight any more. And I meant it. I'd really been trying. But when that switch I mentioned gets flipped, when someone does something to embarrass or disrespect me, all I could think about was making them pay for it.

The ginger-haired kid had a few inches and a few more pounds on me, but I still just about speared him out of his cleats. I drove him to the ground. My fists moved like they had minds of their own. I landed two shots before the ginger-haired kid got his arms up to protect himself.

I kept wailing on him. Our teammates were too afraid to come near us to break it up. But someone else wasn't. A pair of arms snagged me and dragged me off the ginger-haired kid. Whoever had me, I broke free from them, turned, and shoved him as hard as I could.

Turned out to be the ref.

And I'd shoved him harder than I'd meant to.

A lot harder.

He flew through the air, hit the ground, and tumbled backward. Everyone went dead silent. Me, the kids on both teams, our coaches, even all the spectators. The ref sprang back to his feet, blew his whistle furiously, and shoved a red card in my face.

I didn't even try to argue. I knew I'd blown it big time. I spent the rest of the match riding the bench, staring at my cleats as I kicked at the ground.

I stopped feeling sorry for myself when it felt like someone was watching me. A chill took hold. I turned toward the spectators on the sidelines. My eyes landed on three people. Something about them just

seemed off. Maybe it was the fact they weren't watching the action on the field. Their attention was all on me instead.

They were normal-looking enough. I probably wouldn't have paid them the slightest bit of attention if they weren't staring at me so intensely. It reminded me of how our cat, Donovan, would watch birds. I reached for my hurley and gripped it tight. I glanced their way again. Only now they were gone.

The ref blew the whistle. From the looks on my teammates' faces, I could tell we'd lost. None of them said a word to me or even looked at me as they headed back to the bench. I didn't blame them. I searched for Coach Finlay. He was talking to a couple of the league officials — no doubt about me shoving that ref and getting in another fight.

I knew things were getting bad when it looked like Coach Finlay was almost begging in front of the officials, which was so not like him, but it didn't look like they were going to budge. One shook his head, and the other made a "that's it" sign with his hands before they both walked away.

Coach Finlay just stood there for a moment then let out a big sigh and started walking toward me.

"Well, what'd they say?" I asked, even though I already had a pretty good idea.

"You're out for the rest of the season," said Coach.

"What? C'mon! Playoffs are coming up."

"You don't have to remind me."

"You'll try talking to them again. Right?"

Coach's face reddened. "They've had enough of your behavior, Colin. Frankly, so have I. I've stuck up for you so many times it's not even funny. I was barely able to talk that boy's parents out of pressing charges against you."

"But he tripped me!"

"That's no excuse. And you know this wouldn't have happened if you'd just passed the ball when you had a chance."

"But I —"

"We've talked about this before, Colin." Coach took a breath, like he was trying to calm down. "Your temper. The fights. How many times have you promised me you're going to do better?"

Too many times, I had to admit.

“On top of all that, your selfishness, your showboating,” Coach reminded me. “I hope you’ve finally learned a lesson.”

The look of disappointment on Coach’s face was too much to bear. I turned away, only to catch my teammates glaring at me. My throat ached. I wanted to cry but forced myself not to. Instead, I started packing my gear. Ma and Jenny came to get me. The look of disappointment on Ma’s face was even harder to take than Coach’s.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

I’d always had a temper. Only lately, it had gotten a lot worse. I was getting in a lot of fights, not just during hurling matches but at school too. I’d been trying really hard to get it under control. I even saw a therapist for a while. For some reason, nothing worked.

“I talked to Coach Finlay,” she said. Seven years in the States, and she still held on to her brogue, her Irish accent. “Sounds like he said pretty much everything I wanted to. No sense belaboring the point.” She stared at me for a moment, eyes full of worry.

“What’s wrong with me, Ma?” I asked.

Ma suddenly looked like she was trying to hold back tears herself.

“It’s just the age you’re at, Colin,” she said.

“Patricia.”

Ma and I turned toward Sean, who’d been watching the match with some of the others. He was a regular at the pub and the head librarian at the Irish Heritage Foundation, which was the center of the Irish community here in Phoenix. He’d been looking after me, Ma, and Jenny since we first arrived from Ireland. I was only six at the time. Ma was still pregnant with Jenny.

Sean looked at Ma with his *we-need-to-talk face*. Ma sighed. She excused herself and told me to meet her at the car. She and Sean started walking toward the parking lot ahead of us, already talking. About me, no doubt.

Jenny waited with me. I stared down at my little sis’, with her red hair in pigtails and her big blue eyes. Those eyes. I swear, they could look right through me, and don’t get me started on her mysterious, little grin. Sometimes, it was easy to forget she was only seven years old and not some little old lady in disguise.

“I suppose you’ve got something to say to me too,” I told her.

Jenny just smiled then stepped up and gave me a hug. I hugged her back and smiled. My little sis', she didn't say much, probably because she didn't have to. With just a look or an action, she could always make her point.

Technically Jenny's my half-sister, even though I loved her with my *whole* heart. Her da's name was Casey. He was a great guy. He died in some sort of accident. Ma didn't go into any details, but we left Ireland for the States soon after that. I've never known my own da. Ma never talked about him and didn't have any pictures of him either. I didn't know if he was alive or dead. To be honest, at this point, I didn't care anymore.

Jenny helped me pack up the rest of my gear. I held her hand as we walked to the parking lot. My hold tightened a little as I felt like I was being watched again, just like I'd been on the bench during the match. That same chill took hold. I started walking faster, but that feeling didn't go away. It was like we were being followed. I thought back to the three people who'd been watching me in the crowd. Was this them?

My heart sped up a little. I glanced at Jenny then at my gear bag. I wasn't sure what to do. Either I was going to grab Jenny's hand and run, or I'd tell her to run while I fought off whoever this was with my hurley. Whatever I was going to do I needed to decide fast.

I heard whispering. But could only make out a few words.

"No. Not here. Not now."

And just like that, it felt like whatever had been following us was gone. I stood there, searching the park for — I didn't know what. I glanced down at Jenny when she squeezed my hand. She gave me her little gap-toothed smile.

"That was close," she said.

Chapter Two

I tightened my grip on Jenny's hand and hurried us the rest of the way through the park. I kept looking back over my shoulder. It didn't feel like we were being watched or followed anymore. But I wasn't going to take any chances.

Ma and Sean were standing by her SUV, still talking. It looked serious. Each of them looked like they wanted to yell and shout but were forcing themselves to keep their voices down. They stopped talking when they spotted me and Jenny. Yeah, that wasn't suspicious or anything.

I glanced at Jenny. What did she mean earlier, when she said, "That was close?" Did she know we were being followed? It's not like Jenny didn't have a history of saying or doing strange things. But that — that was taking it to a whole new level.

Sean said goodnight to us. Ma drove us home. It was a quick drive, less than a mile. We lived in an apartment above the pub Ma ran, the Fenian. Sean had gotten her a job in the kitchen, not long after we'd arrived in Phoenix. She was an amazing cook and had all sorts of recipes that had been passed down through our family for years.

It didn't take long for word to spread about her awesome food, and new customers quickly turned into regulars, and the Fenian became packed, night after night. A couple years ago, the owner made her a partner and let her run the place while he retired to a cottage in County Cork, back in Ireland.

The Fenian would still be open for another couple hours. Ma told me to put Jenny to bed while she went to check in with Michelle, her assistant manager, who she'd left in charge. I took Jenny's hand and walked her up the stairs to our apartment.

A familiar pair of golden eyes shone from the darkness when I opened the front door. Our cat, Donovan, was waiting for us, sitting on the couch. We'd had him for about five years now. He'd just showed up out of nowhere. Ma had found him sitting at the back door of the Fenian one

morning, like he was waiting for her to arrive. He had no tags, and if he'd been living on the streets it sure didn't show. He had a sleek, shiny black coat and was lean and muscular.

Donovan went straight to Jenny, who snatched him up in her arms and immediately started cuddling him. Donovan responded by purring like a finely-tuned sports car.

"Hey you. How was your day today?" she asked him. "Did you catch that pigeon that's been coming around? He's been such a bother, hasn't he?"

She carried him to her room, talking to him the whole time, and by the way Donovan stared at her, you'd think he was paying attention and understanding everything she said.

I cleaned up and changed my clothes. When I checked on Jenny, she was already in her pj's and under the covers. Donovan, of course, was curled up next to her. Jenny had her TV on, and I swore Donovan was watching it too. I mean, paying attention and everything.

I stood there, watching the two of them. One time I'd read how peasants back in Ireland believed cats were fairies because of their *mysterious* nature. Spend enough time with Donovan, and you could see why.

I wandered into my room and dropped onto my bed — only to spring back up again. I'd forgotten I'd left a book on my bed and sat right on it. It wasn't just any book either. It was one of Sean's. *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, an old story about one of Ireland's greatest heroes, CuChulainn.

He was from the Ulster region of Ireland, just like me. I remember a few years ago, how some of the old-timers at the Fenian were shocked to find out I knew nothing about the old myths of Ireland. They were even more surprised to hear I'd never heard of CuChulainn. I asked Ma about him. She just said he was some hero from the old myths then immediately changed the subject. I tried asking if she knew any stories about him. She said she didn't.

So it was up to me to learn about all that on my own. I was obsessed. What I found out about CuChulainn blew me away. He was known as the hound of Ulster — and he was not only Ulster's greatest hero but the greatest hero in all of Ireland. There was even a statue of him in the general post office in Dublin.

He was fearless and unstoppable, a real machine in battle. Unfortunately, he was known for having these things called *warp-spasms* when the fighting got too intense. He'd swell up like the Hulk and

go into a berserker rage. In one story, he killed his best friend during one of his warp-spasms. That part of his legend I didn't like so much. Especially lately, with my temper getting me into so much trouble.

I couldn't understand why Ma hadn't told me any of this. She was all about making sure we were connected to our Irish roots — through history, food, music, dancing, the language. But she never talked about any of the old myths. Not just about CuChulainn but the gods of Ireland too. The Tuatha Dé Danann. And whenever I tried to share something cool I'd read with her, she'd "uh huh" her way out of it and find something else to do or talk about.

At the time, I didn't understand why she did that. But now, I understood completely.

Jenny and I had Irish language lessons at the Irish Heritage Foundation after school. She had step-dancing class after that. I usually had hurling practice at the same time, but since I'd gotten kicked off the team, I now spent that time doing my homework in the library while I waited for Jenny.

The IHF was our second home. Their staff were like family. It was a cool place, built to look like an actual Irish castle. I'd never forget the first time I laid eyes on it, seeing those big towers and high walls smack in the middle of a modern city. There was an authentic replica of a medieval farm cottage on the grounds too and a great hall, like they had in villages back in the day.

There was a garden and small grove on the grounds as well for the people who were interested in the ways of the Druids, the priests and wizards of ancient Ireland. They'd learn all about the medicinal value of the herbs in the garden and the spiritual significance of the different trees in the grove.

I'd just finished the last of my algebra homework when Sean set a book down in front of me. It looked old. I handled it carefully as I read the title.

"The Book of Invasions." A big smile slid across my face.

I couldn't wait to crack it open. I'd already read everything about the Tuatha Dé Danann and CuChulainn that was for younger readers. Lately, Sean had been bringing me real books, old books written by Irish scholars from back in the day.

I knew *The Book of Invasions* was the first written account of how the Danann came to Ireland and their battles with the Fomorians, this race of

demonic giants who were their greatest enemies. They were nasty looking buggers. Serious nightmare fuel. Some were covered in scales, others in fur. Some had animal heads. Some even had multiple heads or multiple arms.

Sean nudged his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I know you’ve read *Gods and Fighting Men* which covers a lot of the same details. But I thought it high-time you dove into the original version. It’s in Irish but with an English translation of each passage side-by-side.”

I thanked Sean. He was the best. He was funny, nice — and willing to find books about Irish mythology for me, even though he knew Ma would probably kill him for doing it.

It was kind of hard to tell how old he was. He had some gray hair on the sides of his head, so he wasn’t young. He was so knowledgeable about a lot of things. Wise too. I always found myself going to him for advice. It didn’t seem possible for someone to know as much as he did and pick up that much wisdom without having lived a very long life.

Sean tapped the book. “This is one of my favorites, so be kind to it. And it, by no means, goes home with you.”

I nodded and dove right into the book. Reading Irish mythology was like solving an ancient mystery. There were big holes in a lot of the stories. Characters would die in one story then reappear in another one without explanation, some stories contradicted others, and there were different characters with the same name who’d pop up over and over again. There were huge gaps too where no one knew what had happened for like centuries.

Sean said that was because Ireland had a strong oral tradition. History and myths were passed down like stories around a campfire for generations. It wasn’t until centuries later, after Christianity took over, when people finally decided to write things down. No doubt, by then, some details had been exaggerated while others had been added or left out or changed, like what often happens with stories.

Lately, I’d had a crazy idea that maybe all that mythology had been mixed up on purpose in order to keep the true history of the Danann safe.

“That is not crazy at all.” A young woman’s voice startled me. “In fact that is actually quite insightful.”

I whipped around in my chair toward her. She was dressed in a long red gown and a black cloak. She looked like a hot Goth chick with long,

blood red hair that was tied in braids that fell down to the small of her back.

“Who are you?” I was shook-up. What she’d said, it was like she’d read my mind. I had no idea who she was either, and I literally knew everyone who worked at the IHF and most of the people who visited on a regular basis.

“It is not important you know our identity. Not at this time,” I turned in the direction of another woman’s voice.

She was older and wore a red gown and black cloak identical to the younger one. Both spoke with brogues. The younger one’s was more lilting. This one’s was slightly deeper and more severe. I glanced from the older woman to the younger woman then back again. They were practically identical. Except for their ages. This new lady could have been the younger one’s mother.

“All you need to know is the Fifth Cycle is about to begin,” a third woman spoke up. She also had brogue. Her voice sounded positively ancient.

She was dressed exactly like the other two. She looked like them as well but had deep lines in her face and grey streaks through her red braids.

Fifth Cycle? What was that? I wanted to ask but couldn’t speak. All three women had this presence, this aura, about them. It was so powerful I couldn’t look away. It was like I was frozen in awe. And in fear.

They stood all around me. Their eyes bored holes into three different sides of my head.

“You will play a crucial role in the upcoming events, Colin Caulfield,” said the youngest one.

Wait. How did she know my name?

“Best be ready,” said the grown-up one. “Especially to protect those you love.”

“Starting with your wee sister,” said the ancient one.

“What are you talking about?” My voice suddenly returned. “Are you threatening my sister?”

The three women didn’t say a word. They turned as one and started walking toward the big double doors that led out to the courtyard. At that point, I noticed the library had this sort of dreamy feel about it. The edges were all hazy. I couldn’t make out any of the finer details like the words on the signs and the posters on the walls.

I ran after the women. Only I couldn't catch up. The air felt heavy all around me. I could barely push through it. The three women had no problem at all. They just kept walking, and the double doors opened on their own for them.

I lost sight out of them as they went down the stairs and into the courtyard. By the time I finally got through the doors, they were gone. All I could see were three large black birds, like crows or ravens, flying off into the night.

I blinked —

— and was back at the table where I'd been sitting. I glanced at Sean. He was working away at the front desk, like nothing unusual had happened at all. A chill grabbed me. I shook it off and looked down at the book I was reading.

My eyes were pulled toward an illustration. It was one of the three women. The youngest one. The caption underneath it said she was the Morrigan, the Queen of Phantoms, the goddess of magic, war, and fate. One of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

If that wasn't enough, a shape had been drawn on the cover of my notebook. There were four overlapping circles, and they were surrounded by a fifth one. Had I drawn that? In the middle of whatever-had-just-happened? I must have, seeing as how my pen was still in my hand, and was drawn in the same color ink. I traced the shape with my finger. Circles. Cycles.

Five cycles.

Chapter Three

I slammed the book shut and pushed it across the table, wanting to get away from that picture of the Morrigan as fast as I could. I then caught myself staring at the symbol I'd drawn on my notebook without even realizing it. Five circles. Or cycles. The Morrigan had said about the Fifth Cycle getting ready to begin. They also said people I cared about could be a danger. Starting with Jenny.

I remembered what had happened during my last hurling match. How I was being watched by those people in the crowd. And how Jenny and I were followed later.

"No. Not here," I remembered those voices saying. "Not now."

Jenny. I sprang from my chair and ran out through the double doors. Sean called after me, no doubt wondering what the heck was going on, but I didn't answer him. I ran across the courtyard to the Great Hall, where Jenny had her step-dancing class.

I heard music and took that as a good sign nothing was wrong. I opened the door, and there was Jenny with the rest of the girls in her class. They danced a jig in unison, while their teacher checked their form and gave instructions. A sigh of relief slipped through my lips.

Jenny glanced my way. She gave me the stink-eye and waved me off. But I didn't mind. I stepped back, closing the door behind me. I leaned against the wall and chuckled, shaking my head. Man, I felt stupid. But hey, Jenny was safe. That was what mattered most.

I returned to the library, trying to chase all the weird stuff that had been happening out of my head and convince myself that my imagination was getting away from me.

"Colin." Sean was waiting for me inside, right by the door. "Is everything all right?"

Of course. The way I ran out like that, he had to be worried.

“Uh. Yeah.” I fished my phone out of my back pocket. “Just got an important call.”

Sean nodded and headed back to the reference desk. His gaze lingered on me the whole time. I could tell he didn’t believe me. Heck, I wouldn’t have believed me. I grabbed my things and brought *The Book of Invasions* back to Sean, thanking him for letting me read it. He said goodnight. And sounded a little concerned when he did.

I sat on the little stone wall outside of the Cottage. It was across the courtyard from the Great Hall. Jenny’s dance class was about to end. A load of moms gathered around the door. I watched them walk their kids to the parking lot, one after another, before Jenny finally came out.

“How was practice?” I asked.

She gave me a so-so hand sign. I took her dance bag and backpack and reached for her hand. She started heading for the park.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I snatched her hand. “Ma will crease us if we don’t come straight home. Let’s go.”

I had to yank Jenny to get her walking, which was not like her at all. She was quiet the entire way. I figured she was mad at me for peeking in on her class like that. Whatever.

She kept looking back toward the park the entire time. We finally got home. We climbed the stairs to our apartment, I reached for my key, and Jenny suddenly tugged on my hand wanting to go back down the stairs.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked. “What’s the matter? Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Jenny pulled even harder and started down the stairs. I had to grab the handrail to keep her from dragging me down with her. What the heck was going on? Why was she so strong all of a sudden?

“Jenny, knock it off. Seriously, I don’t need this.”

I managed to yank her over to the door and get it unlocked. She fought even harder then. I needed both hands to get her through the door.

A blood-curdling screech made me almost jump out of my skin. It was Donovan, perched on the arm of the couch. His back was arched and just about every hair on his body stood on end. He growled and let another of those horrible cries. At Jenny of all people.

I turned to Jenny. She was horrified, about to panic. Her eyes suddenly seemed larger than normal. Her skin turned gray. Her face bulged and shifted. So did her arms, her legs, her entire body.

It stopped. And she wasn't Jenny anymore. Just something twisted and inhuman with overly long arms, pointy ears, and a hooked nose.

"Bejaysus!" I cried out.

That *thing* cackled, its mouth opened wide, showing off its fangs. Donovan pounced, screeching. That thing bolted out the door and down the stairs, with Donovan hot after it.

What had just bloody happened? That thing *was* Jenny. I mean it was Jenny before turning into that — thing. It was still wearing her clothes. What was going on? Where was Jenny?

I sprinted down the stairs. Donovan chased the thing all over the parking lot behind the Fenian. By the time I got there, they'd leapt over the back wall. I did my best to keep up, bounding over the wall after them and landing in the alley on the other side. I couldn't see Donovan or that *thing* — but between the two of them screeching and all the crashing sounds they made I was able to follow them.

They were heading for the park near the IHF. I caught a glance of Donovan chasing that *thing* across the street. Brakes squealed. Horns blared. Two cars came inches from hitting them. The drivers were quickly out of their cars, looking at each other then in the direction Donovan and that *thing* had disappeared, like they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

They still looked pretty dazed as I ran past them and into the park. I stopped in the middle of the jogging path, my head on a swivel, scanning the length of the park, from the playground to the bridge. No sign of Donovan or that thing. Couldn't see them. Couldn't hear them.

There was a rattling sound. An old homeless lady pushed a packed shopping cart my way. She walked with a purpose, heading straight for me. Bushes behind me rustled. A couple of homeless men stepped out with camping gear on their backs. They started toward me as well.

Living in the city for as long as I had, I wasn't usually freaked out by the homeless. In fact, I always gave them any spare change I had on me. But these three, the way they looked at me, they reminded me of the three creeps I'd seen at my last hurling match. The ones who'd looked at me like I was their prey.

Their bodies bulged and shifted the same way that *thing* did earlier in our apartment. They turned into larger versions of it. Much larger. And much scarier. They snarled and growled like gorillas.

They surrounded me. One fainted at me. I flinched. Another one fainted. I flinched again. The three — whatever they were — I swore they were laughing at me. I tried to find an opening. Maybe I could escape. But these *beasties* had circled me. And were now closing in.

The ground erupted. Huge plant stalks shot out from the ground. They snatched each of the *beasties* by their arms, legs, and necks.

“Hold them,” a familiar voice called out.

The air shimmered. Sean appeared out of nowhere, so did two other IHF staff members, his assistant, Fleur, and one of the groundskeepers, Terry.

Fleur and Terry were concentrating, their hands glowed bright green. The harder they concentrated, the tighter the plants squeezed the *beasties*.

Sean threw his hands out. Streams of light shot from each of his fingertips, all the colors of the rainbow. They wound around each of the three *beasties*, weaving what looked like Celtic knots.

“That’ll be enough out of you.”

Sean clenched his fists, and the bands of light holding the *beasties* tightened and tightened until they exploded into clouds of glowing dust.

“You killed them!” I said.

“They were prepared to do the same to you,” said Sean. “Trust me.”

I struggled to catch my breath.

“There’s another one,” I finally managed to say. “A little one. My sister. Jenny.”

“It’s all right, love. She’s right here.”

It was Mrs. Byrne. She taught my Irish language class. Her husband was with her. He worked in the genealogy library. Don’t tell me they were in on this too? Whatever *this* was?

Jenny stood in front of Mrs. Byrne as they walked down a nearby path. She held Donovan in her arms. I could hear the little bugger purring away.

“They were under the bridge, just like our divining spell showed us,” said Mr. Byrne. “Two goblins were guarding her, but me and the missus took care of them.”

Mrs. Byrne scratched Donovan behind the ears. “This one did quite a number on that little goblin.”

I knelt in front of Jenny. She didn’t look shaken up at all. Or even slightly bothered. I hugged her really tight. When I let her go, she looked up at me and said, “I’m hungry. What’d Ma leave for supper?”

I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh, cry, or scream. Sean set his hand on my shoulder. I threw it off as I sprang to my feet. "What is all this? What's going on? What were those things? Who are you all, really?"

Sean held up his hands, as if to calm me down. "It's high time for you to know everything, Colin. And we will tell you. But first we need to find your mother."

Chapter Four

Sean walked us back to the Fenian, while the others took care of the mess they'd left in the park. Donovan stayed put in Jenny's arms the whole time. I kept one hand on her shoulder. I didn't want her out of my sight or out of my reach for even a second. I kept an eye on Sean the whole time too, as I was still trying to wrap my head around what had gone down in the park.

Jenny let Donovan down when we reached the front door. Instead of running up the stairs to our apartment, the little bugger just sat there, off to the side, like he was going to wait for us. Inside the Fenian, a trio played one of the old songs, "Rocky Road to Dublin," on the stage. Both the dining room and the bar were packed. Everyone was stomping and clapping, and the old timers at the bar sang along. Most times, I'd be bobbing my head to the music, singing along with them. But I wasn't in a real party mood at the moment.

Ma went from table to table, checking on everyone, making sure they were getting enough to eat and drink. She then spotted me and Jenny with Sean. Call it "mom-sense" or whatever, but just looking at us she could tell something was wrong. The smile dropped from her face, and she immediately whisked us through the kitchen door, telling her assistant manager, Michelle, to take over until she came back.

"What happened?" Ma asked me on the way.

"We should wait until we're in your office," Patrick told her.

Ma went pale for a moment. She then hustled us to her office, shut, and locked the door once we were all inside. She stared at Sean, arms crossed, waiting for her answer.

"There were creatures from the Otherworld. Goblins is the best translation of their actual name," Sean explained. "They'd kidnapped Jenny and tried to use that to lure Colin into the park, to ambush him."

Ma rushed to me, checking to see if I'd been hurt.

"He's fine. So is Jenny," Sean added. "We were there in time."

Ma finished checking me then went to Jenny, who was sitting in a chair in the corner.

“Your word doesn’t mean much to me right now,” she told Sean.. “You said we were safe. You had *masking* spells you called them.”

I shook my head. What was going on? Goblins. Spells. The Otherworld. Why were Sean and Ma talking like this was all normal somehow?

“We do. The spells are still in place.” Sean sighed. “But whoever is looking for you, their power has grown. We’ll find a way to reinforce the masking spells. I swear.”

“Find a way?” said Ma. “That sounds very reassuring.”

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on here?” I yelled.

Sean and Ma stared at me. A blanket of silence dropped over us. It was broken by a crunching sound. We all turned to see Jenny sitting in a folding chair. She’d gotten an apple from Ma’s mini fridge and held it with both hands at her mouth. She took another bite. Crunch.

A stream of emotions flashed across Ma’s face. Shock, anger, then finally a sort of sadness. Sean tried to put his hand on her shoulder, but Ma shrugged it off.

“He needs to know,” Sean told her. “It’s time.”

What did he mean by that? Time for what?

Ma nodded then put her arm around my shoulder and walked me over to the nearest chair. “You should sit down, love.”

I crossed my arms and stood still. I glared at her and Sean. I’d go ahead and stand.

“You’re a very special lad, Colin,” said Sean.

Ma shifted in her chair. “We’re talking about the, uh, circumstances about how you were,” she forced the last word out, “Conceived.”

Conceived? What did she mean by that? I mean, I knew what the word meant but — was she talking about my da? Was she finally going to tell me about him? After all these years? Thing was, from the looks on her and Sean’s faces, I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like whatever it was they had to say.

“It was during my final year at university,” she started. “I was in my flat watching telly when suddenly everything around me went all — *dreamy*.”

Dreamy? I thought back to my visit from the Morrigan. That was how I’d described it.

“This man appeared,” Ma continued. “He was so handsome, so perfect. He told me he was a god. An actual god. Lugh.”

Lugh? Thee Lugh? The god of light? He was one of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Heck, he was one of the most important of them.

“I couldn’t bring myself to question him,” said Ma. “I couldn’t do anything. I was so mesmerized. He opened the door to my bedroom and — suddenly we were in some sort of palace. It was on a beautiful island surrounded by this almost turquoise-colored ocean. I lost track of how long I was there. Weeks. Months. Lugh and I had a ‘relationship.’ When he told me I had to leave, I was heartbroken. He was too. But he told me to stay strong. For you. Our child. That you were destined to become a great hero.”

“Wait. No. Hold on,” I told her. “That’s the story of CuChulainn. How he was born.”

“We know,” said Sean.

“I don’t know how else to describe it.” Ma squirmed a little. “I blinked and was back in my flat again, sitting on my couch, watching telly. Only a few seconds had passed. I convinced myself it all was all some sort of dream. Then eight weeks later ... I was pregnant.”

“What are you saying then?” I asked. “That I’m the son of Lugh? A god?”

“You’re more than that,” said Sean. “You are CuChulainn reborn.”

I sat there, looking from Ma to Sean and back again, waiting for them to tell me this was some sort of joke. Only there were the things I’d seen Sean and the others do earlier and those *goblins* — Guess that was what I had to call them now. And let’s not forget my little visit from the Morrigan.

I turned to Sean, my face getting hot. “Where do you come into all this?”

He rolled his sleeve up to his elbow. His skin glowed. Lines appeared, forming the shape of a woman with a trinity knot above her head. That was the sign of Danu, the earth goddess, the mother of the Tuatha Dé Danann, which literally translated into *the tribe of Danu*.

“I’m one of the Druids of Danu,” he said.

“So was Casey,” Ma added.

What? Casey was a part of all this too? I checked Jenny to see how she was reacting to hearing her da’s name. She just smiled then went back to munching on her apple.

“Casey said he was assigned to watch over us,” said Ma. “To keep us safe.”

“Safe? From what? More of those goblin-thingies?”

“It was a couple days after I’d told Casey I was pregnant with Jenny that he finally told me the truth,” said Ma. “That he’d been watching you and me for ages, but he’d fallen in love with me and couldn’t keep his distance anymore. Finally, after I’d told him about Jenny, he said he couldn’t stand keeping secrets any longer. I thought he was daft. But then he told me he knew about my time in the Otherworld. He showed me some of his power. I was so angry. Said I didn’t want to hear from him ever again.”

I remembered that. The two had had a big fight. Ma kicked him out of our apartment. She wouldn’t even let him say goodbye to me.

Ma started tearing up. “A few weeks later, he called me, scared out of his mind, told me to run. To get as far away as I could. Then I heard some sort of commotion on the other end of the phone. A fight.” She sniffed and snatched a Kleenex from the box on her desk. “Next day, the garda — police told me his body had washed up along the river. He’d drowned.” She clenched her fist. “Drowned? He was a crack swimmer. A certified diver too.”

I remembered that day too. Hearing about what had happened to Casey. The sadness I felt that day came rushing back to me. “So that’s why we left Ireland.”

“I thought I was getting us away from it all.” She gave Sean the side-eye. “Then you came into the picture.”

Sean tensed up a little, like he was trying not to take what Ma had said as an insult.

“Your arrival came to me in a vision,” he told me. “I was told to prepare for you.”

“So all this. Everything you’ve done,” I told him. “I thought you were our friend. I thought you cared about us.”

“I am your friend. I do care,” said Sean. “I’ve taken care of you, your mother, Jenny — protected you, kept you hidden for as long as I could. I’m sorry I had to keep it a secret from you, Colin. I wish there could have been another way. I really do.”

We were locked in silence for a moment. Jenny had even stopped munching on her apple.

“He said he was sorry, Colin. Ma’s sorry too,” she said. “They did the best they could.”

A tiny smile reached my lips. I couldn't help but take what Jenny had to say to heart. It was almost like magic.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked Ma. "All this time — about my da — about me?"

"Do you think I wanted you involved in some mythical-hero-destiny-nonsense?" Ma looked like she was fighting back a sob. "I thought I could protect you. Keep you away from it. So much for that."

Sean gave her an apologetic look. He put his hand on Ma's shoulder. This time she let him.

"You told me you've felt stronger and faster lately," Sean told me. "Then there's your aggression. The fights you've been getting into. All of that is CuChulainn's power beginning to manifest."

"Aggression?" I said. "You mean, his warp-spasms?"

I thought about all the fights I'd gotten into. I thought I'd lost control then. But a warp-spasm, like CuChulainn's, that was a whole new level. People could actually get killed. Please tell me that wasn't going to happen.

"I don't know," said Sean. "There are so few details. One thing that is known for sure. You're going to have to leave."

"What? No way!"

"You're coming into your power. You need to be trained how to use it properly. Danu has told us someone will come for you, to take you Alba, where the original CuChulainn was trained."

"You mean the Morrigan?" I asked.

"You've been in touch with the Morrigan?" Sean asked.

I nodded. "And I don't care what the three of her, Danu, or you say, I'm not going anywhere. I'm not leaving Ma or Jenny."

"If you stay, you will put them in danger," said Sean. "Goblins, like the ones we encountered, don't work on their own. They're foot soldiers, usually in service of a greater power. Someone has been using them to track you. Who knows how many more are out there or where they might be? You've seen how they have no problem using your loved ones to get to you."

"Why?" I asked, trying to sound tough. "Just because I'm CuChulainn reborn?"

Ugh. Saying it out loud, it sounded so weird.

"The Fifth Cycle is about to begin," said Sean. "And you will play an important role in it."

I scoffed. “The Morrigan said the same thing. It was a vision. Kind of like the one Ma described. I drew a symbol too, without knowing.”

“Did it look like this?” Sean ran his finger through the air. A trail of light followed the tip. He created the same symbol I’d drawn on my notebook.

I nodded. “What does it mean?”

“It’s connected to the four cycles in Irish mythology,” said Sean. “The Mythological, the Ulster, the Fenian, the Historical. It’s been said a fifth cycle will come, and there will be a convergence between this world and the Otherworld. The Tuatha Dé Danann will return. And you will be their champion.”

The Otherworld. That was the home of the Tuatha Dé Danann and all sorts of supernatural creatures. It was where all magic came from. I shook my head. This was really happening, wasn’t it?

I swallowed. “I guess someone out there isn’t too happy about that.”

Sean nodded. “When the convergence comes, if the Danann are not ready to take power, someone else could take advantage of this and take control of both this world and the Otherworld.”

“Who are they?” I asked. But at the same time I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“No one knows. I’m sorry. I wish there was more I could tell you.”

“Yeah. That would be nice.”

“You need to go to Alba. You need to prepare for what’s to come.”

I was ready to argue. Only I couldn’t. If meeting the Morrigan and drawing that symbol wasn’t enough, there was what had just happened to Jenny. And then there were those people who’d followed me and Jenny after my last hurling match. Were they goblins too? And if goblins could change their appearance, like I saw them do tonight, they could be anyone. Or anywhere.

Sean stepped closer to me. “If it helps, time in the Otherworld moves much differently than it does here. No matter how long you are there, seconds — maybe minutes will pass here.”

“You swear on that?” I asked.

Sean nodded. I looked to Ma, her shoulders slumped, looking defeated. I didn’t like the idea of leaving her and Jenny for who knows where, even if Sean said I’d only be gone for that long — at least from their perspective. But I had to admit Sean had taken good care of us over the years. He did

save me and Jenny tonight. And if it was his “mystical duty” to protect us — well, enough said.

“It is time, Colin Caulfield,” a familiar voice said.

Ma’s office went all hazy around the edges, like the library did for me earlier that day. It grew too, became massive. And yep, there they were, the Morrigan, all three of them, a triple goddess, representing all stages of womanhood at once. Maiden. Mother. Crone. It was the Maiden who’d spoken first.

“Follow us, Colin Caulfield,” said the Mother.

“We shall lead the way,” said the Crone.

Ma and Sean both looked at me then in the direction I was staring then back again.

“You can’t see them?” I asked.

“See who?” asked Ma.

“The Morrigan.”

“They’re here?” Sean sounded in awe. “You can see them?”

“They were in the library. That’s why I rushed out like I did.”

Sean smiled. “This is a good sign. The Morrigan are the patrons of heroes. They appeared before the original CuChulainn.”

“Yeah, and he was too stupid to take their help,” I reminded him.

Sean rested his hand on my shoulder. “Hopefully, you won’t repeat his mistake.”

I answered with a tight smile. The Morrigan stood there, waiting for me. At least they were allowing me time to say goodbye to Ma and Jenny.

“You come back to me,” said Ma, trying really hard not to cry. “No matter what.”

I promised I would. Jenny gave me a thumbs-up.

“You’ve got this,” she said.

What did she mean? Got *what*? Little weirdo. I grinned and tousled her hair.

The Morrigan turned in unison and started walking. I followed. A mist rose out of nowhere. It kept getting thicker and thicker.

I stopped short when water brushed against my shoes. I squinted through the mist. All I could see was water, in every direction. The Morrigan were still walking ahead of me. I could buy that they could walk on water. But could I? Only one way to find out.

I took one step then another and chuckled in disbelief. I was walking on water. So weird, the way it shimmied beneath my feet. I sent out ripples with each step I made. I kept walking. The mist grew thick again, surrounding me. The Morrigan were nowhere in sight.

“Hello?” I called out. “Anyone out there?”

I took a couple more steps before finally stopping on what felt like dry, solid ground. That was when the mist started to clear. I was standing in a stone courtyard. There were cottages and larger buildings all around. The whole place was surrounded by huge stone walls.

Ma’s office, the Fenian, the world I knew — was gone.

Was this Scathach’s Island? Alba?

A man stood there like he’d been waiting for me. He wore a cloak with the hood pulled completely over his head. He tossed something to me. It clanged and clattered as it slid across the stones then landed near my feet. It was an ancient Irish war sword, one-handed with a short thick blade. I’d seen pictures of them in books. This one looked almost brand-new.

“Pick it up,” the man in the hood growled.

Chapter Five

“Pick. It. Up.”

The guy in the cloak drew his own sword and started charging. The blade whistled as he swung it in circles in front of him. I scrambled for the sword he'd tossed me, snatched it up, and raised it just high enough to block his sword from cutting me in two, right down the middle.

I got to my feet. He swung again, this time for the side of my neck like he wanted to chop my head off. I got my sword up again, just in time, and staggered backward a couple steps.

The guy in the cloak kept attacking me. And I kept blocking his attacks. It was automatic. I didn't need to think about it. It just happened.

What was this? I came here to train not to get killed.

Unless this was some sort of messed-up audition.

“That is the best you can do?” asked the guy in the cloak.

He kept taunting me with every attack he made. Every now and then, he'd smack me with the flat part of his sword on the back of my head or against my butt.

My face grew hot. I kept fighting. All of a sudden, I spotted an opening and attacked. The guy in the cloak blocked it, sort of rolled with it, then attacked me again. I spotted another opening and attacked.

The guy in the cloak blocked it. “Good. You are finally remembering who you are.”

That was when he started getting really aggressive, driving me back further and further. I swung too hard and knocked myself off-balance. The guy in the cloak came at me like he was ready to run me through with his sword. No time to block. I leapt out of the way.

And oh man, did I leap!

Seriously. Like ten feet in the air. And landed a good thirty feet from the guy in the cloak. CuChulainn was able to do that. He called it the “salmon leap.”

I leapt into the air again, sword held high, ready to pounce on the guy with the cloak. He just stood there, as I came closer and closer and closer. I realized — what the heck was I doing? I was going to kill this guy.

But at the last second, the guy in the cloak hopped to the side. I hit the ground hard. I bounced then landed flat. Ow. Seriously, ow. Pain held every inch of my body to the ground. Even my hair hurt.

The guy slid back his hood — only it turned out he wasn't actually a guy. He — I mean *she* was a woman with pale skin and long black hair tied in a thick braid bound with a golden clasp. Then, I remembered. Scathach, CuChulainn's trainer, was a woman. Crikey, I should've suspected this was her.

"Impressive," she said. "You are already accessing your memories of your life as CuChulainn. And not only are your fighting skills returning to you. Apparently, so is your physical prowess. That was a fine salmon-leap."

"Uh. Thanks?"

My head stopped swimming. I was finally able to push my-aching-self to my feet. It was then I'd noticed our little duel had had an audience. People were standing all around the courtyard. Kids, boys and girls, some my age, some older. Most of them were dressed in fancy, colorful clothes with golden trim and different types of jewelry. The ones standing toward the back wore plain looking breeches and tunics that looked pretty faded and worn.

"Breccan," Scathach called out.

One of the plain-clothed kids, a boy my age, came running. He was a bit taller than me but way skinnier with wild-looking black hair and a longish face. He gave Scathach a quick bow then stood at attention.

"Escort Colin Caulfield to the cottage that has been prepared for him," she ordered. She then turned back to me. "Breccan will be your personal servant. He will tend to your needs."

A servant? For real? I wasn't quite sure how to handle that.

The crowd parted for me and Breccan. I guess the plain-clothed kids were all servants. The ones in the fancy clothes — were they students then? Were they here learning to fight like I was?

They were all taller than me, skinny, with pointy ears. I wondered if they were Aes Sidhe, fairy royalty. *Fairy* was actually a term for a bunch of different magical races. I'd known, since I was little, that all fairies didn't look like Tinkerbell.

A few of the kids were human. That reminded me of stories about Aes Sidhe kidnapping beautiful human children and raising them as their own.

They were mingled in with the Aes Sidhe. I took that as a sign they were treated as equals.

All of them, Aes Sidhe or Aes Sidhe-raised checked me out as much as I checked them out. Most of them nodded respectfully. Some even smiled, all excited, like I was some sort of celebrity.

“We have been awaiting your arrival,” said Breccan. “It is an honor to be in your presence, Colin Caulfield, son of Lugh, CuChulainn reborn.”

So that was my official title, huh? I could’ve lived with the *son of Lugh-part*. It’s not like he was around or anything when I was growing up.

I kept following Breccan and soon found out not everyone looked happy about me being on Alba. One clique of older kids, Aes Sidhe and Aes Sidhe-raised, just kind of smirked and turned their noses when I walked past. That reminded me —

“Is it such a good idea letting everyone know who I am?” I asked Breccan. “I already know not everyone wants to see me succeed in my little quest.”

Breccan grinned, showing off teeth that looked too big for his mouth. “The students who come here to train are all from the finest, most honorable houses of the Aes Sidhe, with lineages that can be traced back to the Tuatha Dé Danann themselves. Believe me, they eagerly await the beginning of the Fifth Cycle. Their families are heavily invested in it.”

That was good to hear. And made me feel a little better. But like Sean had said, those goblins were only soldiers. Did anyone here in the Otherworld have any idea who was giving the orders yet? That was taking up a lot of space in my mind, while Breccan showed me around the training camp. I heard about every other word he said.

“You are wondering what your role is in the coming of the Fifth Cycle,” he said suddenly, like he’d read my mind. He chuckled. “Forgive me for being so forward. I have always been sensitive to other people’s emotions. You seemed distressed. And that seemed to me to be the most obvious reason.”

I grinned. “Cool. And yeah, I am. Among other things.”

“This must be very overwhelming for you, Master,” said Breccan. “Learning not only that the gods, and all things magical do exist, but that you will be playing a crucial role in restoring their presence to your world.”

“Gee. You think?”

“I am certain Scathach is well aware of your state of mind,” said Breccan. “She is as wise as she is formidable. She knows you will need a period of adjustment before you begin training in earnest.”

I shook my head. “I’ve got family to get back to. So the sooner the better.”

We ended up at a row of cottages in the middle of the camp. Trainees wandered in and out of them. Some of them stopped short to give me the same starry-eyed look the ones in the courtyard had done. Each time, I nodded their way, looking cool, like I was used to being treated like a rock star, like it was no big deal.

Breccan pointed out my cottage at the end of the row. Before I could reach the door, he was there, holding it open for me. It was all one room. There was a hearth, a table and chairs in the middle, and a wardrobe and bed off to the side. Wooden swords, spears, and shields hung on pegs on the wall by the door.

“Those are for training,” said Breccan. “There are clothes for you in the wardrobe.”

I headed toward it to get a peek. Once again, Breccan was there to open it for me. Inside the wardrobe, there were all kinds of tunics, breeches, and boots. Some were kind of plain-looking but thick and sturdy. Breccan explained they were for training. Then, there were some blinged-out ones like I saw the other trainees in the courtyard were wearing, with golden trim and clear jewels sewn into the cuffs, shoulders, and collar.

“Shall I prepare something for you to wear, Master?” Breccan asked.

I cringed when he said *Master*. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever get used to that. Not sure I wanted to, actually. “Uh. No. I’m fine,” I ended up telling him.

“I imagine you are hungry,” Breccan continued. “Dinner is about to be served. I can bring you a plate.”

“No. I’ll go with everyone else,” I said. “Might as well dive right in. Right?”

“You might want to dress for dinner then.”

I shook my head. “I’ll be fine.”

“May I at least direct you to the dining hall?”

“Uh. Yeah. Thanks.”

Breccan bowed just a bit. “Very good.”

He held the door open for me then took the lead. We reached the main pathway that ran through the camp. As we walked along, I kept thinking

about how I was actually in the Otherworld. *Thee* Otherworld. A supernatural realm full of supernatural beings I'd once thought only existed in stories.

But here it was. Here *I* was.

What surprised me the most was how at home I felt here. Like I belonged.

The dining hall reminded me a lot of the Great Hall back at the IHF. It was a long plank building with a thatched roof and multiple doors. I headed inside and took my place at the end of a very long line. Everyone was dressed in fancy gear. I looked down at my jeans, Chucks, and Dropkick Murphys t-shirt and shifted my feet a little. Great. I guess everyone always dressed up for dinner. I'd thought Breccan was only suggesting it.

A few trainees in line whispered and snickered at me. I thought about heading back to my cottage and changing. No. Forget that. I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

Besides, whatever they were serving for dinner smelled amazing. Its scent hooked me good. My stomach started growling like a bear. I craned my neck to see around the line. There were tables set up near the huge hearth, where servants spooned roasted potatoes onto trainees' plates and set down big hunks of grainy-looking bread.

The hearth was big enough to walk inside, and there were servants slicing pieces off of a wild boar that was cooking on a spit. The thing was a monster. It still had the head and tusks attached.

My stomach became even more ferocious. The line was moving pretty quick, but before I knew it the trainees in front of me were waving me ahead of them, giving me the same respectful looks the ones in the courtyard had given me.

I shook my head with a polite smile. But they were so insistent, I ended up giving in. Next thing I knew, more trainees were waving me ahead of them. A big smile spread across my face. This was pretty sweet.

I was about to reach the front of the line when I got a hard stare from a group just ahead of me. It was the same group who'd given me the stink-eye back in the courtyard. The same ones who'd laughed at my clothes, too.

I stopped cold. Oh, well. Whatever. Like I wanted to get that close to them anyway. And I was still pretty close to the front of the line, and it didn't look like they were in any danger of running out of food.

"You are in the same row of cottages as us."

I turned to face the twin boys behind me. They were Aes Sidhe and totally identical, from their clear blue eyes to their blonde-almost-white hair that each of them had tied back in a ponytail. They were lean and wiry. Each of them was a bit taller than me, but they both looked to be around my age.

“My cottage is two down from yours,” said one of the boys.

“Mine is on the other side of his,” said the other. “I am Kian.”

“Kelan,” said the other.

“I’m —” I started to say

“We know who you are,” said Kian.

“The whole camp knows who you are,” said Kelan.

“Yeah. I kind of got that feeling.”

“Colin Caulfield, son of Lugh, CuChulainn reborn,” said Kian.

I smiled but at the same time grit my teeth, wishing they’d drop the *son of Lugh-part*.

“It is an honor,” said Kelan.

“We hope to get to fight at your side.”

“When the Fifth Cycle begins.”

“So you know all about that then,” I said, keeping up as the line kept moving. What did that mean “fight by my side?” Was there going to be some big war?

“Of course, we do,” chuckled Kian.

“Everyone does,” chuckled Kelan.

“Everyone except the guy who’s supposed to play the most important part in it,” I said.

Kian and Kelan sighed at the same exact time.

“Forgive us,” said Kian.

“We forgot you were not born in our world,” said Kelan.

“Without any knowledge of the prophecy at all,” said Kian.

“Mind filling me in?” I asked.

Kian and Kelan giggled.

“You know how the Tuatha Dé Danann left your world, do you not?” Kian asked.

“Yeah. They were beaten by the Milesians.”

Which I always thought was weird. I mean, the Milesians were just normal humans, who’d come from another part of Europe. They had iron weapons, which were supposed to have been like Kryptonite to the Danann.

But the Danann were gods. They had powers. Couldn't they have found a way around them?

Kian and Kelan chuckled.

"That is the story the humans were told," said Kelan.

"The truth is the gods relinquished control to the Milesians," said Kian.

"It was ordained by the Morrigan that their age would come to an end."

"So they left your world."

"But still went on to make their presence known on occasion."

"But in her message, the Morrigan said the Danann would return to power when the Fifth Cycle began," Kian and Kelan both said at the same time.

Okay. That answered some questions, but I still had more. By that time, we'd made it to the tables where they were dishing out the food. Our plates were piled high. I followed Kian and Kelan as we looked for a place to sit.

"But aren't the Danann still around?" I asked. "Aren't they still in Ireland, living underground?"

Kian and Kelan stopped short and stared at each other like they couldn't believe what they'd just heard. Both of them turned toward me.

"You do not know?" they said in unison.

"Know what?"

According to everything I'd read, after the Danann were defeated by the Milesians, they went underground. Their homes were supposed to be under the hills. They became the original Aes Sidhe, which meant "people of the mounds." Or hills.

I'd always thought they still lived there. That they never left. Then again, apparently the Danann weren't beaten by the Milesians like I'd read either.

"The Danann did not actually live under the hills," Kian started explaining.

"They were each granted their own realm within this world," Kelan continued. "What you would call the Otherworld."

"So there are entrances to their realms under those hills? I asked.

"Exactly," Kian and Kelan said in unison.

We found a place to sit. The trainees already at the table looked happy to make room for us. They all looked about my age, just like Kian and Kelan did. Then again, we were talking about fairies here. They didn't age

like humans did. They could have been hundreds of years old as far as I knew. But at least they acted my age. That was enough.

“But the Danann are still around, right?” I asked. “They’re supposed to be immortal. Something about a special mead they drank at a regular feast On Manannán’s island. Or is that part wrong too?”

“To an extent,” said Kian.

“Our two worlds are connected,” said Kelan. “On a spiritual level.”

“Events in your world have powerful ramifications on ours.”

“Wars, strife, and destruction in your world have caused our world to suffer in many ways.”

I let out a sigh. “So what happened?”

“The bees that create the honey that goes into the Danann’s special mead became ill,” said Kian.

“They died in scores,” said Kelan. “No mead was able to be produced that year.”

“So missing their mead one year, that did them in?” I asked.

Kian nodded sadly. “The mead keeps the Danann alive and at their peak. Without it, they immediately succumb to the ravages of age.”

“Some perished within weeks,” said Kelan. “Most in days.”

“But the Morrigan’s still alive,” I said. “Lugh too.”

“The Morrigan are one of the ancients,” said Kian. “Like Danu. They are eternal.”

“As for Lugh, no one knows why he is still alive,” said Kelan. “No one has seen him for ages either.”

“But if the rest of them are really dead,” I started to ask. “How do you come back from that? How are they supposed to take over again?”

Everyone at the table went silent. They traded blank looks back and forth. I took that as meaning none of them knew. Great.

I decided to let it go for now. Hopefully, someone on Alba could answer my questions. I focused on my meal, hoping it might help distract me a bit. It was a good start. Mmm. So good. All of it. Especially the wild boar. Slow roasted and so tender, I barely had to chew it.

I suddenly felt a pair of eyes boring into the side of my head. I turned to see one of the trainees, at another table, mad dogging me. He was part of an older group of Aes Sidhe. They looked like high-schoolers. He was taller than the others at his table and more muscular too. His cheekbones were as sharp as daggers, and he had clear blue eyes and golden-blond hair.

He and his group sat at a table at the far end of the dining hall. They sat in chairs, while the rest of us sat on benches, and servants came to them with more food and drinks. Servants also brought them bowls of glazed fruits and cakes. I didn't see any of that on the serving table where we got our food.

Kian and Kelan must have caught me looking his way.

"That is Niall," Kian practically whispered like he was afraid Niall would hear him, even though he was pretty far away. "Scathach's best student. Some say the best she has had in centuries."

"He sits in a place of honor and receives the Hero's portion of dinner," said Kelan. "Him and his closest comrades."

I glanced back at Niall. His chair at that table looked more like a throne, compared to the others. A servant poured him a drink.

"He even gets to drink mead," said Kian.

"Not the same mead the Danann drank," added Kelan. "But a fine quality all the same."

Niall's gaze closed in on me. The way he smirked as he raised his drinking horn my way, that was a challenge if I'd ever seen one. I chuckled and returned his smirk. Challenge accepted.

Chapter Six

As the sun rose the next morning, I half-expected to wake up in my own bed in my own room to the smell of Ma frying up breakfast. But no, I was in my cottage on Alba. I sat up in my bed for a while, thinking about Ma and Jenny, wondering what they were doing and if they were okay.

The Morrigan had said time moved differently in the Otherworld, that maybe only seconds or minutes had passed back home. But that wasn't going to keep me from worrying about them. Or missing them.

Breccan came over. I'd insisted on starting my training that day, and he insisted on getting me ready. He started by going over the map of Alba that was pinned to the wall above the hearth so I could get to know the land better.

Scathach's fort was a ringfort. Outside was a huge, round stone wall. There were smaller round walls inside. From above, it must have looked like a bullseye with Scathach's roundhouse in the center. From the outside gates, a road led to the shore and a harbor. Behind the fort was a Druids' grove. The rest of the island was all forests and hills. Trails ran through them, and there were what looked like borders marking off what looked like different territories.

Before I could even ask, Breccan started explaining what they were. "There are a number of wild Sidhe living on the island. Spriggans dwell in this part of the hills. They appear small and harmless at first but expand themselves to gigantic proportions. Avoid these ponds and streams here, here, and here. Get too close and kelpies will drag you under."

I nodded, taking it all in.

"Gillie-Doos are in this part of the forest," Breccan continued.

I chuckled at the name. Gillie-Doos.

"I assure you they are quite dangerous," warned Breccan. "And intensely territorial."

I got serious again as Breccan told me about the other Wild Sidhe that lived on the island.

"Pixies live in this part of the forest here," he continued. "They may appear innocent but are actually quite devilish. Pillywiggins live here. They

are tiny and ride on the backs of bees, but there are enough of them that they can command a swarm to attack anything or anyone they wish.”

I winced at the thought of that.

“While Scathach does govern the entire island,” Breccan started. “She respects their freedom. She simply asks we stay clear of their individual territories. You will find the paths and borders are clearly marked. You simply need to know what to look for. I will be glad to show you.”

“Yeah. That’ll help. Thanks.”

I tried to start packing my gear for the first day of combat training, but Breccan insisted on doing it himself. Man, it was still so weird having an actual servant. From what I’d seen so far, none of the other trainees had a problem with it. Probably because they were all royalty. No doubt they’d had servants their whole lives. Never had to do anything for themselves.

“So how long have you been on Alba?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?” Breccan asked back.

“Just — how long have you been on Alba?”

“I have been here some time. I originally worked in the kitchens. You are the first trainee I have personally served.”

“Which do you like better?” I asked.

Breccan stopped packing and stared at me.

“What?” I asked.

“I do not understand the nature of your questions, Master,” said Breccan.

“I was just, I don’t know, making small talk.”

Breccan responded with a puzzled look.

“Small talk. Friendly banter. I just want to get to know you.”

That seemed to make Breccan even more confused. After an awkward silence —

“Master, I will finish this for you and meet you at your training area,” he finally said. “I recommend you head to the dining hall to break your fast. Enjoy a hearty meal. You will have quite an eventful day.”

I nodded and headed out. I caught up with Kian and Kelan on the way to the dining hall. While we were in line, I scanned the people sitting at the other tables. Last night, the twins had told me about all of the different Sidhe royal houses. You could figure out who was who by the way they dressed.

Kian, Kelan, and their friends were all part of House Rowan. They said a lot of great scholars, poets, and philosophers came from that House. They tended to wear red tunics with gold trim. Their element was air, and their sign was the cat so a lot of them wore brooches or other jewelry with cats on them decorated with diamonds.

They were cool with the kids from House Ash who were known for being great artists and poets, and with the kids from House Hazel who had a history of turning out great scholars too.

Niall and most of his friends were part of House Birch. They were one of the most powerful Houses, so everyone kissed up to them. Their sign was the stag, and they wore a lot of gold. Rubies too. They were great warriors and supposed to be directly descended from members of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

As we lined up for food, I mentioned to Kian and Kelan what Breccan had told me about the Wild Sidhe living on the island. Kian and Kelan considered themselves experts on Wild Sidhe, especially the ones living on Alba, so they talked my ears off the whole time. By the time we got to our table, the topic of our conversation shifted to the Fomorians, the Danann's ancient enemy.

"Monsters," said Kian.

"Savages," said Kelan.

"They're still around?" I asked.

"They are not as formidable as they once were," Kian grumbled. "Not after their second battle with the Tuatha Dé Danann."

"However, raiding parties do turn up on our shores from time to time," Kelan added.

"The brutes," said Kian.

They weren't the only ones with Fomorian stories to tell. Everyone at the table had something to say. Some of them had actually had firsthand encounters with Fomorians. They went pale just talking about them.

It turned out a bunch of them had never actually even seen a Fomorian though. They told stories they'd heard from other people but spoke about Fomorians with that same mixture of hatred and fear the others' did. From what they said, I got the impression they'd been taught to hate and fear Fomorians from their parents and the other grown-ups in their lives.

"You think they're the ones trying to stop the Danann from taking power again?" I asked.

“It is possible,” said Kian. “I would not doubt it.”

“Then why don’t you all do something about it? A preemptive strike.”

“Oh, there have been many attempts,” said Kelan. “That is one thing all of the Houses agree upon is that the Fomorian must be destroyed for good.”

“Many times, fleets have been sent to the Glass Island, the Fomorian’s ancestral home,” added Kian.

“And?” I asked.

“It is gone,” said Kelan.

“The Glass Island? You mean like it’s been destroyed?” I asked.

Kian shook his head. “It has vanished entirely.”

“Seriously?”

“The fleets that had been sent out all followed the maps accurately,” said Kelan. “There was no mistaking. The Glass Island is gone. There is no trace of it.”

“Then where are these raiding parties coming from?” I asked.

Kian and Kelan glanced at each other then back at me. They said at the same time, “No one knows.”

After stuffing ourselves on an excellent breakfast of sausages and eggs, bread and fruit, we left the dining hall for our training areas. Kian and Kelan explained to me how, when it came to training, the trainees were separated into different levels or *tiers*.

I had a hard time concentrating. I kept thinking about The Glass Island just disappearing, but Fomorian raiding parties were still showing up and causing trouble. I decided to file that away for later, see if there was someone around I got to talk to in more detail about that. Maybe Scathach.

For now, I wanted my mind clear for training. Apparently, I’d done such a good job during my little “audition” with Scathach, when I first got here, that I’d skip the basics and start in one of the middle tiers.

“That is only befitting the son of Lugh, CuChulainn-reborn,” said Kian.

I forced a smile and nodded. Again with the *son of Lugh-crap*. It was funny. Growing up, since Ma wouldn’t tell me about my real da, I’d make up stories about him, like he was a special ops soldier or part of some elite police unit who took out serious bad guys and saved a lot of lives. But no matter what he did, he died a hero, and Ma was just too heartbroken to ever talk about him or even look at a picture of him.

Now I knew he was a god. Not just any god. He was *the* god. The perfect god. Lugh was the champion of the Danann, and he was not only their greatest warrior but the greatest at everything he did. That should have been awesome, knowing Lugh was my da. It just brought up more questions and feelings to deal with. I shoved all that aside. I needed to focus on training. I had to make a good impression.

Kian and Kelan were in a different tier than me, a more advanced one, but some of the kids we'd had breakfast with were in the same tier as me. I walked with them to the field where we'd be training.

Breccan was already there waiting for me. He handed me one of the practice swords he'd brought from my cottage along with a round shield that went from my fist to my elbow. It was made of oak and covered with leather. There were two leather straps inside. One fit around my forearm. I gripped the other in my fist.

Everyone else around me had out practice swords and shields and were warming up, practicing different moves and combinations. Crikey, they were good. Really good. I tried reminding myself they'd been doing this a lot longer than I have. I mean, this was my first day. But that didn't cut down any of the pressure I was feeling.

My practice sword was as heavy as the real one I'd used last night and just as well-balanced. I took a few swings and copied moves I saw some of the other guys doing. I smiled and let out a little chuckle. Yeah, this felt right. It was so natural, like the sword was an extension of my arm.

Our instructor called us to attention. He was an Aes Sidhe. Honestly, I couldn't tell you much more about him than that, because my attention was fixed on the girl standing next to him.

I'd seen her in the dining hall before, sitting with Niall and the rest of his clique. She was one of the few trainees on Alba that weren't Aes Sidhe but a human raised by them. And I could see why. She was gorgeous. Seriously, she made any girl I'd seen back home, in real life or on TV or in movies, look like a hag. She had the greenest eyes I'd ever seen and hair the color of fall leaves.

"Many of you know Lady Alaynna already," he said. "She has recently advanced to the topmost tier but has agreed to aid in your instruction today."

Alaynna. Her name was Alaynna.

She looked so sweet and gentle — that was until she picked up a training sword and shield and started leading us through some drills. Man, she was intense. A good fighter too. Real good. Tall and graceful, she made everything she did look like part of some deadly dance.

We started by practicing different strikes. Sweeps, slashes, and thrusts, overhead and crosswise blows. Long blows targeted the legs. Middle blows went for the torso. Then there were front blows, which targeted everything above the shoulders. Our shields could be used as weapons too. We could shove an opponent back with it, disarm them, or crack them upside the head if they got close enough.

After drills, Alaynna and our instructor squared off. They went at it like it was a real battle. Good thing they were wearing padded tunics and iron-brimmed helmets like the rest of us because those practice swords looked like they hurt.

The instructor and Alaynna showed us a disarm and takedown sequence. According to him, they'd learned it yesterday. This was just a review. Well, for them it was.

We paired up and started working on the sequence. Alaynna and our instructor walked among us, checking everyone's form. I attacked my training partner, but I kept getting the steps mixed up in my head. I hesitated. On one try, I almost lost my balance and fell over. My partner chuckled each time I made a mistake. Others noticed too and thought it was just as funny.

This was the son of Lugh? they were probably telling themselves. This was CuChulainn reborn? Pathetic!

My heart pounded so loud I could barely hear myself think. A couple of deep, steady breaths, and it started slowing down. I gripped my practice sword until my knuckles turned white. It didn't matter what I was doing, I hated making mistakes. But at least they made me want to try harder.

I knew I needed to keep my temper in check. I knew I'd inherited CuChulainn's strength, speed, and toughness. Not to mention his salmon-leap. What's to say I didn't inherit his warp-spasms too? I needed to be careful.

I thought about the combination, imagined the steps in my head. Maybe that's what was wrong. Maybe I was thinking too much. During my fight with Scathach, I didn't have time to think. I just went at it. Let my instincts take charge. I was able to stand up to her. Well, for the most part.

I took another breath to clear my head and tried the sequence again. This time, I didn't think so hard about each move. I went on instinct. And it worked. I did the combination over again with my partner just to make sure. I nailed it. Again. The jerk wasn't laughing anymore. Neither was anyone else.

There was another review sequence. After that, we were taught a new one. I totally dominated my partner. All the moves were coming more and more easily to me. I was so caught up in what I was doing, I didn't notice Alaynna until she was behind me.

"Excellent form," she said, her voice like honey.

A pleasant chill ran through me. "Thank you."

I stood there just staring at her until Alaynna made a *keep-going* gesture.

"The training period is not over yet," she reminded me.

"Right. Sorry." I returned to practicing with my partner.

"Very nice," she said. "You look as if you have performed that sequence before, on numerous occasions."

"Yeah. Kind of feels like it."

Before she moved on, Alaynna gave me some added tips like popping my hips more when I took down an opponent and twisting my wrist at the end of my sword strike to give it that little extra impact. Her suggestions definitely added a lot to my practice. Our training period ended. Breccan was ready with a towel, a fresh tunic, and a waterskin.

"You were quite impressive today." I turned to see Alaynna standing behind me. "Of course one would not expect any less from CuChulainn reborn."

My cheeks flushed. "Thank you."

At least she didn't say the *son of Lugh-part*.

"You mastered each new move and sequence you were shown almost instantly," she continued. "It almost seemed as if you already knew them and just needed to be reminded."

I chuckled. "Yeah. That's what it feels like."

Alaynna stepped closer, her eyes locked on mine. "I hope you appreciate these gifts you have been given."

I blinked with surprise. Where was this coming from?

"Everyone around you," she continued. "Has had to train and struggle to learn what you have been apparently born with. Do not take any of it for

granted.”

I stood there in disbelief as Alaynna walked away. I couldn't believe what I'd just heard, especially from someone who'd just met me, who didn't know me. Before I knew it, I was running after her.

“Hey. Wait.” I caught up with her. “You think you've got me figured out? Well, you're wrong. I didn't ask for this. Any of this. This whole-CuChulainn reborn-thing.”

“And?” Alaynna asked.

“I'm here because I have to. I have no choice.”

“Everyone has choices.”

“Not if I want to keep my ma and my sister safe,” I told her.

Alaynna's eyes widened. She looked surprised.

“Apparently I'm a marked man back in my world,” I continued. “And there are a bunch of goblins being sent by whoever who'll do anything to get me. Even use my little sister as bait. So yeah, here I am. Trying to make the best of this. If I beat the bad guys and help the gods take power, great! But what matters most to me is keeping the people I love safe.”

A tiny smile touched Alaynna's lips. “Perhaps I was mistaken about you.”

“No *perhaps* about it.”

Alaynna nodded. “Train hard. Train wisely. The time may come where you'll have to protect many people's mothers and sisters.”

I swallowed what felt like a stone that had risen in my throat. Kian and Kelan talked last night about how there would be some big battle ahead. They were so sure of it.

That wasn't exactly why everyone was on Alba to train. I'd learned some of the trainees had been here a long time already. When Aes Sidhe got to a certain age, they came to train on Alba so they could help protect their homes from enemies, mostly Wild Sidhe and Fomorians. But now, with the Fifth Cycle approaching, they might be needed to face an even greater threat.

“I hope to get the opportunity to train with you again,” she said.

“Yeah. Me too.”

Alaynna started to turn away then wheeled back around again like she had more to say. “Are you telling me you do not enjoy it though? The power? It must be thrilling.”

For a moment, I thought about denying it just to tick her off. Only I couldn't. That would have been a straight-up lie. And I had a funny feeling Alaynna would have seen right through it. Truth was, yeah, I did like it. Being able to fight like that and beat people who'd been training for longer than me, it was a rush.

"Just be careful, will you?" Alaynna asked. "Do not let it make you arrogant."

"If I do, I've got a feeling you'll be there to put me in check," I said, making a slapping motion.

Alaynna chuckled. Her mouth relaxed into a smile. She had a great smile.

"Alaynna!" It was Niall. He waved to her then waved her over to him.

"I must go," she said.

"I'm definitely up for training again," was all I could think of to say.

Alaynna smiled and waved goodbye. She hurried to catch up with Niall. The two embraced, looking very cozy. Here I'd thought Alaynna was perfect. Apparently, she had bad taste in boyfriends.

Chapter Seven

Our instructor gave us a water break. We each had a skin filled from the well in the fort. Oh man, best water ever. Someone could make a fortune bottling and selling this back in my world.

Next up was physical conditioning. I thought back to the conditioning I'd done during practices when I was still on a hurling team. Lots of pushups, crunches, burpees, and loads and loads of laps around the field. That was nothing compared to what went on here.

We started with some running — but not across a nice smooth track or flat fields. We left the fort and ran across the uneven terrain that led to the hills in the middle of the island. I tried not to think too much about how crazy this was. Instead, I focused on keeping pace with the other trainees around me. Before I knew it, I was passing people left and right.

Once we were in the forest, the whole thing became more like sprinting through an obstacle course, avoiding branches, leaping over boulders or fallen logs. I ducked, dodged, and jumped. My stride was never broken, and I soon found myself way far ahead of the rest of the trainees in my tier.

I reached the peak of the highest hill, where we were supposed to stop, and stood there, dizzy and lightheaded but in a totally enjoyable way. I stared down at the other trainees still trying to make their way up the hill and then back at the fort in the distance where we'd started.

What an amazing run. I barely felt the least bit tired.

The other trainees arrived, a few here, a few there. Once they'd all arrived, and everyone had caught their breath, we ran down the hill and ended up in a valley cluttered with giant logs and boulders. Before I could even ask what was next, the other trainees started picking up logs and boulders, pressing them over their heads, squatting with them across their shoulders, or tossing them as far as they could.

It was insane. They made it look so easy. I caught a few people glancing at me with curious looks and smirks, probably wondering why I hadn't started yet. Some of them chuckled back and forth.

My face got hot. I took a breath and stormed over to the nearest boulder. It was huge. I could barely get my arms around it. A few people stopped to

watch, probably doubting I could do it. It was a lot bigger than anything they'd been lifting.

I planted my feet and tightened my grip. I straightened my legs, rolled my shoulders, and the boulder popped out of the ground. I tossed it up, caught it over my head, did some reps with it, then hurled it as far as I could. Everyone watched the boulder sail toward the tree line.

I smirked back at them then looked for something else to lift and toss around.

Something even heavier this time.

That was how my mornings were spent. Combat training. Physical conditioning. We trained not just with swords and shields but with spears and daggers. We also learned how to wrestle and fight hand-to-hand. Every time, the moves felt so familiar. After a few tries, I had them down. Memories of my life as CuChulainn were definitely coming back to me.

Before I knew it, I was being advanced from tier to tier at Scathach's command. She spent a lot of time observing my training sessions. After a few visits, I'd catch her pulling each instructor to the side to talk to him or her. Next thing I knew, I was moving up the ranks.

It wasn't long until I was in the same tier as Kian and Kelan. They were just as psyched as I was to get to train with me. Our instructor gathered us on our practice field and told us a student from the top tier would be helping out with our session that day.

I smiled, hoping it would be Alaynna.

It was Niall.

I tensed up when his gaze hit mine. But instead of throwing back that same challenging smirk he gave me that first day in the dining hall, he just nodded and walked away.

We immediately paired up for sparring. Niall and the instructor walked through the rows checking out each trainee's form, giving tips and corrections where necessary. Niall never left my line of sight. It seemed like he had one eye on me the whole time. It messed up my concentration. Of course, that was probably exactly what the jerk had in mind. I ended up paying more attention to him than my opponent.

Finally, Niall strolled toward me. My muscles tightened. My face got hot.

“What happened?” he asked. “You were doing fine when we first started. Your form was fluid but forceful. Now you are distracted. Tense. What happened?”

You started getting in my head, was what I wanted to tell him. Instead, I just shrugged.

“Try it again.” The way Niall was standing, I could tell he wasn’t going away until I did as he said.

So I did.

“Good. Relax. Remember the sword is a part of you. You move. It moves. Very nice. Much better. Do you feel the difference?”

I nodded, hating to admit he was right. I kept practicing. It wasn’t easy with him standing there like that. But I got used to it. Soon, I was back in the zone.

“Much better.” Niall gave me a half-smirk as he walked away. “For a moment, I actually believed you were CuChulainn reborn.”

I stood there, watching him go off to help some other trainees. My first night on Alba, in the dining room, it felt like Niall was challenging me. The best student on the island vs. CuChulainn reborn. So why was he helping me? He came back later on to give me more advice and pointers. He kept complimenting me too every time I did a good job. What was he up to?

Niall ended up choosing me, Kian, Kelan, and a few others for some special spear-training at the edge of our training field. Growing up watching fantasy movies and TV shows had made me think swords were all-that, but since I’d started training here on Alba I was starting to realize the spear was the king of weapons.

Niall stood in front of us, wearing a padded tunic and helmet, armed and ready.

“You want to go into battle with at least two spears,” he said, holding them up. “Three if you can handle them.” He hefted one spear into a throwing grip then signaled for Kian to let go of a clay jug that had been tied to the highest branch of a nearby tree. It swung free.

“The smaller ones are for throwing. Take out your opponent in the distance if you can.” He tossed the practice spear. It hit the jug square in the middle, right where we’d been taught to throw it. The jug shattered. Sand spilled everywhere.

Niall signaled for Kelan to charge him. “The heavier spear is for close combat. Use it to keep your enemy away from you.” He demonstrated.

“Control them. Keep them at a manageable distance. Remember you have more than just the point. You can slice with the sides of the spear head or strike from overhead.” He demonstrated these moves along with some straightforward jabs at Kelan, who could barely keep up. “And never forget, there are two ends of your spear.”

Niall feinted a jab then caught Kelan’s ankle with the other end of his spear, taking the leg out from under him and driving him to the ground. I blinked with surprise. Okay. I was impressed.

Niall had us partner up and practice some strikes and combinations, first showing us the best places to aim for. Eyes, throat, groin, kidneys, ribs, and between the shoulder blades if you ever ended up behind your opponent.

“Stab, twist, and yank each time,” said Niall. “Very good.”

Niall then brought out a training dummy for us to work with. It was gigantic, at least three times as tall as any of us. I bet it was supposed to be a Fomorian. It had to be.

The dummy was attached to ropes and hung from the same tree as the jug had been.

“If you do ever find yourself face-to-face with a Fomorian,” Niall said. “Distance is your ally. Go for the arms, try to force them to drop their weapon. Go for the knees. Hobble them. If you can, thrust high up in the inside inner arm or inside of the thigh. There are arteries there. It will bleed out in moments.”

Everyone was dying to practice on the Fomorian dummy. I could tell they were imagining it was the real thing. They each let out a war cry when they attacked it, but their strikes were sloppy. Most of them missed their marks. Some of them attacked too hard, and their spears got stuck.

Then it was my turn. I didn’t grow up hating Fomorians like the rest of them did. I just concentrated on my attacks and hit each target. I even slashed the insides of both thighs and arms as Niall instructed. It was easy. The blades on these practice spears were almost as long as the blades on our swords.

He smiled and nodded. He caught up with me after training and offered me a sip from his water skin. “I have been hearing good things about you,” he said.

“From Alaynna?”

Niall grinned. “From her. And others. I have to admit I was quite impressed today.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying not to sound too confused or too suspicious, like I thought he was up to something. “Then again, I am CuChulainn reborn.”

Niall chuckled. “That became very apparent watching you train today.” The look on his face. The sound in his voice. If I didn’t know better, I’d have sworn he really was impressed. I glanced around me. Everyone was gathering together for our run.

“I should probably go,” I told him.

“Of course.”

Niall nodded and stood by casually as I followed the others. I started off slow, pacing myself, then started overtaking one person after another, including Kian, Kelan, and finally our instructor. Heavy footsteps hit the ground behind me, closing in, growing louder and louder. Rapid like machine gun fire. I glanced over my shoulder. It was Niall. Crikey, where did he come from?

He was smiling, but his gaze was determined and set. I grinned and poured on the speed. No way was I going to let him pass me.

Chapter Eight

Niall and I made it to the hilltop at almost exactly the same time. It was too hard to tell who reached it first. My lungs were on fire. I swore my heart was about to beat a hole through my chest. But no way was I going to let any of that show. Not in front of Niall.

He stood at the edge, staring out to sea, then waved for me to join him. “This world is an endless sea, filled with islands, pockets of life. Alba is just one of many. Do you know any of the others that exist in this world?”

I did. Sort of. I’d read about them. Then again, I’d been finding out the books I’d read weren’t entirely accurate. I stood at Niall’s side, shading the sun from my eyes as he pointed out a group of islands in the distance. There were five islands clustered together.

I’d never seen them before in my life — but their names came to me in an instant.

“Falias. Findias. Murias. Gorias.”

“That is four of them,” said Niall. “What about the one at the head of them all?”

“Mag Mell. All five of them together are known as Tir na nÓg, the crown of the Otherworld. The birthplace of the Tuatha Dé Danann.”

“Very good. Know of any of the other islands?”

I searched, found one, and pointed. “That one. Is that Aoife’s island?”

Aoife was Scathach’s sister. She trained warriors too and was not a very nice person from what I’d read. She and Scathach had a pretty nasty feud.

“It *was* her island,” said Niall. “But it has been abandoned. Ever since Scathach killed her. It was a vicious duel. They reached a cliff top. Aoife slipped. She barely hung on by one hand. Scathach tried to save her, but Aoife would have none of it. According to Scathach, she let go and fell to her death smiling.”

Wow. That was intense.

“Do you know any of the other islands?” Niall asked.

I shook my head. Niall waved me over and pointed off in the distance, in different directions. “First off, there is Tir fo Thuinn. It is the land under

the ocean, home of the merpeople and other denizens of the deep. Over there is Ildathach, the multicolored place. That is said to be the home of the Morrigan.”

“Said to be?”

Niall grinned. “Do you think the Morrigan ever invites guests into her home?”

I grinned back. Good point.

“What about the Glass Island?” I asked.

Niall nodded like he was impressed. “You know about the home of the Fomorians.”

I nodded. “I’ve heard it’s missing. No one’s been able to find it.”

“No. They have not.” He scowled. “But that has not stopped their blasted raiding parties from reaching our shores.”

“In my world, back at home,” I started. “I had these goblins hunting for me. They’re supposed to be just soldiers. Someone else gives them orders.”

“I am aware,” said Niall.

“Do you think it could be the Fomorians calling the shots?” I asked.

Niall frowned and stared across the sea. “We are taught about the wars between the Fomorians and the Tuatha Dé Danann. The Fomorians were never the same after that final battle. They’d lost their greatest leaders. They have appeared so directionless since then. We never see more than four or five of them at a time in their raiding parties.”

“Does anyone know how many Fomorians are left?” I asked.

Niall’s eyes widened for a moment like my question had caught him off guard.

“I do not know,” he said. “Nor does anyone else I can think of. My uncles were part of the first fleet sent to the Glass Island after the raiding parties began appearing. They could not believe an entire island could disappear like that. Like it had never been there. They took part in several of the expeditions that followed to find the Fomorians’ new home. They returned home disappointed each time.”

My heart sped up a little. I started questioning the training I’d been doing. And wondered if it would be enough. I mean, to make an entire island vanish and how the Fomorians were appearing and disappearing out of nowhere, that sounded like it took a lot of power. Would I be ready to face whoever was behind all this? I tried to squash that thought. In my experience, that kind of thinking guaranteed defeat.

The other trainees finally made it to the peak. Kian and Kelan watched me with Niall, a bit jealous. I started toward them, but Niall caught my arm.

“Are you ready to head back?” he asked. “Or do you need more time to rest?”

That was a challenge if I’d ever heard one. It was *so* on. We started sprinting down the hill, passing surprised-looking trainees who were still trying to reach the top. The challenge going downhill was keeping your balance while maintaining your speed. It required a lot of hopping, leaping, and a bit of skidding here and there.

I’d seen a lot of trainees trip, fall, and tumble down this hill. I’d been lucky so far not being one of them. And I sure as heck didn’t want today to be the day that streak ended. Not in front of Niall.

We ran neck-and-neck most of the time. Niall would dash ahead a bit. Then I would. We went back and forth. I started using my salmon-leap. Not all out. Just little bursts, here and there, landing on flat bits of land then using them as springboards to launch myself even further.

A quick glance behind me. Niall was nowhere in sight. Yes! I slowed down a bit and decided to coast for a while but kept checking over my shoulder, ready to pour the speed back on if Niall showed up.

It then was I noticed none of the terrain and foliage around me looked familiar. Did I leave our usual path? When did that happen?

Treetops suddenly rustled all around me. I sensed something moving — a bunch of somethings — moving all around me — but couldn’t see anything. I caught a green and brown blur out of the corner of my eye but was too late to react.

It hit me in the chest, knocked the wind out of me, and sent me flying. I braced myself for a rough landing. Instead, I got snatched mid-air and hurled toward some trees. What was going on?

I managed to twist my body around and go limp. My back smacked against the tree trunk. Hurt like a you-know-what, but at least nothing was broken.

I pushed myself to my feet, ready for a fight. Only I couldn’t see anyone. I knew they were there. I could hear them rustling the leaves, grunting like apes. They were surrounding me. I snapped off a tree branch. It was about the size of a hurley and just as heavy too.

I turned and finally caught a look at who I was facing. Somehow I just knew what they were. Gillie-Doos. Wild Sidhe. Ape-like, hairy buggers,

whose coats could change color to blend in with their surroundings.

Two ran up on me on all fours, hollering and showing off some sick-looking fangs. They were fast. Almost already on me. I swung my branch, clocking one of them upside the head. The other one got his arms up in time. I went low, knocking his feet out from under him.

The bugger did a flip and landed on his feet. He then hit me with some sort of drop kick that sent me flying. I hit the ground, flat on my back. The back of my head smacked against the ground with a loud thud. Pain streaked up and down my spine. My head swam.

I managed to shake it off and don't ask me how I managed to hold on to that tree branch, but I did. I hit the ground and rolled backward onto my feet.

Just in time too. That second Gillie-Doo came flying at me. I fought through the pain and cracked it in the gut with the branch and one more time upside its head. I didn't have time to make sure he was knocked out.

Two more Gillie-Doos charged me from either side. They moved so fluidly. The trees surrounding us didn't slow them down, not even a tiny bit. I smacked one and turned, ready to face the second. He was right on top of me. I grabbed him and rolled through, coiling my legs under him then sending him flying.

I got back to my feet. Only to get slammed by another Gillie-Doo. Then another.

I hurt everywhere but still managed to keep on fighting. I moved on instinct, swinging that tree branch against anything that moved.

Then came a fierce sound. It forced a silence all around us. It was somewhere between a horse's whinny and a dragon's roar. The Gillie-Doos froze in place, their faces stretched with fear.

A sound like thunder. The ground shook.

A huge black stallion exploded through the brush. The Gillie-Doos shrieked and started to run. They could tell, just like I could, this was no normal horse. Its eyes glowed red and crackled with energy. Its hooves gave off sparks when they struck the ground. A name flashed into my brain.

This was a Pooka. One of the most powerful, dangerous, and unpredictable of the Wild Sidhe. It faced off with the remaining Gillie-Doos. They stood there petrified. It looked like they were afraid to even breathe.

The Pooka struck the ground with one of its hooves. The earth cracked. A tremor shook the Gillie-Doos and sent them running, carrying their wounded over their shoulders. The Pooka glanced around, almost like it was making sure they were gone. It then turned and gave me its undivided attention.

I swallowed, keeping my eyes locked on it while my fingers sought out the tree branch I'd been using as a weapon. I'd dropped it when I was getting beaten back and forth. I was sore all over, but I doubted the Pooka would care about that and decide to go easy on me.

The Pooka looked me over, up and down. I had the tree branch back in my grasp. I was ready. But the Pooka just snorted and tossed its head. Then dashed off into the forest.

All I could do was stand there and watch it disappear into the distance.

Chapter Nine

I pushed my aching body, step-by-step, the rest of the way down the hill. Every breath hurt. By the time I got to the bottom of the hill, everyone was already there, even the slow-pokes. Servants were there, handing out water skins. Niall and my instructor looked like they were having an intense conversation. That ended when they spotted me.

Niall chuckled. "It is about time you made it."

His expression turned serious along with everyone else's when I got close enough for them to see my bruises and scrapes from my fight with the Gillie-Doos. Breccan, Kian, and Kelan rushed over and helped me sit on a tree stump. I explained what had happened.

"You'd dashed ahead of me," said Niall. "Then did one of your leaps. I lost sight of you."

"I was still careful," I told everyone. "I didn't see any of those border markers. I didn't know I was in their territory."

"You were not," said Kian. "We are still far from it."

"You are certain?" Niall asked.

Kian nodded, looking very sure of himself. Niall ran to get our instructor. He gathered everyone, and we headed back to the fort. Niall, Breccan, Kian, and Kelan walked with me. I focused on every step I took, making sure they were nice and light. Every time I stepped down too heavily, a bolt of pain shot through me.

Niall's grinned. "At least you got to taste some actual combat. And against Wild Sidhe. It must have been exhilarating."

Now that it was over, the more I thought about it — yeah, it was pretty sweet.

"I did have a little help," I admitted.

I told them about the Pooka. The four of them tossed the same concerned looks back and forth.

"I cannot remember the last time anyone mentioned a Pooka here on Alba," said Niall.

"That is because there never has been one here," said Kian.

“Believe us. We would know,” said Kelan.

“We are knowledgeable of all forms of Wild Sidhe,” Kian reminded me.

“Especially those living on Alba,” Kelan added.

Niall looked convinced. And if what Kian and Kelan were saying was true, if there’d never been a Pooka on Alba, then what the heck was that I saw back there? That had saved me from those Gillie-Doos?

“Breccan, you will take Colin to the Druids for healing,” said Niall.

Breccan was slow to answer. He looked off in his own world. Niall, Kian, and Kelan rushed to join the others.

“The Druids’ grove should be this way,” said Breccan.

“I’m fine,” I told him, wanting to know what the heck was going on with the others.

“Consider it a precaution, Master,” said Breccan. “I would hate for you to succumb to some hidden, internal injury.”

He looked so concerned there was no way I could say no.

“Alright. I’ll let the Druids check me out,” I told him. “On one condition.”

“You do not need to levy any conditions on me, Master. Whatever you say, I must do without question. It is my duty.”

“Okay then. From now on, I don’t want you calling me ‘Master’ anymore. You’re going to call me Colin, okay?”

Breccan stammered. “I cannot do that. I am a servant. You are my master. It would not look right.” The poor guy actually looked afraid. Like he might get in trouble or something.

I thought for a moment. “Alright, how about this? When we’re out in public, around the camp, you call me ‘master.’ But when no one else is around, when it’s just you and me, you call me ‘Colin.’” I grinned. “That’s an order.”

Breccan chuckled. “Yes, Mas —” Looked around. “Colin.”

Good. I was glad that was sorted. We continued to the Druids’ grove. It was my first time there. It was thick with oak trees, and there was an open area with a bunch of round cottages and herb gardens.

Druids moved about. Some cared for trainees with injuries. Others tended to the herbs they were growing. They looked nothing like Druids from the movies. No long white beards and heavy robes. There were men and women, all different ages. They wore tunics and breeches and cloaks made of either animal fur or brightly colored feathers.

One of them came to meet us. An older guy, short and kind of stocky. He had a bit of a beard. I thought he was going bald, but when he got close enough to us, I could see he'd shaved his head from ear to ear. It only looked like he had a receding hairline. I now noticed other Druids had shaved their heads the same way as him. It must have been some sort of ritualistic-thing.

"I do not think I have seen you here before," Breccan told him.

"I recently arrived from Findias, in Tír na nÓg," the man said. "I am Gannon."

"My master was injured during an encounter with the Gillie-Doos," said Breccan.

"Oh dear," Gannon waved me to his side. "It shall be an honor to tend to you, Colin Caulfield. CuChullain reborn."

"You know me?" I asked. Of course he would. Everyone else in Alba did.

Breccan said he'd stay if I needed him. I told him it was okay. He could head back to the fort. I winced when I pulled off my tunic. Maybe I was more hurt than I thought. I knew my face was messed up a bit. My left eye had started closing up, all swollen. I ran the tip of my tongue on the cut on my lip and tasted a bit of blood.

I now saw the constellation of bruises covering my arms, chest, and stomach, along with scrapes on my elbows and palms. I imagined more on my back. Gannon had me sit on a bench while he summoned over a younger Druid, probably some sort of apprentice, and gave him some orders.

The apprentice returned with a water skin and something I'd once seen in science class called a mortar and pestle. It was filled with dried herbs that Gannon ground into a powder. He mixed in a little water and stirred it into a paste.

I caught a whiff and made a face. Gannon chuckled.

"Not the most pleasant of smells I admit," he said. "But I guarantee this poultice is quite potent."

I decided to trust him. He finished preparing his poultice and held the mortar with both hands. He shut his eyes and started breathing deeply. His hands glowed bright green, and it looked like whatever energy he'd generated passed into the poultice.

I gasped in wonder. Gannon dabbed poultice on my wounds. Yeah, it stank, but I could feel it working almost immediately. It seeped through my skin, healing my bruises and cleaning and closing my scrapes. It made me feel itchy and tingly all over. It was hard to sit still, but somehow I managed.

Gannon told me to stay put while the poultice dried. He then brought over a bowl of water and a rag. I cleaned off the poultice. I wasn't itching or tingling anymore, and my bruises and scrapes were completely healed. My eye wasn't swollen anymore, and the cut on my lip was gone too. It was amazing.

I looked to Gannon. "Thank you."

He handed me my tunic. "I have not seen you around the grove yet. Time here is supposed to be part of your training."

"Yeah, I heard we're supposed to learn about herbs and trees and nature."

"To start with, yes."

Gannon guided me toward one of the huts. It was like a little library. There were wooden shelves filled with leather-bound books and racks of scrolls. Tables and chairs were set up, and some trainees were scattered about reading.

"What are these?" I asked.

"Our histories. Although in your world, I am certain they would be referred to as myths and legends."

"I thought you guys didn't write any of this down. That everything was passed down orally."

Gannon grinned. "There was a point when it was decided to begin keeping written records. For the oldest recollections though, for events that no one was present to experience firsthand, we rely on the Witnesses."

Before I could ask who these "witnesses" were, Gannon walked me over to some shelves filled with human skulls. Each one was decorated with specific runes and colored patterns.

"These are the skulls of ancient Druids, preserved by magic," Gannon started. "When they lived, they observed many important events. Some give accounts of events that occurred long before the arrival of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Their memories are secured within their skulls. The runes and patterns indicate the events each Druid has witnessed."

"How does it work?" I asked.

“Choose a skull, sit and commune with it, and you will experience their memories of each event as if you were there firsthand.”

I stared at the Witnesses with big eyes. I could feel the power radiating from them. A hum rose in my ears like the Witnesses were already trying to talk to me, all at once.

“We’re free to come in here anytime?” I asked.

Gannon nodded.

“Is there anything about the wars between the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians?”

“Of course. Some of the Witnesses can tell you about your father, Lugh. Many of his tales are recorded in some of the scrolls and folios as well. I can set them aside for you.”

I forced a smile and agreed to let Gannon put them aside for me, even though I knew I wouldn’t touch them.

“I have a family friend back on Earth,” I told Gannon, trying to change the subject. “His name’s Sean. He’s a member of a group called the Druids of Danu.”

“I have heard of them,” said Gannon. “A fine order.”

Hearing that from an actual Druid in the Otherworld made Sean’s group seem more legit now. I thumbed through some scrolls.

“Sean helped me, Ma, and Jenny get settled when we got to Phoenix,” I said. “He still looks after us, I guess. He’d give me all sorts of books on CuChulainn and the Danann.”

“You and this Sean, you are close?”

“Yeah. I guess so.” Even though I was still trying to deal with how he and Ma kept all those secrets from me. At least the two of them were there for me growing up. More than I could say for Lugh.

“He said his group will look after my ma and my sister, Jenny, while I’m here,” I continued. “Something had happened. These goblin-thingies kidnapped Jenny, tried to use her to get to me. Sean said the only way to keep them safe was to come here and train.”

“You do know time moves differently in this world,” Gannon reminded me. “To them, you might be gone mere minutes.”

“I know. Still ...”

“You miss them. Your mother and sister especially. I hear it in your voice.”

I sighed. Yeah. I did.

“Would you like to see them?” Gannon asked.

My face scrunched up a little. What did he mean by that? He waited for my answer.

“Of course I would,” I told him.

Gannon smiled and led me to another cottage in the Grove. He said it was his cottage. There wasn't a whole lot of furniture in it. A bed, a table with a couple chairs, a small bookshelf, and a hearth. Against the far wall, there was a worktable and shelves with colored stones, jars of dried herbs, strips of barks, stuff like that.

I sat at the table in the middle of the room. Gannon poured some water into a clay bowl, sprinkled in a little of this and a bit of that. As he carried it over, his hands glowed like they did with the poultice. He set it on the table in front of me.

I looked inside the bowl. My breath caught in my throat. I saw Ma, Jenny, and Sean on the water's surface almost like it was a TV screen. They were still in Ma's office in the Fenian. They were standing in the exact same places they were there when I left with the Morrigan.

I smiled. “Can I see what they're doing now?”

“You are. This scrying spell is allowing us to see your family as they are this moment.”

For real? I'd been gone for a long time now. I looked again. It took me a moment, but I finally noticed the differences. Ma was at a bit of an angle, like she was heading for the door. Sean was turning toward her with a worried look on his face. And Jenny was on her way back to her chair.

The Morrigan were right. Days might be passing here, but only moments were passing back home. That was a relief. For one thing, Ma and Jenny stood a better chance of being safe. It also meant they weren't going to miss me as much as I was missing them.

Chapter Ten

“I was told you would be here.” Scathach entered Gannon’s cottage. “I need to see Gannon as well, so you have saved me an additional trip.”

“Is this about what happened today?” I asked. “With the Gillie-Doos?”

“Do not forget this Pooka you have claimed to have seen either,” Scathach added.

Gannon became extra focused at the sound of the word *Pooka*. The three of us sat at the table. I told Scathach and Gannon everything that had happened, how I had gotten separated from Niall and was attacked by the Gillie-Doos. Then the Pooka appeared.

“So it has reached Alba,” Gannon told Scathach.

I looked from him to Scathach. What were they talking about? *What* has reached Alba?

Scathach sighed. “We are sharing this with you because of who you are, Colin.”

“Something is happening,” Gannon continued. “All about our world. Wild Sidhe, everywhere, have been feeling it, like an oncoming storm. It has been causing them to panic and attack without reason.”

“It has to do with the Fifth Cycle, doesn’t it?” I asked.

Gannon and Scathach exchanged a troubled look.

“No one knows for certain at the moment,” said Gannon. “Many Druids, such as I, have been investigating. However, yes, that is our best guess.”

“The appearance of this Pooka is a more immediate concern,” said Scathach.

“I agree,” said Gannon.

“Why?” I asked.

“Pookas are very unpredictable,” said Gannon. “Very dangerous.”

“In all my time on Alba though, a Pooka has never been seen on the island,” said Scathach, confirming what Kian and Kelan had said earlier. “It had to have been sent here.”

“By who?” I asked.

Scathach and Gannon exchanged another troubled glance. They had no idea, did they?

“But the Pooka saved me,” I reminded them. “If it’s such a threat, why did it do that? Why didn’t it just let the Gillie-Doos finish me off?”

Scathach frowned. “We cannot take any chances.”

Gannon nodded in agreement. The two of them went on to discuss the next steps in dealing with the Pooka. Patrols. Traps. Containment. Worse, if needed. I kept trying to speak up for the Pooka, but Scathach shot me down with a hard look each time. I finally left.

“How are you feeling, Master?” Breccan asked, coming out of nowhere as usual.

I glanced around. There were Druids and trainees around, which had to be why he’d called me Master instead of Colin like I’d told him he could.

“Yeah. Gannon fixed me up,” I told him.

Breccan nodded. We started walking off together.

“And Mistress Scathach?” Breccan asked. “Did she come to check on your condition as well?”

I scoffed. “That would mean she actually cared about me.”

“Colin,” now that we weren’t in earshot of anyone. “I assure you Mistress Scathach cares a great deal about you.”

“She’s got a strange way of showing it. Back there, in Gannon’s cottage, that was like the longest conversation we’d had since I’ve gotten here.”

Breccan grinned. “Trust me. She cares.”

I stared back at him wanting to know what he meant.

“Servants talk,” was all he said.

I still wasn’t convinced. “She seemed to care more about that Pooka than anything.”

Breccan’s jaw clenched. “Yes, word is already starting to spread about your fight with the Gillie-Doos and the Pooka you encountered.”

“It has? Already?”

“I suppose Mistress Scathach came to consult with Gannon on how to handle the situation.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Have they decided what they are going to do about the Pooka?” Breccan asked.

“Gannon and the other Druids are going to work some magic to try and find it. Then they’re going to move in on it. Capture it. Kill it. They’re sort of taking it one step at a time.”

Breccan nodded, turning away just a bit. “Good. Pookas are a menace. They should be destroyed.”

Wow. Where did that come from? All this time I’d never heard Breccan say anything bad about anyone or anything. He was quiet on the way back to the fort and to my cottage. I told Breccan I wanted to be alone for a while. Before he left, he prepared some fresh water, soap, and towels for me to clean up.

I fell asleep for a bit. I woke up hungry and figured it was probably close to lunchtime or mid-day meal as they called it here. Niall called out to me from the doorway to the dining hall. Alaynna was with him, so were some of the members of their little clique. He and Alaynna looked happy to see me. The others? Not so much.

“Good to see you back on your feet,” said Niall, clasping my hand.

“All thanks to your mysterious Pooka,” Alaynna added.

“So you’ve heard,” I said.

“The entire camp knows,” said Niall. “It will not be long before your epic encounter with the savage Gillie-Doos and the mysterious Pooka are immortalized in lines of verse.”

Alaynna giggled, so did a few other people.

“I cannot believe you actually laid eyes on a Pooka,” she said.

“He is lucky it was not a Fomorian,” said Darragh.

He was part of Niall’s clique. He let out a sharp laugh, so did Niall and some of the others. I noticed the smile fall from Alaynna’s face. She withdrew from everyone and headed into the dining hall.

Niall noticed too. “I say it is time we get in the queue as well.”

The others didn’t need to be told twice. They headed into the dining hall. I asked Niall if I could talk to him alone for a bit.

“I just want to thank you for the extra help you’ve been giving me,” I told him.

“You are quite welcome,” said Niall.

“When I first got here,” I started. “I thought you didn’t like me.”

Niall smirked. “Do you know how one gains entrance into Scathach’s camp?”

I gazed at the fort walls in the distance. “You have to make it across a wasteland full of Wild Sidhe. Then, when you get here, you’ve got to find a way over the outer wall barehanded.”

It was seriously tall, and the stones were packed together incredibly tight. In the legend, CuChulainn used his salmon-leap to get over it. I couldn’t imagine how anyone else could do it without some sort of gear.

“Not everyone makes it either. Yet you were given direct passage,” Niall reminded me. “Dropped off in the main courtyard.”

“Yeah, by the Morrigan,” I reminded him.

“Indeed. You are special. Chosen by the gods. Some accepted that readily from the start. Others cannot help but be envious.” Niall sighed and showed me a tiny grin. “But some of those individuals are coming around. I have been the best in Scathach’s camp for a long time now. But you will be better than me one day. It is undeniable and only a matter of time. However, the Fifth Cycle approaches, and if there is a force out there that wants to keep you from helping restore the Tuatha Dé Danann to their rightful places and insist on threatening the lives of those in both your world and mine — perhaps petty grievances should be set aside so we can all be properly prepared.”

I stood stunned for a bit. All this time, I’d thought Niall was a jerk. But I was starting to think maybe I was wrong about him. I held out my hand.

“Sounds good.”

Chapter Eleven

Niall and the rest of his clique had their usual table and were waited on by servants, while the rest of us could only watch in envy. I sat with Kian, Kelan, and some others I'd been getting to know. All they wanted to talk about were the Gillie-Doos and the Pooka. They sounded really concerned about the Pooka. Gannon and the other Druids were casting spells trying to locate it, and Scathach had sent her guards out to patrol the woods.

"The Druids will most likely find some way to contain it with their magic," said Kian.

"They are bound to destroy it then," said Kelan. "It would be too reckless to have such a creature running about on Alba."

Kian and the others agreed. But destroying the Pooka didn't sit well with me. I knew a little bit about Pookas. They were shape changers. Their favorite trick was to turn into a beautiful wild horse, and when someone tried to take him home, the Pooka would throw that person on their back and take him for one heck of a wild ride.

That might not seem so bad, but Pookas also had power over the elements. They would demand a portion of a farmer's crops every year, and if the farmer didn't deliver, the Pooka would make sure next year's crop never came through. I could understand why they might be worried about that. In this world, no crops equaled no food.

But still, this Pooka had saved my life.

I lay in my bed that night, reliving my encounter with the Pooka, remembering how tall it was and how its muscles moved fluidly beneath that sleek black skin. There was an intense fire in its eyes. It radiated sheer power, and even though the Pooka did save me, I was still wary of it. Like if I did the wrong thing, disrespected or threatened it somehow, it would turn on me.

I don't know why, but I had to try to see the Pooka again. It was an urge, a craving that wasn't going to go away easily. I finally gave in. I had to go out in the woods and try to find it.

That night was similar to a lot of nights here in the Otherworld. There was always a star-filled sky, and the moon was always bright no matter what size it was. I knew I wouldn't need a torch when I went into the woods.

All I had to do was get over the outer wall. Scathach's legendary wall. It was at least five times as tall as I was, and there was nothing even resembling a handhold. Whenever I left the fort to train, it was always through the main gates, but I thought back to what Niall had told me, how other students were resentful of me because I didn't get here the same way they did. I didn't cross a wasteland, fighting off Wild Sidhe. I didn't go over the wall either.

At this time of night, the main gates weren't an option, not with the guards posted there. I was sure if I looked long enough, I'd find some other way to sneak out of the fort. But I didn't have that kind of time. I had to try going over the wall. Part of me wanted to do it just to prove that I could. Even though there was no one around to witness it, I had to do it for myself. I calculated the distance I'd need then ran, coiled my body up, then threw myself into the air.

I gave it everything I had. Crikey, I went flying — straight over the wall. I'd have been happy just landing on top of it. But instead I cleared it. The ground rushed toward me. I went limp. I hit and rolled with it and was back on my feet. I smiled and looked around.

Oh yeah, sweet leap. Too bad no one was around to see it.

I made my way down the forest trails. I thought I'd start looking for the Pooka where I'd last seen it, over near the Gillie-Doos territory. Just not *too* near it.

At about that time, I started feeling like I was being followed. I listened close and heard faint footsteps behind me. I hurried ahead then doubled-back around and hid behind some brush. Whoever — or whatever was following me would have to pass by this spot. Then I'd have them.

"What are you doing?"

A voice startled me. I whirled around. It was Alaynna. She gave me the weirdest look, like I'd grown a set of eyeballs in my forehead.

"I was being followed," I said.

"Yes. By me," she said. "A fair attempt at trying to turn the tables and ambush me. But back to my original question. What are you doing out here in the woods at night?"

She crossed her arms and stared at me.

“What are *you* doing out here?” I asked her.

“I was out for a walk when I saw you leave your cottage. I thought I would follow you.”

“Why?”

“You looked so intent, like you had a mission to complete. So ...?” Alaynna was waiting for an answer to her original question.

I hesitated, trying to think of some excuse and maybe even a way to get rid of her. But the Alaynna I’d come to know was very persistent. Not to mention smart enough to see through any lie.

“I’m looking for the Pooka,” I admitted.

“What? Why?”

“Everyone’s hell bent on catching it. And when they do — I’m not sure I want to think about it. But that Pooka, I swear it saved my life. It chased off the Gillie-Doos.”

Alaynna’s arms slowly dropped to her sides. “And what are you going to do if you find it?”

“Nothing really. I just want to make sure it’s okay, I guess.”

Silence hovered between us. Alaynna then smiled.

“Lead the way,” she said. “I will assume you have some idea where you are going.”

“Are you serious?”

Alaynna smiled. “I have always wanted to see a Pooka.”

I chuckled and waved for her to follow me. I still planned on heading back to the last place I’d seen it, but on the way, for some reason, I started thinking about this spot Breccan had shown me. A watering hole a lot of animals liked to visit. There was a lush clearing and bushes full of wild berries.

I felt compelled to check there first. I don’t know why. I just did. Alaynna followed me without question. As we got close to the watering hole, my skin started to tingle. My heart raced. Something told me I’d made a good choice. I hurried my pace, Alaynna caught up. We stopped short the moment I saw it.

It was the Pooka. It raced around the field, chasing a group of Will-o-the-Wisps, who at this distance were nothing more than flickering lights dancing through the air. Alaynna moved next to me. She took in the sight in front of her and smiled.

“Beautiful,” she breathed.

I smiled. I had to agree. I didn’t doubt the Pooka was dangerous. It radiated sheer power, and I still remember the sound it made before it appeared that day and the look of terror on the Gillie-Doos’ faces.

Only now it was playing with these fluttering fairies, snorting and whinnying, prancing and dashing about. It was an amazing sight. We sat and watched them for a while. Alaynna giggled off and on.

Next thing I knew, she laid her hand on mine. A pleasant chill ran through me. I didn’t want her let go. Sadly, she ended up pulling her hand away.

After a while, the Will-o-the-Wisps flew away, leaving the Pooka alone. The Pooka then turned its head our way and looked right at us. It didn’t look the least bit surprised, like it knew we’d been there all along and didn’t mind one bit.

Crikey, how lucky were we to actually find the Pooka again? Seriously, what were the odds. A sudden thought came to me. It was the Pooka. Somehow, it had reached out to me, like with some sort of telepathy. It wanted me here. Did it know I was worried? Did it do this to make me feel better?

Either way. Very cool.

The Pooka trotted away without a care. Once it was gone, Alaynna and I started back to the fort. On the way, I told her about my life, first in Ireland than in the States. She then talked her life growing up in a royal court. She confirmed what I’d already thought — that she was a human child taken by the Aes Sidhe and raised as their own.

Living among them, in their land, breathing their air, eating their food and drinking their drink, she grew as strong and as fast as any full-blooded Aes Sidhe. She also gained the ability to live a long, long life. Some of the things she described, during trips into the mortal world she’d made — Crikey, she had to be almost a couple hundred years old. But she looked about sixteen.

We reached the fort.

“Just so you know,” I started. “I won’t tell Niall about you and me being out at night like this.”

“Why?”

I was caught off-guard for a moment. “Because the two of you are ...”

“Friends,” she said. “We have known each other all our lives. Our families have been close for generations. He should have no problem with me being out on my own. If he does, that is unfortunate for him.”

She walked ahead. Next thing I knew, she was scaling the wall like a spider, leaving me completely speechless.

Chapter Twelve

The search continued for the Pooka. Groups going out for physical conditioning were told to be extra careful, that they should stick together, and no one should wander off. Scathach's guards continued to patrol the woods, while Gannon and the other Druids worked their magics to try to find the Pooka. I hid my smile every time I heard they were having no luck. I had a feeling they wouldn't find the Pooka unless it wanted to be found.

I caught myself thinking back to the night Alaynna and I saw the Pooka. It was kind of fun sharing a secret like this with her, and I knew I could trust her not to tell anyone. I don't know why. I just felt like I could trust her with anything.

When we were together, I thought about how much Niall liked her. He talked about her a lot, about how they'd grown up together and their families were close allies.

"It is only a matter of time before we are betrothed," he'd told me one time.

I smiled, trying to look happy for him, even though I knew Alaynna didn't feel the same way for Niall as he did for her. She and I had begun spending more time together too, sometimes training one-on-one, other times at the Druids' grove whenever Niall was busy. She rarely ever mentioned Niall. When she did, it sounded like she only considered him to be a friend.

Poor guy. At some point, he was going to learn the truth, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be around when that happened. I tried not to think too much about it. It was *so* soap opera.

Besides, I had more important things to focus on, other than my combat training of course. The Fomorians. Niall had said no one knew how many of them were left anymore. I'd checked with Kian and Kelan. They had no idea either. Combine that with the fact no one knew where the Fomorians

were coming from and that their ancient home, the Glass Island, had completely disappeared — there was too much mystery, too much we didn't know. To me, that sounded potentially dangerous. Back in the day, the Fomorians were the biggest threat to the Tuatha Dé Danann. Who says they still weren't?

I decided to visit the Treasury at the Druids' grove and do some research. Treasury, that was what Gannon and the other Druids called the cottage that held all the scrolls and folios, not to mention the Witnesses.

Gannon had shown me how to decipher the runes and patterns on each skull so I could know what events it had witnessed firsthand. I chose a skull and sat down with it. I stared into its empty eye sockets and a rush of information flooded me. Voices and images. I learned how, millennia ago, Ireland was known as Inis Fáil, and it was a mythical land full of great power. People all over the world tried to find it. Not everyone was successful. And many who made it didn't last very long.

The first group to settle on Inis Fáil was led by a woman named Cessair. They tended the land and made homes for themselves. But a flood came and wiped them out. Several centuries later, another group reached arrived. They were led by a man named Partholon. His people didn't do much better. They got wiped out by a plague.

The next group was really important. They were led by a man named Nemed. His group had the most success of all — at least up until then. His people were the first to battle with the Fomorians. Only back then, they weren't monsters. They were human pirates who worshipped a goddess named Domnu.

Domnu. Hearing that name snapped me back to reality. I'd come across that name before in a book or on a website somewhere. She was one of the oldest goddesses and known as the Queen of the Dark Places. I remembered feeling a chill the first time I'd read about her, like something was crawling up and down my spine. I got that same chill, hearing about her again this time.

I picked out another of the Witnesses. It told me more about the Fomorians and how they kept trying to take over Inis Fáil, but Nemed's people beat them back every time. Finally, they realized they couldn't do it on their own, so the Fomorians prayed to Domnu for help. She was the one who gave them the power to finally beat Nemed and his people and take over Inis Fáil by turning them into the twisted monstrous giants.

Some of Nemed's people were able to escape, but most were caught and killed or made into slaves. But Nemed was blessed by Danu. She appeared to him in the form of his dead wife, Macha, and led him into the Otherworld, to Tír Na nÓg, where he fathered the Tuatha Dé Danann with Danu, while she was in Macha's form.

I sat back in my chair, stunned. Sean would love to know about this. I had to keep going. I had to know more. Another Witness told me how the Danann were raised in Tír Na nÓg by their parents and trained by the greatest Druids who had ever lived. When they were ready, they took Inis Fáil from the Fomorians.

Lugh, my da, wasn't with that first group. He was part of a next generation of Danann. He wouldn't make a name for himself until the second time they fought the Fomorians and beat them for good. The Fomorians weren't such a big deal any more after that. They popped up in stories every now and then but were nothing to worry about. None of the other Witnesses knew anything about Domnu either. I couldn't find any scrolls or folios that mentioned her either.

Domnu. I got that creepy chill again.

Suddenly, my breath caught in my throat.

Everything went black.

I woke up to Gannon calling my name over and over. I felt like I'd passed out, but I was still sitting in my chair. My mouth was dry. Cold sweat kissed my forehead.

Gannon got me a cup of water then sat with me.

"You seized up," he told me. "You were pale. Shaking."

I stared at Gannon. His eyes were filled with concern. I needed to tell someone about what had just happened. Gannon definitely seemed like the best bet.

"I'd been consulting with the Witnesses about the Fomorians and —" I was almost afraid to say her name. "Domnu. Then, it all went dark — at first. Then I saw something."

"What did you see?"

I tried to speak but only ended up swallowing. It felt like a huge rock was lodged in my throat. I kept trying. Gannon stopped me.

He reached for my hand. "Show me what you saw instead."

Show him? How was that supposed to work? I decided not to ask and took his hand.

Everything went dark for a moment, like it'd done earlier.

Through the darkness, I heard a chorus of droning voices. The sound rose. It was joined by chanting. The darkness stirred. I could make out men in dark robes.

Candles flickered, revealing an altar decorated with skulls and seashells. I caught glimpses of faces beneath the robes. Some human. Some not so much.

The droning grew louder. The chanting became faster. It was in old Irish. All I could make out was *Croí Dorcha*. The Dark Hearted.

Fomorians gathered, each one ugly in its own *special* way. They were joined by goblins like the ones I'd seen in the park. The Fomorians and the goblins all wore armor and banged their swords against their shields in a brutal rhythm, while grunting, growling and howling. Behind them, there were other creatures swarming and stirring within the shadows behind them.

There was a symbol on their shields. The cloaked figures wore necklaces with the same symbol on them. It was a skull with a long snout filled with teeth. It looked like some sort of sea monster.

I pulled away from Gannon, panting and trying to catch my breath. I looked to Gannon. The expression on his face told me he'd seen the same thing I did.

And he didn't know what to make of it either.

"It's got to do with Domnu, doesn't it?" I asked.

Gannon frowned and looked like he was trying to think of something to say.

"Domnu has not made her presence felt since the second war with the Tuatha Dé Danann," he finally said. "And there has been no trace of her worshippers for centuries."

"What if they've just been laying low? Domnu *and* her worshippers? She's a goddess. She's immortal or at least has a long lifespan. Maybe this has been her plan since the prophecy of the Fifth Cycle came out. I mean, you saw it. She has an army, not just the Fomorians and those goblins. There were even more waiting in the shadows."

Gannon sat there, appearing deep in thought.

"You are tied to the Fifth Cycle in ways that have yet to be fully explored," he finally said. "This vision you had should not be discounted." He smiled. "Along with the argument you have just made. Your father, Lugh, would be proud."

I faked a smile. Why did he have to bring up my da?

Chapter Thirteen

“Just a reminder, Colin,” said Gannon. “Do not let others know about your vision yet. Not until we have further proof to support its accuracy.”

I nodded and headed out the door. He made sense. We shouldn't start a panic if we could help it.

"There is one thing we can be thankful for," Gannon added.

I stopped to hear what he had to say. After the possibility had just risen that I'd be facing an ancient goddess and her army, I would definitely have appreciated some good news.

"At least we know the Morrigan is on our side," said Gannon.

I stopped to think about that. It seemed like he did have a point. The Morrigan had warned me that day in the library of what was coming and brought me to Alba to train. A weight dropped from my shoulders. I thanked Gannon and told him goodnight. Yeah. The Morrigan was on our side. We definitely had that going for us.

I thought about the Morrigan all the way back to my cottage. She was the most confusing of all the goddesses. She went by several different names, and it was never clear if she was one person or group of them. The next day, I consulted with the Witnesses and learned so much more. The Morrigan, She-Who-Was-Three, was more ancient than the Tuatha Dé Danann. Cessair and Partholón's people both worshipped the Morrigan. And they referred to her as old even back then.

She would always be wherever a big battle was brewing. She would choose sides, and whichever side she chose ended up having the best chance of winning. She possessed mad power. The Witnesses showed me scenes from the second battle the Danann had with the Fomorians. She created columns of fire to cage both armies, to make sure no one got away. She could control the elements too. She made it rain blood on the Fomorians and not just a light mist either. We're talking a full-on storm. She

could control hordes of snakes, packs of wolves, and flocks of — no, *murders* of crows to attack her enemies. I had a feeling those were just a few of her powers too.

After the battle, both sides left their dead out for what was called The Morrigan's Feast. This was a tradition. The Morrigan's crows would feed on the corpses, while she claimed the souls of the honored dead, from both sides of the battle, and took them away with her to her home in the Multicolored Place.

Having the Morrigan on our side did help me feel a little more confident. But I didn't want to rely on that altogether. I stepped up my combat training. On Alba, we were also supposed to practice writing poetry, learn about the powers of sacred plants and trees, and work all sorts of metal-crafting. It was all about creating balance within.

Learning about plants and trees from the Druids was okay. Some of them had medical value. But the metalwork? It wasn't like we were making swords or spearheads. We were supposed to make jewelry and other delicate, little things. It was all too frustrating. Everything I tried to make fell apart, and don't get me started on how many times I burned my fingers. And poetry? That definitely wasn't me. I didn't see how any of that would help me anyway.

It made me think about how my da, Lugh, was supposed to be good at everything he did. Obviously, I wasn't. And I had to learn to be okay with that.

Niall became my full-time sparring partner. We ran drills and sparred during our free time. He showed me these cool flourishes with swords and spears. They looked flashy but were more than just about showing off. Each motion in these flourishes was a deadly cut all on its own. He demonstrated it with a practice dummy. His sword moved like a flying buzzsaw and sliced practice dummy up like it was lunch meat.

The thing was, the harder I pushed myself the more mistakes I made. Niall never let up during sparring, which was exactly what I wanted. He took advantage of every opening I left him, would take me down, and force me to yield. But I kept getting back up again.

That's not good enough, I'd keep telling myself. You're not good enough. You can do better. You have to do better.

That day was especially bad. I felt like such a loser, I couldn't do anything right, but I still refused to quit. The more frustrated, the angrier I got, the hotter my skin felt, to the point where I wanted to throw off my helmet and tunic.

My guts churned. Every muscle in my body shifted and pulsated. All I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears.

Niall took me down then walked away, without forcing me to yield. "We are done for today."

I sprang to my feet. "We're done when I say we're done."

Niall gave me this angry but confused look.

"Could you not feel it?" he asked. "What was happening to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your features were changing. Your arms and legs were bulging in places. You looked crazed." Niall paused. "It was the warp-spasm."

It felt like I'd gone deaf for a moment. Was that the warp-spasm I was experiencing? I was so angry in that moment. I had to admit it. Niall was right stopping when he did. If I'd kept fighting, I could have easily lost control.

I remembered all the times I'd lost my temper over something that had happened at school or during a hurling match. I'd hurt other kids. Blackened their eyes, busted their lips or noses. But now, if I wasn't careful, I could actually kill someone.

I didn't want that. I'd do anything to make sure that didn't happen. I started pushing myself to my feet. Niall took my hand and helped me up the rest of the way.

"We can continue training," he said. "But it is important you learn how to control the warp-spasm. You know now how it feels when it starts to overcome you. That will help. When you feel it starting, focus on your breath, try to channel the energy elsewhere."

I nodded. That sounded good.

"I will remain aware as well. I do not wish to fall victim to your warp-spasm." Niall smirked. "And if I need to, I will take you down."

I chuckled. Yeah, right. I took my helmet off to wipe the sweat from my forehead and drink from my water skin. Niall and I got ready for another round of sparring.

Before we started back up again, I asked, "Niall, you'll help me keep this a secret, right? I don't want anyone to know about this. I just want to

get this thing under control.”

Niall nodded. “You have my word.”

We trained until the afternoon without any other incidents. More time passed, and in other training sessions I did feel the warp-spasm start to rise up inside me, but I was able to squash it before I lost control.

In time, Scathach finally advanced me to the top tier with Niall and Alaynna. Other than us, there were four others. It was the smallest of the tiers. The best of the best. I got to spend more time sparring with Niall and Alaynna, which was great. They pushed me just as hard during our physical conditioning too. The three of us were always at the top of the hill before the others and then back down again. I was lifting heavier logs and boulders, pressing them over my head, and hurling them a little farther each time.

That day, I was determined to lift this ginormous boulder, bigger than anything I’d ever tried before. It had been staring at me the last few days, almost daring me to lift it.

“Give up. I doubt you will be even able to budge it,” Niall called out.

We’d been doing that a lot lately. Talking trash to each other when we were trying to lift. You know, get inside each other’s head, trying to psych each other out.

My hands clenched the boulder. I had a solid grip and planted my feet. I lifted from my legs and hips. I growled, my muscles straining. Sweat gathered along my eyebrows.

“Careful. Do not hurt yourself,” Niall called out.

That was one of our favorite taunts. Alaynna shook her head, already tired of our routine, as she fixed her grip around a large log. My boulder finally shifted and came free from the ground. I raised it a few inches, strained and lifted it to his chest height.

My back twinged a bit — but I heaved it over my head. Niall was silent, staring, so was Alaynna and everyone else as I jogged a few steps and hurled the boulder as hard and as far as I could, while letting out a triumphant roar.

It crashed into a grove of trees, shaking the foliage and landing with a huge thud.

“Oh, yeah!” I threw my hands over my head. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

Niall ran over to congratulate me. Alaynna stayed back, but she smiled and gave me a polite bit of applause.

The trees shook again. But not from the direction where I'd hurled the boulder. From behind us. Giant hands tore through the foliage.

There were three of them. Each one was three times as tall as any of us and seriously bulky. One was covered in patches of fur. It had a head like a boar with huge tusks, gripping what looked like a giant whip. Another was scaly with four arms. Each hand wielded a massive club. The last one, half his face looked normal, the other half looked like melted candle wax. He swung a huge axe over his head as the three of them charged us.

These were Fomorians — actual Fomorians. The expressions on everyone's faces — Niall, Alaynna, even our instructor for that matter — told me this must have been the first time any Fomorians had ever set foot on Alba. Everyone dashed for cover.

I was ready to join them when I noticed Alaynna frozen with shock. I tackled her, knocking her out of the way right as the Fomorian with the axe swung at her. The blade sank into the earth.

This would have been a great time for my Pooka-buddy to make an appearance. His backup would have been appreciated. But I had no time to wait.

While Ol' Ugly tried to pull his axe free, I took advantage and leapt on the handle, using it like a springboard. I shot into the air and landed a sweet Superman-punch between his eyes. The Fomorian staggered and doubled-over.

As much as I wanted to finish him off, I needed to check on his two buddies. The scaly one stood over an unconscious Niall, all four clubs raised. Oh man, Niall'd gotten knocked out already? Scale-Face looked like he was about to finish him off when he spotted me.

The one with the boar's head closed in on Alaynna, flourishing his whip.

"Run, girl! Do something!" I yelled to her.

That snapped her out of her trance. The Fomorian's whip cracked. Alaynna dove out of the way. It ended up taking a big chunk out of the ground instead of her.

Ol' Ugly was still trying to shake off my Superman-punch, so I focused on Scale-Face. He came at me, swinging one club after the other, like he

was trying to play the drums. All I could do at first was just jump, roll, and dive out of the way.

I glanced at Alaynna. She'd gotten some distance between her and Boar's Head. She grabbed a nearby boulder and let out a bloodcurdling wail as she hurled it at his face. That boulder was huge too. I'd never seen her lift anything that heavy, but she did, and she chucked it as easily as if it was a basketball.

It must have been an adrenaline-thing. No time to figure it out now.

Boar's Head tried to dodge Alaynna's boulder. It cracked him on the side of his head. He dropped his whip and staggered. Alaynna let out another wail as she charged Boar's Head. She caught him mid-stagger, both hands clasped together, right in the groin. Boar's Head did a somersault in the air before landing. Crikey, I'd never seen her so ferocious before.

I kept dodging Scale-Face. I finally got some distance and ran toward one of the logs we'd lift. Scale-Face charged me. I hurled the log low. It spun like a propeller and caught him in the legs. I covered the distance with a salmon-leap as he fell then clocked him under the chin before he hit the ground.

Alaynna straddled Boar's Head's chest and pounded him mercilessly, screaming the whole time. Her eyes were wide and crazy. I was about to pull her off of him when I saw Ol' Ugly was ready for round two. His beady little eyes narrowed on me. He let out a sick roar.

Alaynna was still pulping Boar's Head. Scale-Face didn't move. Neither did Niall.

I faced off with Ol' Ugly. Fine. Whatever. Bring it.

"That is enough!"

It was Scathach. Her voice came out of nowhere. What was she doing here?

She faded into view, along with Gannon, like they'd been invisible. The three Fomorian had frozen in place. They didn't even blink. Their forms shimmered. They turned into three of Scathach's guards. Each one removed some sort of silver necklace.

Alaynna sat in the grass, confused and exhausted. Our instructor, Aedan, returned with the rest of the tier. He looked pretty calm, like he was in on the whole thing. I raced over to check on Niall.

He stirred just a bit. That's when Gannon came over. He crushed a dried herb and held it under Niall's nose. Niall coughed and sputtered. His eyes

then fluttered open. He tried to get to his feet, but Gannon insisted he stay put, so he could check him out, make sure he wasn't seriously injured.

Scathach smiled. "Well done to the three of you who stood your ground and fought. You are the top tier of students on my island. When the time comes, you will be the first to experience real battles. Whether it is to protect your people from Wild Sidhe or Fomorians. Or to support Colin Caulfield and the Tuatha Dé Danann when it is time for them to return to power."

Niall sat up as Gannon kept checking over him. His face was flame-red. I couldn't tell if he was angry, embarrassed, or both. Alaynna was on her feet now, holding herself. Her face was pale and expressionless. What was going on with her?

Scathach's hand landed on my shoulder with a clap. "Very impressive, the way you and Alaynna used your natural abilities and your surroundings to defend yourselves."

"You were there the whole time?" I asked.

"Gannon's magic concealed us," she explained. "And his charms gave my guards the appearance and power of a typical Fomorian. Again, well done."

"Thank you," I muttered.

Scathach went to personally congratulate Alaynna. Alaynna smiled and thanked her, but she still looked pale and shaky.

"Congratulations." Niall stood beside me now. He was frowning and not standing as tall as he normally did.

"Hey, she was proud of all three of us," I reminded him.

"Yes, but you and Alaynna did not get disabled so easily," he said. "You fought all the way to the end."

Oh man. He really was taking this hard.

I turned my attention to Alaynna. "Is she all right?"

"What do you mean?" Niall snapped back. "Why would she not be?"

"Maybe you should talk to her."

"Why?"

"The two of you are friends, aren't you?"

Seriously? First he couldn't even tell something was wrong with Alaynna, even though I could see it clearly. Then he had to ask why he should be checking on her instead of me?

I watched Niall approach Alaynna. They talked for a moment. Alaynna nodded, arms crossed. She nodded and forced a smile like she was reassuring Niall that she was okay. She then walked back toward camp. Niall tried to catch up to her, but she held up a hand for him to stop. I guess she wanted to be alone for a while.

Chapter Fourteen

Everyone made such a big deal out of me back at camp, you'd have thought me and Alaynna had fought actual Fomorians, not some of Scathach's guards in disguise. Then again, it's not like we knew that at that time. I mean, those charms they'd used did a real good job of making them seem like the real thing.

I felt bad for Niall. He was still beating himself up for — well, getting beaten up and knocked out so easily. I was more worried about Alaynna though. She still looked upset when I saw her later that day. At dinner time, the three of us were supposed to receive the Hero's Portion. We were going to sit at the big table with those comfy chairs, have people wait on us, get fancy desserts and drink mead. I didn't even really know what mead was or what it would taste like — but I still wanted it really bad. Mead was legendary. All the big-time heroes drank mead.

Niall didn't want to go. He said he didn't deserve it. I did my best to try to talk him out of it. No luck. I asked Kian and Kelan to join me. We waited for Alaynna — but she never showed up in the dining hall.

Word got back to us she wasn't feeling too well and was skipping dinner. I thought about how she'd reacted during the fight with — what we thought were Fomorians. The way she went from petrified with fear to straight-up psycho had me worried. And now she was hiding away from everyone, that had me even more worried.

I tried enjoying my meal, trying to convince myself Alaynna would be fine. She was as tough as they came. Whatever was troubling her, she'd get a handle on it. That turned out that wasn't the case. What Alaynna was going through was even worse than I could've ever imagined.

Over the next few days, in training, Alaynna was either really distracted or overly aggressive. Nothing in between. It took me a while, but I finally worked up the guts to confront her.

Niall had beaten me to it. I spotted the two of them standing near the outer wall. Alaynna was leaning on him. Her head was almost on his shoulder. I hope that meant she was finally going to open up about what was troubling her. It made sense she'd tell Niall. Like she'd said before, their families were close. They'd known each other since they were little. And who knows maybe they really would be *betrothed* someday.

I headed back to my cottage to clean up and chill for a while. At dinnertime, I decided to pass by Alaynna's cottage on the way to the dining hall, hoping I'd run into her. I got there, just as she was stepping out of her cottage — flanked by four of Scathach's guards.

They were in armor and helmets, carrying spears and shields. They walked Alaynna toward Scathach's villa at the center of the camp. I squinted, not exactly sure of what I saw at first. But Alaynna's wrists were shackled, her arms in front of her.

The look on her face. She was scared and *that* scared me, because I'd never seen Alaynna afraid of anything before.

"Oh, good. They are taking that filth into custody," said Kelan.

"What did you say?"

I wheeled around so fast, Kelan leapt out of the way, looking like he was afraid I was about to knock him out. And I just might have.

Kian stepped, holding up his hands like he was pleading. "You must not have heard. Lady Alaynna has been keeping a secret for us. She is part Fomorian."

"What?" Alaynna, part Fomorian? No way.

"Not all Fomorians are monstrous giants," said Kian. "Some look very human."

That sounded familiar. I remembered reading something like that back when Sean was sneaking me books from the IHF library. Lugh's mother — my grandmother, I guess — was supposed to have been Fomorian. She was supposed to have been gorgeous too, like Alaynna.

"Even if that's true, there's no way Alaynna knew anything about it," I insisted.

"She admitted it to Niall, herself," Kelan. "Can you believe it?"

I suddenly felt like I'd been hit in the stomach. "And he turned her in?"

“Of course he did,” said Kian. “Why would he not?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. I ended up just walking away. Apparently, news about Alaynna had spread all over camp. Everywhere I went that was all anyone talked about.

“I cannot believe it!”

“There must be some mistake!”

“It makes sense now.”

“She has always been so ferocious in sparring.”

“Disgusting.”

“To think she has been lurking amongst us the entire time.”

It wasn’t just the average trainee saying these kinds of things. People I’d thought were Alaynna’s friends were throwing all kinds of shade too. I couldn’t believe it.

Niall was the worst, going on about how ashamed and disgusted he was to have been friends for so long with such a “monster.”

“To think I actually wished to be betrothed to that beast,” I heard him say.

It took everything inside me not to rip him in half. The only thing that held me back, not just from knocking out Niall but everyone who was spewing filth about Alaynna, was fear of the warp-spasm. I’d been doing a good job squashing it when sparring. But this was different. These were people attacking someone I cared about. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to control myself if I confronted any of these people.

Over the next few days, people would not shut up about what was going on with Alaynna. According to Kian and Kelan, word had gotten back to her home, House Rowan. Her adopted parents, the King and Queen, were in huge trouble. Their court had turned against them.

Alaynna was locked up too. Apparently, there was a special building where troublemakers got sent for a little “time-out.” People went out of their way to pass by and yell all sorts of trash at Alaynna. They probably would have done more if Scathach didn’t have guards outside her door. I wanted so bad to stop by and talk to Alaynna, let her know I was on her side. But her guards weren’t letting anyone near her.

Finally, early in the morning, Scathach summoned everyone to the courtyard, including servants, for a big announcement. This was it. This was about Alaynna. Niall and his friends were near the front of the crowd.

Murmurs coursed through the crowd, but everyone went silent when Scathach stepped onto her balcony. Alaynna stood behind her with a guard on either side. I zoomed in on Alaynna. She still looked nervous — but was forcing herself to stand tall.

Scathach appeared outside the entrance of her roundhouse. “It appears we have been deceived by one of our most renowned.” She swallowed. “As well as one of our most beloved students.” She cast a sad glance toward Alaynna. “Alaynna of House Rowan has admitted that she has been deceiving us. Not only us but others, all her life. It has long been believed that she was a human child adopted by Queen Eva when she was still a princess.” She paused. “Only Alaynna has admitted that it was all a lie. That she is in fact the child of Eva’s former handmaiden — and a Fomorian raider.”

Everyone around me started yelling, calling Alaynna names. I was hot. I wanted to run around and shut every single one of them up by shoving my fists into each and every one of their big mouths. But I managed to force my feet to stay still. And my fists to unclench. Luckily, Breccan was with me. He turned out to be a very calming influence.

I looked to Alaynna. She was trying so hard to stand tall and keep her head high. Scathach held her hands high in the air silencing everyone instantly.

“Rather than face banishment outright,” she continued. “Alaynna has chosen to exact her right to face the gauntlet. If she is successful, she may remain among us.”

The crowd went nuts again. Some were yelling. Some were actually laughing.

“She should go back to her kind,” said Kian. “Wherever they are.”

“She should be forced to tell us where they are,” added Kelan. “She was most likely sent as a spy.”

I glanced at my two friends and resisted the urge to smack their heads together. I then spotted Niall and some of his buddies off to the side. He looked pretty pleased with himself.

“No way she makes it through the gauntlet,” said Kian.

“No way at all,” said Kelan.

Both of them shut up when my glance turned to a glare. They looked confused, like they were wondering why I would care about what happened to Alaynna now that the truth about her had been revealed.

Twelve of the top trainees would be chosen at random to form the gauntlet. Their names were written on scraps of paper and drawn by Scathach from a bowl during a big presentation.

Niall didn't get chosen and just about threw a fit over it. I got picked though. And from the order I'd been chosen, I'd be at the very end. The last one Alaynna would have to face in the gauntlet. If she even made it that far.

"It will be up to you to finish her off." Niall came looking for me as I was suiting up for the gauntlet. "You and I both know Alaynna will make it past the others, but it will take a lot out of her. Make sure you finish that monster off."

My face was hot. I didn't say anything. He didn't wait around for me to answer. He just walked away, like he assumed I was onboard.

I would have torn after him if Breccan hadn't been there.

"What do you think you will do, Colin?" he asked. "If you have to face off with Lady Alaynna?"

I sighed. My shoulders slumped a bit. "I don't know. From the way everyone's been talking and acting, I can understand why she kept it a secret. And I don't believe she's bad. Especially that nonsense about her being a spy. I mean, seriously?"

"This will not be the first gauntlet I have witnessed," said Breccan. "They are brutal. In your position, at the end, you will be forced to watch her fight the entire time. And she will get hurt. There is no escaping that."

Yeah, I'd imagined the same thing.

"Will you be able to stand by and merely watch?" Breccan asked. "I know you two are close. I know you care about her."

The way he said that last sentence confused me a little. Did he think Alaynna and I were more than friends or something?

He waited for me to answer his question. But there was no time. A runner fetched everyone involved in the gauntlet. We assembled in the middle of the great courtyard. Each of us was dressed in the same padded tunics and helmets we wore when we sparred. We all had wooden swords and shields too. I heard more than one person mutter about how they wished they had real weapons.

A crowd surrounded us. Everyone in camp, trainees and servants, were there. I knew Alaynna was on her way when they all started booing and calling her names.

Scathach ordered them to part and make way. Four guards escorted Alaynna. She was so intense. Anyone caught in her gaze flinched just a bit. She wore a padded tunic and carried an iron-brimmed helmet in her hand. Her hair was slicked back with lime and looked like a horse's mane. Her face and arms were streaked with woad, this blue war paint ancient warriors used to wear into battle. She traded a look with Scathach. If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn Scathach was wishing her luck.

The other attackers and I stood in two lines about twenty feet apart, and we were instructed to stand about ten feet from each other in our lines. Alaynna stood at the opposite end of the gauntlet. She looked just as eager to tear into her attackers as they did her.

Scathach explained the rules. Alaynna had to get through all of us to get to the other side. Only one of us could attack her at a time, and we couldn't attack until the person before them had been dropped. Not yielded. Dropped. As in beaten so bad they weren't able to continue.

"If she makes it to the end of the gauntlet, then she has earned the right to stay on Alba," said Scathach.

Gannon and two other Druids stood behind her. When she was finished, Scathach waved them forward. They carried out a prayer of sorts, blessing those who proved to be worthy. I held my breath, hoping it would be Alaynna.

One of Scathach's assistant trainers blew a huge decorative horn. The gauntlet had begun. The crowd went wild. Everyone cheered for us to take Alaynna apart. But it looked like Alaynna had them all tuned out. If they were getting to her, it definitely didn't show.

She slipped her helmet on her head, let out a roar, and raced toward her first opponent before he could even blink. She swung her sword over her head in a ferocious arc.

Her opponent was not ready at all for her. He barely raised his sword in time to block it. She had him on the defensive. I'd seen that guy spar before. He was no joke. He had some serious moves. But against Alaynna, that day, this might as well have been the first time he'd ever picked up a sword.

Crikey, I'd seen her in action a bunch times before this, but she never moved this fast or hit as hard as she did right now. Had she been holding back all this time in practicing and sparring?

Alaynna doubled her first attacker over with a shot to the gut that made me wince. She then flattened him with a strike to the back that I could hear even as far away from the action as I was. The guy had barely hit the ground when Alaynna charged her next opponent. He rushed to meet her. Their swords smacked and cracked against each other. I'd seen this guy spar too. He was really good.

He was ready for Alaynna too. He blocked and parried her moves. They had a good back-and-forth going. He even managed to smack Alaynna a couple times. Once on the shoulder. Another time in the ribs.

Alaynna buckled and dropped to one knee. I found myself wanting to rush in and help her. The crowd was in a frenzy, thinking she was beat.

Her opponent swung. At the last possible split-second, Alaynna rolled out of the way and popped to her feet. Nothing wrong with her leg at all. She'd suckered him in beautifully. Now he was off-balance. She swung, and her sword cracked against the back of his helmet. He fell flat on his face.

I caught myself smiling, very impressed.

Alaynna met her next opponent head-on. Then the one after that. And the one after that. I stared in awe. She'd gone through five of her attackers. Anyone else in camp would have been finished by then. But Alaynna had strength to spare, taking down one after the other.

Finally, she started to slow down a bit. Her steps were heavier, so was her breathing. Her guard slipped more with each of her remaining opponents. She was getting hit, more and more. But she kept at it, drawing reserves of strength and was able to come out on top each time and make it further down the gauntlet.

Darragh was next. He actually licked his lips before he charged Alaynna. She blocked his first strike and barely evaded his next one. I'd never seen Alaynna on the defensive so much at all. I caught a desperate grimace on her face.

In my head, I cheered her on. I bit my lip to keep from shouting out loud. Darragh spun around, swinging his sword. I'd never seen him move so fast before. Alaynna raised her sword in time to block. But the force of Darragh's strike broke her blade in two.

The crowd really went nuts when that happened. They thought Alaynna was done for sure.

But Darragh made the mistake of toying with Alaynna instead of just finishing her. He poked with the point of his practice sword and slapped her

with flat of the blade. The crowd laughed it up. They thought it was a riot.

Alaynna finally found her opening. She was almost too quick to follow. She struck Darragh's wrist with the rim of her shield, disarming him. She caught his sword before it hit the ground and started using it against him. I caught myself smiling, definitely impressed. Alaynna didn't make the mistake Darragh did. She finished him off really quick. One blow dropped him to a knee. The next one hit across the head so hard his helmet flew off.

Alaynna didn't waste time celebrating. She had two more opponents to get through before she reached me. Once she had passed me, that was it. She'd have made it. Alaynna was running on adrenaline and instinct by then. For every blow she landed, each of her opponents landed two or three.

Only Alaynna's were more precise. She roared like an animal each time.

She left the last guy — the last guy before me — in a heap on the ground. She limped toward me. She'd lost her helmet in the last fight. Blood ran from her nose. One of her eyes was swollen shut. Welts and bruises ran along her arms, even beneath the woad. She'd abandoned her shield, clutching her side. She didn't breathe so much as coughed and wheezed. She still raised her sword with her other hand, ready to fight.

The crowd screamed for me to finish her off. Alaynna was trembling, ready to face me. I raised my sword. Held it out to the side. And let it go.

It clattered against the cobblestones. The crowd went silent. I mean, completely. Alaynna's eye, the one that wasn't swollen, opened wide.

I took a couple steps back and waved her forward. She moved cautiously, watching me the whole time in case I might land a sneak attack. But I didn't. I didn't want to either.

Alaynna passed by me. She'd made it through the gauntlet. The crowd erupted, screaming and yelling. They wanted both our heads now. Which was fine by me. Let 'em try. The only person who was silent was Breccan. He'd worked his way to the front of the crowd. He smiled and gave me an approving nod.

Scathach silenced them all with one wave of her hands. "Alaynna has made it through the gauntlet. She may stay if she wishes to do so."

"No!" Niall stomped toward Scathach. Trainees and servants hustled to get out of his way. "This is an outrage. Colin Caulfield did nothing to stop her like he is supposed to."

I grinned. "According to the rules, Alaynna only had to make it through the gauntlet. I didn't hear anything about me having to stop her."

Scathach returned my grin. That was twice now it looked like I'd impressed her.

"I will look into that for future reference," she said. "Until then, Alaynna may stay on Alba."

"But she admitted to having Fomorian blood," Niall continued. "She does not belong here."

"She made it through the gauntlet," Scathach repeatedly slowly and very menacingly. "That gives her the right to stay."

Niall blinked and backed up a step. "My father will hear of this." He waved toward the crowd. "All of our fathers will."

Scathach strode toward him. "I trained your father. I trained everyone's father here. And their fathers before them." Her gaze narrowed on Niall. "And they all know that I recognize no sovereignty other than my own. And that I answer to no one except the Morrigan herself."

The Morrigan? What did she mean by that?

Scathach's eyes were still drilling holes through Niall. Had to give him credit, he wasn't backing down. Even though it looked like he seriously wanted to.

"Your father has respected my judgment," she continued. "As did his father before him. As have all of the Aes Sidhe. And the Tuatha Dé Danann themselves." She faced the crowd. "Anyone who wishes to leave my camp and cease their training because of the day's events are free to do so at any time."

No one in the crowd budged. Or even blinked. It was clear to me they weren't going anywhere. Training on Alba was a big deal. Heck, Scathach was a big deal. Everyone's parents would no doubt back her decision. Whether they agreed with it or not.

Scathach dismissed Niall then hurried to see to Alaynna. Gannon and the other two Druids had been around the whole time tending to the wounded, pulling them out of the way when they went down. Now, it was Alaynna's turn.

They had her sitting on a stool. Two of them carefully removed the padded tunic she'd been wearing, while Gannon applied some sort of mashed up herbs onto her swollen eye then examined her nose. She didn't flinch, even once.

Her gaze shifted toward me. She gave me a small but very bright smile.

Chapter Fifteen

Sparing Alaynna like I'd done had a lot of people talking around the camp — and not in a good way. I knew I had my share of haters on Alba, but after the gauntlet, I got more side-eyes than usual, and a lot more people whispering behind my back. Whatever. I knew my real friends, like Kian and Kelan, had my back.

I came up with reasons to pass by Alaynna's cottage as often as I could. I'd catch one of the Druids coming in or going out sometimes. No doubt they were taking care of her injuries. Around mealtimes, her servant always brought a plate of food to her cottage. But I never saw Alaynna.

Not like she would have been very welcome though, anywhere around camp. Some of the things people kept saying about her — people I once thought were her friends — it was disgusting. Just because she was half-Fomorian.

I wanted to remind them my da, Lugh, was half-Fomorian too, and he went on to become king of the Tuatha Dé Danann for a while. Actually, I wanted to beat their faces in first *then* remind them. But none of them had the guts to say any of that to my face.

I'd had a rough training session that morning. Niall still wasn't talking to me — not that I cared. I was still mad at him for betraying Alaynna and then having the nerve to order me to “finish her off” during the gauntlet.

He wouldn't spar with me anymore. Again, not that I cared. But the rest of the guys in the tier were his buddies, and had no problem squaring off with me. They were good too. And since the gauntlet, they took our sparring to the next level — as in trying to take my head-off-at-the-shoulders-next-level. But they couldn't. Despite all their attempts, my head was still where it was supposed to be.

That day, I just wanted to go back to my cottage, wash up, and crash for a while. Breccan was waiting for me at the door — which wasn't unusual.

“Are you free, Master?” he asked.

“Yeah. Why?” I asked.

“I spoke with Mistress Alaynna’s servant, Berit. I told her how you have been quite concerned about her.”

“You what? Why did you — I mean, I never said —” Then I remembered Breccan’s annoying way of picking up on other people’s emotions. He’d been with me a few times when I passed by Alaynna’s cottage hoping to get a look at her.

“Berit said Mistress Alaynna would like to see you,” he said.

“She did?” The squeak in my voice caught me by surprise. “I mean, she did,” I repeated in a cooler, much deeper voice.

“Shall I let Mistress Alaynna know you will be arriving soon?” Breccan asked.

“Uh. Yeah. Of course.” All of a sudden I was really aware of how smelly and dirty I was. “Let her know I’ll be over later.”

“Very good.”

As Breccan turned to walk away, I noticed a knowing smile on his face. I didn’t think about it for too long. I hurried inside and started cleaning up. Breccan already had everything ready for me. A fresh pitcher of water, a basin, and a stack of clean towels and a bar of handmade soap.

He’d left a vial of scented oil too. Why did he do that? Was it because I was going to see Alaynna? Crikey, what did he think was going to happen? I would’ve asked him, but he was already gone. I ended up dabbing a couple drops of the oil on the sides of my neck. Not to impress Alaynna. But because it had a nice smell to it. Nice but still manly.

All the way over, I kept wondering if I should’ve brought Alaynna something. Or would that have been too much? Breccan was waiting for me by Alaynna’s door. Before I could ask what he was doing there, he slipped me a small bowl covered with a cloth. It was some of those honey-coated pears they served in the dining hall.

“Berit said they are her mistress’s favorite,” said Breccan.

I thanked him and wiped my hands on my tunic, suddenly noticing how sweaty they were, before taking the pears from him. I was set to knock on the door, but Breccan did it for me.

Alaynna’s servant, Berit, answered. She was tall and skinny with long black hair. Breccan made a big deal about introducing me, like this was some sort of royal event. He then stepped aside, so did Berit, so I could enter the cottage.

It looked a lot like mine. Then again, so did every other cottage I'd seen. We were supposed to keep them all plain and have only the basics, so we would focus entirely on our training. No distractions. Berit hurried to Alaynna's side to help her up from her bed.

She wore a robe over her nightgown. The injuries to her face had almost completely healed up, but her internal injuries had her moving kind of slow. Her injuries must have been serious if they were taking this long to heal, even with Druid magic.

"You don't have to get up." The words jumped from my mouth. "Seriously, take it easy."

Alaynna smiled, like she appreciated me thinking about her. "All I do is lay in bed. Having you over gives me an excuse to get up and move around."

Berit helped her over to a chair by the little table in the middle of the cottage. Alaynna lowered herself onto a chair then nodded for me to sit on the chair on the other side of her. As I was about to sit, I remembered the pears.

"These are for you," I told her. "I heard they were your favorite."

Berit took them from me and brought them over to Alaynna. She glanced inside the bowl and smiled. Some color rose in her cheeks. That made me smile in return.

"You heard correctly," she said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." I swallowed and tried to think of something to say, but all I could come up with was, "So how are you doing?"

"Better. My ribs still hurt, but the Druids insist they are healing nicely."

I nodded, feeling relieved.

"I want to thank you for what you did," said Alaynna.

"No problem. That was pretty messed up, what they put you through. But you kicked all their asses. You took their best shots and still beat each and every one of them. By the time you got to me, I couldn't bring myself to do anything. You'd proven yourself as far as I was concerned."

Alaynna's sweet smile turned to a snarky smirk. "I think I could have beaten you — if you had bothered to put up a fight."

I blinked. Oh, really now? "Well, I'd rather wait until you were all healed up and at your best before we spar with each other again. That way when I beat you, you won't be able to make any excuses."

Alaynna made a surprised-face and started to laugh. But her laughs turned into coughs. She grabbed her ribs. Berit hurried over, but Alaynna waved her away.

She then stared at me for what seemed like the longest time. Tears gathered in her eyes. “The Fomorian,” she started. “I cannot bring myself to call him my father. I have never laid eyes on him. If I ever did — I do not know what I would do.” From the look on her face, *killed him* would have been her first choice.

“You don’t need to tell me about any of this,” I told her. “It’s okay.”

“No. I want to,” said Alaynna. “After what you did for me, during the gauntlet, I think you have more than earned that right. I never knew the circumstances of my birth until later on. I had been told I was taken from a human village as a babe, but somehow that never sounded right to me. I was very different. I did enjoy dressing up and going to dances and all those frilly, girly things. But I also enjoyed swordplay and racing my horse through the fields as fast as I could push him, the rougher the terrain the better. I had a temper too and was quick to fight any of the other children in the court who crossed me. Then, there was the day I was riding through the royal grounds with my mother. Those rides were always so serene, so peaceful.”

“I’d have thought you’d find that boring,” I said.

Alaynna chuckled, minding her ribs. “I did not mind. I was with my mother. On those rides, we rarely, if ever, took an escort. We never needed one. That day we chose to ride on our own. We were not far from home. A huge stag charged out of the brush. It was larger than our horses. It had antlers like spears and this crazed look in its eyes. Our horses reared. My mother and I were both thrown. I recovered in time to see the stag bear down on my mother. She held her foot. It was twisted. The stag was ready to trample her.”

She fidgeted with her hands. “Next thing I knew, I’d leapt on the stag and had actually dragged it down to the ground. Once I had realized what I had done, I hesitated. The stag broke free. Luckily, it ran back into the forest.” She managed a tiny chuckle. “No doubt too afraid to face me. There and then, Queen Eva — my mother — finally decided to tell me the truth. When she was young, my birth mother had been her handmaiden. But they adored each other. They were more like sisters.

“One day, they were traveling to see Eva’s uncle when their coach was attacked by Fomorian raiders.” Her voice started to crack, like she could cry any moment. “Their escorts did their best to fight them off. Somehow, my birth mother knew the Fomorians were after Eva, to hold her for ransom. My birth mother convinced her to change clothes with her. They took her instead, thinking she was a princess. Eva fled. The Fomorians did not bother with her. They thought she was just a simple handmaiden. When Eva made it back to the castle, she begged her father to pay my birth mother’s ransom, but he refused. Months later, my birth mother managed to escape and made it back to the castle. She was pregnant with me. They had kept her all that time as a slave. She — she served many of their needs. All against her will.”

I drew back in shock. I didn’t know what to say. Alaynna dropped her gaze toward the table, looking like she was trying to fight back tears. Her pain suddenly became my pain. All I wanted in the world was to make her feel better.

“Your birth mother sounds like an amazing person,” I said. “Smart, brave, tough. You obviously take after her.”

Alaynna lifted her head and stared at me with big eyes. For a moment, I thought I’d said the wrong thing. But then she smiled. Her cheeks were roses in bloom.

“Thank you,” she said. “That is what Eva has always told me.”

“You never got to know her?” I was almost too afraid to ask.

Alaynna shook her head. “Eva took care of my birth mother. She purchased a small, secluded farm for her, and she agreed to meet me once. Only I could tell how difficult it was for her to be around me. She did her best to hide it. But seeing me had to be a reminder of the horrors she had been forced to endure during her captivity.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. Eva has been the only mother I have ever known. I love her dearly.”

“Was she the only who knew about — you know?”

“She told her husband — my father. They kept it from everyone. As far as their family and friends knew, I was a human babe she had taken from a poverty-stricken village.”

“Do you wish Eva never told you about how you were born?”

Alaynna smiled. “I admit I was angry she had kept it a secret from me. But was glad she told me. It answered a lot of questions about myself.” Her smile then collapsed. “And who I am.”

“Lugh was half-Fomorian,” I reminded her. “I guess that makes me a quarter-Fomorian.”

Alaynna’s smile returned, like she appreciated what I was trying to do. “The age of Lugh and the other Tuatha Dé Danann is gone. Besides, Lugh had also proven himself in battle.”

“Yeah, but I’m bringing all that back, remember? You know, the Fifth Cycle? Stick with me, we’ll change everyone’s minds.”

Alaynna giggled. “Thank you.”

A knock at the door. Berit answered it. Alaynna and I rose when Scathach entered the cottage. She looked surprised to see me.

“I came to check on you,” Scathach told Alaynna. “See how you were faring.”

“Thank you,” said Alaynna.

“The Druids say you are healing nicely. Let me know when you are ready to resume training.”

Alaynna nodded. Scathach started for the door but stopped short. “You were amazing during the gauntlet. I have been wanting to tell you that.”

“Thank you,” said Alaynna. “I hope I proved to you that I belong here, even though I am of — tainted blood.”

Scathach frowned. “Stop thinking of yourself that way. None of us can help the circumstances of our birth. Dwelling upon it, as opposed to coming to terms with it, traps you in the past. It keeps you from moving forward and achieving the great potential I have seen in you since your first day here.”

A warm smile materialized on Alaynna’s face.

Scathach smiled back at Alaynna. “I knew if anyone could make it through the gauntlet, it would be you.” She glanced at me from the corner of her eye. “Despite your clever interpretation of the rules.” She returned her attention to Alaynna. “Most importantly, I hope you have proven to yourself that you belong here.”

Alaynna’s mouth trembled like she was going to cry — but a happy-cry. Scathach then turned back toward the door. On the way, she glanced back at me.

“Well done,” she said.

I wanted to ask her what I'd done *so well*. Was she talking about the gauntlet again? Or me being here to support Alaynna? But she was already gone.

Chapter Sixteen

“Please tell us Alaynna has you under some form of spell,” said Kian.

He and Kelan were waiting outside of my cottage. They caught me as I was heading to Alaynna’s again that morning. Kelan stood behind his brother, looking a bit of jumpy, no doubt remembering how he ticked me off the last time we talked about Alaynna. I had a feeling he’d be letting Kian do all the talking.

“It is the only thing that makes sense,” Kian continued. “For you to spare her during the gauntlet like you did.”

I stared back at him. I couldn’t believe they were doing this.

“Has she given you any form of charm or token?” Kian asked. “Has she given you anything to eat or drink that she may have prepared on her own? Or perhaps it is some sort of Fomorian ability she possesses.”

“All right, that’s enough,” I told him. “Alaynna is still the same good person she was before all this Fomorian-bollocks got out. And no, she’s not working any sort of spell on me either.”

“Of course you would say that.” Kelan stepped out from behind his brother. “If you were under a spell.”

I shot him a look that made him dart behind Kian again. I sighed and took a breath to calm down.

“You’re my friends, right?” I asked Kian and Kelan.

The two glanced at each other then looked back at me and nodded kind of shamefully.

“You trust me? You have my back?” I asked. “You’ve talked about going into battle with me when the time comes.”

Both nodded, squirming and shifting their feet.

“Then believe me when I tell you Alaynna is all right,” I told them. “She’s not some monster. No one has anything to fear from her at all.”

Kian and Kelan turned to each other. Kian swallowed. Kelan shifted his shoulders a little.

“Very well,” Kian finally said.

“If you say so,” Kelan added.

They stayed behind while I went on my way. Some doubt rose in my mind over whether or not Kian or Kelan were being honest with me when they said they’d give Alaynna a chance. But they’d been such good friends to me since I got to camp, I chose to give them the benefit of the doubt.

I reached Alaynna’s cottage and knocked at the door. She opened it before my hand could even return to my side.

“Ready?” I asked.

She was dressed in her training gear. Her hair was tied in a thick braid that hung down to the small of her back, and she held her gear under her arm. She’d finally healed up from her injuries and was set to start training again. She looked determined enough, but then I noticed her fingers drumming against the side of her leg.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Alaynna pushed past me. “Are you coming with me or not?”

I hustled to catch up with her. I knew Alaynna was well-ready to start training again. But was she ready for the way the other trainees and assistant trainers would be around her? I’d told her they’d been talking a lot of smack about her. She’d said she expected it.

But there was something else making her so intense. I dashed ahead and cut her off. “Is something wrong?” I asked. “Did someone in the camp say or do something?”

Alaynna looked like she was about to tell me to shut up. But then she sighed. She pulled something from a pouch that hung from her belt. It was a purple crystal hanging from a golden chain.

I’d seen it before. It was magic. She said each of her parents had one just like it. They used it to communicate. Each person’s image would appear in the other person’s gem, and they could talk back and forth. Like FaceTime. Only with magic.

“Bad news from home?” I asked, preparing myself for the worst.

“More members of my father’s court are calling for him to abdicate the throne,” Alaynna told me. “His enemies now outnumber his allies. He is

worried about an all-out rebellion. Because of me.”

I swallowed then asked, “Do you think you’ll go back and help him?”

Alaynna grimaced a little. “As much I want to, I know my presence would only make matters worse for my father.”

“Sorry.” Just looking at her, I could tell this was eating Alaynna up inside. “Have you heard from your ma? Is she still doing okay?”

Alaynna had told me how her da had gotten her ma out of their kingdom in secret. She was holed up somewhere with some guards and servants they knew they could trust.

“She is staying strong,” said Alaynna.

“You think you might stay with her?”

“She still has not told me where she is. She insists it is for my protection.”

“Sorry.” Pause. “All this, it’s not your fault.”

“It is,” says Alaynna. “I chose to tell Niall the truth about my origins. I really thought I could trust him. I had known him all my life. I also knew he had, well, feelings for me.”

“He’s a jerk. And he’s the only one to blame for all this.”

“Thank you.” Alaynna smiled back. Her expression then hardened again. I recognized that look on her face. I knew the feeling behind it all too well. She needed to hit something.

We headed down the main path through the camp. People passing by stopped in their tracks when they saw her — saw us, I should say. I made sure to walk right by Alaynna’s side.

The faces people made at us. The way they backed up and whispered to each other while giving us the side-eye. I wanted to tear into them but held back for Alaynna’s sake. But Alaynna kept her head up the entire time, eyes forward, not even giving those idiots the slightest bit of attention. I made sure she saw my proud smile. She smiled back and stepped a tiny bit closer to me.

We arrived at our tier’s training area. Niall and the others were already there, so was Aedan, the assistant trainer we worked with. He was big with fiery red hair and was one of Scathach’s best.

They were stretching and warming up but stopped all at once when they saw us. They closed ranks, scowling at us. Alaynna hesitated, but I was able to urge her forward, guiding her with my hand on her back.

The other trainees in our tier had been part of the gauntlet, and Alaynna had whooped each of their butts good. So they knew better than to say anything to her face. Now if they were to rush me and Alaynna all once, that would be something. Only I knew they wouldn't. At least not while Aedan was there.

One of the trainees, Cathal, approached Aedan.

"You cannot expect us to train with that — thing," he said, pointing his finger at Alaynna in disgust.

She trembled, fists clenching at her side.

Aedan glanced at me and Alaynna.

"It is Scathach's will that she continues training with us," he said less than enthusiastically. "We best do as she abides. Now square off for sparring."

I checked Niall. While Cathal and the others grumbled back and forth with each other, he was weirdly silent. He threw me and Alaynna an occasional glance. Nothing too hostile. In fact, he looked kind of confused, like he was trying to work something out.

Niall and the others paired up with each other, leaving me with Alaynna, which was fine by me. We cinched up our padded tunics and put on our helmets. We tucked our practice swords into our belts and prepared to start off with spears.

"I know this is your first day back." I smirked. "So we'll start off slow. I'll take it easy on you."

Right as I finished that sentence, Alaynna smacked me upside my helmeted head with the butt of her spear. I staggered a couple steps. My head swam for a moment. When it settled, Alaynna stood in a fighting stance, spear forward with a snarky smirk on her lips and a wicked glint in her eyes.

I grinned and took a fighting stance of my own. Okay. So that's how she wanted it then.

I went at her. Jab. Thrust. Slash. She blocked and countered every move, switching off between using the point and the butt of her spear. I was able to block every attack she threw at me. Once I got an opening, I did a salmon-leap, flipping over her head, ready to land behind her.

Only Alaynna was ready for me. Moment I landed, she swept my feet out from under me with the shaft of her spear. I was as impressed as well as surprised.

She tried to pin me to the ground with her spear, but I rolled out of the way, back to my feet, and drew my practice sword. I blocked her thrusts and strikes. Each time getting in a little closer to her.

I came in for an overhead strike. Alaynna raised her practice spear to block, but I hit it with just enough force and in the right spot that it broke it almost in two. Only some splintery strands held them together.

Instead of tossing it aside, Alaynna tore the spear into two pieces and used both of them to attack. I'd never seen anything like it. It didn't look like she was making it up as she went along either. She'd obviously practiced this.

I knocked one of the broken spear pieces out of Alaynna's hand. She kept coming at me with the other one that was all broken and splintery at the end. She tossed it at me. I knocked it out of the way with my sword. That was when Alaynna drew her own practice sword.

I was ready for her. I charged with a tiny salmon-leap. Alaynna barely got her practice sword up in time. I had her on the defensive. Alaynna gnashed her teeth and snarled. But every now and then I swore I saw a smile. Like she was enjoying this as much as I did.

I finally disarmed her. Alaynna held up her hands and yielded. She then started laughing. Me too.

"You know you only defeated me, because I had been laid up with injuries," she said.

"Ah, ah, ah. What did I tell you about excuses?" I reminded her.

Alaynna sputtered and started laughing again. Me too. I stared at her, face flushed, eyes bright, with a beaming smile. Something fluttered in my stomach, and a sweet chill ran through me.

Once we'd caught our breaths and had some water, we went back to sparring. We went at it for who knows how long, but when we were finally ready to call it quits, we noticed the others were gone. It looked like they'd been gone for a while too.

We packed our gear. Alaynna and I walked back to her cottage.

"Would you like to come inside?" she asked.

I nodded and followed her through the door. She hung her gear up and offered me a chair. I left my gear by the door then took a seat at her table. Alaynna joined me, holding a leather-bound folio. She handed it to me. It was already open. On the page was a handwritten poem.

*Wild Sidhe
Strong and free.
Eyes of fire. Full of power.
Your sleek black form races through
the forest
And my thoughts
and dreams.
You gaze upon me
Eyes filled with wisdom and mystery.
Wild Sidhe.
Remain wild
And forever free.*

Alaynna looked like she was holding her breath, waiting for my reaction.

I smiled. "It's about the Pooka."

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Of course I do. It's brilliant. It rhymes and everything."

Alaynna giggled a little.

"Seriously, I wish I could write something like this," I said.

"Have you tried?"

I shifted my shoulders. "Yeah, but I sucked at it. Metalworking too. Anyway, with the whole Fifth Cycle-thing, I figure I should be spending all my time learning to fight than writing poems or making jewelry."

I waited for Alaynna to agree with me. She looked disappointed.

"You may read more if you like," she told me.

I flipped back a few pages in her folio, as careful as I would some sacred text, and began to read. Crikey, she must have had this folio forever. There were some poems about feeling different and lonely, even when she was surrounded by crowds of people. Some other poems were about feeling ashamed and isolated because of her Fomorian blood.

I turned to Alaynna. She gave me a hesitant but hopeful smile. She was so brave for letting me read this. I felt honored.

Alaynna flipped ahead a few pages. "I have just started this one."

I began reading.

A secret revealed.

*Surrounded by scorn
but I feel no shame.
A weight has been lifted.
Those I once loved
have shown their true faces.
Though sad, I now see clearly
And in the end
I am better for it
For at last I am truly honest with myself—*

My eyes got a little misty as I read the last line.

— And have found a true friend.

Chapter Seventeen

Scathach had sent out word that no one was to mess with Alaynna at all. I'd like to think the fact that she was hanging out with me helped too — you know, me being CuChulainn reborn and all that.

We kept training together and spent time at the Druids' grove too. We'd read, and she'd write a few lines of poetry every now and then. Kian and Kelan and my other friends started coming around. They had no problem with Alaynna sitting with us in the dining hall, and she hung out with us whenever we had some free time too.

That day, she'd finally agreed to join us on the hurling field. It was never hard getting a match together. There were always other trainees on the field, messing around or running drills, just waiting for someone to come around and challenge them.

We used a rock instead of a ball just like in the legends said, but since everyone here was supernaturally strong and tough — some more than others — it didn't matter. We had no problem shoulder-blocking each other, and no one suffered any broken bones from getting hit or trying to catch the rock as we smacked it through the air. We walked away with some cuts and bruises, but we wore them like badges of honor.

Sure enough, we were able to get a match going that day. My friends and I against another group that showed up not long after we'd gotten to the field. I tried to get Alaynna to join us. I could tell she was tempted but still said no.

It was a good match. We won of course. After that, we kicked back on the field, drinking from our water skins and eating some fruit we'd taken from the dining hall. I sat next to Alaynna. When we weren't talking, I

found myself just looking at her. Not staring. But stealing little glances every now and then.

She tensed up suddenly. So did Kian, Kelan, and the others. That was because Niall was heading our way. He wasn't alone either. Darragh, Cathal, and a bunch of their friends were with them. They all carried hurleys. Niall bounced a smooth round rock in his hand.

They were having a pretty intense-looking conversation as they walked toward us. Niall was definitely giving the orders. Everyone else was nodding. Whatever was going on, they were all on the same page. Kian and Kelan and some others looked ready to bolt. I motioned for them to stay put then got to my feet and met Niall and his crew part way.

"Field's all yours," I told them. I didn't even bother looking Niall in the eye. "We were just about to head out anyway."

"But we came looking for a challenge," said Niall. "Are you and your friends not up for one?"

I glanced from Alaynna to Kian and Kelan and all the rest. They watched us with anxious faces. Niall stepped closer to me. He glared past me, at Alaynna.

"How can you stand even being near her?" Niall asked me.

My face got hot. My fists clenched at my sides. "You mean, Alaynna? It wasn't too long ago she was all you'd talk about. You wanted to be betrothed to her."

Niall turned away for a moment, looking embarrassed. That quickly turned into anger. "That was different," he said. "That was before I knew."

"It doesn't make any difference. She's still the same Alaynna."

Niall scoffed. His face looked very smackable all of a sudden.

"You know, technically, I'm part Fomorian too," I reminded him.

"That is different! You are the son of Lugh. You are also Tuatha Dé Danann." Niall snorted, looking flustered. "Do you not feel betrayed at all by her? She kept that horrible secret from us for so long."

"She told you all about it, didn't she?" I asked. "About what happened to her ma?"

He didn't say no, so I figured she must've told him.

"She didn't ask for this. Any of this," I said. "She was too scared to say anything to anybody. The way people around here feel about Fomorians, can you blame her? It took guts for her to tell you, to trust you. And what did you do?"

Niall bowed his head a bit. He looked ashamed.

“She’s still the same Alaynna,” I told him. “And I think she should be judged by the type of person she is, not by what kind of blood’s in her veins.”

Niall seethed, grinding his teeth. His eyes were wide and bit teary. He wiped them then forced a smile. He stared at me for a moment then said, “You make a fine point.”

“Thanks,” I told him.

Niall glanced at his friends, who’d been eagerly observing our conversation. Niall gave them a slight nod then returned his attention to me.

“Are you certain we cannot talk you and your friends into a match?” he asked.

I thought about it. I wanted to give Niall the benefit of the doubt, that he’d finally come around about Alaynna.

“Let me see,” I told him.

Niall returned to his friends. They had what looked like another intense-looking conversation. I got back to my friends. They didn’t exactly jump at the chance to play against Niall’s team. It took a little convincing, but they finally agreed. Alaynna sat on the sidelines. The look she gave me, I could tell she didn’t think this was a good idea. I smiled, trying to assure her everything would be okay.

A crowd started gathering to watch our match. They lined both sides of the field.

I faced off with Niall in the center of the field, our teammates positioned behind us. We scrambled with our hurleys. They smacked and cracked against each other as we fought to get the flat end, the *bas*, under the rock so we could flip it into the air and get some control over it.

I just about had it. Next thing I knew, Niall cracked his hurley against the side of my head. I fell flat, seeing stars, my head ringing. Niall raced down the field, bouncing the rock off the end of his hurley. Two of his teammates ran ahead of him, to clear a path.

I sat there, stunned. What the hell was that about? Why did he do that? I mean, yeah, we weren’t exactly wussies when we played hurley, but we never purposefully tried to take each other’s blasted heads off with our hurleys.

I sprang to my feet and raced after Niall. Two more of his teammates ran up on me from either side like they were going to box me in. I didn’t

even have the rock. I caught a glimpse of some of the people who'd gathered on the sidelines. They chuckled and pointed at me.

I tightened my grip on my hurley. If Niall and his buddies wanted to go all out, fine, it was their funeral. I waited until the two who were charging me got really close before I feinted, sidestepped, and spun out of the way. It was too close for them to stop and adjust. They ended up smacking into each other.

One of them turned around. I knocked his legs out from under him with my hurley. As he fell, I shifted my grip and jammed the handle into the second one's guts as hard as I could. His breath left him. He staggered, and I cracked him across the back to make sure he'd no longer be a problem.

I sprinted to catch up to Niall. He hadn't gotten too far. His teammates were keeping Kian and Kelan and some others busy. My face was hot. My blood felt like lava.

Everyone watching the match cheered for Niall. Another of his teammates rushed me. He swung his hurley. I blocked and hooked it. I pulled him off-balance then cracked him upside the head. He went flying.

I took out two more of them before I finally got a clear path to Niall. He didn't even try to run away. He just kind of strutted about, bouncing the rock off the end of his hurley.

I swung, trying to connect with the rock. Niall bounced it higher, out of the way. All my hurley hit was air. I kept trying. With each miss, I got that much angrier. And Niall's smile got bigger. His laughter became louder and more obnoxious.

"Not quite," Niall said. "Try again. You almost had it."

Tears stung my eyes. Just about everyone watching the match was laughing and pointing at me now. Had they been waiting for this moment the whole time I was here? To watch me fail?

He snarled and hissed, "You will never be better than me. Never!"

That moment, an all-too-familiar switch flipped inside me. Only this time it was different. Worse. It was like a bomb went off in my gut. Every cell in my body ignited. I heard this horrible scream. Then realized it had come from me.

I shook violently. It felt like I was being stretched and pulled in a million different directions at once. Muscles all over my body swelled and pulsed, threatening to explode one moment then return to normal the next.

I kept screaming. The pain. Everything hurt. And that pain only fueled my anger.

This was it. This was the warp-spasm.

Niall? Where was he?

Something struck the back of my knee, buckling me just a bit. I turned and got cracked across the side of my head with a hurley. It was Niall. He caught me again on the other side then raised his hurley for an overhead shot.

I caught his hurley, squeezed, and snapped it clean. Niall's eyes went wide. His mouth fell open. I knew I was already much stronger than the average trainee at camp. But now, with the warp-spasm, my strength was off the charts.

Niall's shots might as well have been bug bites. I hit him in the gut beneath his ribs, taking him off his feet. My next shot connected with his cheek and spun him around. My third landed under his chin and sent him flying.

I wasn't done with Niall yet either. I charged after him. His friends got in the way, walloping me with their hurleys. I could tell they were giving it everything they got, and any of those blows would have dropped any other trainee.

But in this state, they might as well have been a swarm of gnats. Annoying but not even slightly dangerous. I struck one after the other, feeling bones crack like pencils and flesh pulp like fruit. Once they were down, I ran toward whoever was closest to me. It was some of the guys on my team. I couldn't control myself. It was like being at the wheel of a runaway train.

I spotted Kian. He stood petrified. I wanted to scream for him to run, but all that came out of my mouth were roars and growls. My arms moved on its own. What was happening? Why couldn't I stop myself?

I backhanded Kian and sent him flying. I then spotted Kelan running away. Next thing I knew I'd pounced on him and drove him to the ground. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I tried to hold myself back, but it was no use. I was completely out of control. An engine of destruction.

The people watching the match ran for cover. I leapt and landed in the middle of a crowd, sending a bunch of them flying. I grabbed someone — I didn't know who — and just shook him until he went limp then tossed him aside.

Alaynna leapt into my path and started darting around me. What did she think she was doing? I kept chasing after her, but she kept managing to stay out of my reach. Why was she doing this? Why wasn't she running away?

But then I spotted Scathach leaping toward me. She snatched my arm and flipped herself up and over. Her legs wrapped around my throat. She squeezed super tight while pulling and barring my arm.

I stumbled and fell to the ground. The more I fought back, the harder Scathach squeezed, cutting off both my breath and blood flow to my brain. I pawed at her with my free hand. But honestly, I wanted her to choke me out and keep me from hurting anyone else.

I struggled to breathe. My head became lighter, my limbs heavier. My vision grew darker and finally went to black.

I woke up in a strange bed but was greeted by a familiar face. Scathach. I reached for my throat. It was still sore and tender from that chokehold she'd put on me — not that I was going to hold it against her.

She handed me a cup. "This will help your throat."

"Thank you." My voice didn't quite work right. "Are we in your roundhouse?"

Scathach nodded. I took the cup with my both hands and sipped. It was some sort of herbal tea. The two of us looked at each for a moment. I searched for something to say.

"Scathach —"

She held up her hand, silencing me. "I spoke to everyone involved. I know all of the pertinent details."

"Niall." I kept thinking about the way he acted, like he was deliberately trying to provoke me. I thought about the times we'd sparred and how he'd caught me before I lost control. He said he wanted to help me control it. "What did he have to say?"

"He admitted to provoking you but claimed it was only meant for the sake of competition," said Scathach. "He said he had no idea you would be overcome with the warp-spasm. After he and his friends tried to stop you and found they couldn't, they worked to get as many people as possible to safety."

No way. That couldn't be right. I wanted to argue, but memories of what I did during the warp-spasm starting back to me.

"Did I — is everyone —?" I tried to ask, tripping over my own words.

“There were no fatalities,” she answered. “This time.”

I shuddered and clenched my eyes shut but opened them when Scathach sat beside me.

“It was never certain whether or not you would have inherited CuChulainn’s warp-spasms,” she said. “That was one reason why I wanted to face you myself when you arrived on Alba. I paid close attention to your training, spoke with your trainers.” She stared at the floor. “I really thought you were clear. That there was no danger.”

I swallowed a lump that had risen in my throat. “I knew the danger was there. So did Niall. I felt my first warp-spasm when we were sparring one time. Actually, Niall saw it happening then told me. I asked him to keep it a secret. I thought I could control it on my own. I really thought I had to. Then Niall —”

“Do not blame him.”

“I don’t. I’m — sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“As you should be.” She turned away for what felt like the longest time. She turned back around and held up her medallion, a silver triskele, three spirals meeting in the middle. “You are familiar with the triskele, are you not?”

I nodded.

Scathach traced each spiral as she spoke to the center point where they met. “It is a symbol of balance between body, mind, and soul. The Tuatha Dé Danann understood the need for balance. Without balance, there is no stability. Without stability, there is no strength. That was why the Danann were not just great warriors but scholars and artists as well. They understood the importance of that union. The original CuChulainn did not. I often wondered if he was more balanced if he would have suffered from the warp-spasms.”

“You think if I was more balanced, I could control the warp-spasms?”

“I believe it is possible.”

I turned away. My heart felt like it weighed a ton.

“It will not be easy,” Scathach continued. “Then again, no worthwhile accomplishment is.”

I nodded. “So what I need to do?”

Scathach let out a small sigh. “Those who did not witness your warp-spasm firsthand have heard of it now and seen the damage you have caused. I cannot have that kind of tension in my camp.”

I flashed back to all those horrified faces, the people caught in the path of my warp-spasm. The witnesses. The victims.

“You’re kicking me out.” Then again, why not? I deserved it.

”Let us call it ‘relocating your training.’ At least for the time being,” said Scathach. “I have a hunting lodge to the north. You will stay there.”

A sick feeling churned in my stomach. Some big hero I was turning out to be.

The door opened. A servant stepped aside for Alaynna and Breccan.

“Breccan, of course, will be there for you,” said Scathach. “And Alaynna has agreed to go with you as well.”

That brought a bit of a smile to my face. “What about Berit?”

Alaynna hesitated then said, “She asked for a different placement.”

“Because of me?”

Alaynna shook her head. “Because of me. She did not wish to serve a *monster* anymore.”

My heart sank a little. I knew how much Alaynna had liked Berit.

“My lodge is well-stocked,” said Scathach. “But if you should need anything send Breccan.”

She stood up. I followed after her.

“Have you packed already?” Scathach asked Breccan.

“The wagon is outside,” he said.

“Could you guys wait a sec’ for me?” I asked Alaynna and Breccan.

They nodded and stepped out of the room. Scathach turned toward me.

“If we send Breccan here for anything,” I started. “What if people mess with him? I don’t want anything bad to happen to him.”

Scathach gave me a warm smile. “You have my word nothing will happen to Breccan if you should need to send him back here.”

That was a relief. Scathach walked me outside. Alaynna and Breccan were sitting in a wagon pulled by a single pony. They scooted over for me. Breccan snapped the pony’s reigns, and we were off. Its hooves clip-clopped along the dirt road.

“Thank you for coming with me,” I told Alaynna.

She smiled. “You were there for me when I needed a friend. Now it is my turn to be there for you. Besides, without you, there is nothing left for me here.”

I reached for her hand. She grabbed mine in return and gave it a little squeeze. We rode down the main road through camp. Everyone — and I

mean, everyone — came out to watch us. There were Kian and Kelan and everyone else I'd injured. A line of them, bandaged, with broken bones bound to splints, leaning on crutches.

I wanted to leap from the wagon, run up and tell them how sorry I was and beg for forgiveness. Alaynna must have sensed this, because she tightened her grip on my hand and shook her head. I slumped in my seat. She was probably right. Apologies weren't going to make up for the damage I'd done. I needed to find a way to control the warp-spasm, like Scathach had said. Right now, that seemed almost impossible.

I bowed my head, not able to look anyone in the face anymore. But I felt all their hard stares as we made our way out of the camp. Scathach's guards were positioned all the way to the front gate, no doubt to make sure we kept going and that no one, on either side, did anything stupid.

Waiting by the gate were Niall and his friends. They were bandaged up from my attack on the hurling field. Half of Niall's face was still swollen from where I'd hit him. He clutched his ribs too.

But through it all, he smirked at me and nodded, looking very proud of himself.

Chapter Eighteen

We followed a bumpy dirt road from the camp to Scathach's hunting lodge. I drifted to sleep — or at least thought I did. Warm sunlight bathed my face. Soft grass lay beneath me. Gentle hands lifted my head and rested it in a comforting lap.

“Ma,” I murmured.

“I am mother to all, my child,” said an unfamiliar voice.

No. Not Ma. But her voice was so soothing, so was her touch, that I didn't mind. I didn't bother to question. I shifted in her lap. She ran her fingers through my hair.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“What for, love?” she answered.

“I failed.”

“You have not failed, my child. At least not yet. The mark of a true hero lies not only how they handle victory, but how they also handle defeat. Do they surrender or do they learn from their mistakes and come back even stronger? But I know you will make the right choice, Colin Caulfield. For you are a true hero. Lean on your friends in this time of trouble. They still believe in you, as do I. Let our belief carry you until you are able to believe in yourself again.”

My eyes fluttered open. A name on my lips. Danu. That was Danu, the earth goddess, the mother of the Tuatha Dé Danann. I could still hear her words in my ears, and they gave me the spark of hope I needed.

The cart had stopped.

“We are here,” said Alaynna.

So this was Scathach's lodge. It was made up of a large cottage with two smaller buildings attached on either side. One was a stable, where we parked the cart and untied the pony from its harness and found it a stall. A quick peek revealed the other building was a metalworking shop.

Inside the lodge, racks of antlers were mounted over the hearth, and pelts and coats were draped over the couches. There was a large bookshelf against a far wall full of scrolls and folios, and there was one small bedroom off to either side.

“You and Lady Alaynna shall take the rooms, I insist,” said Breccan.

“Where will you sleep?” I asked.

“By the hearth.”

I made a sour face. “Why don’t we trade off? Take turns. I insist.”

Breccan smiled. “Very well.”

Alaynna looked pleased with my decision. But seriously, it was high time, Breccan stopped acting like a servant. The three of us checked out the grounds some more. Alaynna and I got water from the well, while Breccan went through the gardens. He plucked bit after bit of herbs from the ground, luxuriating in each scent, before dropping them into a wicker basket.

We caught up with him in the vegetable garden as he pulled up carrots and potatoes. “There were some salted meats by the hearth,” he said. “I will make a lovely stew for dinner.”

I was ready to argue that he didn’t have to do that, but he had worked in the kitchens before. He was no doubt a better cook than me and Alaynna, who grew up in a castle. And it wasn’t like Grub Hub or Postmates delivered here.

“Would you like some help?” Alaynna asked.

Breccan gave both of us a warm smile. “I will be fine. But thank you.”

He really seemed to appreciate us asking as opposed to insisting he did it all himself. Alaynna and I then decided to go for a walk. At the end of the clearing, we found a trail that took us through the forest.

There were tall green trees all around us. The branches of the ones near the trail stretched overhead, forming a canopy. There were all sorts of wildflowers. Pheasants flew past us, and rabbits dashed for cover the moment they saw us. A few does and bucks stood their ground, waiting for us to make the first move. They relaxed when we kept walking.

At least we wouldn’t starve while we were here. Not that I knew how to hunt. I was pretty sure Alaynna did. I tried really hard to enjoy the scenery, but other thoughts kept invading my mind.

Alaynna smacked my shoulder. I threw her a look.

“I said, do you not think it is beautiful here?” she asked for what sounded like the second time.

“Sorry. I was a million miles away there.”

“Are you thinking about what happened the other day? On the hurling field?”

I sucked in a breath. My fists opened and closed at my sides. “Niall was the first person to spot the warp-spasm when it would take over me. It happened when we trained together one time. That day, during the hurling match, I can’t help thinking he might’ve done what he did just to bring it out of me on purpose. He and his friends fought like they thought they could actually stop me.”

“He probably thought they could,” said Alaynna. “For as long as I have known him, Niall has always needed to be the best. At everything. He has dreamed of being a great warrior. As mighty as any of the Tuatha Dé Danann. And a great ruler.”

I didn’t doubt that at all. Not one bit. “We did a lot of training together. He taught me a lot. I really thought he wanted to be my friend. But he was just looking for a weakness he could exploit, wasn’t he?”

Alaynna frowned. “I wish I could say no. All this time, I really thought I knew Niall. But the way many Aes Sidhe are brought up, especially in houses as powerful as Niall’s. Friendship. Love. They are just words. In the proper moment, anyone can be sacrificed in order to further one’s goal.”

I fumed. My fists clenched at my sides. Niall was going to get his, someday somehow, I’d see to that personally. Alaynna moved beside me. Her hand landed on my back, between my shoulder blades. Her touch sent a pleasant chill through me and settled me down.

The trail took us to the edge of a lake. The water was still and clear, almost like glass. I pulled off my sandals, rolled up my breeches, and waded in up to my knees. The refreshing coolness quickly spread through my body. I glanced behind me to see Alaynna wading into the lake herself. I waited for her to catch up.

“Before we left, Scathach told me if I had more balance, I might be able to control the warp-spasms,” I said. “I might even be a better hero than the original CuChulainn.”

Alaynna nodded. “It makes sense. The cycle of reincarnation is supposed to be about improving ourselves, our true selves, our essences, and learning from the mistakes of our past existences.”

I hesitated a bit, trying to put together what I wanted to say next. “While we’re here, waiting for — I don’t know what — I’m all for continuing to

spar and train. I know we have gear. But as far as the scholarly and artistic stuff goes — maybe you'd be willing to help me with that?"

Alaynna smiled. "Absolutely."

We stood there, just staring at each other. Alaynna's eyes were so bright. I could have stared into them forever. But she pulled her gaze away all of a sudden.

"We should head back," she said. "Perhaps Breccan has changed his mind and will let us help him with dinner."

She started off in a hurry, not even waiting for me to answer.

What happened? Did I do something wrong? I had no time to wonder. Something erupted from the water behind me, drenching me. Alaynna dashed back to my side. We both stood in awe as two large horses emerged from the lake and galloped toward the edge. One grey. One black.

I thought they might have been Kelpies, a type of Wild Sidhe, like Pooka. They liked to come out of lakes and rivers to drown people. Only they weren't Kelpies. Alaynna and I looked to each other.

I could tell she recognized them. I then remembered them too, from a story I'd read. They were Liath and Dubh. The mystical horses of the original CuChulainn. They'd emerged from a magic pool for him back then. And they were doing the same thing for me now.

They dashed off toward the woods and disappeared in moments.

"We need to catch them," said Alaynna.

I was way ahead of her. Liath and Dubh, appearing to me the same way they did for the original CuChulainn — this meant something. They weren't hard to follow. They might have been no longer in sight, but they left a trail of trampled brush behind them. Alaynna and I followed it for what felt like miles, but I finally spotted them. Their backs were to us.

We waited. The plan was to spread out and approach the two horses from either side. After that? We'd see what happened.

Both Alaynna and I froze when we spotted the Pooka standing with the horses. *The Pooka*. It stood in front of Liath and Dubh. They were nose to nose to, well, nose. The three snorted and whinnied to each other softly, back and forth, like they were communicating with each other. It was actually kind of beautiful.

Liath and Dubh must have caught wind of us. They both turned, looking ready to bolt. The Pooka dashed in front of them. It "spoke" to them again and seemed to be calming them down.

That was when the Pooka looked directly at us. He stared at us for the longest time, his brow scrunched up like he was thinking. The Pooka's eyes went wide. His lips quivered. His head and face started changing, twisting and reforming like it was made of clay. Breccan stared back at us, his head on the Pooka's body.

I blinked in surprise. Alaynna looked just as shocked.

Breccan answered with a nervous grin. "I figured this would be as good of a time as any to tell you my little secret. I will send Liath and Dubh to the lodge. They will wait for us at the stables."

He whinnied and snorted, and Liath and Dubh trotted toward the lodge. Breccan disappeared into some brush and came out a bit later hitching up his breeches and fixing his tunic.

"I sensed Liath and Dubh when they emerged from the lake," he started, his voice quivering a little. "I thought I could have calmed them down and brought them back to the lodge without either of you —" Nervous grin. "— finding out — what I really am."

I smiled at Breccan, my friend. I understood why it took so long for him to tell us his secret. I mean, heck he had the hardest time learning to call me by my name instead of *master*. Then, there were all those things he'd said about Pookas, back before we knew. He sounded like he hated them. Did he really feel that way? About himself? Poor guy.

I looked to Alaynna. She didn't seem to have a problem with Breccan being a Pooka either. "It must be relief to finally share your secret with someone," she told him.

Tears rolled down Breccan's cheeks. He nodded. "Even though you both of you are very dear to me. I have never been more scared than in the moment I finally decided to reveal myself to you."

"I understand." Alaynna's eyes watered. "I understand completely."

She moved forward and surprised Breccan by embracing him.

"Group hug." I moved in and wrapped my arms around both of them. I then looked Breccan in the eyes. "Thanks for saving my life against the Gillie-Doos."

Breccan's eyes filled with tears. "You are very welcome."

When we were ready, the three of us headed back to the cottage. Sure enough, Liath and Dubh were waiting for us at the stable door. They allowed Breccan to lead them into two empty stalls and close the gates

behind them. Alaynna and I fetched some oats and grains from the supplies we'd brought, while Breccan got water from the well.

We fed and watered Dubh and Liath. They were huge. Each one had to be over six feet tall with shiny coats and rippling muscles. Each had a super intense gaze, and they both carried themselves like they were royalty.

"This was meant to be," Alaynna told me. "You finding them here."

"*Us* finding them there," I reminded her. "Back in the day, they pulled the original CuChulainn's chariot."

Breccan let out a shriek that sounded a lot like a horse's neigh. He raced toward what looked like a pile of junk in the corner. He chucked one piece aside after another until he'd apparently found what he'd been looking for.

At first, it looked like some kind of four-wheeled cart. Then I noticed how streamlined it was. It was a chariot, but not one of those little one or two person chariots the Romans drove. This was a carbad, an old Irish war chariot from back in the day. It could carry a whole bunch of people.

"We can fix this," said Breccan, his chest puffed out. "Restore it to its former glory."

I glanced at Liath and Dubh. It looked they'd be pulling another chariot into battle again.

Chapter Nineteen

Alaynna and I sparred every morning. We kept up with our conditioning too. For a few hours a day, in the afternoons, we'd work on the chariot. We'd dragged it outside of the stable so we could have plenty of room and used tools we'd found in a nearby shed.

Alaynna was already familiar with chariots, so she was in charge. Breccan knew which types of wood would be the best for specific parts of the chariot. On some parts, we needed solid and strong. On others, we needed bendy and pliable.

Being out there, so close to the forest, brought out a whole new side of Breccan. I was sure not having to hide who he was anymore had something to do with it too. He became so much more confident and acted less like a servant and more like an equal, which he always was to me, but maybe now he actually felt it.

He revealed to us, that first night, he was actually only part-Pooka. His mother was human. Alaynna and I waited for more details, but Breccan wasn't ready to share them yet. We didn't push him. We decided we'd let him tell us his story in his own time. We both had a feeling it wasn't a very happy one.

His Pooka-half made him closer to nature than us. That was why he was able to know which woods to use on which parts of the chariots. He could communicate with animals too and not necessarily control them, more like "influence" them to do what he asked them to do. That was why Liath and Dubh were so obedient for him. It was also why vermin and scavengers steered clear of the lodge at night or when we weren't around.

Breccan's ability to pick up on other people's emotions, which I'd experienced firsthand many times already, was also part of his nature. In time, he started opening up more.

“I have all the abilities of a Pooka,” he explained to me and Alaynna one day while we were working on the chariot. “However, being part human allows me to curb the more destructive and dangerous behaviors my race is known for.”

“How did you end up in Alba?” Alaynna asked.

Breccan shrugged. “I did not have anywhere else to go. I had been on my own since my mother passed, barely surviving, trying to keep others from discovering my secret.”

“And your da?” I asked.

Breccan hesitated. The look on his face told me he didn’t want to talk about his father.

I let it go. I could relate.

“Being on Alba, I may have been a servant, but at least I had shelter and food every day,” he continued. “I never imagined I would be placed with a finer master than you, Colin, someone who would want to befriend me and treat me like an equal.”

I smiled back and gave him a little fist bump on the shoulder.

Breccan giggled and returned the gesture.

We got a visitor the next day. We’d come back from a hunting trip and found Gannon waiting for us, admiring the work we’d done on the chariot.

“Fine job. Fine job indeed,” he said. “Looks almost complete. All you need are horses.”

I grinned. “Now that you mention it.”

Alaynna and Breccan took the rabbits we’d caught to clean and dress, while I showed Gannon the stable and introduced him to Liath and Dubh. He smiled as he stroked each one’s mane.

“So how are you?” he asked as we walked outside.

“I’m okay. I guess,” was all I could think to say.

“I have no doubt you are still exercising your physical skills. As for obtaining balance,” he pointed to the chariot. “This is a good start.”

“It is?”

“Hands that destroy must also learn to create.”

I caught myself grinning. I liked that.

“Are you still reading?” Gannon continued.

“Scathach’s got a library here.”

“She has a forge as well. Has it seen any use as lately?”

Just thinking about metalworking made me frustrated. “I’ve tried before, back in the fort. It’s hopeless. I just don’t have the patience for it.”

“Patience. Control. Focus. Qualities that could help you tame the warp-spasm.”

I wanted to argue but stopped short. He was right.

“Do you enjoy working on the chariot with Alayna and Breccan?” Gannon asked.

“Of course.”

“You and your dearest friends are creating something together,” he added.

I nodded, thinking about how much fun the three of us had been having.

“When you worked with metal, what did you attempt to create?” Gannon asked.

I shrugged. “Plates. Cups. Simple stuff like that.”

“It sounds as if you are in need of some inspiration. What about creating something for a loved one?”

I immediately thought about Ma and Jenny. Before getting kicked out, whenever I wanted to see them, Gannon would perform that same scrying spell. They were fine. With the way time moved differently in the Otherworld, only minutes had probably passed since the last time I’d been with them. Even though it had been — I’d lost track of how long I’d been here.

I suddenly found myself imagining a pair of silver bracelets. They were made of thin threads woven together like Celtic knots. A triquetra, an ancient symbol, was set on each one. I wanted to make one for Ma and another one for Jenny.

Gannon stayed for lunch before he headed back to the fort. I’d gone that whole time without asking about what was going on there. If things had cooled down any. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

The image of those two bracelets stayed with me. After a while, I decided to head into the workshop and fired up the forge. There were bars of refined silver billet on one of the shelves. More than enough for two bracelets.

I decided to give it a try. While the fire got hot enough, I searched through the tools on the shelves, looking for the ones I’d need. Once I had all that, I heated the silver until it was soft enough to work this.

I had the same problems I did back at the fort. I was useless at this. I might as well have been performing brain surgery while wearing boxing gloves. *I can't do anything right.*

“What are you making?”

It was Alaynna. I jumped a tiny bit. I tried not to snap at her. “I wanted to make something for my ma and sister. Some bracelets.”

Alaynna smiled. “How are they coming along?”

“So far, all I’ve succeeded in making is a mess.”

Alaynna examined my work-in-progress. “How about you put it aside for a while? Come back to it later.”

“No. I just want to get this done.”

Alaynna rested a hand on mine. “You are frustrated. That will only make matters worse. A hearth’s heat can only be met with a cool mind.”

I grinned. I liked that. “Will you help me?”

“Of course.”

I smiled and caught myself gazing into Alaynna’s eyes again. In return, she gave me what looked like a sad smile. She then tousled my hair, a lot like I would Jenny’s, and walked away.

I stayed behind, stewing in my embarrassment. Finally, I made my way back to the main building of the lodge, not knowing what I was going to say to Alaynna or how to act around her. I felt so stupid now, acting like a lovestruck dope around her and actually thinking she might feel the same way.

What was I thinking? She was so much older than me. I was a child next to her.

I hoped she wasn’t going to hold it against me. She was a great friend, and I didn’t want anything to get weird between us. I stood at the door watching as she sat by the hearth, her hair tied back behind her, chopping vegetables while Breccan stirred the inside of the cooking pot that hung on a metal hinge over the fire. He was probably making one of his awesome stews.

He offered her a sip from his spoon. I heard him say something about salt. She shook her head then looked my way.

“Colin, come have a taste,” she said. “Breccan thinks his stew needs more salt. I disagree.”

I stood there stunned for a moment. Breccan looked a little confused, no doubt reading the emotions in the room. Alaynna gave me a friendly smile

that seemed to say *it's okay, everything is all right*.

I made my way over. I took a sip of the stew and agreed it didn't need any more salt. But an extra dash of pepper would've given it a little kick. Breccan and Alaynna each took another sip and agreed.

So we were fine after that, me and Alaynna. She helped me make those bracelets for Ma and Jenny. She kept the fire going at the right temperature, picked the tools that would do the best job, and helped keep each bracelet steady while I did the decorating.

It was a different kind of challenge than anything I'd face before, but I was determined not to give up. It was frustrating, exhausting, and seemed like it took forever. But then there were moments, when I was fully focused on what I was doing, that nothing else mattered and nothing else existed than what I was doing in that moment. It was really peaceful.

I finished and stared at the bracelets as they lay on the worktable. I still couldn't get over the fact it was me that had actually made them. They were so delicate and beautiful. I had no idea I was capable of creating anything like that. Finishing them gave me a different of feeling of satisfaction, a kind I'd never experienced before. But I found it just as meaningful. Maybe even more.

"They are beautiful," she said. "Your mother and your sister will adore them."

I thanked Alaynna and made sure I didn't stare into her eyes like a lovestruck dope anymore.

Gannon came by the lodge just about every day after that. He'd take me on what he called meditation-walks through the forest. I was supposed to walk very slow and pay attention to every step, every breath, and everything going on around me.

"This will help strengthen your mind," he explained. "You will have increased awareness of your thoughts and emotions. Once you have accomplished that, you will be able to better control them."

That sounded like exactly what I needed. It wasn't easy. My head was always swimming with thoughts.

"That is the point of the exercise," Gannon told me. "When the mind becomes too burdened, focus on your breath, your surroundings, the ground beneath your feet, the breeze against your skin. You might be surprised by the results."

I kept trying. Each time, I found myself walking a bit slower. Every step I made was more precise and deliberate. After a few times, I started getting the hang of it. I was able to straighten out my thoughts and clear my mind a little quicker each time. It felt nice. Very relaxing.

That day, my head was extra full. I thought about Alaynna and Breccan. I thought about Ma and Jenny too — and how much I missed them. Then I started thinking about Niall and that day on the hurling field. I thought about combat training and how it felt when I couldn't get the moves right the first time. Not just that either. But everything I had ever done. Sports. School. I always felt like I was being watched and judged. Nothing I ever did was good enough. But who was watching me? Judging me?

It suddenly felt like needles were stabbing my heart. I wanted to cry but couldn't. I doubled-over, clutching my stomach.

Gannon rushed over to me. "Colin, what is it? What is wrong?"

I tried to tell him, but my throat hurt too much. Gannon walked me over to some large stones. We sat. I drank from his water skin and waited until I could finally speak.

"My da," I finally said.

"What about him?"

"All my life I wanted to know who he was." I swallowed. "Where he was. Why he was never around."

Gannon smiled. "You know who he is now. The god, Lugh. You are divine. You have a great destiny before you."

"And that should make a difference. That should make me feel better. Only it doesn't," I told him. Gannon blinked with surprise. I ignored it and kept talking. "I always wondered if it was something I did that didn't want to make him stay, even though I was just a baby. Was something wrong with me? Wasn't I good enough? It's crazy, but if I was the best at everything I did, somehow he'd notice and come claim me as his son. I know that doesn't make any sense."

"It does not sound crazy at all," Gannon told me. "I am so sorry. That must have been a horrible burden to bear."

I sniffed and pawed at the tears running down my cheeks. Thing was, now that I'd finally said all that out loud, I felt a lot better. No more needles stabbing my heart.

Gannon swallowed. I'd never seen him look so emotional. "I am certain your father did not wish to hurt you intentionally — albeit that is no excuse.

I am certain, if he could, he would have been there for you throughout your life.”

“He’s a god,” I snapped back. “What stopped him?”

Gannon winced, like he took what I had to say personally. “Even the gods have their limits,” He stared at me. “I am certain your father is very sorry for not being there for you. And if he could see you now, spend time with you, he would be incredibly proud of you. Especially now.”

I caught myself smiling. “Why now?”

“Going into battle or undertaking a great quest does require great strength and courage. But not everyone can dare face their inner turmoil. Let alone find a means to manage them. Would you consider writing about this? It might help give a more solid form to your feelings, help you gain a firm grasp on them.”

“You mean, like a poem?”

“I think maybe it is time. The finest warriors wielded their words as deftly as they wielded their sword or their spear.”

What he said reverberated through me. I told Gannon I’d think about it. He didn’t push. We walked back to the lodge together. He stayed for dinner then headed back to the fort just as the sun began to set. Breccan and Alaynna turned in not long after that. But I couldn’t sleep.

Outside, the stars were bright, and the moon was big and full. I stretched out in the cool grass and shut my eyes. My mind quieted. I reveled in the peacefulness.

Suddenly, my eyes popped open. I sat upright. Words rushed up from somewhere deep inside me. They wanted to be released. So I wrote them down.

*To so many you are a great champion.
The god of light.
But I have yet to know
Your bright warmth.
Or feel your strength
And courage inspires me.
Your absence is your presence
In my life.
To me, you have only cast
A shadow*

*That follows me everywhere
I go. Leaving me alone
Lost
And abandoned
In Darkness.
But I will find my way through
And will shine my own light
To guide me.*

That was it. That was all I could manage. I didn't think it would be so painful, just putting words on a page. But I was glad I did. Somehow, in my heart, I knew it was a good kind of pain, like I'd torn out some sort of weed that had been strangling me deep down inside.

It reminded me of the time when Ma had me seeing a counselor, when I first started getting into fights and trouble in school. She was always trying to get me in touch with my feelings, what was causing me to act up like that. Back then, I didn't want to. Take that back — I didn't care. Maybe I just wasn't ready then.

Now that this whatever-it-was had been torn loose, I could deal with it now properly. I glanced down at my little poem. Poem? It didn't even rhyme.

But I was proud of it. Just like the bracelets I'd made for Ma and Jenny.

Chapter Twenty

After my talk with Gannon, after writing that poem, I felt more and more like a new person with each day that passed. Lighter. Freer. Stronger too. I understood the importance of balance in life now too. In fighting, if you're off-balance, you can't block or strike as well as you normally could. You're in greater danger of losing the fight.

I thought about all the good things I had in my life now and how strong they made me feel. There was Ma and Jenny, Gannon, Scathach too. Then there was Breccan and Alaynna.

What Gannon had said to me, about how hands that destroy should learn to create, stayed with me. I spent some time at the forge each day, making whatever I felt like. There was the chariot too. We'd finally finished it. Man, it looked sweet.

I wrote more too. Dealing with what was hurting inside me made me feel more balanced too. Inside and out. A few times, Breccan and Alaynna each commented on how different I was now than when I first arrived at Alba. I wasn't the only one who'd changed either.

Breccan was like a completely different person. He stood taller, held his head higher, and there was a confidence in his voice now that wasn't there before. Now that the chariot was finished, we rode it around the nearby meadow just about every day.

Breccan was the only one Liath and Dubh would let close enough to throw a bridle and reins over them, and he drove the chariot like he'd been doing it his whole life. Alaynna and I would ride in the back, clinging to the sides when Breccan sped up or pulled sharp turns.

He was a heck of a hunter too. A master with a sling. He made it out of some fabric and leather cords he'd found lying around the stable. He'd twirl it over his head like a helicopter then let the stone fly. It flew like a bullet, and he could drop a pheasant or a rabbit with one shot fifty feet away. He was amazing.

We were all exhausted that day and ended up going straight to bed after dinner. I stretched out in my bed, shifting around until I found a

comfortable position. I don't even remember shutting my eyes I was that tired. But I sure as heck remembered opening them when Breccan was hollering for me and Alaynna to wake up.

"We are under attack," he yelled. "Get out! Now!"

I moved in an instant, so did Alaynna. I skidded to a stop once I was through the door. Alaynna slammed into my back. She was about to yell at me — that was until she saw the reason why I'd stopped.

There were a group of goblins, at least six of them, like the ones from the vision I'd had. They wore armor and had swords strapped to their sides. The sea monster symbol was on their breastplates.

They carried torches and had them raised over their heads like they were about to chuck them at the lodge. The goblins looked just as shocked to see us as we did them. Breccan must have sensed them when they were still coming. They must have wanted to torch the lodge while we slept. The cowards. The goblins looked to each other then behind them. That's when I noticed the guy on the horse. He had to be their boss.

Breccan came up behind us. "Cover me."

Alaynna and I nodded. The goblins turned Breccan's way long enough for me to do a salmon-leap, landing on one of them, driving the breath from him when he hit the ground. I sprang toward another goblin. He reached for his sword. I elbowed him then snatched it from its scabbard.

I froze for a moment. I hadn't held a real sword since my duel with Scathach when I first got to Alba. That was just a test. This was the real deal. Life or death.

The goblin stood before me. I knew a fighting stance when I saw it. There was enough light in the sky for me to get a good look at its eyes. All I saw was hate and aggression. It smiled too, drool hung from the bottom of its mouth.

This thing wanted to kill me. It wasn't going to think twice about it.

Next thing I knew, the goblin had a dagger in its hand and was racing toward me, screaming at the top of its lungs. It swiped for my stomach. I hopped out of the way and swung my sword.

The blade cut through the goblin's neck as easily as it did the air. Its head hit the ground and bounced. The rest of its body staggered forward several steps, dropped to its knees, then fell flat. A ragged breath left my lips. I stared at what I'd done — and told myself I had no choice.

The sounds of fighting yanked me back to reality. Alaynna had disarmed a goblin herself and was using its sword against the others. Breccan swung his sling over his head. He let a rock fly. It buried itself in a goblin's eye, killing him instantly. He'd let Liath and Dubh out of the stables, and they were down for a fight. They reared onto their hind legs and brought their hooves crashing down on any goblin that came toward them.

That was when I noticed the goblins' boss riding toward them, looking like he wanted in on the action. He wore a black tunic, boots, and gloves, with dark breeches. His helmet covered his face. It was shaped like the sea monster skull from my vision.

I ran to catch up. He set his sights on Breccan first. Breccan spotted him. His eyes flashed. I'd seen him do that with Liath and Dubh when he needed to get them under control.

This time he did something to the Boss's horse. It whinnied and bucked and didn't stop until it had thrown its rider. The Boss tumbled backward and landed in a crouch. I leapt toward him. The Boss spun and got his own sword up in time to block it.

His boot connected with my stomach, doubling me over. He swung at me from overhead. I tumbled out of the way and sprang back to my feet. The Boss unleashed a flurry of moves. Crikey, he was good. I barely blocked each one. There was something so familiar about his form. I couldn't let go of that. It kept distracting me.

Finally, I pushed the thought from my head, feinted and parried. I sliced the Boss's shoulder. He grunted and threw himself into his next move, thrusting his sword at my chest. I spun out of the way and cracked the side of his helmeted head with my elbow.

Bad idea. I may have staggered the Boss a bit, but his helmet was solid metal. Pain radiated through my arm, stunning me for a moment. The Boss took advantage and attacked with a flourish of moves I could barely hold back.

A quick glance over my shoulder. He was backing me up toward a large oak. I had to think fast. I suckered the Boss in. He swung. I did a salmon-leap, straight into the air. I tucked my knees to my chin then kicked him.

Both feet connected with his chest. The Boss went flying, tumbling when he hit the ground. His helmet slipped off. I ran at him, hoping to catch him before he got to his feet. The Boss rose to a crouch. His long blonde

hair was plastered with sweat. He turned to face me. I stopped short, stunned.

It was Niall. Only he was so different. His skin was ash-gray, and he had huge black circles beneath his eyes. He grinned like a maniac, and there was nothing in his eyes except pure rage.

“Fear the Croí Dorcha,” he hissed.

Alaynna and Breccan dashed to either side of them. They must’ve finished off the rest of the goblins.

“Colin!” Alaynna pointed past me.

I turned in time to catch Niall bolt into the forest. I tore off after him and could hear Alaynna and Breccan right behind me. I grinned. My hand tightened around my sword as I thought about what I was going to do to Niall when I got my hands on him.

I stopped short. Something was wrong.

Alaynna and Breccan closed in on either side of me. They looked like they wanted to ask what was wrong. But they could see it for themselves.

Niall was nowhere in sight. That was impossible. He only had a few seconds’ lead on us. There should have been some sign of him. We searched, our heads on a swivel, weapons ready. There was no trace of Niall anywhere. We exchanged disappointed glances. We had to give up. Niall was gone.

I finally noticed it was close to dawn. The sun’s light reached over the horizon and began chasing away the night as we reached the lodge. I wished his goblins’ corpses had disappeared just as easily. I wasn’t looking forward to getting rid of those.

“Colin,” Alaynna called out.

I turned in the direction she and Breccan were looking. A dark shape coursed through the sky. I thought it was a cloud for a moment. But the weather on Alba was always perfect. Besides that, clouds drift. This thing was flying, twisting and writhing through the air.

“The Jagged Wind,” said Alaynna. “Demons of the air.”

It was heading straight for the fort. First we got attacked, now the fort was getting attacked. This had to be connected.

“Everyone in the fort will just be waking up,” said Breccan. “They will be ambushed.”

My fists curled at my side.

“Get the chariot,” I told him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Alaynna and I took the weapons off the dead goblins and grabbed the spears we used for hunting. Breccan had the chariot ready. He slowed it just enough for me and Alaynna to jump in. He snapped the reins. Liath and Dubh poured on the speed. Crikey, I didn't know they could go anywhere near that fast. Alaynna and I clung to the sides the chariot and planted our feet so we wouldn't go flying out the back.

We closed in on Scathach's fort. But the Jagged Wind were already there. They spread out, disappearing behind the walls. Alaynna and I exchanged a worried glance. Breccan snapped the reins again, urging Liath and Dubh to run even faster.

"There is a servants' gate in the rear of the outer wall," Breccan hollered over his shoulder. I barely heard him over Liath and Dubh's thunderous hoofbeats.

We slowed a bit as we reached the iron gate. Right as I was wondering how we were going to open it, Liath and Dubh reared up and kicked it down with their hooves. It came out clean from the wall and landed several feet in front of us.

"That'll work," I muttered.

We rode on through into an open area. The Jagged Wind attacked everyone in sight. I couldn't make out individual air demons. I only saw dark, screeching blurs take down one person after another. Trainees and assistant trainers fought back the best they could with practice weapons. Scathach's guards fared better with real weapons and armor. They covered each other as they helped the wounded find shelter.

As we sped through, a number of air demons bombarded us. Alaynna and I used spears, jabbing and striking as many as we could. Our arms got cut up in the process. I skewered one air demon after another until they weighed my spear down. Each air demon was the size of an eagle but wiry. Their bodies were pitch black. Their wings were thin like a bat's. Their eyes

were huge and crazed looking, and each one had a long furry snout that was filled with jagged teeth.

I shook them off my spear and kept jabbing so did Alaynna. She had cuts all over her shoulders and back. I did too. They stung like heck. I finally decided to switch to a sword. It meant letting the air demons get closer, but I could take out two or three of them at a time with each swing.

We had to find Scathach. I was about to tell Breccan, but apparently he had the same idea. More of Scathach's guards were out, working in squads, protecting trainees and servants from the Jagged Wind and getting them to safety. We reached the armory next to her roundhouse. A group of her guards and assistant trainers ran out armed and armored, carrying loads of extra weapons to bring to others.

Scathach saw me and smiled. Breccan pulled the chariot to a skidding stop. She and a group of assistant trainers and guards jumped aboard. Alaynna and I quickly put on helmets and chain mail shirts. Scathach took the reins from Breccan for a moment so he could armor up too.

Scathach's guards lined both sides of the chariot, shoulder-to-shoulder. They held shields, not the small round ones we used in training but long, tall ones. They interlocked them, forming walls on either side of the chariot. Alaynna, Scathach, and I held tall shields over our heads, forming a roof.

Air demons hit our shields like a violent storm. Breccan was covered enough by our shields to keep steering the chariot. Liath and Dubh handled the extra weight no problem. The air demons were unable to pierce their tough hides, and any one of them that was dumb enough to get near either Liath or Dubh's heads got its throat torn out in one swift bite.

We rode through camp taking out as we could. We came across a group of trainees doing their best to fight while protecting some wounded. We stopped the chariot and hurried to help.

I ran to one of the trainees. He stood over another lying on the ground unmoving. He swung wildly at a pair of air demons with his practice sword. I threw my spear at one. Its lifeless body dropped to the ground. The other air demon flew away. The trainee dropped to his knees, his body heaving with sobs.

I reached for him. It was Kian.

He cradled Kelan's head in his lap. Kelan was covered in more wounds than I could count. He wasn't moving either. I turned to Kian, his eyes filled

with tears. I laid a hand on Kelan's chest, hoping to feel it rise even a tiny bit. It was so still. Not even the slightest heartbeat.

"I'm so sorry," I told Kian.

Tears gushed from Kian's eyes. I helped him carry Kelan's body to a nearby cottage. A group of servants were huddled inside. We laid Kelan out on the table. Kian gasped and groaned as he tried to force back his tears as he straightened his brother's body out and laid his arms at his side. I yanked a blanket off the nearby bed and draped it over Kelan's body.

Kian smiled through his tears, thanking me for the gesture. I laid my hand on his shoulder and bowed my head. Kian leaned against me for a moment. He then looked up at me, with a hard expression on his face. The message he sent was loud and clear. I nodded, knowing what I had to do.

My grief and sadness turned to stone. I tightened my grip on my sword and my shield-strap. It felt like flames shot from my eyes as I stalked out of the cottage cutting down every air demon that tried to charge me. I left a path of bodies back to the chariot, where I caught up with Alaynna and the others.

We rode around more, rescuing whoever we could find, getting them to shelter. Only we couldn't save everyone. We rode past so many bodies sprawled on the ground, covered in blood, still and lifeless. I tightened my grip on my spear. This needed to end.

The air demons. I lost track of how many we'd speared or cut down — but that didn't seem to make any difference. They still filled the air all around us. I started noticing how they moved in groups. Each one had a leader that was slightly larger than the rest.

We pulled toward another group that needed our help. Alaynna and I covered Scathach and some others as they got more wounded to safety. Some of the larger air demons broke off from their groups. They swarmed in front of me, closing in on each other. Next thing I knew, their bodies were twisting and mashing together until they formed one giant demon.

"You got to be kidding me," I heard myself say out loud.

The giant demon charged us. Breccan had his sling. From the chariot, he fired off stone after stone. That slowed it down a bit, got it distracted and off-balance. Alaynna and I charged. She went in high, jabbing with a spear. I came in low, swinging my sword.

Up close, I could see all the smaller demons squished together to make this giant. Their crazy eyes followed my movements. Their jaws lunged and

snapped at me. Every time I swung or stabbed at it, the smaller demons would move and shift, forming a hole. My sword went through but hit nothing every time.

I glanced at Alaynna and could tell she was having the same problem. The giant demon backhanded Alaynna and sent her flying. I swung at its leg at the same time. My sword cut clean through. The giant toppled to the ground. It must have been distracted, somehow. I guess, for all its eyes, it couldn't do two things at once.

I ran to Alaynna. She was okay, back on her feet. Before I could reach her, a curtain of air demons dropped between us. They didn't touch me. They were totally focused on Alaynna.

Breccan had leapt from the chariot and shifted to his Pooka-form.

A gang of air demons swarmed him too, cutting him off from me.

I turned my attention back to the giant demon. Bad enough it was back on its feet, but more air demons had merged with it. It was about twice my height now and thick as an oak tree.

It stalked toward me. I glanced at my friends. I thought about all the wounded we'd gathered up. And all the dead we'd left behind. Was all that pain and suffering just a way to get to me? Starting with Casey's death, then kidnapping Jenny and using that to try to ambush me in the park, and now this? Whoever was behind all this, they didn't care who they hurt, used, or killed as long as they got to me.

My anger rose. There was a twinge in my gut that turned into an explosion. This was exactly what happened when that warp-spasm hit me on the hurling field that one day.

Only this time was different. Power filled me, swelling every muscle. My tunic and breeches shredded. My chainmail burst, sending links flying. I yanked off my helmet.

I was at least three feet taller and jacked, like an MMA fighter. Woad tattoos covered my arms and chest in spirals and knotwork. I felt woad on my face, and every hair on my head stood on end and was as tough as an iron spike. Power flowed through me. Most importantly, I was still in control.

I charged the giant demon. I swore the thing was just standing there. I landed three good punches that sent it reeling. It was then I noticed everything around me was moving slower than before.

No, that wasn't it. I was faster now. Seriously, fast.

The giant demon recovered and attacked back. The woad on my face and body glowed now and felt warm. It threw a punch. I caught its arm and threw it to the ground.

I pounced as the giant demon scrambled back to its feet. I hit it, over and over, faster than it had time to shift and make holes for my punches to pass through. The giant demon managed a couple of a good hits — at least they would have been. Only I barely felt them. They literally bounced off me.

I suckered it in. The demon fired off another shot, but I hooked its arm and drove my fist into its face. Its head burst. The smaller air demons that had formed it went flying. I followed up with shots to the body. Lefts. Rights. Hooks. Uppercuts. Each punch sent more and more air demons flying.

Finally, there was nothing left. I checked Alaynna and Breccan. They'd fought past the air demons that had swarmed them. The Jagged Wind started flying away, clearing the sky all around us.

I groaned and fell to my knees. Every muscle ached. All of my energy was gone. I fell, face first, unconscious before I even hit the ground.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I was up like a shot, almost falling out of bed. My bed, in my cottage. Not that one in Scathach's roundhouse like the last time this had happened. Breccan ran over to me.

"Easy now, Colin," he said. "No rush."

He poured a cup of water from a jug and handed it to me. I drained it then grabbed the jug from him and drank straight from it. After enough water, my voice finally worked again.

"The other trainees — Alaynna — Scathach," I started. "Are they —?"

"Alaynna is fine. As is Scathach," Breccan paused. "There were casualties. Fatalities."

A shudder ran through me. "How many — died?"

Breccan bowed his head. "Over a dozen."

I pulled my knees to my chest. Over a dozen dead. One was too many.

"How's Kian?" I asked.

"As well as can be expected," said Breccan. "The pyres were lit two days ago. The bodies were given back to the heavens, but the mourning continues."

"Two days ago? I've been out of it for two days?"

"Three actually," said Breccan. "Colin, what you did. What you became?"

I flashed-back to what had happened that day. The sensations. The power surging through me. "Don't ask me. I'm just as clueless as the rest of you. It was like a warp-spasm but different. I know I looked different. I felt different too. I mean, I was angry. But I was more in control of it that time."

"Anger is not necessarily detrimental."

Breccan and I turned to see Scathach and Alaynna standing by the door.

"It can be an effective motivator if used properly," said Scathach as she and Alaynna approached. "Righteous anger. Over an injustice. Over harm being done to those you care about — as opposed to tantrums over petty slights."

My cheeks flushed a little. I knew exactly what Scathach meant.

"What about the Jagged Wind?" I asked. "Are we sure they're gone?"

Scathach smiled and rested her hand on my shoulder. “There has been no sign of them for days now. However, I have doubled the amount of guards on each watch. And on patrols.”

That was a relief. Then I remembered. “Niall. He was at the lodge.”

Scathach nodded. “Alaynna told me.”

“He was so different. He’d changed, I mean physically.”

“He disappeared a few days ago after one of his friends, Darragh, came forward. He admitted Niall had talked them into helping purposefully provoke you, to bring out the warp-spasm. He insisted that together they could beat you. They might get hurt a bit, but they would be heroes. And you would be disgraced.”

I was angry, but definitely not surprised. “Do you think he was controlling the Jagged Wind?”

Scathach shook her head. “Only my sister, Aoife, has that power.”

“Isn’t she supposed to be dead?”

Scathach fumed. “Apparently not.”

“Aoife has returned to train an army,” a familiar voice called out. It was the maiden version of the Morrigan. Coming out of nowhere, as usual.

“Many foes of old, long thought dead shall be returning,” said the mother-Morrigan as she stepped into view. “As the Fifth Cycle is set to begin.”

“Your enemy has discovered your presence here, Colin Caulfield,” said the crone-Morrigan, appearing behind her.

“The Croí Dorcha,” I said.

“Indeed, the Dark Hearted,” said the Maiden.

“They’re answering to Domnu, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they indeed serve the Queen of the Dark Places,” said the Mother.

I steadied myself. Not exactly the best news in the world, but at least I now knew what I was up against.

“It is time for you and your comrades to move on,” said the Crone.

I checked Alaynna and Breccan. From the stunned looks on their faces, they were able to see the Morrigan too. More important, they’d heard everything they’d said. I noticed Scathach was looking right at the Morrigan too. Only difference was she didn’t look the least bit surprised or bothered by their presence.

The three Morrigan turned, at once, to Scathach.

“You have done a fine job showing Colin how to balance his power,” said the maiden. “And in finding him proper comrades to aid him in his quest.”

All three Morrigan turned their eyes to Alaynna and Breccan. Wait, did that mean Scathach planned to bring me together with Alaynna and Breccan? Had she been working with the Morrigan the whole time? The way she nodded to them suggested she had been.

“But my training?” I asked. “Am I ready?”

“You have learned as much as you can here at Alba,” said the Mother. “From now on, the lessons you must learn will be on your own. With each new challenge you face.”

“But you said Aoife is training an army. And that there will be others.” I thought back to my vision and all those creatures moving in the shadows behind that goblin army. “How am I —?” I turned to Alaynna and Breccan. “How are we supposed to take on all that?”

“The first step shall be finding the Tuatha Dé Danann,” said the Crone.

“But they’re all dead.”

“And they have been reborn,” said the Maiden.

“You will find them in your home city,” said the Mother.

Phoenix? Seriously?

“For what more appropriate a place is there for reincarnated gods to gather than in a city named after the great firebird renowned for that very same ability,” said the Crone.

My neck became warm all of a sudden. A weight settled around it. It was a large golden torc. Alaynna and Breccan each wore torcs now too. They looked just as surprised by them as I did by mine.

“The torcs will provide you with the ability to locate the Tuatha Dé Danann who have reincarnated,” said the Maiden.

“They will also grant you the ability to see those who walk unseen amongst humanity,” said the Mother.

“You will also be able to summon the Veil of Mists that will allow you to travel between worlds,” said the Crone.

My wrist suddenly warmed up. I looked down to see a golden cuff on it with a sun symbol in the middle, a spear on one side and a sword of the other.”

“Behold the Sunburst,” said the Maiden. “Make a fist.”

I did. And the sun symbol expanded and became a shield. I unclenched my fist, and it disappeared.

“Touch the sword on the cuff,” said the Crone.

I did, and in a split second, I held a real sword in my hand. Seriously cool. Alaynna wore a similar cuff, but it was made of silver and had a moon symbol in between the sword and spear.

“You now possess Moonshard,” the Maiden told her.

Alaynna made a fist. The moon symbol on her cuff turned into a shield. She then touched the spear. A real one appeared in her hand.

“Touch the weapons against the cuff, and each one shall return,” said the Mother.

Breccan now had a new sling in his hands and a pouch hanging from his belt. He reached inside and pulled out a colored stone, then another, then another.

“That is the Whisperer,” said the Crone. “The power of the stones will be revealed in time.”

“We found Liath and Dubh,” I told the Morrigan. “We fixed up a chariot.”

“And you will be able to summon them as well using the power of your torcs,” said the Maiden.

So this was it. Was I really ready for this? What about Alaynna and Breccan?

“You two don’t have to do this,” I told them. “I don’t care if this is the Morrigan. You have a choice in all this.”

Breccan smiled. “I will go with you, Colin.”

I looked to Alaynna. “You’ve proven yourself to everyone in the camp. You’ve earned your place here and then some.”

Alaynna smiled. “It would not be the same without you.”

A warm feeling rose inside me. The three of us together — Alaynna, Breccan, and I — armed with gifts of the gods.”

“Where’s Gannon?” I asked. “If we’re leaving, then I need to say goodbye to him.”

Scathach glanced down for a moment then looked me deep in the eyes.

“There was no Gannon,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“The man you knew as Gannon,” Scathach continued. “Was Lugh, your father, in disguise.”

I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. The things I'd told him, my feelings about my da, not knowing I was actually saying them to him. My da.

"Why didn't he say anything?" I asked.

"I am certain he had his reasons," said Scathach. "Forgive me, Colin. I was forbidden from telling you."

Why would he do that? Why couldn't he meet me in person? Face-to-face? With his *own* face. I scoffed. I guess the perfect god wasn't so perfect after all.

A familiar mist surrounded me, Alaynna, and Breccan. The Morrigan had already disappeared, and Scathach saluted us, bringing her fist to her heart then raising it over her head.

We saluted back to her, but the mist soon grew too thick for us to see her anymore. This was Alaynna and Breccan's first time dealing with this. Not like I was an expert or anything. I just told them to follow me as I started walking. Just like last time, solid land turned into water. Alaynna and Breccan freaked out a little, but I assured them we'd be okay. We could still walk on it.

We kept walking. I couldn't tell how long we'd been at it. I kept checking on Alaynna and Breccan to see if they were okay. They looked fine. Nervous but fine.

Water soon gave way to land. The mist started clearing up a little at the time. When it was finally gone, we were in the parking lot of the Fenian. I smiled. Home sweet home.

Then I spotted Alaynna and Breccan looking around at everything with big bewildered eyes, from the cars in the parking lot to the tall buildings surrounding us. This world was definitely going to be strange to them, but I'd be there to help them adjust.

We drew some stares from the handful of people in the parking lot. Our clothes. The fact we appeared out of nowhere. Luckily, no one said anything. They probably had no idea what to say or to think, and in circumstances like that, it was probably easier to leave and pretend it never happened.

I waved Alaynna and Breccan toward the stairs to our apartment. We were on our way when the backdoor to the kitchen opened. Ma, Jenny, and Sean stepped out. They stopped short. Ma and Sean looked surprised. Jenny on the other hand just stood there, smiling like she'd expected this.

Ma and I threw our arms around each other. I didn't want to let her go — but ended up allowing her to pull away. She looked me up and down.

“You just left us minutes ago,” said Ma.

“It wasn't minutes for me,” I told her, voice cracking, close to tears.

“You look so different. You've changed so much.”

I did? I realized my hair was probably longer. I was probably a bit more muscular too. But as Ma looked me in the eyes, I figured out what she meant. The changes I'd gone through inside must have somehow shown on the outside now.

I glanced back at Alaynna and Breccan. The look of them, if they'd been turtles, their heads would have been in their shells by now. I smiled and waved them over. They stepped forward, a bit timid. I introduced them as my best friends. That made them relax a little.

Ma didn't hesitate to hug them both at the same time. “It's lovely to meet you.”

Alaynna and Breccan both looked caught off guard. Slowly, they relaxed and settled into Ma's hug. I headed toward Jenny. She just stood there. She didn't run up to hug me or anything. She just looked me up and down and nodded.

“You're ready,” was all she said.

What — what did she mean by that? Before I could say anything, Jenny went over to pick up Donovan, who'd been sitting nearby. He meowed a few syllables to me then started purring when Jenny rubbed him behind his ears.

Sean rushed over and hugged me. “The things you must have seen. Things no man has laid eyes on in centuries. I can't wait to hear about it. All of it.”

“Okay. Enough of this,” Ma announced, with her arm around Alaynna's shoulder. “Let's get you inside and, uh, find you some clothes that'll help you fit in a bit better. I have a feeling you're hungry too.”

My stomach growled. Crikey, I'd missed Ma's cooking. Ma led the way. Breccan checked with me. I nodded. Before he headed off with the others, he handed me the bracelets I'd made for Ma and Jenny. I sighed and thanked him. I'd almost forgotten about them.

I looked to Jenny, ready to walk up with her. She cocked her head to the side, looking at the Morrigan, who'd returned. My breath caught in my throat for a moment. I glanced at Jenny then at the Morrigan, suddenly

realizing how much Jenny resembled them, especially the maiden. They both had the same shade of dark red hair. Then, of course, there was the way each of them smiled, like they were in on a secret the rest of us had no clue about.

Jenny grinned at the Morrigan. Yeah, she could definitely see them. She then headed off after the others with Donovan in her arms. I approached the Morrigan, trying to figure out what to say as I did. Lucky for me, one of them spoke first.

“It must be good to see your loved ones again,” said the Maiden.

“Enjoy your time with them,” said the Mother. “Let it help restore you to your fullest before you undertake the quest ahead of you.”

“Let their presence also remind you,” said the Crone. “Of what you will truly be fighting for.”

I nodded and glanced at Sunburst, around my wrist. “At least we know we’ve got you on our side.”

The three Morrigan stared at me with blank expressions. They then started to laugh, one at a time. I blinked and stepped back. What was that about?

“Foolish, boy,” said the Maiden.

“We have only aided you in order to even the odds a bit,” said the Mother. “To make things more interesting.”

“Truth is we have yet to decide which side we will favor in the coming conflict,” said the Crone.

What? Were they kidding? Please tell me they were just messing around. Only I had the feeling a goddess of war, magic, and fate didn’t have much in the way of a sense of humor. I could only stand there watching them walk away then transform into a trio of black birds and fly off into the night sky.

I felt abandoned. Alone.

Only I wasn’t, was I? I had my two best friends ready to fight beside me. So maybe the Morrigan wasn’t exactly on our side. That was fine. I knew that wouldn’t stop us from reuniting the gods and beating back every enemy, the Dark Hearted, planned throwing our way.

THE END

Irish Pronunciation Guide

- Aedan(ay-den)
- Aes Sidhe(eye-shee)
- Alaynna(ah-lay-nah)
- Aoife(ay-fuh)
- Berit(beh-rit)
- Breccan(brek-kan)
- Cathal(cah-hall)
- Cessair(sess-air)
- Croi(kree)
- CuChulainn(koo-kull-un)
- Darragh(dair-uh)
- Domnu(dom-noo) Dorcha(dor-huh)
- Dubh(duhv)
- Farias(far-ee-us)
- Findias(fin-dee-us)
- Fomorian(foh-moh-ree-an)
- Gannon(ga-non)
- Gillie-Doos(gill-ee-doos)

- Gorias(gor-ee-us)
- Ildathach(il-da-hahk)
- Inis Fáil(in-ish-fale)
- Kelan(kell-an)
- Kelpies(kel-pees)
- Kian(kee-an)
- Liath(lye-ath)

- Lugh(loog)

- Macha(maw-kuh)
- Manannán(man-ah-nahn)

- Milesians(myl-zhans)
- Morrigan(mor-i-gan)
- Murias(mer-ee-us)
- Nemed(nem-ed)
- Niall(nye-all)
- Partholon(par-tho-lon)
- Scathach(skah-hahk)
- Sliotar(slid-er)
- Spriggans(sprig-ans)
- Tir fo Thuinn(shir-fo-tun)
- Tir na nÓg(shir-na-nogh)
- Tuatha Dé Danann(too-UH-day-da-nuh)

About the Author

Dan O'Mahony has been a lifelong fan of the fantasy genre, seeing it has the home of dreamers and outsiders who do not feel quite at home in the 'normal world' but know, deep down, they are heroes at heart destined for epic adventures and great deeds.

Dan currently resides near Chandler, Arizona but spends most of his time exploring new worlds and associating with unique characters. When not engaging in his routine flights of fancy, he teaches elementary and junior high students, hoping to inspire within them a love of reading and writing (The trick is to get them while they are young.).

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