



New

*Prince of
Coillearnach*

Russell E. Vance, III

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Cover Photo Credits: Cover photo is of Mr. Henry Hina in the title role of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. The **photographer** is **N. Lynn Bubb**. It was modified for the cover by the author.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR. Russell E. Vance, III, PhD. is a retired psychotherapist who, after retiring, has followed his passions and dreams. He currently lives a nomadic RVer's life spending most of his life off-the-grid far out into the Sonoran Desert or in the Rocky Mountains of Glacier National Park in northwestern Montana where he and Pamela serve as volunteer campground hosts.

An unabashed tree-hugger and environmentalist, Russ' post-retirement advocacy became wildlife management, living among and helping keep deer, mountain goats, big horn sheep, bears and other creatures safe. Many of his stories carry a strong environmental message. `

Living in a twenty-five-foot camper trailer they named Sinopáá, Russ enjoys spending his evenings writing stories. He

has published three novels – *AGEH*, *New Prince of Coillearnach* and *Tree of Life* – and four novella.

Chapter 1

One probably would be stretching it to say that Brian Ferguson burst over the crest of Buffalo Mountain ridge, but for a sixty-five-year-old trail runner he was doing quite well. He looked down at his Pathfinder - a seven functions, four sensors survival watch that shows sunrise-sunset, the temperature, the barometric pressure, the altitude, the direction (correcting for magnetic north), seconds, splits and other timing measurements. Brian always laughed about this complicated device with its plethora of settings and 100 plus page owner's manual. "It even tells time", he would joke.

The Pathfinder said that he was doing fine and had almost eight hours before sunset. Brian calculated he'd completed about 17 miles of the 38 mile Cowan-Skyline trail race. It was a hard race that tested even the youngest and best trail runner's nettle. Less than two-hundred feet from the start runners had encountered an incline that went from 1050 feet to 1710 feet in less than a mile. That defined this grueling race across the Cumberland Plateau where the runner's first thought is survival and then speed.

According to the topographic maps Brian would have a short respite with minimal elevation change before a long and difficult descent to the Rich Bench at about 1700 feet. From there he would be steadily working his way down from 1700 feet to the Prescott Hollow at 600 feet and then into the Tate Cove and northwest to the Tate Spring Finish Line.

Brian was a short man, well-muscled for his age. The muscles in his legs bulged against his compression tights. He was thankful that he was in good enough health to continue this type of physical exertion. His grey hair was rather thin with glimpses of a once healthy crop of red hair. His thin, close cut beard was almost totally grey. People told him that he didn't look sixty-five, but he truthfully wasn't sure whether

they were being honest or nice. Most of the time he didn't feel sixty-five. At least he didn't think he did.

He looked around at the beauty that surrounded him, took a deep satisfied breath, sank his trail poles into the soft soil and headed off at a pace much faster than the long steep climb had allowed him heretofore.

The bottom line was that Brian just loved to run trails and would run from sun up to sunset. He had started running late in life- just a few years before he retired. Brian had taught psychology for thirty-seven years. After his wife, Bridgette, died suddenly five years before he turned to his running. He always told people that it was running that helped him cope with his tremendous grief. It was not only something he loved but running trails required constant concentration and focus on what you're doing. In any case, he proudly sported a bumper sticker that read "Running is cheaper than therapy."

As he ran along the narrow ridge Brian heard an animal cry. At first he didn't pay much attention but he soon realized that it was the sound of an animal in distress. This caused him to slow down. The cry had been nearby. He stopped and listened.

A short distance off the trail Brian entered a clearing where there was a Bobcat caught in a poacher's snare. The animal held perfectly still without a sound when it saw Brian.

"Poor thing," Brian tried to sound soft and comforting. He didn't know if that worked with Bobcats but it was worth a try. The animal's right rear leg was held by a snare that was attached to a sapling that had the poor, frightened animal almost three feet off the ground.

"I'm going to try to set you free," Brian said as he thought hard about how he was going to cut the snare without the Bobcat removing a few of his fingers. He knew that he couldn't just cut the rope at some safe distance because that would trail behind the animal, get tangled and again entrap the animal.

Brian laid down his poles and, removing his pack, got into the Camelbak to get his Swiss Army knife. All the time he kept talking quietly to the Bobcat. Brian's Camelbak pack was always well organized and he could tell you exactly where the knife would be, and it was exactly where it was supposed to be.

As he stood looking at the suspended Bobcat, Brian had an idea. He went back to his Camelbak and pulled out his SOL survival blanket. If he could enfold the Bobcat in the blanket long enough to cut the knot, the cat would probably run instead of attack when he let go.

Brian explained every step of his plan to the Bobcat who watched him cautiously.

"Please, pretty Bobcat," Brian said. "I'm going to hold you down, but that's just to keep you from tearing me apart. Please know that I'm trying to help. Please don't shred me." The cat snarled.

In as few movements as possible, Brian wrapped the helplessly dangling Bobcat in the SOL blanket and pulled the snare so that the cat was on the ground. He had to put his knee on the animal and was terrified that he was going to hurt it. It held perfectly still. As quickly as possible he went for the knot. He slipped the blade of his Swiss Army knife between the Bobcat's leg and the rope. Holding the Bobcat down with his knee, he let go with his right hand to help cut the rope.

Suddenly the rope gave, and the sapling sprang upright hitting Brian in the face as it went. Brian lost his balance. As he fell backwards the pressure of his knee on the Bobcat was released and the animal scrambled free.

It hadn't been pretty and Brian was sure that it was as painful for the Bobcat as it had been for him, but it was successful. That's what really mattered. The Bobcat ran a few yards stopped and turned around. 'Do you think she knows I helped her?' Brian thought as he turned to his Camelpack to get his first aid kit. "You're welcome," Brian said to the cat smiling. "Have a great life!"

Just as Brian reached for his first aid kit a voice said, “thank you. That was very compassionate and very brave.”

Startled, Brian turned so quickly in his crouching position that he ended up sitting on the ground. Before him was a young woman. He just looked.

“I’m sorry,” said the young woman, “I didn’t mean to startle you but I couldn’t leave without thanking you for freeing me.”

Brian was still speechless. She was beautiful. She was slender and dressed in a flowing white dress that clung to her body accentuating her willowy form. Her hair was long and dark; falling in great curls down to her waist and simply parted in the middle of her head. The darkness of her hair emphasized her milky skin. Her face was narrow, with a very fine nose, dark gentle eyes, and almost pouty lips. She seemed totally out of place in the wilderness. But then again Brian couldn’t think of any place where she would look at home except maybe a fantasy.

“Are you okay?” the woman asked, cocking her head at Brian’s speechlessness. It was then that Brian noticed. As she cocked her head her hair fell to the side exposing one of her ears. It was pointed. Sharply pointed.

“Yes,” Brian sputtered. “I’m sorry. You surprised me. I wasn’t expecting anyone, nevertheless . . .” His words trailed off as he continued to stare.

“nevertheless?” the woman said.

Brian worked at regaining his composure. “Nevertheless a beautiful young woman,” he finished his sentence. The woman blushed.

“Where did you come from?” Brian continued.

“I was going to run away but you were so gallant that I had to come back and thank your properly.”

“Thank me for what?” Brian asked.

“For setting me free.” She lifted the hem of her long flowing gown to show her right ankle. There were the burn marks from a rope. Brian sat looking in disbelief.

“It wouldn’t be proper to show you the bruise from your knee as you held me down, but I understand why you did it.”

“You’re saying you’re the Bobcat?”

“Yes,” the woman smiled. She knew that this was totally beyond anything Brian could comprehend nevertheless believe. “My name is Alainn. I was watching you run up the mountain and when I started to look for a place to hide I wasn’t watching carefully and got caught in that snare.”

“My name is Brian. Brian Ferguson,” he said standing up and attempting to look less foolish than he felt. “and I don’t know what to say.”

“Brian,” said Alainn standing there looking at him with a gentle smile. She said his name softly and with a lilt in the old Gaelic way – ‘Bree-an’ – which Brian hadn’t heard since his grandmother died.

Pointing to the first aid kit Brian was holding in his hand, Alainn said, “Let me help you with that.”

Brian, still trying to take it all in, handed Alainn the first aid kit. She had him sit on a fallen tree while she started to clean the scratch left by the sapling.

“I know that Humani don’t believe in Draiochta, . . .” Alainn started.

“Humani? Draiochta?”

“Oh, sorry.” She paused. “Humani are what we call the great non-magic people. All of the magic races are called Draiochta. I am an Elf and I assume that you are a Humani.”

“Am I unconscious?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Because being unconscious and having a dream is the only thing that can account for suddenly meeting a beautiful young Elfin woman who says she was just a Bobcat.” Brian pretended to pinch himself.

His attempt at humor was lost on Alainn but she could understand his perplexity.

“I understand how strange this must seem.”

“An understatement . . .”

“I didn’t really believe that Humani existed until I was a teenager and saw for myself so I can understand you not believing me. Humani work very hard to deny the existence of Draiochta and we take advantage of that by staying out of sight.”

“You mean you hide?”

“Well, not really,” Alainn smiled as she put the finishing touches on her first aide. “Actually a lot of our people, especially wizards, live and work in the Humani world.”

“Then why don’t we see them . . . er, recognize them or whatever?”

“No offense, but Humani only use about 15-20% of your brains. And the portion of the brain you do use filters incoming signals so as to not be overloaded.”

“Yes, that I understand.”

“Well, if you don’t believe something is there the brain will filter out the signal.”

“What?”

“If you don’t expect to see someone and they suddenly walk up to you, you are startled. Do you know why?”

“Yes. Yes. I’ve explained that to students for years. I understand what you’re saying,” said Brian, “but . . .”

“Good.” Alainn continued. “Since you don’t believe that we exist, you don’t see us for who we really are. How many times have you heard someone describe a person as being elfin-like because of their features? They probably were an Elf but no one thought that because Elves don’t exist.”

“But why do you hide, . . . I mean stay out of sight?”

“I don’t know how to say this in a polite way,” Alainn looked truly embarrassed, “but Humani don’t have a very good reputation. They think they’re the only intelligent creatures on earth and are exceptionally prone to violence, so we keep our distance.”

“That I can understand.”

“Please don’t tell anyone you met me.”

“Don’t worry,” Brian smiled. “Even if I did tell I’d end up having a psych-eval.” Alainn cocked her head again in question. “People would be sure I was crazy.” She smiled.

“I do want to reward you for your bravery,” Alainn said.

“No, you don’t need to reward me.”

“Yes I do, and I want to give you a gift – gold, jewels. What would you like?”

“Please,” Brian held up his hands. “Bobcat or Elf I would have done the same. If you were just a Bobcat you wouldn’t have anything to give me and I’d be completely happy just knowing you were free.”

“Wow,” said Alainn in complete amazement. There was an awkward moment.

“What are you doing out here?” Alainn changed the subject.

“I’m doing a trail race.” Brian was suddenly brought back to the reality of the moment. “And, oh, my gosh. I’ve lost so much time.”

“A race?” Alainn questioned.

“Yes, it is a thirty-eight miles race from Cowan, Tennessee to Tate Springs. And I’ve lost lots of time.” Realizing how impolite that sounded, Brian tried desperately to recover, “it has been very pleasant meeting and talking to you, but I do have to run – literally.”

“May I run with you?” Alainn asked. “I love to run through the woods.”

“Will that be as an Elf or a Bobcat?” Brian joked.

“As an Elf, silly,” said Alainn. “And, if you won’t take gold or jewels, perhaps you will let me show you how you can run longer and faster.”

“Sure,” said Brian. “I’m always open to suggestions and new ideas.”

Brian put on his pack and adjusted the harness. Picking up his trail poles he noticed that Alainn was barefooted.

“I do some barefoot running,” he said, “but I rarely run trails absolutely barefoot.”

Enjoying her self-conscious smile he started off down the trail. He was about to look back to see if Alainn was coming when he noticed that she was right beside him. Her stride was long and flawless. She appeared almost to float. Her long white dress flowed out behind her causing Brian a brief moment of embarrassment as he was certain that she knew he was imagining the beautiful body underneath. One thing he did know was that it was going to be tough concentrating with this beautiful creature – human, elf or bobcat - running along-side of him.

“You have a very good form,” Alainn said after they had run a short distance.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t change your basic form, but lift your body as though being pulled up by a string from the top of your head.”

Brian nodded acknowledgement. He’d heard that analogy before.

“Have you ever had the dream that you were flying?”

“You mean like Peter Pan?” Brian asked.

“Peter who?”

“Sorry. You mean flying on your own like a bird?”

“Yes.”

“Actually, I have.”

“Was it very realistic? Did your body feel like it was flying?”

“Yes it did.”

“Great!” she said with enthusiasm. “I want you to remember that feeling as you lift your body. Imagine that you’re just going to use your feet to propel yourself.”

Brian did as Alainn said. He felt his body lift and elongate, his stride lengthened a bit and remembering the dream state of flying it did seem that his feet were just propelling him along.

Unbeknown to Brian, Alainn had cast a spell called Cosa Milis – gentle feet. It wasn't going to turn Brian into a champion runner, but he would be able to run faster for longer.

As they ran they talked. Even making their way down the steep mountain trails they talked. Brian told Alainn about being a psychology professor, how he started running, losing his wife, and about his children and grandchildren.

Brian learned that Alainn was not just an Elf but an Elfin Princess. She was the Princess of Coillearnach which was most of the Appalachian Mountains. Her husband was killed by a Humani poacher leaving her alone to raise their daughter. 'What sorrow at such a young age,' Brian had thought to himself. He didn't really care whether or not she was making it all up. He didn't care whether or not she was an Elfin princess. He had come to the conclusion that no matter what she was, she was real and he was thoroughly enjoying his time with her.

At the bottom of Prescott Hollow Alainn stopped.

"I'd better not go any farther with you. There's a road up ahead and I don't exactly look like a trail runner, do I?"

Brian stood silently. He hadn't thought of what it was going to be like when they came to this point. He had been so wrapped up in this young woman that he hadn't permitted himself to think about her not being next to him.

"I . . . I . . . It's been wonderful!" Is all he could say.

"It's been wonderful for me too," Alainn agreed. She stepped up close. She was so close that Brian could feel her nearness. She took both his hands and gave him a long gentle kiss on the lips.

Brian just stood there when the kiss was over. Then, with a sad smile and a wave good-bye, he turned and began to run down the trail not daring to look back.

As Brian started down the trail toward the finish line he was filled with conflicting emotions. No woman had ever kissed him like that except his wife. Brian had been a widower only a bit over five years and the feeling that Alainn's kiss elicited caused him to be overcome with guilt. He had liked it and didn't want it to end. He couldn't believe that he was so smitten by this young woman. He didn't think of himself as an old man but by comparison he was an old man. He couldn't believe that he was even thinking about her in such terms.

He picked up his pace as the trail opened up next to the gravel road leading northwest to Tate Springs. The trail was running parallel to the road when his family drove by. Pausing only a moment to cheer and encourage Brian they yelled, "we'll see you at the finish line." He waved. Seeing them gave him a burst of energy.



"Wow, he looks good!" exclaimed Thomas, his eldest daughter's husband who was driving the leading car with his wife, Brenda, son, Kevin, and niece, Angela.

"I can't believe the time," replied Brenda. "He shouldn't be here for over an hour. He's bookin'."

About that time Brenda received a text message from her sister-in-law, Martha, in the van behind them. Martha was married to Brian's youngest son, Seamus. They had Brian's daughter, Mary, her husband, Edward, and granddaughter, Cathy, with them.

'Sure doesn't look like he just ran 38 miles,' the text said.

Brenda laughed and shared the message with Thomas. 'Does he ever?' she replied by text.

They found a place to park as close to the finish line as possible. Between the number of people there awaiting runners and the geography that wasn't particularly close.

"I can't believe this," said Martha as they hurried toward the finish line. "I thought we'd be here at least an hour before he finished, and now we might not actually be there."

"Don't worry," her husband, Seamus, comforted her. "He saw us and knows that we're here."



Alainn had been thinking about Brian as well. She had been a widow for over thirty years but she too experienced the guilt. She wondered whether Brian was as attracted to her as she was to him. As many suitors as she had had over the years, and as hard as her mother and daughter had tried to 'fix her up', nothing had clicked for Alainn until now. She had to see him once more.

With a swish of her wand, Alainn was dressed as she thought would be appropriate. It was an outdoor event, so she wore khaki shorts that were turned up to show a substantial amount of her well formed thighs. Her shirt, she thought, was quite modest albeit a bit on the tight side. She blushed at the thought of how she was dressing to make Brian notice her 'as a woman' and not an Elfin princess, as though Brian had not been thinking a lot about that woman.

The last several meters were flat and Brian could see the finish line. He felt good so he decided to put on a bit of a push for the finish. He wasn't above liking to make his family proud and showing them that he was quite fit enough to do these things. He was just waiting for the day when the children would try to talk him out of going off and running trails in the wilderness, so he wanted to make sure they knew

that day hadn't come yet. Concentrating on his form and what Alainn had taught him, Brian was setting a pace that everyone noticed.

As he drew near to the finish line he could see his family almost running to beat him to the finish line, so they could be there when he crossed. He also caught sight of Alainn standing just beyond the finish.

Brian didn't know whether it was emotions or hormones that were making his head spin. He was running at break-neck speed and all he could think about was wanting to take this young woman in his arms and kiss her passionately. But he had only known her for a few hours. Even though he took only minutes to cover that last distance it seemed like an eternity of emotional torture.

As Brian crossed the finish line he looked to the left where he saw his family cheering and rushing toward him. He waved at them. Then he looked straight ahead at Alainn. He came to a stop just in front of her. She stepped forward, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. So much for his fantasy of taking her into his arms. She beat him to it. He put his arms around her and returned her kiss.

The sight of an unknown stranger kissing their father slowed Brian's family significantly.

"Whoa!" exclaimed granddaughter, Cathy, as the family approached.
"Grandpa's secret is out!"

Brian didn't really want to let go of Alainn but he knew his family was close. Gently he disengaged from her embrace.

"I'm sorry!" Alainn exclaimed, "are you angry with me?"

"Heaven's no!" said Brian. "I just need to introduce you to my family."

Alainn could feel herself blush. She turned to see Brian's family standing a few feet away not knowing what to say. Brian broke the awkward pause by rushing to his family and giving each of them a hug. That's all it took. Amidst the excited chatter Brian said, "Everyone, I want you to meet Alainn."



Alainn was amazed at how she was assimilated into Brian's family. She wondered if her family would have reacted like this if they had found Brian kissing her like she kissed him. Brian's children had immediately included her into the excited conversation that followed the brief awkward pause and introductions. Granted, there was a bit of teasing but Alainn had to admit that it was rather pleasant. It was good natured and seemed to be approving. Brian's race obviously took priority but they still took time to ask Alainn about how she had met Brian and came to be here, whether she was a runner, where she lived and about her family. She told the truth. She just excluded certain details.

It was Brian who came up with the explanation that they met while attempting to free a Bobcat from a poacher's snare. That was true. She told them that she was a private land manager and loved to run through the woods although she'd never done it like Brian. She said that she lived close to Tate Springs and had walked to the finish line. Again, it was the truth and it provided a good reason that she should be there ahead of the rest and without a car.

The children were becoming restless and Alainn knew that soon Brian would leave with his family. She knew that she wanted to see him again. She wanted to take him home. She struggled with how she was going to ask him and the fear that he would reject her. But she didn't get her opportunity.

"Hey, guys," Mary said, "the kids are getting restless and Dad is probably starving. How about we take the party down to Stevenson and get something to eat?"

"Sounds good," replied Martha who was joined by the others in agreement.

Then the unimaginable happened for Alainn. Without the slightest hesitation Martha turned to Alainn and said, "I do hope you'll join us."

Alainn heard herself saying "I'd love to." Everyone smiled at Alainn and

started talking about where they might find anything vegetarian for Brian as they made their way toward the cars.

"Alainn's a vegetarian too," Brian announced to anyone who might be listening.

"I want to ride with Grandpa and Ms. Alainn," said Angela as if she had just claimed the prize spot. Her older cousin shot her an angry look. He'd been outmaneuvered.

To Alainn it seemed like total confusion but with amazing ease everyone found a spot and the group headed off to invade the small town of Stevenson, AL. Alainn sat close to Brian and held tightly to his arm. This was the first time she had ever been in a Humani vehicle. This was the first time she had ever been away without a Torc escort. Even though she trusted Brian she felt frightened, and her mother was going to be furious.



In the woods a figure stood watching as Alainn got into the van with Brian and the other. The giant boar shook its massive head and snorted. Lawrence was fast but he wasn't that fast. He didn't know what to do. He had no idea why Princess Alainn had gone with those Humani. Queen Maethoriel was going to be livid with him for letting the princess out of his sight.

Lawrence Clainn Torc was the Captain of the Torc Allta who guarded the royal family. He had known Alainn since she was a child and had been best friends with her late husband, Prince Fionn. Lawrence had watched over Alainn and her daughter for many years and had never seen Alainn do anything like this. Trotting back and forth in a state of frustration and agitation the ground shook from the impact of his powerful legs. Lawrence didn't dare go any further into the Humani world, even in his human form, without having some idea where she was going.

The only thing he could think to do was to return to the castle and find Anastasia. Alaiinn's daughter, Anastasia, had powerful telepathic skills. Hopefully she could find her mother. Lawrence would face the fires of Hell for Alaiinn, but he could only be helpful if he knew where in Hell she was.



The Dinner Bell restaurant was exactly what one would expect of a small, southern mountain town - "down home" and offering only southern comfort foods.

"Are you sure this is going to be okay, Dad?" Brenda asked for the second or third time.

"Yes," Brian insisted, "we'll be fine." He leaned over to Alaiinn, who was just beginning to feel comfortable enough to let go of Brian's arm. "Do you eat eggs?" he whispered.

"Yes," Alaiinn whispered back. "I'll eat anything you eat."

Brian ordered eggs and hash browns without meat for the two of them. The waitress couldn't believe that anyone would not want meat.

"Would you rather have ham than bacon?"

"No, Ma'am. No meat, please."

"We've got Canadian bacon," the waitress offered. Brian's family was having a hard time not laughing.

"No, thank you. We really do **not** want any meat," Brian said slowly and emphatically emphasizing the word 'not' without appearing rude.

The entire group, watching this exchange, laughed at the incredulous look on the waitress' face as she left to put in the order.

"I've got five dollars that says the order comes out with some sort of meat on it," Edward laughed.

No one in their right mind would take that action, the others agreed.

Alainn was beginning to enjoy herself. These Humani were nothing like any of the stories she'd heard. They were loving and compassionate. The food was totally different from anything Alainn had ever eaten, but it was strangely tasty. She could see why they called it comfort food.

Brian responded when Alainn suddenly jerked. "Are you okay?" He asked.

"My daughter is looking for me."

"I'm sorry," apologized Brian. "I didn't think about that when we invited you."

"It's my fault." Alainn paused and closed her eyes. "I should probably go soon."

Everyone was about done when Brian announced that he really needed to get Alainn back since she hadn't had a chance to tell anyone where she was. Thankfully no one questioned her about telephoning her family since they were all ready to head to Brenda and Thomas' home in Huntsville, AL. Seamus and Martha would take Brian and Alainn back to Tate Springs.

"I want to go with Grandpa," announced Kevin in an effort to get a jump on his younger cousin who had outflanked him the last time.

Teasing him, Alainn leaned near the young boy and said, "you know I'm going to kiss your grandfather again."

"Yuck!" said the ten year old boy. Everyone laughed heartily but the threat was not sufficient to keep Kevin from claiming his spot on the other side of his grandfather on the drive to Tate Springs.

□ □ □

At Tate Springs Alainn knew that the moment of truth had come. She knew that Lawrence was nearby but would stay out of sight. He was undoubtedly fuming. She could visualize him in some hidden thicket stomping his massive feet so hard that the very foundation of the mountains were shaken.

But more important to her was her last few minutes with Brian. Seamus forbade the children to follow along as Brian and Alaiinn headed toward the tree-line. They were in sight of the van but too far to be overheard.

“I had a wonderful time with you and your family,” Alaiinn said as they walked.

“They obviously like you very much,” Brian said.

Alaiinn swallowed hard. Here was her opening. “How about you?”

“Me too,” Brian added with a sheepish smile, “that should have been a given.”

Alaiinn blushed. That’s what she wanted to hear. But now what?

She stopped at a point near the tree-line.

“There’s a Torc guard waiting for me somewhere nearby,” Alaiinn said as casually as she could. Brian only recognized the name from the novel about Nicholas Flamel. They were giant were-boars who could take on a human form and who fought ferociously to protect the goddess, Hekate. If he remembered correctly, they were called shape-shifters.

“Is he here to protect you?” Brian asked, not really wanting to encounter an angry Torc who might not take kindly to his being so familiar with the Princess.

“Yes.” Alaiinn smiled.

“Are you in trouble?”

“Yes, but thankfully I’m a princess. He can’t spank me even if that’s what he’d like to do.”

Brian, too, was aware of their situation. He didn’t want their time together to end but neither of them had a choice.

“Will I ever see you again?” he asked.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes, very much.”

“I’d really like you to come and visit my home,” Alaiinn said.

“I’d like that.”

Alainn pulled out her wand and turned to a small sapling behind her so her actions were out of sight of the van. With a few words and a subtle wave of the wand she was holding a beautifully carved walking stick. She handed it to Brian. In high relief was the figure of an Elfin woman with her hands outstretched. Brian smiled. “You?” he asked. Alainn just smiled and dropped her gaze.

“When you want me just tap the staff on the ground two times and say ‘Alainn tar.’” It may take me a little while, but I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Alainn tar,” Brian repeated.

“Come back soon,” Alainn almost pleaded.

Brian smiled even though there was a sickening feeling in his stomach that told him she was about to leave.

They stood looking at each other. Neither of them ready or willing to say the words. Finally, knowing that they could no longer forestall the inevitable parting, they stepped toward each other, embraced and kissed.

At the van a ten year old boy could be heard to say “yuck!” In the woods nearby a Torc Allta guard looked on in disbelief.

Chapter 2.

Ever since she was a child Alainn knew that if you had done something wrong and the Queen summoned you to the large audience room, you were in serious trouble. Despite her age, Alainn had that sickening, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach when her mother, Queen Maethoriel, summoned her to the large audience room shortly after she arrived home.

Slowly she opened the door, expecting at any moment for the Queen to raise her wand and send a plasma bolt hurling at her. The hall was dimly lighted except for the dais where the Queen sat enthroned. Next to her was Lawrence, now standing erect and stern in his human form. Behind them she could see her daughter, Anastasia, and Anastasia's husband, Stephan.

For a moment Alainn just stood looking. Then she regained her composure. Yes, maybe she might have made some poor choices, but she was not a child. She held her head high and walked toward her Mother.

Bowing formally, Alainn said "you summoned me, Your Majesty."

Despite the formal setting, Queen Maethoriel was not in the mood to play court.

"What in the hell were you thinking?!" The words almost spit from her Mother's mouth. "Do you have any idea the fear, the concern, the trouble you have caused, not to mention the risk at which you put our community?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Alainn said unflinching. "I am fully aware of my actions. While I may have made some poor choices there was actually good reason behind them."

"You must be kidding me!" Queen Maethoriel looked upwards in disbelief as though seeking solace from some heavenly being. "What, child, could be a good reason?!"

Alainn couldn't remember the last time that her Mother called her 'child'. She lowered her head to cover her smile. She didn't want her Mother to think that she was laughing at her anger and frustration, but being called 'child' told Alainn that the Queen's maternal love and instincts were ruling the situation. That made Alainn feel a lot better.

"Brian saved my life."

"Oh, 'Brian' is it?"

"Mother, please!" Alainn couldn't believe that she had spoken so sharply to her Mother. She paused.

"You were in no danger," Lawrence offered.

"How do you know?" Alainn demanded.

"Because I was watching you," Lawrence answered matter-of-factly. "I saw you watching the Humani run up the mountain and I saw you step into the snare. I was ready to help you out but I knew that you'd probably get free on your own before I got there. Then the Humani showed up."

"That Humani has a name," Alainn said reprimanding the Torc captain. "It's Brian." Evidently her rebuke had been more forceful than she thought. It had obviously hit the mark and Lawrence physically took a step backwards. Taking a glance at her Mother, Alainn noticed that the Queen too was set back by her daughter's reproof.

"Perhaps I was never really in any danger, but Brian never knew that. He saw a frightened animal that was going to die if he didn't risk serious injury to help it. I proudly bear the bruised ribs from his knee as a symbol of his compassion for all life forms. And if you were watching, Lawrence, you saw that too."

The Queen, Captain Lawrence, Princess Anastasia and Prince Stephan were silent. Alainn was anything but timid. She was destined to be a strong queen, but they all recognized this was different.

“Mother,” Alainn continued, “you raised me to make a very quick assessment of people. You taught me this skill for just such occasions . . . occasions where I must determine to trust or not trust someone in an instant with little or no information. Is that not true?”

Queen Maethoriel nodded agreement. She was trying not to show her admiration of her daughter. She was supposed to be scolding her for her poor judgment.

“The way in which Brian continually tried to comfort me when I was a Bobcat, even though he didn’t believe I could understand him, led me to believe that he was a compassionate man. Even though he thought he was speaking to an animal who could not understand and who would hurt him if given the chance, he told me exactly what he was going to do and then risked serious injury to set me free.” Alainn paused for effect. “Would you not think lesser of me if I would have allowed such valor to go unrewarded?” Alainn looked directly at her Mother. Her Mother’s brief and almost imperceptible lowering of her eyes was all that Alainn needed to see to know that she had won the argument.

“But why did that require going off with him?” Queen Maethoriel asked in a much softer voice.

Alainn went on to share, in relative detail, how she had given him the gift of Casa Milis, what she had learned of Brian during their run and her experience with his family. “Whether or not they thought I was another Humani, I was still invading their family. I was kissing their father. Nevertheless, they welcomed me with open arms.”

“You kissed him?!” Queen Maethoriel’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

Alainn looked at Lawrence who said, “I’ve been your protector for most of your life. I would never tell your Mother such an intimate detail.” The irony of her having told on herself struck Alainn funny. She folded at the waist in laughter.

“What’s so funny?” demanded her Mother.

“You don’t think I’m old enough to kiss a man?”

“It isn’t that,” said a very frustrated Queen. “We’ve been trying to fix you up with suitable husband material for years and years to no avail and you go off and fall in love with a Human!”

“Who said I fell in love?!” Alainn demanded.

“Oh, come on, daughter. Don’t try to play innocent with me. I’m your Mother.”

Alainn felt a sharp stab in her gut. She didn’t want to hear this. She stole a glance at her daughter who was, by this time, making no attempt at hiding her amusement. If Anastasia knew how she felt when she was around Brian would her daughter be angry with her? Would her daughter not feel that she was abandoning Anastasia’s Father – her loving husband? It was this guilt that kept Alainn from answering her Mother.

“Well, Mother, my transgression goes deeper,” Alainn said. The Queen misinterpreted and gave an audible gasped. Realizing what her Mother was thinking Alainn quickly said, “Oh, no! Not that! I asked Brian to come visit us.”

“You what?”

“His family accepted me and made me feel a part of them. They did so because their father accepted me and I wanted him to see that my family is also loving and compassionate.”

Queen Maethoriel just looked.

“Okay,” Alainn caught herself smirking, “I wanted to see him again, too.”

“You can’t be serious,” Lawrence interjected.

“You’re thinking and acting like a teenager in love!” said her Mother.

Alainn avoided eye contact. “And I gave him a staff.”

“Oh, this has got to be good!” said Queen Maethoriel sarcastically.

“It has a teacht anseo spell.”

“I should have guessed as much.”

“And when should we expect your guest?”

“I don’t know, Mother.” Alainn’s voice dropped. She lost some of her bravado. “If you’re lucky he’ll drive away and forget me. If I’m lucky he could come any day.”

“We’ve only had a few very select Humani come into the Flaitheas Scáth, but knowing how much it means to you I would not consider myself lucky if he does not come.”

It took a moment for Alainn to realize what her Mother had just said. Queen Maethoriel was acting like a Mother and not a queen. If it meant her daughter’s happiness she was willing to allow a Humani into their secret realm.

“If he comes, I just want him to experience the same love and compassion and acceptance that I felt with his family.”

“Do you not trust us?”

“Mother I have always trusted you and believed that we are among the most compassionate and loving creatures on Earth. I have no reason to believe that this should prove us otherwise.”

“You’re terrified that he’ll not come,” Queen Maethoriel said softly.

Alainn lifted her head to look at her Mother as the tears rolled down her cheek. That was more than the monarch could handle. She quickly went to Alainn’s aid. Maethoriel held her daughter tightly. “I want you to be happy.”

Captain Lawrence knelt on one knee, put his hand over his heart and bowed his head. This was the most respectful of salutes that expressed undying love and loyalty. Queen Maethoriel knew that it was meant for her daughter, Princess Alainn. Alainn blew him a kiss, which was only allowed in a private situation like this. He stood, bowed from the waist, took two steps backwards, turned smartly and left the audience hall.



About fifty miles away the van carrying Brian Ferguson pulled into his eldest daughter's home. It had been a quiet trip with rather strained conversation. Martha had attempted to make small talk about the race, his fast pace and how nice Alainn seemed. Brian tried to participate but just wasn't doing a very good job. He was preoccupied with trying to make sense of what had happened on the mountain and what he was feeling.

When they arrived, the children jumped from the van and ran into the house with the adults close behind. By the time Brian came around the corner into the family room where Brenda, Thomas, Mary and Edward were sitting, the two children had arrived and Angela was saying "and she kissed him on the mouth just like they do on television," with older cousin, Kevin, providing the appropriate "yuck". The room was filled with laughter and cat-calls as Brian entered.

Brian was embarrassed and yet quite relieved that his family was not angry with him. They seemed to have taken to Alainn as quickly as had he.

The room quieted quickly as the four noticed Seamus and Martha trying to give them the signal to go easy. Brian caught a glimpse of the hand signals and realized that he was bringing down a moment that should have been gregarious.

"I'm sorry," Brian apologized. "I need to talk to you."

The children were sent off to play and Brian sat down. Everyone watched expectantly.

"What's wrong?" Thomas finally asked.

"Nothing's wrong," Brian started, "or at least I hope nothing is wrong."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Seamus.

"You were all very nice to Alainn. I couldn't have asked for you to be more open and accepting."

“Why shouldn’t we?” Brenda’s question was almost a demand. “She’s a lovely young lady and she seems genuinely smitten by you. What’s not to like?” Everyone agreed with Brenda.

“I’m so glad you all feel that way.” Brian paused trying to find the words. “Alainn asked me to visit her and her family.”

“That’s nice,” said Martha. “You are going, aren’t you?”

“I want to.”

“What’s to stop you?” Martha questioned.

“I was afraid.” Everyone sat watching Brian in anticipation. “I was afraid that you would feel that I was being unfaithful to your Mother, and be angry with me.” He put his head down. He didn’t want them to see the tears that began to well up in his eyes.

Each of the children started to express that they would not believe such a thing or be angry. It was Brenda who summed it up.

“You’re afraid that we’d be angry because you feel guilty,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You know that’s ridiculous.”

“What?”

“There’s no reason for you to feel guilty. Because you are attracted to another woman doesn’t mean that you love Mom any less.”

“I know that.”

“If you know that, then your guilt is just your fear that we don’t know that.”

“I guess,” Brian conceded.

“And you shouldn’t care what anyone else thinks,” added Seamus. “We know the truth. We know that you will always love Mom with all your heart.”

Brian started to cry. His children knew and understood. When he was a young man and he and Bridgette were just starting their family he had learned that a person

has the capacity to love more than one person totally. He loved each of his children, their spouses and all of his grandchildren, no matter how different they were, and he loved them completely. Some of his tears were because of the grief he felt and would undoubtedly feel his entire life. Some of his tears were because he was so proud of his children. The question now was could he overcome the feeling of guilt.

“I’d like to go back and visit Alainn tomorrow,” Brian said when he was finally able to compose himself. He looked up to see his children gathered around with tears in their eyes. He knew they weren’t crying because they were upset with his decision. He knew they were crying because they shared his grief and understood his sense of guilt even if they felt he was guilty of nothing.

“That sounds great,” said Mary wiping the tears from her eyes. “Where does she live? She never said.”

“Her family has a place in the woods not too far from Tate Springs. She lives with her mother and daughter. She said that she’d pick me up at Tate Springs because that would be easier than trying to give directions.”

Even though Brian still had to deal with the guilt feelings on his own, he felt so much better having talked with his children. The rest of the evening was spent talking, laughing and teasing as it should be. Obviously Brian’s pending visit with Alainn and their relationship was the main topic of discussion. They all agreed that Alainn was a lovely person and that the age difference didn’t matter. She may be young but she was old enough to understand the difference. If it didn’t matter to her, it shouldn’t be a problem for them. Of course that didn’t stop them from teasing.

“My only problem with her,” said Brenda, “is that she’s so young and beautiful.”

“You said she had a child?” Edward questioned.

“That’s not fair,” chimed in Mary. “She doesn’t look old enough to have a child.”

“You didn’t think to card her, did you, Dad?”

“Are you sure she’s over 18?”

And so it went. One of the girls noticed how Alainn had clung to Brian for a long time when they first left for the restaurant. They decided that it must have been because she was overwhelmed by the group dynamics. Brian laughed and agreed. ‘That,’ thought Brian, ‘and the fact that she’d never been in a car and never been in the Humani world.’ The clincher for Brian was when one of the kids said, “and did you notice her features? Her ears? They’re elfin like.” Everyone had noticed. Brian smiled and, glancing over at the staff next to his running bag, thought ‘If you only knew. If you only knew.’



The next morning Brian left for Tate Springs. He was excited and a bit apprehensive. He had told himself that he didn’t really care whether or not Alainn was an Elfin Princess. If she wasn’t, however, there was no way the staff was going to work. He looked over at the staff resting in the passenger seat, reached out and stroked the figure. Suddenly he had to concede that it did matter, at least if he was going to see her again.

Arriving at Tate Springs, Brian parked, put his pack over his shoulder, picked up the staff and started walking toward the spot where he had left Alainn. He looked up at the mountain. It rose majestically above him. Somewhere up there he hoped that Alainn was waiting for his signal. The time of truth had arrived.

Brian put down his Camelbak and held the staff in front of him. He spent a long time looking at the figure of the Elfin woman. Finally he tapped the staff firmly against the ground two times and called out “Alainn tar.” There was nothing to

indicate that anything magical had happened. All that was left for him to do was to wait.



It was a beautiful day in Flaitheas Scáth. Alainn knew that it must be a beautiful day outside the realm. That's the way the magic worked. Weather inside the realm mirrored weather outside and she hoped that Brian was enjoying the beautiful weather.

Alainn sat on the grand veranda that overlooked the realm. It was mid-morning but Alainn was still dressed in her nightgown and robe. If one didn't know that Flaitheas Scáth was a shadow realm, one would believe that they were sitting in the mountains which physically surrounded the realm. A shadow realm is a magical realm that is a parallel dimension to the real world. Alainn's ancestor had created Flaitheas Scáth to protect the Draiochta who fled to the New World during the great Morganian War. Now Alainn sipped her tea and ignored the hot bowl of porridge in front of her as she stared off into the distance. She didn't hear her Mother approach.

"Ah, I haven't seen a young woman so love-struck since your daughter fell for Stephan," Queen Maethoriel teased as she sat down across the table from Alainn with her tea.

"I'm not love-struck," Alainn snapped almost without looking up. She took a sip of tea. "I'm . . . I'm . . ."

"You're in love." Maethoriel finished her daughter's sentence.

"I can't be," insisted Alainn.

"And why not?"

"Oh, I feel so guilty."

"Why in the world would you feel guilty? Anastasia and I . . . the entire kingdom has been wanting you to fall in love again for years. What's the problem?"

“I feel like I’m adulterous and untrue to Fionn.”

“Oh, for pity sake!” Maethoriel almost spat the words. “You’ve been a widow for 38 years! You have a 49 year old daughter who hasn’t had a father for most of her life. When are you going to accept that no one has ever been as faithful as you and that you can love someone else without stop loving Fionn!”

“But Mother!” tears were running down Alainn’s face. “you don’t talk about getting remarried.” For a stunning moment Maethoriel’s thoughts turned to Sadron, an Elfin servant who was rarely seen far from the Queen. She glanced over at the doors into the Great Hall where Sadron stood patiently waiting. As though knowing her thoughts, he looked up and smiled. The Queen brought her focus back to her daughter.

“Daor amhain!” Maethoriel reverted to the ancient common tongue using the term of endearment – ‘dear one’ – which she had called Alainn at such times ever since she was a baby. “Daor amhain! I was over 80 years old when your father died. I had a kingdom to run and even if I did think about getting married again, how many eligible bachelors or even widowers do you know who are 90 years old?” The thought of a 90 year old eligible bachelor somehow made them both giggle. “Do you really think Fionn would want you to spend your entire life grieving?”

“No, but . . .”

“No, but what?” Maethoriel insisted. “I know for fact that you are quite capable of truly and completely loving this Humani, Brian, without loving Fionn any less.”

“But what would people think?”

“They’d think ‘finally she’s getting on with life and honoring Fionn by living.’ If they didn’t think that, they haven’t a brain in their noggin.”

Alainn laughed. As her mother would get excited about a subject the accent of her ancient native language would become more and more pronounced until she

almost sounded like she was singing or perhaps reciting poetry. Maethoriel was so animated as she spoke that it was difficult to understand her English.

“You’re right, Mother,” Alainn said smiling at Maethoriel. “But right now I don’t know how to escape the guilt feeling.”

“Maybe your knight in shining armor can rescue you.”

Alainn blushed at her Mother's reference to Brian and was picking up her cup when Brian tapped the magic staff twice and called 'Alainn tar'.

“Mother!” Alaiinn cried. “It’s happening!”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Maethoriel asked without being at all perturbed that her daughter was changing from solid to what appeared as almost a gaseous form in front of her.

“Of course, Mother, but I’m not dressed!! I’m not presentable. I don’t want him to see me like this.”

“I wasn’t the one who gave my young man a teacht anseo staff,” Maethoriel laughed and raised her tea cup in salute. “Turas go maith!”

[illegible]

Brian didn't have as long as he thought to wait to see if the staff actually worked. Hearing what sounded like a woman calling out for her mother, Alainn suddenly appeared.

She looked distraught. She was standing there in a dressing gown that was open in the front exposing her silk night gown which, in turn, was sheer enough to expose her undergarments or lack thereof. She was barefooted but Brian knew that's the way she always was except when she had to go to town with his family. Alaiinn pulled her dressing gown tight around her as she struggled to regain her composure.

“Hello!” Brian said, wondering if her obvious struggle to regain her composure was a byproduct of the magic.

Alainn looked at Brian and smiled. “Hi,” she said because she didn’t know what else to say. She stood on her tip-toes a few feet from Brian nervously hopping from one foot to the other.

“I’m sorry,” Alainn started. “I really didn’t want you to see me looking like this. I just didn’t have a chance to get dressed and make myself presentable, and . . .”

Brian interrupted her. “You look lovely.” His voice was soft and desirous.

With that Alainn literally sprang into his arms and gave him such a hug that Brian could hardly breathe.

“I’m so happy you decided to come,” she said into his ear as she continued her bear-hug.

“I’m glad you’re glad.”

Alainn finally let go of Brian enough that he could get his breath and resumed her hopping. She didn’t realize she was doing it. Brian finally put his hands on her shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Alainn apologized.

“That’s okay,” said Brian. “You were just wearing me out.”

They laughed.

“Well,” said Brian, “show me the way.”

Alainn froze. A look of horror crossed her face.

“What’s wrong?” Brian asked.

“I thought about you coming and about you bringing me here with the teacht anseo staff, but I didn’t think about us returning to the realm.”

“Is this just a one-way staff?” Brian laughed.

Alainn didn’t laugh. “Yes. I’m sorry!” She looked ready to cry.

Brian hugged her and comforted her. “Can we walk from here? I have covered a few miles on foot, you know,” he said jokingly.

Alainn looked up and smiled. “Yes. It isn’t very far, but I wanted everything to be perfect.”

“You saw my family. We couldn’t get into the cars and go out to eat without it being chaos,” Brian said. Alainn laughed at the memory. “Yet,” he continued, “it all came out right and everyone was happy.”

Alainn sheepishly pointed to the mountain behind her. “It’s at the top,” she said softly.

Brian laughed. “Oh! That can’t be more than a five or six hundred foot climb. We’ll just take our time and enjoy the beautiful day,” he said, picking up his Camelbak and throwing it over his shoulder.



It takes time to climb six hundred feet even if it was only a bit over a half mile as the proverbial crow flies. Alainn lead the way. She skillfully zigzagged back and forth up the relatively steep mountain side. Brian followed. He had not brought his trail poles so he used the Teachta Anseo staff.

Alainn set a very comfortable pace and, letting her embarrassment go, started chattering about what Brian was going to see. As she related her story she became more animated.

“My family came to the New World to escape the Morganian War. The war had affected everyone, Draiochta and Humani, throughout Europe. My clan, the Coillearnach clan, tried to stay out of it but we did support Merlin, the white wizard, so Morgana had no mercy on us.”

“There were rumors of a land to the west beyond the great sea, so my family sat sail and ended up in America – but it wasn’t called that then. I don’t know what it was called, but the only Humani for almost a thousand years, other than those who

were already here when we arrived, was a Norse sailor named Ericson and an Irish Christian named Brendan. When the English Humani started taking over we moved up into the mountains that the Humani call the Appalachian Mountains. The Coillearnach Kingdom pretty much includes all of the Appalachian Mountain range. The realm to which we are going has been the capital of the Coillearnach Kingdom since 1712. My father became King in 1956. He died from cancer in 2000 and my Mother, Queen Maethoriel, has ruled Coillearnach ever since.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” said Brian. “How big is the place we’re going? What did you call it – capital, realm?”

“Oh, there are several hundred Draiochta living in the shadow realm.”

Just then Alainn stopped and listened. “Teacht amach. Ta se ceart go leor.” She called out. “The Humani is a friend.”

Brian looked around. He hadn’t seen or heard anything, but Alainn had obviously seen or heard something or someone. Soon a head popped out from behind a tree.

In a moment a man was standing in front of them. He appeared to Brian as a very small middle aged man who was now bowing almost to the ground.

“Your Highness,” said the man with a great smile on his face. “It is so wonderful to see you. What be you doing out without Captain Lawrence?” The man couldn’t have been more than four feet tall. He reminded Brian of what Brian thought a Hobbit or Leprechaun might look like. He sported a full beard with less hair on his head than Brian. He wore a long-sleeved collarless shirt with a waistcoat and his bare feet were quite hairy.

“Turloch, This is Brian Ferguson,” Alainn said by way of introductions. “I’m taking him home to meet Mother.”

“You be kidding me.”

“Not at all dear Turloch.”

“He must be a special Humani to be permitted in Flaitheas Scáth,” said Turloch with an impish smile that seemed to say he knew something was going on.

“That he is,” Alainn said returning his smile.

Brian stepped forward and held out his hand. Turloch looked curiously at the extended hand and bowed deeply.

“Oh, shaking hands is a European Humani custom we’ve just never taken up,” Alainn explained.

Brian immediately returned Turloch’s bow saying, “It is a privilege to meet you, sir.”

“You speak kind and well, Brian Ferguson,” said Turloch, “but I’m no lord. I’m just a simple Hogboon in the service of my beloved Queen.” He gave Brian a wink, “and her magnificently beautiful daughter.”

“Turloch, you shameless charmer,” Alainn laughed. “What would your lovely wife say if she heard you talking like that.”

“Probably get a skillet up side me head,” the Hogboon quipped. “But I need to be about me business. Give my love to your Mum.”

“Most assuredly,” Alainn promised, and waiving she and Brian moved on up the mountain.

“Are there a lot of people like Turloch in the mountains?” Brian asked.

“Yes, many thousands throughout the kingdom. We have Elves, Hogboon, Torc Allta, Dwarf. All sorts of Draiochta.”

“What, actually, is a Hogboon?”

“Oh, he’s a type of goblin.”

“Goblin?” said Brian. “In our literature Goblins are not nice creatures.”

“Some types aren’t nice, but for the most part, how do you say it, ‘they get a bad rap.’ Hogboon are actually quite nice. Just try not to put them off.”

Brian had taken an immediate liking to Turloch and noticed how he showed a deep respect for Alainn and her family while still showing a sincere and personal affection for them.

Just below the summit of Pruitt Ridge Alainn turned west for a short distance until they were standing before a giant tree. The magnificent Cucumber Magnolia was enormous, with gnarly branches that reached out many feet in every direction. Brian had never seen anything like it and stood in awe.

“This is home,” Alainn said proudly.

“We’re in the realm?”

“No. No.” she laughed. “This is just the entrance,” she said as she walked up and gently put her hand against the tree. Brian could hear her utter some words which he could neither understand nor hear clearly.

The side of the tree opened exposing a passageway.

“Come on,” said Alainn leading the way into the tree.



Brian stepped into the tree. He didn’t know what to expect. For a short distance it appeared that they were inside of a living tree. Then they stepped out into another world. It looked almost exactly like the Appalachian Mountains on the other side of the tree. That was the lone extent of the similarity. To Brian’s left was a gravel path that led down a gentle slope to a village that looked like something out of a European fairytale. But directly ahead of him was what took away his breath. There was what appeared to be the keep of an enormous castle that looked like it came from medieval England. It was built into the side of the mountain. He could count four stories at least. From their vantage point Brian figured they were seeing the south side. On the downward side of the mountain was a massive multistory building. On the

east side were towers that had archer's windows for at least four stories. From the direction of the path which lead off to their right, Brian figured that the entrance was on the high side of the castle between the two towers. He didn't see any curtain walls. They were either already inside the curtain wall or the builder had decided that it was not necessary.

"Home, sweet home," Alainn announced with obvious pride.

"This is magnificent," Brian exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it."

"It's not as old and drafty as it appears," Alainn said.

"It's marvelous."

"When my ancestors built it in 1725 they hadn't seen modern castles so they ended up building this. Evidently they had a picture or plans of some medieval English castle."

Brian just stood staring.

"When they got this part done they couldn't see any reason to build the curtain walls. The borders of the realm itself are like our curtain walls." She smiled as she watched Brian looking in awe at her world.

"Like I told you, I didn't believe that Humani existed until I was fifteen years old. I knew about the tree, but I was told that it led to a most dangerous place that I was to never enter. Mother still feels that the Humani world is a dangerous and frightening place, although she finds it fascinating."

"A couple of cousins and I sneaked through the tree one day when I was fifteen. Even today Humani rarely come up here, but that day was one of those rare occasions. We saw some Humani hunters. We had no idea about guns, but we knew that we were supposed to stay away from Humani. We watched them. Then we saw them point their guns at a poor defenseless deer and shoot it. We ran back into the tree and I didn't go out again until I married Fionn. He took me out into the forest so that I could see its beauty and how it was just like here. He loved the mountains. He

taught me that not all Humani are bad. Then . . .” Alainn’s eyes began to fill with tears. Brian knew the end of the story. Alainn’s sharing had brought back the memory of her husband’s murder.

“I’m sorry,” Brian tried to comfort her. “It doesn’t seem to get any easier with time, does it?” Alainn tried to smile through her tears and shook her head. ‘No,’ she thought. ‘Thirty-eight years and it still isn’t any easier.’

Suddenly from behind them Brian could hear tremendously heavy footfall. He turned to see a giant boar bearing down on them. He had no idea what to do. He grabbed Alainn by the arm and was going to run for shelter in the tree but Alainn held up her hand.

“It’s okay,” she smiled. “I didn’t think about you never having met a Torc Allta.”

By that time the enormous animal had arrived and lowered its head before Alainn.

“Maith ar maidin, Devin,” she said cheerfully.

In a moment there was a strangely handsome man with bright red hair and brilliant blue eyes standing where the giant boar had just been. He was tall and muscular, wearing what Brian assumed was leather armor and tight leggings. He smiled broadly and bowed deeply to Alainn.

“Your Highness honors us by recognizing us in our natural form,” said the young warrior.

“Oh, I’d know you anywhere, Devin,” Alainn said with an alluring charm that Brian had never seen before. ‘This was Alainn in her natural habitat,’ Brian thought to himself.

The man blushed and bowed again.

Gesturing toward Brian, Alainn said “Devin, may I present Brian Ferguson. He is my guest.” Devin bowed.

“Brian, this is Devin. He is one of the company of Torc Allta guards who protect the royal family and our realm. I’ve known Devin since he was a boy.”

Devin again blushed as Brian bowed toward the young man. “I assume that means . . .” Brian started to say.

Devin interrupted, leaning forward as though being conspiratorial, “yes. She knows stories. I must behave or she’ll tell them.”

Both men laughed.

Again in an instant Devin was a giant were-boar who acknowledged the two by lowering his massive head then trotted off on his appointed rounds.

“They are a proud clan,” Alainn said watching Devin go. “There aren’t many left in the world.”

They started walking up the path toward the entrance of the castle.

“Can they, . . .uh, I mean . . .”

“Yes,” Alainn rescued Brian. “Devin has a wife and three children.”

The two giant towers stood guard over a very impressive entrance. A stone ramp led up to the large double doors. Two Torc guards in their human form stood on either side. They stood to attention and then bowed as they saw Alainn approach. She called them both by name, enquired about their families, and took Brian into the castle.

Chapter 3.

Just inside the large, solid-oak, double-doors was a small foyer. Straight ahead was a wide hallway that ran perpendicular to the foyer from tower to tower. Two more large oak doors opened into the great hall with a gigantic fireplace at one end. Alainn was just telling Brian that the great veranda, her favorite place to enjoy tea and stronger libations, was just beyond the great hall when a very distinguished Torc and a young woman approached. They were introduced to Brian as Captain Lawrence Clainn Torc, Commander of the Torc Alta guards, and Princess Anastasia, Alainn's daughter.

"Finally," said Brian genially, "I can put faces with the names."

Captain Lawrence was obviously trying to look friendly but Brian knew the look of a protective man who was quite distrustful. Perhaps it was his job. This had to be the Torc who had been waiting out of sight when Brian returned Alainn to Tate Springs after going to eat with his family. Brian wondered what the full story was. Was Lawrence a father figure, zealous servant or in love with a woman 'above his station.' Brian bowed low to both, addressing each.

Anastasia wasn't as easy to read. She looked a lot like her mother but a bit taller, with flaxen hair but the same dark eyes. Even as young as she was, Brian recognized a woman in total control of her presentation. Perhaps that was a part of being Elfin royalty.

Anastasia said, "Mother, Grandmother needs your help in her apartment."

"You mean Sadron isn't with her?" Alainn asked.

"I don't know," Anastasia laughed, "but she said she needs you. Mr. Ferguson and I will wait for you in the family room. That will give me an opportunity to get to know him." She smiled. Brian was closest to her and wasn't sure whether or not he

saw a rather devious look in her eye as she spoke. Alainn evidently didn't notice and with a cheerful "see you later" was off toward the south end of the castle. Anastasia and Lawrence lead Brian toward the north side.

At the north end of the hallway there were three doors with the middle one opening into the royal family rooms. Anastasia did not invite Lawrence in so he bowed and headed back down the hall.

The "family room," as Anastasia had called it was a large room with casual seating, tables and desks. Through an adjoining door Brian could see their private dining room which was still large enough to facilitate at least twelve or more around a highly polished wood table. Beyond the dining room was the Great Hall. Straight ahead a door opened into a dark room which Brian would learn later was the Formal Audience Hall.

"Have a seat, Mr. Ferguson," Princess Anastasia said so sweetly that it made Brian nervous.

"Please call me Brian," he said as he picked out a chair.

"I really do want us to have a lovely visit," Anastasia started. Brian agreed as he wondered where this was going. "At the same time, I'm very protective of my Mother." Now he knew where it was going.

"My children are the same way," Brian reassured her.

"I'm sure," she said, "so you'll understand if I come directly to the point."

"Of course." Brian was really beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"What, sir, are your intentions?"

"Wow. When you said direct, you meant direct."

"I want more than anything for my Mother to be happy," Anastasia suddenly appeared almost to the point of tears. "My grandmother and I have been trying to set her up for years to no avail. And now she comes home with you."

"I'm sorry if you're disappointed . . ."

Anastasia didn't give him a chance to finish. "I have nothing against you. In fact, I am hoping beyond hope that you are as wonderful as my Mother thinks you are, but I had to ask you straight out about your intentions. I don't want her hurt!"

"Time out," Brian raised his hands in mock surrender. "May I get a word in here." Anastasia nodded.

"I think your Mother is pretty special and I would think so even if she wasn't an Elfin Princess. I'm not after her gold or jewels and I have no desire for power. I want your Mother to be happy and I wouldn't hurt her for the world. My only concern is our age difference." Anastasia cocked her head like her Mother when Brian said this but let him continue. "I have no idea how old you are. I'm amazed that your Mother is old enough to have a teenage daughter. I didn't think she was far beyond her teenage years herself. But whatever, I am very aware of our age difference. I love being around her. I can't tell you how much I love being around your Mother. She might be enamored with me right now because of the incident with the poacher's snare. I know what happened to your father. After we spend some time together she might find that she's not all that interested in an older man and we part good friends. Your mother will likely never choose to marry me, which is what I sense you're worried about, but I will never be less than a very trusted, true and loyal friend. She may not think that the great difference between our ages is important, but I promise you that, if she should come to the conclusion that she wants to be more than a dear friend, I will raise that question myself. After the sorrow she has experience with your Father's death, the last thing in the world I want to do is burden her with an old man."

Suddenly Anastasia started to laugh. It seemed so inappropriate and out of place in light of the serious nature of what Brian just said. Her laughter startled Brian and he realized that it made him a bit angry.

"Princess," he was almost to the point of criticizing her for laughing at him when she interrupted.

“Oh, please, please forgive me! I’m not laughing at you or anything you said. What you said was tender and quite touching.” Anastasia had stopped her laughing but was smiling. It wasn’t the smile he had seen before but was a warm and sincere smile, very much like her Mother’s. “First of all, you’re anything but an old man. However, what caused me to laugh was the irony of the situation and I apologize for not being more sensitive to your feelings when I started to laugh. Please forgive me!”

“Irony?”

“Dear sweet, Brian. How old do you think I am?”

“I have no idea. I expected a child. You don’t look any older than my eldest granddaughter, so if I had to guess I’d say no more than twenty.”

Anastasia got up, walked over to Brian and kissed him on the cheek. “You’ve got to give lessons to my husband,” she said.

“Your husband?!” Brian sat dumbfounded.

“How old is your oldest child?” Anastasia asked.

“Forty.”

“Girl or boy?”

“Girl”

“Will she not always be your little girl?”

“Yes.”

“I’m my Mother’s little girl,” Anastasia smiled gently, “but her little girl is 49 years old and married with two children both of whom are older than your eldest granddaughter.”

Brian heard himself say, “that can’t be,” even though he didn’t doubt Anastasia’s veracity.

“I don’t think my Mother was trying to hide her age from you. Elves just look a lot younger than Humani.”

“We actually never talked about age,” Brian said, still in shock. “She talked about her little girl – that’s you – and then there was Stephan, Derek and Riona. I never quite figured them out.”

“Stephan is my husband, Derek is my 24 year old son, and Riona is my 21 year old daughter.”

“I had no idea. **You** don’t look twenty-four! Neither does your Mother.”

“What I think is that you were so certain that Mother was so very young that you didn’t make the connection.”

“I thought they were siblings.”

“They are. Just not hers.”

Brian started to laugh with Anastasia. “I’m so relieved. I never actually told her my age either. I just figured that, compared to her, I was an old man. She gave me all the facts but I never put them together. When she told me about your Grandfather, she even told me that he became King in 1956. I was just so certain that she was little more than a child, I didn’t do the math. How old is your Mother?”

“Oh, now, I’m not sure I want to get into trouble,” Anastasia laughed.

“I won’t tell her.”

“Mother is seventy years old.”

“Oh, my,” said Brian.

“Don’t tell her I told you.”

“I won’t, but I have to tell you that I feel much better,” said Brian.

“I’m glad,” Anastasia said very sincerely.

Before they could talk further Alainn enter the room with a mature woman, who, like her daughter and granddaughter, was slender and strikingly beautiful. While she might be called ‘mature’ there was no way one would suspect her of having a seventy year old child. They were followed by the Torc Captain Lawrence and three

young Elves. Or at least Brian assumed that they were young. He had just learned that he had no way of guessing an Elf's age.

Brian immediately jumped to his feet.

"Brian, this is my Mother, Her Majesty, Queen Maethoriel Ailene an tí Coillearnach."

Brian hadn't taken the time to think about what he was going to do when he meet the Queen. Having never met a Queen his only point of reference was from news clips he had seen on television of people approaching Queen Elizabeth II of England. They all approached and knelt down on one knee. That's what Brian did. Getting down on his knee he dipped his head and said "it is truly an honor, Your Majesty."

"My dear," said the Queen to Alainn, "you said this man was an American Humani. Are you sure? We've never known an American Humani to have such chivalrous court skills."

Alainn looked down at Brian and beamed with pride. She continued, "Your Majesty, it is my privilege to present to you Brian Ferguson, who, to the best of my knowledge is a true American Humani."

The Queen laughed. "Please rise, young man and let's go visit." Turning to Alainn. "Daughter, introduce the rest of your family."

The three Elves stepped forward. As they came nearer Brian could tell that the one man was older than the two others. Brian assumed that he was Anastasia's husband and the younger their children.

"Brian, let me introduce my son-in-law, Prince Stephen, and my grandchildren, Derek and Riona." She turned to them and said "children, this is Brian."

Brian bowed to Prince Stephen and spoke to all of them when he said "I am so happy to finally meet you. Princess Alainn spoke of you often and Princess Anastasia is very proud of you."

They smiled affably and returned Brian's bow.

Throughout the exchange, Alainn stood smiling from ear to ear. Sneaking a peak at the Queen, who had picked out a chair rather centrally situated, Brian noticed that she was smiling at her daughter. It was very evident that she was finding great pleasure in her daughter's happiness.

"Brian and I have been visiting while we were waiting and have become great friends," said Anastasia. Little did either Brian or Alainn know that calling him 'Brian' was code for 'he's okay' and 'great friends' was code for 'I approve'. In fact, the only two people in the room who knew were Captain Lawrence and Queen Maethoriel, who beamed at her granddaughter's announcement.

As the others moved to take their places around the Queen, Brian stood facing Lawrence. His expression was totally different. Even though he continued with the soldierly continence his bright blue eyes belied that something had happened to cause him to relax. He no longer looked at Brian with suspicion.

"Will you join us, Captain?" Brian asked.

"No, sir," said Lawrence allowing the hint of a smile to flash across his face. "I'm not family. It would not be proper."

"Oh. Okay. I wouldn't want to ask you to do anything improper. This is all rather new to me," Brian said. Lawrence actually smiled. "Would it be appropriate for us to share a coffee, or something, some time?"

Lawrence caught Brian's emphasis on the words 'or something' and smiled broadly. "I would enjoy that," Lawrence replied. He bowed, said "Tiarna Brian", took two steps backwards before he became totally erect, did a smart about face and left.



Brian enjoyed his visit with Alainn and her family in the castle family room. The atmosphere had become quite relaxed once the formalities of introductions had passed and Anastasia had given her grandmother her positive assessment of Brian.

Shortly after sitting down a kitchen servant approached to see what the family wanted to do about lunch. It was ready. Did the Queen want to eat in the dining room? Queen Maethoriel was obviously well practiced at decision making and accustomed to being the one to do so.

“We’ll have lunch in the dining room. Please ask the chef if she would change things around for this evening and plan an impromptu party in the Great Hall. I’m going to put out the word that everyone in Flaitheas Scáth is welcome to come and meet Tiarna Brian.”

“Yes, Majesty,” the servant said smiling. They bowed, and in the same way as Captain Lawrence, took two steps backwards before they returned to a totally erect posture, turned and left.

There was no doubt in Brian’s mind that Alainn’s family was very close. He couldn’t help but to notice how similar the three women – mother, daughter, granddaughter – were. Brian asked a lot of questions about Coillearnach, Flaitheas Scáth and family which delighted the Queen who would go off on long orations.

“Mother,” Alainn tried to be gentle, “I think you are giving Brian more information that he wants.”

“Is that your kind way of publicly informing me that I’m boring him?”

“You’re not boring me, Your Majesty. Honest!” Brian insisted. “Quite the contrary. My father was a history professor. I love this type of thing.”

The Queen beamed and gave Alainn a look that said ‘I’d blow raspberries at you, but we’re in public.’ Then turning back to Brian she said, “And you can call me Maethoriel when it’s just family.”

Soon the servant returned to announce that lunch was ready in the dining room.

The room was elegant beyond words. It was dominated by a large rectangular mahogany table that was supported by two massive ornately carved pedestals each with four claw feet. The chairs were upholstered with a scarlet brocade. Above the table hung a huge crystal chandelier which was brilliant. On the east wall – to their left as they entered from the family room – was a very large china cupboard. Opposite it was a sideboard that was covered with dishes, food and serving bowls.

There was a brief pause in the conversation as the family gathered around. Queen Maethoriel paused briefly by her chair at the head of the table until she was certain everyone had a seat. Sadron held her chair for her and stepped back out of the way. Everyone sat down and the conversation picked up as though it had never been interrupted.

“Eat up now,” suggested the Queen. “Tonight is probably going to be finger food and gossip.” Everyone laughed.

Alainn leaned over to Brian. “When we invite everyone in Flaitheas Scáth to the Great Hall we’re usually the only ones who go to bed hungry.” Those around her heard her comment and laughed.

The meal began with Sun-dried Tomate Paté followed by a beautiful salad with orange-and-tahini dressing, and jolof rice as the main course. Jolof rice is a west-African dish that was paired with a beautiful red wine that had a marvelous bouquet and just a bit spicy. Brian was thinking that it might be a shiraz but Maethoriel proudly told him that it was produced right there in Flaitheas Scáth.

The Queen gave Brian an approving look when he passed on the decadent desert in favor of coffee and cheese.

Having talked continuously through the meal, the group continued the questions, conversations, teasing and all-around good time for some time after the

servants had cleared the table. It was finally the Queen who suggested that “Poor Tiarna Brian” needed to be shown his apartment and be allowed to rest before the party.

Brian leaned over to Alainn and whispered. “That’s the third time I’ve had ‘Tiarna’ added to my name. What does it mean?”

“It means ‘Lord’,” Alainn whispered back. “You’ve been promoted. She must like you.”

“That’s great,” replied Brian. “Captain Lawrence also used it.”

“Then you’ve definitely made a hit,” smiled Alainn.

Each of the children and grandchildren made a point of again welcoming Brian and expressing how they looked forward to spending time with him. He couldn’t help but notice that everyone pronounced his name ‘bree-an’ in the old Gaelic way. He rather liked it.

As they were leaving the room Queen Maethoriel paused by Brian and said quietly, “We don’t usually lunch like that. Alainn ordered that.” She literally giggled and smirked. “She obviously wanted to impress you.” Then she laughed out loud.

“She was quite successful,” Brian said smiling. He was not smiling as much due to Alainn’s efforts to impress him or that the Queen found it so funny, but because the Queen was being so relaxed and familiar with him. She wasn’t afraid to show her natural side. He liked her very much. He like Alainn’s whole family.



Captain Lawrence showed Brian to his apartment where they were met by Horthien, the House Steward, and an elf named Manwë, whom Horthien announced he had assigned as Brian’s valet.

Brian attempted to object. He didn’t want or need servants.

Captain Lawrence, without flinching, asked “would you excuse us, Horthien?”

He took Brian to one side.

“Firstly, I have spent some time in your world,” he said to Brian. “I understand the American Humani’s aversion to the concept of servants. I understand your history of slavery and I understand the very independent nature which grew out of your history as pioneers and adventurers. That’s fine in your world. But you’re not in your world.”

“In our world everyone has a role to play in the smooth functioning of society and life, and everyone is proud of the role they play and how well they do it. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being either the lowest chamber maid on the roster or the queen. Both people are essential to the proper function of the community and both are respected within the community, not for their title or position, but for who they are personally and how well they do their job.”

“Manwë isn’t a slave and he enjoys being on the castle inside staff. Previously he had been assigned to help care for Princess Anatasia’s children. He asked for that posting because he thought it would be good to show he could work with children. He did an excellent job. I believe you will find that he asked for this posting. A good man-servant is highly respected and worth his weight in gold. Manwë’s goal is to prove he’s such a man-servant. If you reject him, he will take it as a horrible blot on his record.”

“Secondly, you have no idea what you’re doing. You have no idea how to dress. You need a good valet desperately and Manwë is a good valet.”

“I’m so sorry,” Brian apologized. “You’re right. Thank you.”

Lawrence looked down on Brian and gave him a kindly smile. “You’ll be okay as long as you’re willing to listen and learn.”

Returning to where Horthien and Manwë were waiting patiently, Brian said, “I apologize. I have no understanding of your traditions and ways of doing things. I

realize that I will indeed need a good valet. I understand that Manwë is a very good valet and would very much appreciate his services.”

The two men beamed. Brian glanced at Lawrence who gave him a quick wink without breaking character as the staid and proper Captain of the Guard. Horthien expressed his pleasure at Brian’s decision and assured him that Manwë was excellent as he bowed and scurried down the hall trying to keep up with Lawrence’s long strides.

That left only the smiling Manwë standing there waiting.

“Well, let’s check this place out, shall we?” Brian said to Manwë turning toward the open apartment.

The apartment was on the second floor of the southern large round tower. The area had been basically dissected with one half of the large area being a very comfortable sitting room and the other half being the bedroom, bath and toilet. There were five archer windows that had been glassed and finished. Two were in the sitting room, two in the bedroom and one in the bath. The furnishings throughout the apartment were Edwardian. Those who have seen pictures of Edward VII, after whom the period is named, can understand how the chairs and sofas might have been comfortable to him but not a small person. Brian had never been able to sit with his feet flat on the floor and his back against the back of an Edwardian chair. The Edwardian bedroom furniture was quite different. While elegant and beautiful, it was also very functional and comfortable. The bed was of cherry with a large headboard that was dominated by a piece of laminated wood that had been split so the two sides of the medallion mirrored each other. With rich, royal blue bedspread and shams, it was as enjoyable to look at as it was to sleep on.

The wardrobe was massive and Manwë had the drawer at the bottom open and was busily emptying Brian’s backpack into it. Brian had to laugh at how Manwë would

hold up the jeans, t-shirts and running clothes and give them a strange look. They were obviously quite foreign to him.

“Manwë, I really came quite unprepared,” Brian said. “I don’t know what I was thinking. Alainn told me that she was a princess so I should have expected a more formal atmosphere. I don’t even have a shirt and tie for this evening. I assume that I’ll need one. Can you help me?”

“Don’t worry, Tiarna,” Manwë grinned as he threw open the large double doors on the wardrobe exposing a tremendous number and styles of clothes. “I’ve got you covered.”

Brian just stared. “And I assume that means you’re going to tell me what to wear?”

“You’re going to be the best dressed Humani in the Kingdom!” said Manwë proudly.

Chapter 4.

The next couple of days were an adventure in fantasy land for Brian. Everything was new and most of that was so far beyond his experience that he had no comprehension. At the same time there was plenty of time to get to know Alainn's family as very real, very close and lots of fun to be around. Prince Stephan was away from sunup to sunset patrolling the forest. He had taken Prince Fionn's job. Anastasia was quite charming and worked very hard, almost to the point of being conniving, to create situations where Brian and Alainn were left alone in beautiful and/or romantic places. For example, they all went on a picnic to a beautiful waterfall. Suddenly Alainn and Brian realized that Anastasia's entire family had disappeared, and it wasn't magic. If they were trying to be delicate in their efforts, they weren't doing a very good job. Brian figured that they weren't really trying too hard to be subtle.

It was a nice morning, although a bit overcast. Alainn and her mother were sitting on her mother's balcony sipping tea and watching Brian get basic swordsmanship lessons from Lawrence and some of his guards. They were doing a drill and Brian just didn't seem to get the hang of it. The two women weren't watching closely but closely enough that they were feeling sorry for Brian. After all, his opponent was a straw dummy on a pole.

Lawrence stood for a long moment looking at the frustrated Humani and put his hand on his sword hilt. Walking up to Brian he puts his hand on Brian's shoulder.

"Maybe you'd get it if you were using a better sword."

"You think?" replied Brian, looking for any reason that might account for his lack of success.

Lawrence pulled his sword from its sheath. "This is Cosain," said Lawrence with great reverence holding the sword out for Brian to admire. "It is a powerful

magical Elvin blade that is thousands of years old.” Lawrence smiled as Brian showed adequate veneration of the famous sword – most especially look but don’t touch.

“I don’t usually let anyone touch it,” said Lawrence, “but I’m going to make an exception today.”

Brian stood with his mouth open looking from Lawrence to the sword.

Lawrence held Cosain with the hilt facing Brian. “Go ahead,” he said. “Take it.”

Brian reached out with both hands to take the mighty sword. As his hands made contact there was an explosion of silvery sparks. Brian pulled his hands back quickly and began to apologize. “I’m sorry. Did I do something wrong?”

Lawrence, still looking at Cosain’s hilt where Brian had just touched it, slowly looked up at the balcony where Maethoriel and Alainn had noticed the sparks. With Brian still trying to find out what he did wrong, Lawrence raised Cosain above his head. Maethoriel and Alainn stood up.

“Brian,” Lawrence looked back at the poor distraught Humani. “Brian, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I didn’t?” Brian exclaimed.

“No. It was Cosain reacting to you.”

“It doesn’t like me?”

“Quite the contrary,” Lawrence again glanced up at the balcony where the Queen was watching closely. She nodded.

“Brian, I want you to take the sword again. The sparks won’t hurt anyone, so don’t let go if they happen again. Just take the sword by the hilt and hold it above your head with the point skyward.” Lawrence studied Brian. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Brian repeating the instructions, “take the sword, don’t let go, hold it above my head.”

Once again Lawrence held Cosain toward Brian. Brian took ahold of the hilt. Immediately there were sparks. Brian held on and, with two hands on the hilt, held the

sword high above his head. A column of silver energy stretched skyward. On the balcony Alainn slumped into her chair as her mother stood looking.

Brian couldn't see the column of energy but he knew that something was happening. The sword was soon quiet and Brian held it in front of himself. He looked up at Lawrence and handed him the famous blade.

"What just happened?" Brian asked.

"In a few moments Sadron will be here to tell us that we are being summoned by the Queen. She'll answer your questions."

Lawrence had hardly finished speaking when Sadron could be seen running toward them. As Lawrence had predicted, Sadron asked both Brian and Lawrence to join her in her apartment.

Queen Maethoriel's sitting room was elegant without being opulent. At the far end of the room from the door was an oversized marble fireplace with large mirror above the mantle. On either side of the fireplace were pairs of gold upholstered chairs separated by round tables.

When Brian and Lawrence entered Queen Maethoriel was sitting in one of the chairs closest to the fireplace while Alainn was standing looking out a window.

Lawrence bowed just inside the door. Brian followed suit. The Queen indicated for them to come forward. Alainn remained looking out the window. She didn't turn around as the men entered and Brian wondered what was wrong. Lawrence had told him that he hadn't done anything wrong.

The two men stopped a short distance from the Queen. She looked up. Her face belied tremendous tension and concern. She indicated for them to sit down. Alainn kept looking out the window.

Suddenly Anastasia came rushing through the door. "Is it true, Grandmother." She stopped when she saw the two men. Alainn turned around. Anastasia looked at her mother and then ran to her and held her tight.

Lawrence sat silently waiting for Queen Maethoriel to give him permission to speak. Brian, still clueless, decided to follow Lawrence's lead.

"What just happened?" asked the Queen. That gave Lawrence permission to speak.

"Cosain responded to Brian's touch," said Lawrence, "but..."

Queen Maethoriel held up her hand and halted Lawrence.

Brian couldn't wait any longer. Looking anxiously at the Queen and Alainn he said, "I'm sorry. I just touched the sword. Lawrence said I didn't do anything wrong. Please tell me why you're upset with me." He looked back toward Alainn who was sitting near the window with her head in her hands and Anastasia comforting her. Anastasia gave Brian a very angry look.

"What have I done?" Brian turned his attention back to Queen Maethoriel. "You know that I wouldn't purposely do anything disrespectful. Ask Manwë. He'll tell you that he gives me lessons on how to act and what to do every night."

Queen Maethoriel held up her hand demanding silence. Brian sat back. He could sense Lawrence prepare to say something and then think better.

"Who are you, Mr. Ferguson," Queen Maethoriel asked very formally.

"I'm Brian Ferguson. You know who I am."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"Yes," insisted Brian. "It's the truth. Who do you think I am?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Queen Maethoriel. "but after what we just saw it is obvious that you're not the Humani you'd like us to think you are."

"What do you mean?" Brian kept glancing back at Alainn who continued to sob. "I'm Brian Ferguson. I'm second generation Irish-American. I grew up in the mid-west, went to college, got married, had four children, was a psychology professor, my wife died of cancer and I retired. I'm an open book!" He almost screamed the

last few words. Dropping back into the chair he put his hands over his face and said, to himself as much as anyone, “I don’t believe this is happening.”

“Then,” demanded the Queen, a bit annoyed at his raising his voice, “explain how a famous Elfin sword recognized you.”

“It made a mistake!” Brian insisted. The American-Humani temperament was beginning to show. “I have never seen that sword before in my life and there’s no way it knows me.”

“It may not know you personally, but it knows who, or what you are.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Brian said almost sarcastically.

“It knows you are Draiochta.”

“Absurd!”

“It wouldn’t react that way to a Humani touch.”

“Then you tell me, because I have no answer and I’m not Draiochta. Don’t you think I’d know if I was?” Brian was becoming emotionally exhausted and his eyes were beginning to well with tears as he continued to glance back at Alaiinn who seemed to become more distressed with each exchange.

The Queen sat silently for a time, looking again and again at her sobbing daughter. Brian was almost certain that Lawrence was going to speak up again but he kept quiet.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ferguson,” Queen Maethoriel finally said. “I do hope that this can be sorted out amicably and that I will owe you a tremendous apology, but until that time you are confined to your apartment. The house staff will take good care of you and you will have a Torc Allta with you at all times. Captain Lawrence will see to that.” Lawrence lowered his head in compliance.

“But Mother,” Alaiinn pleaded.

“I’m sorry, Alainn,” said the Queen. Brian could tell that the Queen was almost in tears seeing her daughter so heartbroken. “Daor amhain, this time I must act like a Queen.”

Alainn began to cry harder as the Queen instructed Lawrence to escort Brian to his apartment. As they passed Alainn, Brian tried to speak.

“Alainn, this is . . .”

He was interrupted by Anastasia who almost spat, “I told you that I would not react kindly to you hurting my Mother!”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he could be heard insisting as they left the Queen’s chambers.



Once inside Brian’s apartment Lawrence told Brian to sit down. It was not in a commanding tone, but Brian knew that he needed to do what Lawrence said. Even though Lawrence did not speak up on his behalf before the Queen he felt that Lawrence was a man he could trust.

Manwë came rushing in. “I heard what happened.”

“Okay, Manwë, here’s where we find out what you’re made of,” said Lawrence.

“What?”

“I believe Brian,” Lawrence said bluntly, “and I’m going to prove that his motives for coming here were just what he said. Where do you stand?”

Manwë looked at both men. Finally he said, “I can’t believe that Brian is anything other than a Humani who’s fallen in love with our Princess.”

“He’s not a Humani,” Lawrence said.

“What?” both Manwë and Brian exclaimed at the same time.

“He’s not a Humani,” Lawrence repeated. “My guess is that underneath that Humani exterior there’s a wizard . . . a potentially powerful wizard. That’s why Queen Maethoriel is being so cautious.”

“Please explain,” Brian pleaded.

“The Queen is right. There is no way that a Humani would have caused Cosain to react like that. Whether or not you know it, friend Brian, you are Draiochta. Neither one of us mentioned it but the energy that came from the sword when you held it up was silver. I’m sure even Alainn noticed that. That is a strong indication that you might be a wizard with a silver aura. Firstly, wizards with silver auras are quite rare. They have historically been good, which is why you’re just confined to your apartment and not in the dungeon. But they are also definitely exceptionally powerful.” Brian just sat there looking at Lawrence with his mouth open as the Torc captain spoke.

“What I am sure is puzzling the Queen is why such a powerful wizard would pretend to be a Humani and go to such bother to get Princess Alainn to bring him into the Flaitheas Scáth. Even if he didn’t have the purest of motives he could just have requested an audience with the Queen. She’s trying to figure out what you’re up to that would require pretending to be a Humani.”

“That sounds great,” complained Brian, “but how does it get me out of this mess? I’m not a powerful wizard. I came here because I’m really fond of Alainn and she asked me to come meet her family. End of story.”

“First thing you’re going to have to accept is that you are a Draiochta. You are a wizard. How powerful you are is yet to be seen.”

“How could I be a wizard and not know it?”

“I have a theory on that,” said Manwë. Everyone turned and starred.

“Out with it man,” insisted Lawrence showing some impatience.

“During the Morganian War a lot of Wizards hid their children by giving them to Humani families.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Lawrence exclaimed. “Glad you were paying attention to your history lessons!”

“And guess where most of them were sent?” Manwë waited for a response that never came. Finally he said, “Ireland! That was as far from Briton as they could get.”

“You mean that I might be related to a wizard from the 6th. Century who was given to my Irish family to escape Morgana?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Manwë said with emphasis.

“Works for me,” said Lawrence. “It at least explains how you could be Draiochta without knowing it.”

“So now what?” asked Brian.

“The Queen is going to be calling in some really heavy weight cabinet members and charge them with finding out who you really are and why you’re in Flaitheas Scáth. Our politicians, unfortunately, aren’t much different than yours,” Lawrence started. “They are going to try to fit you into whatever scenario fits their agenda best, so we don’t have a lot of time.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked Manwë.

“Keep your eyes and ears open when you go into the servant’s quarters.” Lawrence smiled. “You guys know everything that goes on in the apartments.”

“That we do,” Manwë agreed.

“If they take him off to interrogate him, send word to me immediately.”

“Right!” said Manwë.

“The Queen told me that you will have a Torc Allta with you at all times. Is that right?”

“Yes,” replied Brian.

“Those were her exact words, weren’t they?”

“I think so,” said Brian.

“That’s important,” said Lawrence in a very scheming voice. “I listened very carefully. She didn’t say a ‘Torc guard’ or a ‘Torc Allta guard’. She just said a Torc Allta.”

“Yes,” said Brian, “but I don’t understand why that’s important.”

“Not all Torc Allta are guards.” Lawrence smiled. “I’m going to give you protection and I’m going to have a Torc Allta with you. The Torc Allta whom I am going to assign is probably the finest sword fighter in Flaitheas Scáth and the one whom I would trust most with this assignment, but she’s not a guard.”

Manwë reacted immediately to ‘she’. “Neala?”

“Yes,” said Lawrence who now looked at an even more confused Brian. “Neala is my daughter. She is usually not talking to me because I won’t enlist her in the guard. We’re fairly equal rights here, but Flaitheas Scáth is not ready for a female guard. Maybe we can when she’s a bit older and more mature. Nevertheless, she is undoubtedly the finest person, male or female, with a sword. She can take her old-man. But above all I trust her explicitly.”

The three men talked well into the evening. Neala showed up around 8pm. Her human form presented as a tall, slender young female. Brian couldn’t help noticing that she was rather pretty in her human form and wondered what she looked like in her wereboar form. She wore leather armor and green tights with an Elfin sword hanging at her side.

After introductions and a brief explanation to Neala, Lawrence gave final instructions. “I want you two to stay with Brian twenty-four hours a day. I’ll have a couple of cots sent up from the barracks so we don’t announce to the kingdom what we’re doing.” Lawrence paused briefly trying to decide if he had taken care of everything. “Don’t let Brian out of this room without one of the two of you. Do you understand?” Neala and Manwë both shook their heads as Lawrence left.



After a restless night, Brian found the first day of his confinement the most agonizing and distressful experience he could remember. He could see one of Alainn's balconies from his bathroom window. He wanted so much to talk to her and convince her that this was all a big mistake. After Lawrence's explanation he could understand why Queen Maethoriel had said that she had to act like a queen and not a mother, but that didn't really make it any easier on him. What was the worst was that Alainn was thinking that he didn't really care for her and had broken her heart.

About noon a servant of the Minister of Defense came to the door asking that Brian go to a conference room to meet with the minister. Manwë successfully stalled the meeting by saying that he had been given instructions by the Torc Allta Captain that Brian was not to be moved without him present. The servant took this as a safety precaution and left to tell the Minister. Neala immediately sent word to her father who was there within an hour.

Lawrence arrived just moments before the Minister of Defense showed up at Brian's door. Lawrence sent his daughter to the bedroom and told her to stay out of sight. Here wasn't the place to defend her right to be a guard.

The Minister of Defense was a small wizard, but he was very distinguished looking. He wore a full-length tunic of white brocade that had a wide belt, and a full-length light green coat. His hair was very blonde and hung to his shoulders. He picked a chair and sat down, motioning for Brian, who was still standing facing him, to also sit.

"My name is Minister Morcion," the Minister started. "I'm sure you know why I'm here."

"I have no idea," said Brian.

"We want to know who you really are."

“My name is Brian Ferguson. I’m second generation Irish-American. I grew up in the mid-west, went to college, got married, had four children, was a psychology professor, my wife died of cancer five year ago and I retired. I met Princess Alainn while doing a trail race. She asked me to come and visit. Here I am.”

“Yes, yes,” said the Minister, “we know who you say you are, but we want to know who you really are.”

“You’re calling me a liar?”

“Well, if that means we don’t believe that story, yes,” said the Minister without appearing the least bit ruffled.

“Have you checked out my story?”

“We don’t have to.”

“And why, may I ask, do you not have to check on the veracity of my story?”

“Because it is impossible.”

“And why is it impossible?”

“Because no Humani would ever get that response from an Elfin blade.”

“That is 100% of your evidence against me?”

“I don’t need more.”

“Funny,” Brian looked up at Lawrence, who had been standing almost at attention working very hard not to laugh at how Brian was making a fool of the Minister, “and Alainn said that Humani only use 15-20% of their brains. Perhaps we either make better use of our 15-20% or we feel that we at least owe an accused person the courtesy to check out their story.”

“You’re not being funny,” the Minister was becoming a bit unglued. “This is very serious.”

“Oh, I’m serious okay,” said Brian leaning toward the minister to show him that he was not afraid of him. “If you are so much more civilized than Humani, as you tell

me you are, you would be looking for evidence of the truth or falsehood of my statement and not base your final decision on the reaction of an Elfin relic.”

“Who are you?” the Minister almost screamed.

“My name is Brian Ferguson. I’m second generation Irish-American. I grew up in the mid-west, went to college, got married, had four children, was a psychology professor, my wife died of cancer five year ago and I retired. I met Princess Alainn while doing a trail race. She asked me to come and visit. Here I am.”

“You can’t be. You are Draiochta!” With that the Minister stood up.

Brian likewise stood up and stepped toward the Minister. “Bull shit!” Brian exclaimed. “I am who I say I am. If I happen to be Draiochta I didn’t know it until yesterday. Now come up with some new questions or leave.”

The Minister stood stunned. He was obviously accustomed to people being afraid of him and he didn’t know how to react to Brian. Realizing that they were at an impasse the Minister attempted to leave with some dignity.

“If you will not answer my question there is no reason for me to stay,” said the Minister, “but next time you will come to me and I will get answers.”

“That sounds like a threat,” Brian said calmly.

The Minister blustered and his servant went ashen at the accusation. The Minister turned and waited for the shaken servant to open the door for him and with great pomp left.

Brian turned to Manwë with a smile, “Manwë, if I ever stand like that waiting for you to open a door for me, would you please smack me in the side of the head with the nearest heavy object you can find.”

Manwë laughed.

“I told you,” said Lawrence, “our politicians aren’t that much different than yours. He could care less about the truth. He just needs to look good in front of the Queen and the people.”

“If you guys use more of your brain than we do, why haven’t you exterminated these cockroaches before?”

“They do, unfortunately, play an important part in maintaining good social structure from time to time. They’re a necessary evil,” said Lawrence shrugging his shoulders.

Brian shook his head.

“You did do a good job of handling him,” Manwë interjected.

“Yes,” agreed Lawrence, “I was having trouble keeping a straight face.”

Neala joined them. She had been listening at the door. “That was awesome, Brian Ferguson,” she exclaimed.

“Thank you, but I don’t know that it was awesome,” laughed Brian.

“And I don’t know how long it is going to stall the Minister either,” said Lawrence.



If Brian, Neala, and Manwë had been asked they would not have been able to say where Lawrence went when he left them. The logical assumption was that he would have to maintain his duties. The truth is that he been talking to some of the Flaitheas Scáth’s leading elders to find out if any of them knew much about what happened to the children during the Morganian War. The last person to whom he had spoken before he received the warning about the Minister’s visit had told him that they knew very little but they thought that an extremely old witch, Sorchá, might be able to help. Lawrence was on his way to her cottage which was well down the valley.

Lawrence knocked on the door of the witch’s cottage. It was a pretty, traditional thatched roof cottage in the Irish style. Sorchá was a tiny woman. Between her age and her size, she appeared so fragile that Lawrence wondered how she moved

without breaking. She greeted the Torc Allta Captain with a sincere smile. She wore a cheery blue dress, dark blue stockings and slippers. She had her staff in her right hand although it was obvious that it was being used, at this time, for support.

“Tráthnóna maith, Tiarna,” said Sorchá. “To what do I owe the privilege of your visit?”

“Tráthnóna maith, Witch Sorchá,” replied Lawrence. “I come seeking your counsel.”

“From me?” She looked surprised.

“Yes, ma’am. I understand that you might know a great deal about what happened to the children who were hidden among the Humani during the Morganian War.”

“Come in,” Sorchá said stepping back from the door. “come in.”

The interior of the cottage was as pleasant as its exterior. It was one large room. At one end there was a large fireplace and a kitchen area. At the other end there was a bed. Two wooden chairs sat next to the fire.

“I don’t know how I can help you,” started Sorchá. “It has been a very long time.”

Lawrence told Sorchá about Brian and about Manwë’s idea that he might be the descendent of one of the hidden children. Sorchá had heard of Princess Aláinn’s Humani love and listened intently to what Lawrence had to share.

“For starters,” said the witch after Lawrence had given her as much detail as he had, “Manwë is quite right. If this man is actually Draiochta and really never knew, then that is by far the most likely explanation.”

“But how do we prove that?” Lawrence asked.

“That won’t be easy,” said Sorchá. “There have been, what, over 50 generations since the Morganian War?”

“I imagine,” Lawrence had to agree. “How do you suggest we begin?”

“I’ll help you,” she smiled. “What is his Humani surname?”

“Ferguson,” said Lawrence.

“Oh, wonderful. The Ferguson clan took more of the children than any other. Even some of my ancestors were Fergusons and very likely related to the hidden children.”

“That’s great,” said Lawrence.

“Give me a couple of days. I know some in my order who have kept detailed family records. If we’re really lucky we might be able to make a connection for you.”

“Is there anything that I can do to help you,” Lawrence asked.

“No. I’ll let you know.” Witch Sorcha smiled and offered Lawrence some tea. He figured that she seldom had visitors so he graciously accepted her tea, had a pleasant visit and excused himself.



The next day the Minister of Defense summoned Brian to his apartment on the third floor of the north tower two times. Both times the conversation ended in much the same way as the first. Brian realized that the Minister was, in fact, afraid of the accusation of threat. He didn’t know why, but the Queen was protecting Brian from the rough treatment that the Minister was evidently capable of and accustomed to dispensing.

Over the evening meal Manwë and Neala attempted to keep Brian’s mind off what was happening, but all Brian could think of was Alainn. Neala asked a lot of questions about Humani life. She was especially interested in the feminist movement. She figured that, if she were Humani or lived in the Humani world, she would be a feminist. She even suggested that she might start a feminist movement in the kingdom.

Brian finally excused himself and retired into his bedroom. Several times he went to the bathroom window thinking that maybe he could see Alainn on her balcony. He didn't hear the tap at the apartment door.

Neala, not Manwë, came to tell Brian that he had company. When he entered the sitting room tears came to his eyes. There sat Alainn with Manwë standing next to her.

Alainn stood up. Silently the two looked at each other with unabashed tears streaming down their faces. For a long time neither of them spoke. Manwë motioned for Neala, who was standing in the bedroom door and also crying, to go back into the bedroom. He followed.

It was Alainn who finally spoke. "I had to see you," she said. "whether the Minister is right or not, I had to see you."

"I'm sure he doesn't have a good thing to say about me," Brian tried to smile.

"No, he doesn't," Alainn also tried to smile.

"What do you think?" For Brian this was the most important thing.

"I don't think you would lie to me," Alainn said.

"I've been so worried that you would think I betrayed you. You were so hurt when I saw you in your Mother's apartment. You know I would never lie to you. I . . ."

Brian didn't finish his sentence. Alainn ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. "I believe you," she said through her sobs.

They stood there just holding on to each other for a long time. Finally they sat down together on a sofa.

"The Minister thinks that you are some sort of spy or trying to take over the kingdom by getting to me," said Alainn.

"But the only evidence he has is the sword."

"Yes."

"Does that make sense to you?"

“Well, it is true that a magical Elfin sword would only react as it did to a Draiochta, but I don’t know why the Minister refuses to believe that you might be Draiochta and not know it.”

“Doesn’t that make more sense?”

“Well, yes and no.”

“What?”

“I want to believe in you, but we have no record of anyone being Draiochta and not knowing it especially after 65 years.”

“But that makes sense,” insisted Brian. “You’re not going to have record of them unless they do something like touch an ancient Elfin sword. If I hadn’t touched Lawrence’s sword we would probably never have known that I’m Draiochta. We will never know how many Draiochta witches and wizards who are related to the Hidden Children might be out there because there’s no way to count them. How many thousands of people have gone their entire lives not knowing the truth about themselves?”

“That’s true but the Minister is so intent upon exposing some deep sinister secret.”

“I know. He’s a politician,” said Brian. “But what does your Mother think.”

“I’m so angry with her that I haven’t spoken to her since she called the Minister.”

“Don’t be too hard on her. I saw her face when she had to make the decision in her apartment. It took everything she had to make that decision. It almost killed her to hurt you, but she does have to think about the kingdom. I know that I’m innocent but she doesn’t dare take any chances.”

They would have talked all night but a tap came at the door. Alainn stepped out of sight and Brian called for Manwë to answer it. It was one of Alainn’s servants. The Queen had been enquiring about Alainn. Her servants had covered for her but were

concerned that the Queen might arrive at any minute. It would not do for Alainn to be found in Brian's apartment.

Alainn kissed Brian gently on the lips and said, "I believe in you," and slipped out the door with her servant.



Alainn's visit helped Brian survive the next couple of days. She figured out that Brian could see her south balcony so she would go out on the balcony before retiring and blow him a kiss. She couldn't see through the archer's window so she couldn't see Brian return it. Minister Morcion continued to harass Brian without relief. Lawrence kept telling him to hang in there because he was working on a solution. He was hanging, but it wasn't easy.

Manwë would make two or three visits a day to the servant's quarters to pick up the latest gossip. From what he understood the Queen was getting tired of the Minister's excuses and was pushing for a resolution. Neala was now going with Brian when he was summoned by the Minister. No one said anything about Brian's Torc guard being a female and there was no one Lawrence, and Brian for that matter, would trust any more than Neala. Several times she had to stand up to the Minister's guards, who were Elfin and Dwarf, without losing her temper and starting a fight. Even though she was a young woman they knew she was Torc and no one in their right mind purposely picked a fight with a Torc Allta - at least not more than once.

Their night time routine had become almost ritual. Manwë would step outside the door, look around, and if no one was present would tap on Princess Alainn's door. It was corny but they used the Humani 'Shave-and-a-haircut' knock. That told the Princess that Brian would be watching for her to say good-night. While Manwë was

doing that, Neala would walk the hallway looking for anything out of order without ever being out of sight of Brian's door. When they were all inside, Neala would lock the door and check the entire apartment before leaving Brian alone in the bedroom. Before lying down on her cot near the fireplace she would double check the door and say goodnight to Manwë.

In the middle of the night Neala awakened. A key had been inserted into the door lock and was being slowly turned. There was almost no sound until the click when the lock opened. Neala lay very still listening. She felt in the dark for her sword which she kept next to her cot. Quietly she brought it close to her body. She could sense someone drawing near. They were short and rather large. 'They must be a Dwarf', Neala thought. She could tell that they held their sword in their left hand.

She waited patiently for them to prepare to strike. As they lifted their sword Neala rolled off her cot directly into the intruder's legs. A heavy sword crashed into the cot where Neala had been. She could hear the intruder gasp as she crashed into his legs forcing his knees backwards. In a moment she was on her feet with her sword at the ready while the intruder was still struggling to regain his balance. She sensed that he was swinging his sword. She held her sword parallel to her body and slightly angled to block the on-coming blow while simultaneously taking a step forward, then bringing her sword in an arch and up toward her opponent. They blocked her blow but were not quick enough to defend against Neala swinging in reverse and bring her sword down on their left shoulder.

There was a scream of pain. Neala had purposely brought her sword down flat to avoid a killing blow, but if she was correct, the person was left handed and had just had their sword arm disabled. Neala was equally competent with both hands. She soon learned that was not the case for her attacker. She could barely make out the dark figure run out the still open door.

Neala screamed at Manwë, "lock the door after me and don't let anyone but me or

my Father in." With that she went in pursuit of the intruder. Manwë did as he was instructed. When Manwë and Brian turned up the lights they found a large amount of blood on the floor and a trail of blood leading out the door.

Manwë saw Brian looking at the blood. "It isn't Neala's," he said. "She got the bastard a good one."

In the few moments it took to yell instructions at Manwë the intruder had been able to get out of sight. Neala followed the blood. As she suspected it lead straight to the Minister's door. She decided that it would not be prudent to go in. She had no authority.

She ran down the steps and called to the Torc guards in the guard room near the entrance to the castle.

"Quickly," she said, "Send someone to fetch my Father. We have been attacked. Tell him we're all okay, so he doesn't worry but I need him right away." The guards didn't wait to ask questions. One of the guards immediately headed out the gate and, taking on his natural wereboar form, thundered off to find Captain Lawrence.

Neala went straight back to Brian's apartment. By this time Alainn's servants were standing in the hallway. Neala gave them a very brief account and told them to go inside and lock the door. Neala was sure that one of the Torc guards would be up soon to take his place by the door. That was standard protocol even if there was no reason to believe that the royal family was in danger. Within a short time there would be guards at the entrance to each of the royal family's apartments and guards roaming up and down the hallways. There would be so many Torc guards that they would have a continuous line of sight from one to the other throughout the castle.

Inside Brian's apartment a very pale Manwë opened the door while Brian paced back and forth.

"How are you two doing?" Neala asked.

"I've had better days," said Brian, "but more importantly how are you?"

“I don’t want to sound like a braggart but he didn’t have a chance,” said Neala very matter-of-factly. “I had to work not to kill him.”

“Who was he?” asked Manwë.

“He must have been one of Minister Morcion’s men. I’m just about positive that he was Dwarf.” Neala looked down at the intruder’s sword which still lay where he dropped it. “And that confirms it,” she said point to the sword. “They are the only Dwarf in the castle right now, and the trail of blood led to Morcion’s door.”

“Why would he send someone to kills us?” Brian was wondering out loud, not really expecting an answer.

A loud knock came at the door. Manwë stood ready to unlock the door once Neala was ready. She drew her sword. Manwë slowly opened the door.

“I’m glad you pay attention,” said Lawrence.

“Thank you,” said Neala putting her sword back in her sheath once she was certain that her father was not being used by an intruder to gain entrance.

Lawrence looked around. The cot next to the fireplace had a great gash in it. He looked at the pool of blood and Dwarfish sword, then looked up at his daughter.

“You obviously did a bit of damage,” he said.

“I tried not to kill him, Father,” said Neala. “when I brought the blade down I tried to hit him with the flat.”

“That’s okay,” said Lawrence. “I’d rather you be safe than risk your life trying to take an assassin captive.”

“I followed him to Minister Morcion’s apartment. I didn’t knock nor did I let on I had followed him.”

“Good,” Lawrence smiled with pride at his daughter. “Would you like to go with me to visit Minister Morcion?”

“Most definitely!” Neala was excited that her father was treating her like a Torc guard. “I assume there will be a guard here soon for Tiarna Brian.”

“He should be on station outside the door right now.”

They opened the door to see a large Torc Allta guard snap to attention.



Lawrence rapped loudly on Minister Morcion’s door. A servant answered the door and told Lawrence that his master was not seeing anyone at that hour.

“Please, tell your master that Captain Lawrence wishes to speak with him.”

“I’m sorry you cannot come in,” insisted the servant.

“I am the Captain of the Guard,” said Lawrence. “There is only one person in this castle who can say that to me, and that’s the Queen. You are not the Queen, so I would suggest that you go get your master and I will wait in his sitting room.”

Lawrence pushed his way past the servant with Neala close behind. Lying in the middle of the sitting room floor was the body of a Dwarf with a wound to his left shoulder and bleeding from a wound to his stomach. Standing nearby was Minister Morcion holding a short sword covered with blood.

“He forced his way in here,” said Minister Morcion. “I had no choice.”

Neala stepped around her father and looked down at the dead Dwarf and shook her head. “How did he force his way in here without a weapon?” she asked holding out the dead Dwarf’s sword. “He was left handed and I gave him that wound to his left shoulder, so he couldn’t have forced anyone. He would have been lucky to walk.”

Minister Morcion stood defiantly looking at the two Torc.

“You just killed your own man,” she said shaking her head.

“This isn’t my man,” insisted Morcion.

“Then if I count your guards you won’t be one short,” said Lawrence.

“Oh, I sent one on an errand this afternoon. He hasn’t returned yet.” Morcion was not a particularly good liar. None of what he said could stand up to close scrutiny, but, being a politician, he spoke the words with confidence.

“So you’re telling me that you personally had to kill this intruder in self-defense.”

“Yes.”

“Do you realize that he’s unarmed?”

Morcion didn’t flinch. “I couldn’t tell when he was coming at me.”

“I see,” said Lawrence. “Interesting story.”

“It’s the truth.”

“I’ll send some guards to take away the body,” said Lawrence without acknowledging Morcion’s claim to truth. “The castle is on lock-down until I am satisfied that all is safe. Do you understand.”

“Yes, Captain Lawrence,” said Morcion with very fake civility. “Thank you for coming.”

Lawrence turned and started toward the door. Neala stood for a moment looking at the dead Dwarf and then at Morcion. She thought about saying something but realizing that her father had concluded the interview for a reason so turned and followed him out the door.



“Father,” Neala said on the way back to Brian’s apartment. “You’re not going to let him get away with that, are you?”

“Mercy, no!” said Lawrence. “But there was no reason to make a scene and possibly have a fight on our hands.” He looked at his daughter. “If you’re going to be

a Torc Allta Guard you need to know the first rule is always try to solve a confrontation without a sword.”

With that Neala walked a little taller. She was a Torc Guard. It was her dream come true. Then her father added, “You did an excellent job tonight. I’m very proud of you.”

Back at Brian’s apartment Lawrence told everyone to sit down and listen.

“Morcion’s little stunt this evening is forcing our hand,” Lawrence began. “I don’t think he realizes that. At least I hope he doesn’t. Even though it won’t be hard to show that the dead Dwarf is one of Morcion’s guards, there is no way that I can prove that Morcion put him up to the attack and then killed him to keep him quiet unless one of Morcion’s own men comes forward. That’s not going to happen. In the end, even if I show that Morcion is guilty it doesn’t solve Brian’s problem.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Brian.

“You, my friend,” said Lawrence, “are going to send word to the Queen saying that ‘if I’m a Draiochta then I’m claiming the right to plead my case before the Queen?’”

“What will that do?”

“She will most likely give you a hearing.”

“And?”

“And I’m going to have to make a strong case that what I saw when you touched Cosain was real – I mean your reaction. You’ll have to admit you just about wet your pants.”

“Okay, I admit that, but is that going to help?”

“I don’t know, but it also gives us a chance to point out that Morcion has been harassing you and, if nothing else, show condemning evidence that he was involved in tonight attack.”

“Talk about a long-shot.”

“I know,” said Lawrence. “I’m waiting for a witch who has some connections to bring us evidence that you are a descendant of one of the hidden children. If she doesn’t get back before the Queen grants you an audience, then we’re going to have to go with what we’ve got.”

“You guys are supposed to be so far ahead of us Humani, don’t you have something like a lie detector?”

“No,” said Lawrence shaking his head.

“Anastasia is telepathic,” said Brian. “Perhaps she would read my mind.”

“It doesn’t work like that, and that’s not evidence of truth, just what you’re allowing her to hear.”

The sun was up and Lawrence had to do his official duty. Neala stayed with Brian while Manwë took the request for an audience to the Queen.

“There’s got to be a way for me to prove I’m telling the truth,” Brian said to Neala as they ate breakfast.

“I don’t know,” said Neala, “unless you know of a way for someone to get inside your head.”

“What did you say?” Brian asked.

“I said, ‘I don’t know of any way unless you know of a way for someone to get inside your head.’”

“You’re brilliant,” Brian exclaimed, “bloody brilliant.” He jumped up and gave the startled Torc a hug and kiss. “You not only swing a mean sword but I think you just saved my ass!”

Brian was almost leaping around the room with Neala trying to get him to calm down and tell her what she said that was so brilliant.

“What if I could produce someone who, without magic, could get inside my head and show them I’m not lying? Do you think that might convince the Queen?”

“I would think so,” said Neala. “But who can do that?”

“A hypnotherapist!” Brian almost shouted.

“A what?”

“A hypnotherapist,” Brian repeated. “A hypnotherapist would put me in a trance and ask me questions. It’s kind of like being asleep without actually being asleep. Ah, it’s complicated. In any case, I would always tell the truth. If I didn’t want to divulge something, I would keep quiet, but I wouldn’t lie. I would tell the truth exactly as I believe it. We could have Anastasia kind of monitoring us so that she would know it was all on the up and up.”

“Where do you find these hypno-what-do-you-call-it?”

“Oh!” Brian’s elation deflated instantly. “You probably don’t have any in Flaitheas Scáth.”

Manwë returned to the commotion wondering what was going on. Brian and Neala explained their conversation and the idea of the hypnotherapist.

“I’ve heard of those,” said Manwë.

“You have?”

“Yes, they make people cluck like chickens,” Manwë laughed.

They told Lawrence about the hypnotherapist idea when he stopped by to check on them later in the morning. He suggested that Manwë get anyone he could recruit to help us see if there was a Draiochta hypnotherapist anywhere in the kingdom. Manwë was excellent at that. He spread the word among the servant staff and soon Lords and Ladies across the kingdom were being asked if they knew a hypnotherapist.

About mid-afternoon one of the Queen’s servants knocked at Brian’s apartment with the official reply. Brian was to be prepared to present himself before the Queen at 9am in the morning. There was a lot to be accomplished before 9am.



Brian entered the formal audience hall from the Great Room with Lawrence acting as his Torc Allta guard and Neala and Manwë right behind. Queen Maethoriel sat on her throne at the far end of the chamber. On either side of her sat her family – Princess Alainn, Princess Anastasia and Prince Stephan. Off to one side stood Minister Moricon with his assistant.

Upon entering Brian and the others bowed and awaited the Queen's signal to approach. Once at the foot of the dais Brian stopped and got down on one knee.

"You may rise and address the Queen," said Queen Maethoriel.

Brian stood up.

"Your Majesty," Brian started, "I am very appreciative of your willingness to hear my plea especially in light of its relationship to your family, and I am willing to accept your judgment."

"You realize," Maethoriel replied, "that if you pursue this course, there is no turning back."

"I understand that, Your Majesty, and I believe that you will listen with an open mind and weight what I have to say without prejudice despite how you may feel about me."

Queen Maethoriel was obviously moved by the trust Brian placed in her and without words gave him permission to continue.

"Your own Captain of the Guard has told me that I must accept the fact that I am Draiochta. That is, of course, how I was able to claim the right to this audience. However, accepting that reality does not mean that I ever knew about being Draiochta before the fateful day when Cosain made it known."

"Your Majesty," objected Minister Morcion, "we have heard . . ."

Brian interrupted him. "Your Majesty, it is my understanding that this is not a courtroom and that I am permitted to plead my case before you without interruption or interpretation by Minister Morcion or any other person."

“You are correct, Tiarna Ferguson,” said Queen Maethoriel. “Minister Morcion, you will remain quiet unless asked to speak, or you will be removed. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Morcion shot Brian an angry look.

Brian was pleasantly surprised that the Queen referred to him as Tiarna Ferguson. She evidently had doubts about her own Minister because she was leveling the playing field between them. With a single word Queen Maethoriel had given Brian a whole new set of rights and privileges.

“Minister Morcion’s entire investigation has boiled down to nothing more than continually calling me in to his apartment, making veiled threats, and insisting that I tell him the truth. I have continually told him the truth which he refuses to accept and likewise refuses to investigate.” Brian paused purposefully.

“Is this true?” the Queen asked Morcion.

“Your Majesty,” Morcion started. “there is no way . . .”

“Just answer my question, Minister Morcion,” said the Queen. “Have you done anything except interrogate Tiarna Ferguson? . . . yes or no?”

“No, Your Majesty, but . . .”

“Thank you, Minister Morcion,” the Queen cut him off.

“Further, Your Majesty,” Brian continued, “there was an attack upon my apartment two nights ago. Had it not been for the valiant service and outstanding skill of my Torc guard, Neala, I might have been killed. She wounded the intruder and when he fled, Neala followed him to Minister Morcion’s apartments where he was found dead by Captain Lawrence some time later. We have irrefutable evidence that the attacker was one of Minister Morcion’s own guards.”

“This is indeed a serious accusation,” said the Queen.

“Your Majesty,” Morcion started.

“Minister is this true?” demanded the Queen.

“He was not acting under my orders,” said the Minister.

“I assume, Captain Lawrence, that you will have a full report of this incident for me,” the Queen said calmly turning to Lawrence. Lawrence bowed. He could tell by her demeanor that she knew the full story. She knew the castle was on lock-down. She had servants and, like everyone else, she talked to her servants. Lawrence shot Morcion a glance. Morcion was actually beginning to show signs of discomfort.

“The purpose of my requesting your intercession, Majesty, is twofold: firstly, to bring this injustice to light and force the Minister to actually investigate what he has been told, and secondly, to offer what I hope might be a solution to our dilemma.”

Queen Maethoriel nodded understanding permitting Brian to continue.

“I believe that Minister Morcion’s admission, which we all just heard, will suffice to address the first of my purposes, if I may move on to the second.”

Again Queen Maethoriel nodded. Minister Morcion was looking daggers.

“With Your Majesty’s permission I would like to ask Princess Anastasia some questions. I believe that she is the key to the success of my second objective.”

Anastasia looked stunned. Queen Maethoriel gave Brian’s request some thought and finally consented.

“Princess Anastasia, I know that you are extremely angry with me, because you think I have hurt your Mother emotionally,” Brian began. “However, like your Mother and Grandmother, I believe that you are a just and compassionate woman. I’m sure you understand that, despite your anger towards me at this time, I am willing to put my fate in your hands.”

Anastasia said, “Yes, but I don’t see how I can help you.”

“Is it true that you have telepathic powers?”

“Yes,” said Anastasia

“That’s how you found your Mother when she was at dinner with my family.”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell what a person is thinking?”

“No, not unless they permit me.”

“Then, if I were to permit you to know what I was thinking I would be free to make up anything I wanted?”

“Yes, that’s true,” said Anastasia.

“Do you know hypnosis?”

“No.”

“Your Majesty. As you may know, hypnosis is not a magical skill. With considerable effort we have found a Draiochta who lives and works as a hypnotherapist in the Humani world in a town called State College, Pennsylvania. She grew up in Thuaidh Scáth. We asked her to come to Flaitheas Scáth and be prepared to use her skills if you permit. I would beg Your Majesty to summon her and have her hypnotize me.”

“This is quite extraordinary,” said the Queen. “What does it have to do with your plea and my Granddaughter?”

“If I am hypnotized I will not lie. I might refuse to say something which I do not want the therapist to know, but I would not lie. Besides, if the hypnotist gives Anastasia permission to listen in, so to speak, she will be able to confirm the veracity of what I say under hypnosis. Since you know that she is not an ally of mine, you can trust her word. I am trusting that she will fairly report what she hears.”

“Interesting idea,” said the Queen, obviously mulling over the pros and cons of the idea. “Very well.”

“You may wait in your apartment,” said the Queen. “We will call you when the hypnotist is here.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Brian bowed deeply, as did those with him, and left the audience room.



It was almost three hours before Brian was summoned. Standing near the Queen was a tall, slender Elfin woman. She was dressed more like a Humani than Elf.

“This is Faelwen,” said the Queen by way of introduction. “She is a hypnotherapist in private practice in State College. I have had the opportunity to interview her and believe that her skills might be most useful.” Brian smiled and said ‘hello’.

“May I ask Ms. Faelwen some questions?” asked Brian.

“Do you have a problem?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Brian said emphatically. “I would like to ask some questions which will help us all to know and understand Faelwen’s skills and credentials.”

“Very well.”

“Ms. Faelwen, are you a certified or licensed hypnotherapist in the Humani world?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I am licensed in the State of Pennsylvania and hold a national certification.”

“Would you, please, explain to us what a national certification entails.”

“To be nationally board certified I had to have a doctor’s degree and attend special certification sessions for eight weeks. After that I had to document 250 hours of hypnotherapy.”

“Then you’re a doctor as well?”

“Yes, I have a PhD in psychology.”

“That’s quite impressive,” said Brian. “Are you willing to hypnotize me at this time?”

“Yes,” said Faelwen.

“Were you told we are to be open to Princess Anastasia’s telepathic powers so that she can attest to the validity of our conversation.”

“Yes, but there could be a problem there,” explained Faelwen. “Most people do not speak during their first session. Many people never speak but only indicate answers to yes or no questions. I’m concerned if you do not speak.”

“I understand,” said Brian. “But if I understand the process properly, I will be thinking clearly and will not lie.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Then Princess Anastasia should be able to understand my thoughts.”

“Yes, theoretically,” said Faelwen. “I’ve never known anything like this being done before.”

“I understand,” Brian reassured her. “Humani do not accept telepathy.”

“That’s true.”

Faelwen had Brian sit in a comfortable chair before the Queen. She sat on a stool next to him.

“Firstly, Your Majesty, let me explain that I’m an Ericsonian hypnotherapist. We are sometimes called ‘permissive’ hypnotherapists because we do not swing watches or tell people they’re growing sleepy. If I tell someone that their eyes are growing heavy and they’re not, I just lost my credibility with the patient. So, I ask.”

“Are you ready?” Faelwen asked Brian.

“Ready.”

“Please sit back and relax . . .” Faelwen very skillfully put Brian into what she called a ‘trance-state.’

“Your Majesty, Brian is now in a trance-state. He is not asleep, nor is he awake as you and me. He can hear me and everything that is going on. I cannot make him do anything against his will or morals. I cannot make him confess to something he did not do. If he is guilty of something, and I ask about it, he will not lie but may not respond. As I said, it is rare that a subject actually verbalizes during their first session. I guess that’s where Princess Anastasia comes in. I will permit her to hear my thoughts

and she should be able to do the same with Brian. We're breaking new ground here, so I have no idea how successful that will be. I can say, however, that whatever he tells us verbally or with signals will be the truth as he knows it. His mind will not lie."

Queen Maethoriel was watching carefully as were the others. Faelwen indicated for Princess Anastasia to sit down on the other side of Brian.

"Brian," said Faelwen, "Sometimes when we're in this very relaxed state our arms feel like they can float and sometime they feel so heavy that we can't lift them. I wonder how your arms feel. Do they feel like they can float or are they heavy?"

As she continued to talk calmly and quietly to Brian his hands began to rise as though suspended. Faelwen looked at Princess Anastasia.

"He's very relaxed," she said to the Queen, "and he's thinking about how his arms feel like they are floating. He's listening to everything and hears me speak but it's as if he's just an observer." Faelwen smiled.

"Now Brian do you want to let your hands relax on the chair?" Brian's hands lowered to the chair. "Let's go back to the day Lawrence was teaching you sword skills outside the castle." She paused. "If you understand and remember, please raise the index finger of your left hand. If you do not, please raise the index finger of your right hand." Brian's left index finger went up.

"Very good. Were you having a good time?" Again the left index finger went up.

"You were having a tough time learning the skill, weren't you?" Left index finger. "But you trust Lawrence?" Left index finger.

"Can we go back to that time?" Left index finger.

"Are you there?" Left index finger.

"Brian, if you wish you may speak to me and tell me how you feel." Faelwen looked up at the Queen with a 'here goes' look. "Can you tell me how you feel?"

"Yes," said Brian.

“Are you happy?”

“Yes.”

“What is happening?”

“Lawrence said that he is going to let me use Cosain.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Excited. Honored. Frightened.”

“Why do you feel excited?”

“Because I’ve never touched anything like that. I didn’t believe in Elf swords before I met Lawrence.”

“Why do you feel honored?”

“Because Lawrence is trusting me. He’s a great man who trusts me.” Everyone looked at Lawrence, who was standing nearby. The Torc captain couldn’t help but to blush.

“Trusting you?”

“Yes. I can tell by the way he holds it that the sword is very special to him. I must be very careful.”

“Why, then, are you frightened?”

“Because I don’t want to do anything wrong. Lawrence is trusting me with his precious sword and I don’t want to let him down. I’m afraid because I have no idea what I am doing.”

“Haven’t you seen magic Elfin swords before?”

“No. This is my first. It is beautiful. It looks so powerful.”

“What’s happening now?”

“Oh, no!” Brian gasped. There was an expression of fear on his face. “I’ve done something wrong. Something is terribly wrong. What have I done?!”

“It’s okay,” Faelwen said to Brian in a calm voice. “You’re safe. Nothing can hurt you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“What’s happened?”

“When I touched the hilt of the sword there were sparks and some sort of energy going everywhere. I let go.”

“Did it frighten you?”

“Yes, I didn’t know what was happening.”

“What is Lawrence saying to you?”

“He’s looking up at the castle and is holding his sword up so that someone there can see it.”

“Is he saying anything to you?”

“Yes, he is saying that I didn’t do anything wrong. He is saying that the sparks won’t hurt and he wants me to take the sword and hold it over my head.”

“Why is he asking you to do that?”

“I don’t know. But I trust Lawrence and will do it.”

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know. I know that something is happening with the sword but I can’t see. I’m focused on Lawrence. I’ll keep my arms up until he says to put them down.”

“I want to ask you something, Brian.” Faelwen paused. “Are you Draiochta?”

“No.” Then Brian’s face became distorted – a combination of confusion and disbelief. “Yes. I don’t know!”

“It’s okay, Brian. Nothing can hurt you,” Faelwen said in a soothing voice. “Can you tell me what made you upset?”

“They say I’m Draiochta. They say I lied about being Humani.” Brian was becoming more upset and agitated as the words came out. “I tried to tell them I’m not Draiochta but Lawrence says that I must accept that I am. Alainn thinks I’ve betrayed her. She’s crying. I don’t want her to cry. I can’t stand to see her cry. They must believe

me! They must believe me!" At this point Brian broke down and began sobbing hysterically.

"It's okay, Brian. It's okay. You're safe." Faelwen looked up at the Queen and asked, "have you heard enough?"

Queen Maethoriel looked at Anastasia who was sitting there with her mouth open. "He's being totally honest," she said softly.

"Brian," Faelwen said, "we're going to come back now. But before we do I want to make a suggestion. If you say something which is truthful, I want you to follow whatever you say with the words 'Inis mé an fhírinne'. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Brian said, sitting calmly and quietly.

"Okay, we're coming back to the here-and-now. When you open your eyes you will feel rested and you will look at someone who means a great deal to you and say 'hello, I missed you.' You will awaken on the count of three . . . one - take your time. There's no rush. Two – stretch your arms and wiggle your toes. You feel good. If you're ready to open your eyes,. . . . three."

At the count of three Brian opened his eyes, stretched, smiled at Alaiinn and said "hello, I missed you."

Everyone laughed except Minister Morcion.

"Did I do okay?" Brian asked Faelwen.

"You were an excellent subject." Faelwen looked at Anastasia. "Princess, were we being truthful?"

"Yes," said Anastasia. "You were both speaking the truth."

"How do you feel?" Faelwen asked Brian.

"I feel very good. Inis mé an fhírinne," said Brian. He looked surprised at his own reply.

Faelwen stood up and faced the Queen. "Your Majesty, I hope that you are satisfied with my services."

“Quite so,” said Queen Maethoriel. “Very impressive.”

“I wish I could take more credit, but Brian was like an open book.”

After Faelwen had taken her leave, Queen Maethoriel called Brian forward.

“Tiarna Brian Ferguson, your Queen humbly seeks your forgiveness.”

Alainn began to cry with joy and ran to Brian, who was standing there in shock. It was all Lawrence could do to remain staid and proper while his daughter, Neala, and Manwë did their own little victory dance behind him.

“And I as well,” said Anastasia with tears running down her cheek. “I never should have doubted you.”

“If you cannot forgive me,” the Queen continued, working very hard to maintain her composure, “I ask that you do not hold my actions against my daughter, Princess Alainn, who has insisted upon your innocence from the beginning.”

“Your Majesty,” the room became hushed as Brian spoke. “I cannot deny that I was very upset but I hope you will believe me when I say I never doubted your good intentions for the security and happiness of your family and your people. *Inis mé an fhírinne*.”

A snicker went across the room, not because of what Brian had said, but because of the look on his face when he added ‘*Inis mé an fhírinne*’ to the end of his statement. Brian looked back at the door through which Faelwen had just exited.

“Yes,” said the Queen, knowing what was going through Brian’s mind without the use of hypnosis or telepathy. “She gave you a suggestion that every time you make a truthful statement you will say ‘*Inis mé an fhírinne*’.”

“What does it mean?” Brian asked.

“It means,” Anastasia said giving Brian a hug, “I speak the truth.”

Apologies were made and accepted, as were promises of trust. The Queen did have something to say about Minister Morcion’s behavior. Brian assumed that meant

he was going to get canned and would have to face accusations of orchestrating the attack. He stomped out of the room with a Torc Allta guard close behind.

As they were talking a servant came hustling into the audience hall to tell the Queen that there was a witch named Sorchá who said that she needed to see the Queen immediately. The witch had said that it was a matter of life and death.

Sorchá was ushered into the audience hall. It was obvious that she had never been there before as she looked around. There were signs of fear in her eyes until she saw Lawrence. She relaxed and smiled.

“Your Majesty,” said Sorchá, “I bring you important news about Tiarna Brian Ferguson. May I speak?”

“Of course,” said Maethoriel, “we are very anxious to solve the mystery.”

“The man-servant, Manwë, was absolutely correct,” Sorchá said. “With the help of several friends, one of whom personally remembers the Morganian War, we were able to trace Brian Ferguson’s lineage.”

Sorchá carefully started with his parents and went back, parent-by-parent, for fifty generations. By the time she had gone through the first five or ten generations everyone knew where it was going to end, but no one interrupted the witch who was obviously quite proud of her work.

“And his parents were Eirnin and Muiread,” Sorchá was at generation fifty-one. “Eirnin was of the Ferguson clan, and guess what?” Sorchá didn’t wait long for an answer because she wanted to say it, “neither he nor Muiread were the natural children of their parents. They were infants right in the middle of the Morganian War! Tiarna Brian Ferguson is the descendant of two hidden children. For fifty-one generations the truth has been hidden from Morgana. He didn’t know. No one knew.”

Everyone applauded Sorchá’s diligence. She beamed with pride and satisfaction totally unaware that Brian had already been exonerated. No one was going to spoil her moment.

“Your efforts on Tiarna Brian’s behalf have saved your Queen from a horrible injustice,” Maethoriel said. “How can I reward you?”

Sorcha beamed. She looked at Brian with Alainn holding him tight around the neck as though to not let him slip away. “I’m an old woman. I don’t need anything, but I will ask a favor.”

“That being?”

Looking right straight at Alainn she said, “I’d love a front row seat at the royal wedding.”

Alainn and Brian went crimson and the room burst into a gale of laughter.

“If it comes to that,” said Maethoriel once she became able to speak, “you will definitely have a front row seat. In the mean time you have our eternal gratitude and if you need help of any sort, please let us know.”

Chapter 5.

The entire shadow realm could sense the release of tension following Brian's exoneration. Alainn and Brian took long runs through the forest during the days and sat talking on the grand veranda sipping wine in the evenings. They had a lot to talk about. The reality that Brian was a wizard opened up a whole new set of problems. The saving grace was that these problems were relatively easily surmountable and Brian would have lots of support.

Brian would notice from time to time that Alainn was pre-occupied and looking off into the distance. When he would ask her if there was something bothering her she would tell him 'no'. She didn't like lying to Brian, but she was worried. Her mother had arranged for the Headmaster of the Draiochta Academy to meet with Brian and determine the extent of his magical powers. Depending on the outcome of that meeting, Brian might be forced to choose between his human world and her. She couldn't help but to worry but she couldn't share her worries with Brian.

Headmaster Fergus Shaunessy arrived in Flaitheas Scáth a couple of days later. He was the consummate school headmaster and a very powerful wizard. The Headmaster was a tall man with long dark hair that hung to his shoulder and matching bushy eyebrows. His slender face was dominated by an equally long and slender nose. He dressed all in black; a black cassock under his floor length academic gown. The gown was trimmed in red velvet and he sported red slippers. He carried an ornate staff and wore a large silver ring which was said to have been passed down to him from Merlin. Headmaster Schaunessy was a pure aura wizard. Everyone has an aura, even non-Draiochta, and most auras are a mixture of colors. The currently accepted theory is that the colors represent the person's lineage. A pure aura wizard is one with an aura of only one color. Such wizards are generally more powerful than those with mixed color auras. White and silver auras are quite rare. The white aura is the rarest

and is seen only once every thousand years or so. There hasn't been a white aura wizard known since Merlin. The silver aura wizard is a bit less rare. There may be two or three such wizards every one to two hundred years. Again, the currently accepted theory is that such wizards are the result of the union of two wizards with pure aura, but there is little evidence to support the theory and, in reality, no one really cared.

Despite his rather imposing and formidable appearance, Headmaster Schaunessy was an affable and easygoing person. Pranking usually stopped at the academy shortly after the arrival of the freshman class because they soon learned that the Headmaster could out-prank the best of them.

He moved slowly from the entrance of the Audience Hall to the foot of the dais where the Queen sat enthroned. He stopped and bowed deeply. After the Queen acknowledged his greeting he turned and recognized Brian and the family standing beside her. The twinkle in his eyes told Brian that everything he had heard about Headmaster Schaunessy was true.

The Headmaster had already heard about what happened and was aware of the situation. After introductions Brian and the Headmaster withdrew to a conference room adjacent to the family rooms. They had spent but a few minutes alone when Brian decided that he really liked this man. The Headmaster immediately put Brian at ease and explained what was going to happen.

The two of them spent over an hour sequestered in the conference room. Alainn paced the family room like a caged animal while her mother sat stoically in her favorite straight-backed chair. Anastasia and Stephan tried to make small talk but they got only grunts from Alainn and nothing from Queen Maethoriel. The process was not dangerous but Anastasia and Stephan knew why Alainn and her mother were so tense. They had only seen silver on that fateful day, and Lawrence reported silver. Anastasia and Stephan knew that Alainn was worried that Brian was a silver wizard

and might choose his human world over her. They knew that grandmother was worried about her daughter.

The room was electrified with tension when Brian and the Headmaster entered.

“Your Majesty,” the Headmaster addressed the Queen who moved for the first time since she sat down, “we have finished and I have reached a conclusion.”

“And?” Princess Alainn asked, having no patience for court courtesy.

“And,” said the Headmaster turning his attention to the Princess. “I have concluded that Tiarna Brian is a silver wizard.”

Alainn dropped into the nearest chair and put her face in her hands. Brian, who had been smiling broadly, stopped smiling and looked with surprise at Alainn’s reaction. He looked around the room and there were no smiles. Anastasia rushed to the dumbfounded Brian.

“I thought everyone would be happy and proud,” he said perplexed.

“We are very proud of you,” said Anastasia. “We are very proud of you, but Mother and Grandmother are worried because you will now have to make a really tough decision.”

“I thought we were past that type of thing,” said Brian a bit put off at the situation, not the people. “We’re in a fairy-tale land. When is this going to have a happy ending?”

“Grandmother,” Anastasia addressed the Queen. “May I . . .?”

Queen Maethoriel nodded as she stared at her daughter.

“Silver wizards are very rare. There are only two or three every couple of hundred years.”

“Isn’t that good?” Brian asked bewildered by seeming contradiction.

“It’s wonderful,” said Anastasia smiling weakly. “But there is a problem and that’s why Mother and Grandmother are so distraught.”

“Problem?”

“My boy,” Headmaster Schaunessy interjected. “do Humani have the saying ‘with great power comes great responsibility?’”

“Yes, we do.”

“You have the potential to be one of the most powerful wizards in the world.”

“And,” Anastasia picked up the explanation, “not all Draiochta are good. Like in your Humani world, there are those who are willing to do anything to obtain power.”

“What she’s trying to delicately say,” said Headmaster, “is that there are still followers of Morgana Pendragon. They are what, in your fantasy books, you call ‘black’ wizards. If you accept what you are, you will not be able to hide the fact that you are a silver wizard. You will then become the target of every Morganian with aspirations of power and grandeur.”

“I must take my responsibility,” said Queen Maethoriel standing up and moving toward Brian. “You have a decision to make. Alinn is terrified of what that decision might be.”

“Is it that bad?” Brian asked.

“For us, potentially yes.”

“Oh,” Brian went to Alinn and hunkered down next to her chair. “Whatever decision must be made, we can do it,” he said.

Alinn looked up at Brian and then at her Mother. “It must be your decision alone,” she said to Brian.

“Okay, what is this decision?”

“You have two choices,” Queen Maethoriel started. “You can accept or reject being a silver wizard.”

“That’s not hard,” Brian said.

“On the contrary,” the Queen contradicted him. “If you accept being a silver wizard your life will never be the same again and, as you have heard, there will likely

be those who want to destroy you for their gain. If you elect this path you may come and go in both worlds but you will never be Humani again, as you have in the past. Also, we will have to try to keep secret that you're a silver wizard until you have enough skill to protect yourself. If there are any Morganian wizards out there thinking about making a bid for power, they will know that they must try to destroy you before you learn to use your power."

"Oh," was all Brian could say.

Queen Maethoriel continued. "If you do not want this, you may walk away and we pretend none of this ever happened. However, to do that you will have to go back to your Humani world and never return."

"Never?"

"Never."

Brian looked from the Queen to Alainn. Then he began to look to the others for some sort of sign or support.

"This is why Alainn is so upset," said Queen Maethoriel. "She couldn't ask you to give up your Humani life and take on the responsibility and risk of a silver wizard."

The Queen returned to her chair and sat down. The Headmaster had moved back as if trying to extract himself from the situation and Prince Stephan was now holding Princess Anastasia.

Brian took hold of Alainn's hands but looked to the Queen. "I have two questions."

"Yes?" said the Queen.

"You said that I could come and go in both worlds, correct?"

"Yes."

"Would you permit my children to come and visit Flaitheas Scáth so that they might understand?"

Queen Maethoriel looked perplexed. She looked at Brian for several moments and then at her daughter. Motherhood took precedence. “Yes,” she said softly. “Yes, I would.”

Brian turned to Alainn. “I knew that you meant a great deal to me before all of this, but it wasn’t until your Mother said that I would never be able to return and see you that I realized just how much you mean to me.”

Alainn dared to look up at Brian. He was smiling at her. His face didn’t show the confusion and bewilderment that he had before. He was calm and at peace.

“I have to admit that I was getting to like the idea of being a wizard.” He laughed. “The idea of having to hide the fact that I’m a silver wizard until I have the skills to defend myself is rather scary.” He paused. “Okay, that whole thing about the Morganians is terrifying, but there is nothing, no matter how terrifying, that would make me do anything that would keep me from seeing you. But neither could I abandon my family.”

Alainn’s reaction was almost convulsive. Her body shook. She laughed and cried at the same time. She reached out and gently stroked his face.

“If I had to give up being a wizard to keep you, I’d do that. But, as it is, it looks like I’m a wizard for better or worse.” He got down on his knees, leaned forward and hugged Alainn. “I love you.”

With that there wasn’t a dry eye in the room. Even Headmaster Schaunessy caught himself wiping his eyes. Then the room was filled with laughing and happy chatter as though a great and dark dread had been lifted.

Queen Maethoriel looked at the Headmaster and with a smile said, “Headmaster Schaunessy it looks like you have a new student.”

“This is going to be quite a new experience,” he said acknowledging his new charge.

Brian and Headmaster Schaunessy took over the third floor of the south tower and turned it into Brian's private school room.

"First," said the Headmaster as they started Brian's education, "you need to know what magic is." He looked closely at Brian. "Do you know what magic is?"

"Well, I guess . . .," Brian stuttered. "Making things happen that the laws of physics say can't happen?"

"Nice try," the Headmaster smiled. "But not even close."

"Oh," said Brian.

"Magic is so natural to the Draiochta that most of them forget that it is, in essence, a science."

"Science?"

"Magic is a natural force that is innate to all creatures but it requires great brain power."

The Headmaster went on to explain that while magic is innate to all creatures the Humani are known to use only 15-20% of their brain at best. For a creature like a Humani to do magic requires the ability to use a minimum of 50% of their brain. The power of a witch or wizard is predominantly dependent upon the percentage of their brain they are able to use. Even then, however, learning skills to maximize brain use will maximize the individual's power. A silver wizard, like Brian, will have the ability to use 85-90% of their brain, but they must learn the skills and practice to achieve the full potential of their powers.

The natural force, or science, upon which magic is based is akin to what the Humani call quantum physics. Nothing is "solid" and therefore the power of the brain can change appearances and action. For example, something may appear to materialize out of no-where by bringing elements that are present together in an order

that produces the desired object. The next step is to not only bring the elements together but to cause them to act in a particular manner. For example, one might bring together the elements to make a ball and then cause it to fly across space to another person.

The Draiochta causes this to happen by focusing their brain on the intended outcome and using their wand, ring or staff to focus their power. The brain translates the conscious intentions into what, for lack of a better description, might be called code that brings about the object or action. To help the Draiochta do magic they learn "spells". Spells are, in the simplest terms, where the brain learns to react in a certain way with the prompt of an incantation. The weaker the individual's power the more they are dependent upon "spells". The more powerful they are, the less they are dependent upon spells and may do a magical act merely by describing it and pointing their wand, ring or staff to focus the ensuing power. The most powerful Draiochta may not even need to speak a description but simply think and point. There have been Draiochta in history who were found to be able to do magic without a wand, ring or staff.

The limits of one's magical power and ability is dependent upon heredity and innate skills. For example, a Humani may become a good golfer with practice but never be able to play like a professional. At the same time that golf star might not be able to ride a bike. For this reason some people cannot do things like shape-shifting, create plasma bolts, practice telepathy, alchemy, etc. Actually, most Draiochta cannot shape-shift, do telepathy or alchemy.

Some projects must be done by a group - e.g. creating a shadow realm. Some people believe that there are beings called "elders" who have existed since the beginning of time and who have basically no limits. They are even supposed to be able to create a shadow realm by themselves.

"Does this make sense?" the Headmaster concluded.

“Actually, it does,” said Brian.

“We know that you have the innate ability to use 85-90% of your brain’s power. Now what we have to do is enable you to use that power and teach you how to control it.”

“Oh,” Brian laughed, “is that all? What if I’m the guy who can’t ride a bike?”

“Not likely, but we’re going to need help.”

“Help?”

“Yes, I’ve never helped a person open their mind. I’ve already sent the word out to my colleagues at the Academy. One of them should be able to help us. After that it’s a matter of training.”



Much to Brian’s delight the Headmaster’s staff all agreed that the witch for the job was the witch Sorcha. As one might expect, she was delighted to help again. The ritual for helping one open their mind was ancient, complicated and had to be done carefully. Once the mind was opened there would be none of the usual Human filters that limit the amount of sense data with which the brain must contend. Suddenly the individual’s brain would be aware of hearing everything, seeing everything, smelling everything, tasting and feeling everything. It could be quite overwhelming. The practitioner must maintain control of both brains for a period of time, depending on whether or not the practitioner intended to implant some knowledge. In Brian’s case, Sorcha decided that she should implant the fluent use of all the Draiochta languages so that Brian could converse with other creatures in their native tongues. The Headmaster asked her to implant a few basic spells, especially defense spells.

Once the ritual was ended Brian would need someone with him continually for twenty-four to thirty-six hours or more while his brain adjusted to the tremendous

influx of sense data and learn to manage it. He would learn to filter the data but, unlike the way his Humani brain had worked, this filtering would be at his will.

As one might expect, due to her telepathic powers, this task fell to Anastasia. She would be able to telepathically communicate with Brian if he became so overloaded that one could not communicate with him verbally.

For hours following the ritual Brian lay as still as possible on his bed. His body didn't move but his mind was being overwhelmed with sense data he had never experienced before. For most of that time Anastasia spoke to Brian telepathically, helping him focus on particular data income and reassuring him that his brain was sufficiently powerful to handle the information and would learn to manage it without him even thinking about it. She told him stories in other languages so that his mind would be occupied by the new language and distract him from his brain's efforts to re-establish equilibrium. As time went on she started speaking to him out loud in Elfin and the Draiochta languages not only so that he could practice but bring his consciousness to the world outside his head. Realizing that he could communicate in these previously unknown languages gave him confidence.

The process took him close to thirty hours. Just after twenty-two hours he began to get sleepy. That was a good sign. It meant that his brain was completing its task and didn't require the exceptional high level of acuity. Just before hour twenty-nine Brian fell asleep.

Anastasia, who had been sitting in the same chair by his bed for this entire time, looked across the room at her mother who, likewise, had kept vigil the whole ordeal. Alainn smiled and quietly said "Thank you." Anastasia smiled, leaned her head against the back of the chair, and fell into a deep peaceful sleep.

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After the mind opening Brian's education went into high gear. Since Brian didn't grow up as a Draiochta, he had to have a special education to help him learn those things which the Draiochta children learned as a part of their growing up and interacting with adult Draiochta. The curriculum that Headmaster Schaunessy set up for Brian included Theory and Science of Magic; Defensive Magic; Herbology; Potions; Spells, Charms and Transfiguration; Animagi; and Alchemy. The Headmaster decided that Brian should actually attend classes at the academy with the first-year students to learn Herbology and Potions. Not only were they subjects that the Headmaster felt were better learned in an academic laboratory setting but they were also subjects that he felt more comfortable having his staff teach. Besides, as important as they would be to Brian's education, there was no immediacy to them.

The Headmaster's initial focus was upon Brian learning defensive magic. Defensive Magic for most students was like the Humani children learning self-defense – it wasn't something they ever expected to use. That wasn't the case for Brian. He knew that he would eventually have to use these important skills. It started with protective shields and blocking. Brian would ultimately be able to literally throw a protective shield over one or more persons that would protect them from most objects and magic. Defensive Magic was also where he learned the use of the plasma bolt. He would become so skilled at the use of the plasma bolt that he could use it to disarm an opponent and cause pain without injury. Last, but far from least, this class taught him how to recognize and overcome malevolent magic.

Since Brian learned the theory and science of magic – i.e. the why it works and what one does to make it work - besides being a silver wizard, this would give Brian an advantage. He progressed extremely rapidly. Draiochta children grow up with magic and don't really pay much attention to the theory and science. As a result, they become dependent upon spells, incantations and charms. Brian never developed that dependence. Very quickly he was able to do magic without needing to use memorized

spells and incantations. He was able to think the intended result or action, express it in a couple of Draiochta words and send the force through his wand. Because he was a silver wizard, it wasn't long after that that he gave up the wand and didn't need to verbalize the incantation.

The Headmaster combined each of the course elements into every lesson. When he would introduce a concept or skill they would talk about why it works (theory and science) as Brian learned the skill and applied it. In the beginning the application was almost always Defensive Magic and the Headmaster made great use of Wizard's Dueling. This was similar to martial arts competitions in the Human world or the classic fencing in both worlds where the students would use the skills they learned against other students in friendly competition – i.e. no intention of hurting the other person. Like martial arts competitions and fencing, Wizard Dueling had become a sport in the Draiochta world. Even while they were dueling, Brian and the Headmaster would talk about the spell or defense that one of them had used, discuss how it worked and its potential applications in real life.

The Headmaster was a powerful wizard and excellent at dueling, but he was concerned that Brian knew him too well. He was concerned that some of Brian's success in their duels was that he knew the Headmaster so well that the Headmaster's attacks and defenses were no longer unexpected. That's when he decided to put Brian up against the Academy's dueling master and a champion in dueling competitions.



The Great Hall was packed with spectators crammed together all trying to get as close as they were allowed to the long red carpet that stretched down the center of the hall. They were there to see the famous Dueling Master, Herenyonnen. The fact that he was dueling Brian only meant that it wasn't going to last long. Herenyonnen was known throughout the kingdom not for being a professor at the academy but for

having the greatest number of dueling victories in known history. His name was synonymous with Wizard Dueling.

The crowd cheered when Brian entered the hall from the family rooms at the north end. He took his place at the end of the red carpet. He wore a simple black cassock and student's gown and carried a wand in his left hand. Beneath his cassock was heavy leather body armor. Even though they were to avoid spells, bolts, plasma, etc., that might cause injury, the game was rough and it hurt to get hit, so the leather body armor was a dueler's essential. On his belt there hung a white linen handkerchief bearing the symbol of Princess Alainn. Brian had told her about the medieval Humani knights who would wear the favor of their lady into battle or tournament and Alainn had given him a handkerchief to wear. Even though the crowd cheered and yelled encouragement to Brian, Brian knew that the Wizard Duel was a stately event where the dueling wizards maintained a dignified composure at all times. Brian properly acknowledged the cheers of the crowd and then stood quietly waiting for the grand entrance of the champion.

Herenyonnen entered the hall from the veranda nearest his end of the carpet. The crowd went wild. The din was so intense that Brian could feel the pressure. Herenyonnen was dressed in a bright yellow cassock with scarlet piping. He wore no gown or over-coat and carried his wand in his right hand. Watching the master move slowly toward the carpet, maintaining his stateliness while still acknowledging the crowd, Brian wanted to join in the cheering. Brian had met Herenyonnen when he arrived. The master was really quite modest and unassuming. That wasn't the message this crowd was getting. Brian tried not to smile but it was hard. Herenyonnen was working the crowd and had them in a total frenzy.

The two men stood at opposite ends of the carpet. The Headmaster stepped onto the carpet halfway between the two men and indicated for them to approach. Brian tried to match his pace to that of the great master. The Headmaster gave last

minute instructions and the two wizards bowed to each other before returning to their end of the carpet. The Great Hall became hushed as the Headmaster held up his hand.

The Headmaster dropped his hand and stepped off the carpet. The duel had begun. It was only seconds before Heronyonnen hit Brian with a blast. Brian was knocked off his feet, but he was able to throw up a block before Heronyonnen could strike again. It was a lot harder than the Headmaster had ever hit him and it took a moment for Brian to recover. In that moment Brian saw Heronyonnen's wand come up. Brian knew that a spell was coming. He wasn't quite back up on his feet so he rolled forward. Heronyonnen had missed. Brian shot a plasma bolt at Heronyonnen which the champion easily deflected. Almost immediately the master responded with a plasma bolt and another blast. Brian again went down and was again able to protect himself. But it was getting harder to get back up. Brian knew that he didn't have much of a chance against the champion no matter what he did, but he definitely didn't have a chance as long as he was doing this tit-for-tat routine. He had to do something unexpected. 'Headmaster never said anything about it being against the rules to use both hands,' Brian thought. Of course most wizards can't use both hands unless they have two wands which was unheard of.

Brian blocked a couple of attacks as he got to his feet. Feigning to the left with his wand, Brian sent a plasma bolt for which the master was prepared, while, almost instantaneously he used his right hand to hit Heronyonnen with a blast. The champion didn't see that coming. No one, except the Headmaster, saw that come from Brian's right hand. Heronyonnen stumbled backward and fell. The crowd reacted with surprise. Brian was quick to create a spell that put unseen weight on Heronyonnen so that he could not get up. Heronyonnen was trying to get his right arm free so that he could use his wand. Brian disappeared and re-appeared at Heronyonnen feet with his wand pointing at the master.

“Do you yield?” Brian asked.

Dropping back on the carpet in resignation the defeated champion said, “I yield.”

The crowd stood silent and awestruck for some moments and then broke into cheers. Brian had done the unthinkable. He had defeated the great Wizard Dueling champion.

Brian lifted the weight spell and helped the embarrassed Heronyonnen to his feet. Then, taking a step back, bowed. The Headmaster stood smiling. Brian had come farther than he had thought. He was glad that no one, with the exception of Heronyonnen, had noticed the use of both hands and the use of magic without a wand, ring or staff. Likewise, in all of the commotion and noise, no one, except the champion, had realized that, unlike Heronyonnen who yelled his incantations, Brian never spoke.

Despite his defeat Heronyonnen had a long line of well-wishers and fans who wanted to meet him and get an autograph. Brian and the Headmaster watched from the family dining room. When the last fan had gone the Champion joined the Headmaster and Brian. They went out on the Grand Veranda with a glass of Miruvor to critique the match.

“Okay,” said Heronyonnen looking at the Headmaster, “why didn’t you tell me that Tiarna Brian doesn’t need a wand, can throw a spell with both hands and doesn’t verbalize?!” He wasn’t really angry but still a bit annoyed. “I was going easy on the man because you said he is a novice student and he proceeded to thump me hard.”

“I’m sorry, Heronyonnen,” the Headmaster apologized. “He is a novice student. I had never seen him use both hands. But I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention it.”

“I understand secrecy,” said the champion, “but I would have done things differently if I had known.” Heronyonnen looked seriously at Brian. “You beat me

fairly and I'm not trying to make excuses, but you might not have defeated me had I known."

"We're hoping that, when he has to face a Morganian or other real adversary, they don't know," Headmaster said.

"But he's right," Brian interjected. "There's no guarantee that I'll have the element of surprise on my side in a real situation."

"Well, yes," said Headmaster.

"Can we try it again?" Brian asked the Champion. "And this time you not only know but let's use the entire room."

"What?" the Headmaster started to object.

"I agree with Tiarna Brian," said Heronyonnen.

"Call me Brian."

"I agree with Brian. If you really want him to be ready, we need to make it a bit more realistic."

Without asking the Headmaster's permission, Heronyonnen and Brian returned to the empty Great Hall. As Brian walked toward his end of the room he sensed quick movement. He dropped to his knees and ducked his head. A plasma bolt just missed his head.

"Oh, that was sneaky," he said. Heronyonnen just grinned.

They both walked back and forth for some time. Brian tried the feign left and shoot from the right, but as soon as Heronyonnen saw the movement to the left he put up a shield to his left, which blocked the bolt from Brian's right hand. More stalking.

By this time the royal family, most of the Torc guards and house staff were aware of what was happening and stood watching from doors, trying to see but not wanting to get in the line of fire.

Heronyonnen threw a bolt-spell-bolt. Brian wasn't able to respond quickly enough and was knocked down by the second bolt. As he fell he sent a bolt back toward the Champion which hit its mark. Both men were on the floor.

Brian used all of his energy getting to his knees. He started sending one bolt after another at Heronyonnen who was finding it difficult to hold his defense and get up nevertheless mount a counter-offensive.

Brian was on one knee and still sending bolt after bolt. He was trying to get to his feet while maintaining the barrage. He almost lost his balance as he attempted to stand and, in the brief moment he took, Heronyonnen had leaped from a squatting position and grabbed one of the maids. When Brian started to send another bolt he realized that Heronyonnen was using the maid as a shield. Even in a role-play situation like this he didn't dare to hit the maid. Not only would it be inappropriate – he wouldn't hurt an innocent person in a real fight – but even in wizard duel she could get hurt. They had on body armor.

Brian was so shocked by Heronyonnen's move that he left himself momentarily undefended. Heronyonnen took advantage and hit him with two well-placed plasma bolts. Brian went down hard. There was a gasp from the spectators. Heronyonnen hit him again. Brian was in trouble and tried to roll away until he could put up a shield. Once the shield was up he regained his feet. His mind was racing with ideas of how he was to get past the maid.

Suddenly Brian disappeared and reappeared behind Heronyonnen. It took the champion a brief moment to realize what had happened and in his repositioning himself didn't have as tight a hold of the maid. From over ten feet away Brian lifted the woman out of Heronyonnen's grasp put her down a few feet away and threw a shield around her. However, in the short time that it took to do that he had left himself undefended. Heronyonnen hit Brian with two plasma bolts in a row.

It was over. Brian knew it. Not only would such a hit have been fatal in real combat but it did really hurt a lot and he wasn't anxious to get up and take more. He lay still. The maid was safe but Brian was 'dead'. In a real situation that wouldn't have helped the maid at all.

"Are you okay?" Heronyonnen looked down at Brian who had, by this time, rolled over on his back.

"That hurt like hell, but I'm okay."

"It wasn't really a bad idea and you executed it pretty well, but you know that a Morganian is going to expect you to take such a chance to save a life. They feel that's your weakness, and, in reality, it is. It's just a weakness that none of us is willing to give up." The champion held out his hand and helped Brian to his feet.

Their audience had been so stunned by what they had witnessed that they had stood in silence. When the two hugged each other there was a great cheer.

"Now," said Heronyonnen to the Headmaster with emphasis, "let's critique that."

"I'm not sure I can remember everything that happened," he said.

"That's okay," Heronyonnen laughed. "the two of us remember every blow. Right?" Brian put his hand on his side and smiled.

Heronyonnen became Brian's new dueling partner and the two of them would frequently have spontaneous duels where both men fought viciously. Some of the battles went for great lengths of time because they always went until one was defeated. Afterwards the two wizards would go off with a glass of Miruvor and critique every move.



Brian continued his regular education despite his demonstration at the Wizard Duel. There was still a lot he had to know and be able to do. Now, however, the

Headmaster was not worried. His student was excelling rapidly. In fact, his advancement was almost exponential. He encouraged Brian to use magic as often as possible.

One subject that Brian was anxious to study was a type of shape shifting called therianthropy. The shape shifter, called an animagus, is a Draiochta who has the ability to transform themselves into an animal. It is a learned skill. While not a common wizardry skill most Elves are taught at home and are an animagi by the time they go to the academy. Other races of Draiochta are provided information about therianthropy in their transformation classes, but few elect to pursue the skill. Animagi can only transform into one animal and that is determined by the individual's inner traits. Once the skill of therianthropy is mastered the animagi can transform at will.

"Sir," Brian asked the Headmaster, "when are you going to teach me how to change into an animal like Alainn and the others?"

"Oh," said the Headmaster. "People who can transform into animals practice therianthropy and are called an animagus – a type of shape shifter." He went on to explain the process in detail and concluded, "few wizards are animagi but the Elves in Coillearnach seem quite intent upon learning the skill and usually show up at academy already possessing it."

"Is it hard?"

"There is a fair amount of skill involved. It isn't easy."

"Could I learn it?"

"Yes, I suppose you could. Do you want to?"

"I think it would be nice . . .," Brian stumbled over his words but the Headmaster knew where he was going.

"Oh, yes," the Headmaster smiled, "running around the woods with Alainn as a bobcat?"

"Yes. Is that silly?"

“No,” laughed the Headmaster. “It tilts a bit toward the love-struck school boy, but I think I have some information about it in my bag here somewhere.”

The Headmaster rummaged through his satchel that was overloaded with books and papers. “Here it is.” He handed a small pamphlet to Brian. “You can look at that while I run down to Witch Sorcha’s cottage for a few things I forgot. We can talk about it when I get back.”

Brian was already deeply engrossed in the booklet and gave the Headmaster a wave and a grunt as a reply. The Headmaster smiled and left on his errand.

When the Headmaster returned an hour or so later he was confronted by a lion. The lion was just sitting in the middle of the room like a lost kitten.

“Brian!” cried the Headmaster. “How in the world?”

The big cat just shook its head.

“Oh, you can’t get back, can you?”

The lion shook its head up and down.

“Use the incantation ‘Ar aid go dtí gnáth’.”

In a moment a very embarrassed Brian was standing before the Headmaster.

“This appears to be similar to a lesson a young man learned in the Humani story of the Soccer’s Apprentice,” the Headmaster laughed.

“I guess I should have waited for you,” Brian apologized.

“That would have been wise.”

“I was just reading that one’s inner traits determine the animal,” Brian explained. “I started visualizing myself as different animals and before I knew it I was changing.”

“You changed into more than one animal?”

“Yes. How do you know which one is your animal?”

“My boy, you’re not an animagus,” exclaimed the Headmaster, “You are a true shape shifter.”

“Like the ‘Torc?’”

“The ‘Torc,” the Headmaster said, “are a type of shape shifter but they are limited to taking on a human form at will like the animagus takes on an animal form. If you can take on the form of more than one animal the only explanation is that you are a true shape shifter. That is one who can take a wide variety of forms, changing sex and age, looking like anyone or anything you choose, or just changing a part of your appearance.”

“There are shape shifters in Humani fantasy literature.”

“Yes, your author, J.K. Rowling, calls them metamorphomagi.”

“You guys read ‘Harry Potter?’” Brian’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Oh, my, yes!” the Headmaster smiled broadly. “Many Draiochta are big ‘Harry Potter’ fans.”

“I bet I can guess your favorite character,” Brian laughed.

“Albus Dumbledore, of course!”

“Then I can be anything?”

“Pretty much so,” the Headmaster explained. “I’ve only known a couple of true shape shifters. It’s hereditary. You can’t learn it. You can only learn how to use it.”

“Why couldn’t I get back to my normal self?”

“Probably because you never envision yourself as you, you just are. Until you can do that it appears that the incantation ‘Ar aid go dtí gnáth’ works.”

“Do you know what I’d really like to become?” Brian looked seriously at his teacher which made Headmaster Schaunessy a bit uncomfortable.

“What?” he asked.

“A red dragon,” said Brian.

“Why would you want to be a dragon?”

“In China the dragon is a good creature, unlike the portrayal of the European dragon. The dragon symbolizes power, strength, good luck and is very compassionate.

In the Chinese daily language, extraordinary people are referred to as dragons and the greatest blessing that you can bestow upon another person is to say that you hope they or one of their family members will become a dragon.” Brian paused. “If I’m going to have to accept great responsibility as a silver wizard, I’d sure like to be able to become a red dragon.”

Headmaster Schaunessy smiled. “I like the Chinese dragon, and I like your motivation, but we’d better get back to some mundane matters such as learning how to control this power.”

Brian nodded consent as he still thought about the beautiful red dragon.

“See if you can change your nose to look like a pig’s,” said the Headmaster. After a bit of effort Brian’s nose took on the appearance of a pig’s snout. “Now return to normal.”

The discovery of Brian’s new power gave a new direction to the days lessons and practice. Little did they know the important role this power would play in Brian’s future.

Chapter 6.

During his free time Brian enjoyed patrolling the woods with Prince Stephan. Like most Elves, Stephan looked but a fraction of his 50 years. He was tall and slender. His willowy appearance belied his exceptional strength which was evident in his animagus form – a bear. He and Anastasia had met when he was chosen to take her father's place as Chief Forest Steward.

The Chief Forest Steward had primary responsibility for assuring that the woods within the Coillearnach were patrolled to guard against intruders and poachers. They couldn't do anything about legal Humani hunters but they could do their best to thwart poachers and others who would destroy the land and its animals.

Prince Stephan spent almost every day checking on patrols, talking to Draiochta who lived in the woods and would keep watch for him. When Stephan found a poacher, he would use magic to protect the animals. If they used traps, he would destroy them. A few years before Brian arrived, a Draiochta living in the Humani world bought Stephan a cell phone for one purpose only – to call the forest rangers. Whenever he saw a Humani set a trap he would wait until they had left, take the trap, call the rangers and then make sure that the trap was found when the ranger arrived to investigate. If a poacher killed an animal he would call the rangers and guide them to where the Humani poacher was parked.

At first the rangers wanted to ask all sorts of questions but Stephan would only give his name and say that he was a citizen concerned about conservation. Since his information was always reliable, they stopped asking when they answered the phone and it was Stephan. Over time other of the forest stewards got cell phones.

One day Brian and Neala went on patrol with Stephan. Neala didn't really need to go along as Brian's Torc guard, but it gave her an excuse to get out and run in the

big woods. Two large black bears and a were-boar running through the woods together must have been quite a sight.

On this particular day Stephan suddenly stopped and indicated for the others to stop and be quiet. He was so attuned to the sounds and smells of Humani presence that he was aware of their presence at a great distance. He changed into his Elfin form and the others followed suit. Before he could lead them close to see the Humani a shot was heard.

The three raced in the direction of the shot. A poacher was leaning over a doe lying on the ground. Neala was so incensed that she returned to her were-boar form and it was all that Brian and Stephan could do to keep her from charging the poacher.

Brian whispered into Neala's ear and indicated that they all move out of hearing of the poacher. They stopped some distance from the poacher who was preparing his kill for the journey down the mountain.

"Okay," said Neala as she testily she took her human form, "you said we'd do something. I'm here. I'm calm. Now what are we going to do!"

Brian gave a sad smile and shook his head. "You are no calmer than I am, but at least you're willing to listen."

Neala took a deep breath.

Brian looked at Stephan. "I know you've seen this many times but this is our first. I want to do a bit more than get him caught by the forest rangers."

"Can I trample him a bit?" Neala gave a scary smile.

"No," Stephan said emphatically. "You can't trample him." Neala pouted.

"I have an idea," said Brian. "How about we scare him so badly that he'll never come back?"

"What do you have in mind?" asked Stephan.

Brian explained his idea. Everyone laughed and agreed that that would probably cause him to avoid these woods for the rest of his life.

Returning to where the poacher had already started to disembowel the doe, Brian looked at Neala. He could see the anger in her eyes. “Are you going to be alright?” She nodded.

Brian thought about just blasting the rifle but then decided that he really wanted the poacher to try to use it and have it not work. That would be more frightening. Brian quietly made the rifle inoperable, took on the form of a giant buck and stepped out of hiding with a black bear and were-boar by his side.

The buck had to be a magical buck so that Brian could talk. If he had actually become a buck instead of just looking like one, he would not have been able to speak. “Hey, you!” Brian shouted as he marched toward the poacher.

The poacher turned and stood momentarily in shock. There was a large buck but who called him. He picked up his rifle and pointed it at Brian. The three kept moving. The poacher pulled the trigger but nothing happened. Stephan let out a roar, grabbed the rifle and broke it. With his great rack Brian pushed the poacher against a tree. With his face within inches of the poacher Brian said, “How would you like it if we were to invade your home and kill your mate?”

The hunter stood speechless and frozen in fear. Neala pounded the ground.

“No,” said Brian looking at the menacing were-boar, “if I let you do that other Humani wouldn’t see him for the scum he is. There’d be all sorts of Humani out here with guns trying to kill us.”

The poacher started crying and babbling. None of the three could understand what he was trying to say. It didn’t really matter. Stephan had noticed the length of rope the poacher had brought along to drag his kill out of the woods. He roared and pointed to the tree.

“Brilliant,” said Brian.

Stephan threw the rope over one of the branches. The fear in the hunter’s eyes increased.

“Please don’t kill me,” he blubbered. “Please don’t kill me. I have a family.”

“So did she,” Brian said matter-of-factly. “Who’s going to feed her fawn?”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” pleaded the poacher.

“You’re only sorry that you got caught,” said Brian.

“Please. I don’t want to die.”

“Neither did she!” Brian was becoming more angry with the poacher’s pleading. “Why shouldn’t we treat you like you treated her?”

The poacher just cried and kept repeating “no, no.”

Stephan pushed the poacher to the ground and held his head so he could not move. That was the only way of keep him from seeing Brian as he transformed back to his human form in order to tie the rope around the poacher’s ankles. As Brian returned to the form of a deer, Stephan hoisted the poacher so that he was hanging by his ankles.

Again Brian put his face so close to the poacher’s that the poacher could feel his hot breath. “If we ever see you in these woods again you will not walk out. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” whimpered the poacher.

“This is one time I’m sure you will be happy to see the rangers. The longer they take getting here the more uncomfortable you will become until it will be quite painful. I really hope they take a really, really long time getting here.”

Brian went to the doe and dropped his head. Neala gave the poacher a butt with her head sending him spinning and then joined Brian. Stephan knelt down and stroked the doe’s head. After a moment of silence they left.

As soon as he was out of sight of the poacher Brian used Stephan’s cell phone to call the rangers. He didn’t want them to know that Stephan had anything to do with hanging the poacher.

They walked slowly home.



By the next morning everyone in Flaitheas Scáth had heard the story. Brian, Stephan and Neala were summoned to the audience room.

“Anastasia’s mother always says that if you get called to the audience room you are in deep . . . deep . . . well, you were in big trouble,” said Stephan. He looked at the others nervously.

Neala walked along stoically but Brian knew the look of concern in her eyes. He knew she wasn’t afraid of being punished. What she was afraid of was what her father would do. He might dismiss her from the guard.

Sitting talking with the Queen was a Hogboon - an earth goblin. They stopped their conversation as the three entered and bowed. Captain Lawrence was standing behind the Queen. Alainn and Anastasia were just entering the hall from the family rooms.

“This is Chovuv Darksorch,” said the Queen. “He lives near the Ranger station and is one of our forest stewards.” Stephan nodded. “He’s also friends with some of the Humani rangers and he just brought me an interesting story.”

“It was my fault, your Majesty,” Brian jumped in in an effort to protect the other two from the fallout.

“You interrupted me, Tiarna Brian,” the Queen scolded. “But now that you confess . . . to what are you confessing?”

Brian knew that there was no way this was about anything other than their escapade the day before.

“I was the one who hung the poacher from the tree.”

“Yes,” said the Queen. “We know that. A ranger told Chovuv that a person named ‘Brian’ called them and told them where to find him.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Brian.

Brian and his co-conspirator couldn't see Alainn and Anastasia standing slightly behind them having a hard time from laughing. Captain Lawrence was standing sternly by his Queen using every ounce of self-control to keep a straight face. The three looked like school children who had been sent to the headmaster's office.

"Chovuv, would you be so kind as to tell these three hooligans what you told me."

"I ran into one of my ranger friends this morning. He told me that there had been some excitement on the mountain. The ranger station received a call from a man identifying himself as 'Brian' who told them that there was a poacher hanging from a tree and how to find him. When the rangers arrived they found the poacher hanging from the tree by his ankles."

"Was he in much pain?" asked Neala.

"Evidently quite a bit," replied Chovuv. "It took the rangers almost two hours to get there."

Brian tried to cover his smile and took a quick glance behind him when he heard a very quiet "yes!" from Neala.

"They said that there was a dead doe that had been shot by the rifle that was lying almost bent in half," Chovuv continued. Everyone looked at Stephan who looked down to avoid eye contact.

"The rangers said that the man was incoherent and obviously hallucinating. He kept rambling on about a large buck that talked and that there was a black bear and giant boar with the buck who seemed to listen to the buck."

"We obviously know who the ring-leader was, don't we?" said the Queen.

"Does that make the others any less culpable?" asked Lawrence.

"No," replied the Queen. "What do you think we should do?"

"Personally," said Lawrence working with all his might to keep from smiling, "I'd give them medals."

It took the three conspirators a moment for Lawrence's words to sink in. Then the room burst into laughter.

"It wasn't a very wise thing to do," said the Queen as she laughed. "You could have caused some serious problems. However, you didn't . . . you got away with doing what we'd all like to do to poachers." Everyone agreed.

"It's bad enough that the Humani allow hunting in some woods, but we don't have to put up with poachers."

"Oh," said the Queen to Chovuv, "tell them the ranger's reaction."

"The rangers thought it was great. They've started calling it 'Bambi's Revenge'," Chovuv said. "They took their time cutting the poacher down and didn't give him any sympathy. When he told them that he had been threatened with his life if he were seen in the forest ever again they said 'then I guess you'd better not come back.'"

"And I'm afraid the three of you are famous," added Lawrence.

"Yes," said Chovuv, "the poacher told everyone who would listen about the talking buck, black bear and boar – the rangers, ambulance attendant, emergency room staff – everyone. So, everyone for miles around have heard about you."

"What's the consensus?" asked Stephan.

"Most of them are hunters but they all hate poachers, so you are heroes," said Chovuv. Then he added with a laugh, "but don't be around during buck season. They're not that sentimental."



It took some time for the teasing to stop after 'Bambi's Revenge.' Every time Brian and Alainn would go out running someone inevitably warned him not to take the form of a buck.

Actually, they liked running in their natural forms, if for no other reason than they could talk.

On this particular day they were running along the ridge of Bear Den Point. Bear Den Point is only about a mile from Flaitheas Scáth as the proverbial crow flies, but it is a hard climb. They had come up the southeast face which is steep but climbable and were now running northwest along the southwestern ridge. There was a steep 700 foot drop just to their left but the vista, when there was a break in the trees, was magnificent. They were a good two to three hundred feet above any of the other mountain tops and ridges, even Pruitt Ridge where Flaitheas Scáth's entrance is located.

In the mountains storms can come up very suddenly and even the best mountaineer can be caught off guard. The difference between the skilled and experienced mountaineer and the amateur is that the mountaineer never tries to outrun a storm. You "hunker down", as the locals would say, and wait for it to pass.

Alainn and Brian were planning to go all the way to the Humani road 79. On the other side was a place where the Walls of Jericho trail briefly emerged from the heavy forest and returned. There was a tailhead parking lot there. If they had time, they thought they might continue on that trail for a short distance. This, however, was not going to happen. They became aware of an approaching storm.

Brian looked at the barometer on his Pathfinder.

"Woa," he exclaimed, "the barometer's falling like a rock!"

"Do you think we have time to get home?" Alainn asked.

Together they studied the sky ahead of them. The clouds were progressively lower and only a few miles away it looked like a curtain. That was the rain. They looked at each other and said, "no!"

"Well, m'Lady," Brian said in his most chivalrous voice, "what type of lodging would you like?"

"What?"

"Headmaster always tells me that I need to practice, practice, practice."

By this time the rain was beginning.

“You can make us a shelter?”

“I don’t know,” Brian admitted, “but whatever I come up with has to be better than trying to find a cave or something in this rain.”

In a nearby grove of trees nestled up against an outcropping of limestone Brian employed all sorts of magic technique until he had finally produced what was little more than an oversized lean-to about four feet high at its highest. But it was dry.

“I guess I need a bit more practice,” Brian laughed as they crawled in.

“It’s beautiful,” said Alainn.

“You’d say that about anything.”

“Only if you made it.”

The two were totally soaked and now sitting in a very empty and unheated lean-to trying to decide what to do next. A bit of concentration and there was a small wood stove in one corner with a crooked stovepipe to take the smoke outside. Alainn added a ladies touch with a rug and a mattress that was so soft it was more like an overstuffed down comforter. She looked at Brian after she made the bed and immediately blushed.

It was awkward. They had been alone many times, but this was somehow different. When she came up with the idea of the bed Alainn had truthfully been thinking about them having to spend the night. They definitely wouldn’t be trying to negotiate steep mountain trails shortly after a storm. Besides it would probably be dark before the storm was passed. It wasn’t until she had actually created the bed that she realized how it might have appeared.

“Is that a mattress or a bag full of down pillows?” Brian teased.

“If you don’t like it I can put some straw over next to the stove for you,” Alainn lifted her wand and pointed it at the stove.

“This is beautiful,” he said.

“You’re just saying that because you don’t want to sleep on the straw.”

“I’m just saying that because you made it.”

“I’ve heard that somewhere before.”

They were still on their knees in the middle of the hut. Brian was going to grab Alainn and fall onto the mattress but when he grabbed her he was reminded that they were both still sopping wet.

“You’re wet!” he exclaimed.

“No worse than you!” Alainn rebutted.

Another awkward moment. Brian hadn’t thought about magic and had already pulled off his tech shirt. He was just struck by their situation when he considered his running shorts. Alainn was still kneeling beside him. She was dressed in Human running clothes except that she was barefooted. She was watching Brian. By this time she was seriously wondering whether he was going to stop with his shirt.

“Oh!” is all he could say.

Alainn lifted her wand and, making a circle around each of them, left them both clothed in matching soft white linen gowns. “Men have no sense in such situations.”

The moment to impulsively grab Alainn and fall on the mattress had passed. They climbed onto the mattress and lay down facing each other being careful not to touch.

By this time the storm was raging outside. They lay there making small talk about the storm and looking at the warm, comforting fire. But they both knew that the small talk would run out eventually. Then what would they do?

It wasn’t long before that time came. Alainn was now lying on her back propped up with pillows and the comforter. She stared at the fire. Brian, lying on his right side facing her, was looking out at the storm.

“Do you feel guilty too?” Alainn asked.

“Yes,” Brian replied.

“I feel so ashamed of what I’m thinking.”

“That’s supposed to be the boy’s line,” Brian laughed.

She tried to laugh but the best she could do was a smile. “I’m serious.”

“I know you are,” Brian tried to say with as much understanding as possible.

He wanted her to know that he understood exactly how she felt because he felt it too.

“I’m having the same problem.”

“You are?”

“Yes.”

“Why are we feeling so guilty?” She didn’t really expect Brian to have an answer.

“I wish I knew,” Brian was now starrng at the ceiling of their little hut. “Even my kids tell me that it’s okay to fall in love again.”

“Mine too,” said Alainn.

“I feel guilty because I’m alive and I feel guilty because of my feelings for you and that makes me feel like a cheater.”

“Wow, that describes it exactly.”

“It doesn’t seem to matter whether it’s been five years or thirty-three.”

“I can’t tell you how many times Anastasia and mother have tried to fix me up.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes.” Alainn laughed. “I hope the poor fellows didn’t feel that I was being rude.”

“Do you really think we’re guilty of anything?”

“What do you mean?” Alainn questioned.

“The two of us seem to be the only ones who feel that we’re doing something wrong by falling in love.”

“You know what’s stupid?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “What we’re doing is really more about being afraid of what other people will think of us.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m afraid that if people know I’ve fallen in love with you they’ll think I’ve stopped loving Fionn.”

“I know that’s not true.”

“You do?”

“Of course. Your love for him is evident every time you tell me something about him.”

“I’m sorry, . . .”

“That’s okay,” Brian interrupted. “You don’t have to apologize. I’m fine with that. Besides, I’m sure I’m just as bad when I talk about Bridgette.”

Alainn just smiles.

“That’s what I thought.” There was a brief pause. “So why do we do it? Why do we worry about what some person without feelings might think? No matter how much I love you, you know that I’ll always love Bridgette and I know that you’ll always love Fionn. It doesn’t make my love for you any less or inferior.”

“Mother keeps reminding me that we all have the capacity to love many people with total and absolute love.”

“She’s a wise lady,” Brian looked over at Alainn and smiled. When he did he saw the tears running down her cheek.

“Are you okay?” is all he could think to say.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have resisted when Anastasia tried to put us together.” Alainn paused and then turned her gaze on Brian. “Would we ever have confronted this issue had we not been thrown together in the same bed with no place to hide?”

“Probably not.”

“Can we . . .” Alainn couldn’t finish.

“We both know that we’ll never get over the pain of our loss. But we can love each other.” Brian dared to move a bit closer.

“Oh, Brian, I do love you,” Alainn whispered as she moved to meet him.

“And I love you,” Brian said as he enfolded her in his arms.

They held on to each other for the longest time with tears running down their cheeks. Then, as though having received a blessing from some unseen force, they looked into each other’s eyes and kissed passionately. With the most tender compassion and gentleness of affection they drew together and gave of themselves unconditionally accompanied by the gentle patter of rain and the flicker of the fire.



Alainn awakened to the sights, sounds and smells of a beautiful morning – bird song, sunlight through the trees and the smell of freshness. The forest was alive and refreshed after the night’s storm and Alainn felt rejuvenated. She rolled over toward Brian only to find herself in bed alone.

For a brief moment she panicked. Then she realized that even if something had happened to cause Brian to change his mind about their relationship, he would never leave her alone in the woods. ‘I’m thinking like a school girl in love,’ she thought to herself and laughed.

She stepped outside their lean-to and look around. Brian was sitting on a fallen tree just up the hill a few yards from the lean-to. He was wearing the linen gown and was barefooted. Brian appeared to be concentrating on something in the distance. Alainn looked in the same direction but could see nothing out of the ordinary.

“Where did you get coffee?” she asked as she approached.

Brian had been concentrating so hard that he was startled when she spoke. “Oh,” he said looking down at the coffee cup he was holding, “the Headmaster told me to practice as much as possible so I changed my water bottle into a cup of coffee. Pretty neat, huh?”

“Yes,” she laughed, “pretty neat.” Even though Brian had become quite adept at doing magic, he still got tickled every time he did it. That always brought a smile to her face. She couldn’t help wishing that more Draiochta would be that excited about the mundane.

“Want a cup?”

“Sure, it smells good.”

“Well,” he said as he held out both hands and duplicated his cup – even to the amount of coffee left, “it isn’t Starbucks.”

Alainn laughed and looked at the skimpy amount of coffee in the cup he handed her.

“Oh,” said Brian. “Sorry.” He passed his hand over the cup and it was filled to the brim with steaming, delicious smelling coffee.

“I don’t know how you ever got me started on this stuff,” said Alainn. She had never tasted coffee until Brian had started doing magic and decided that he really missed coffee.

“When I was a child we thought all adults drank coffee, and for the most part they did. We didn’t have soda and we’d really messed up tea. Now, I think, coffee is a love it or hate it drink.”

“I don’t know about love it, but I do enjoy it.”

“It’s funny. The Irish and English can’t make a decent cup of coffee to save their lives, and the American’s can’t make a decent cup of tea. They really need to help each other.”

They sat quietly for a while, enjoying the forest and Brian’s gaze went back to the distance in front of him.

“What is so interesting over there?” Alainn finally asked.

“Well, if you must be nosey,” Brian teased, “it was going to be a surprise.” Brian paused. “But thinking about it, it is probably something I should pass by you first.”

“Okay?”

“Well, young lady, you see that spot where the trees are rather thin ninety to a hundred meters from that cliff?”

“Yes.”

“That’s where I’m going to build you a palace.”

“You’re going to do what?” Alainn exclaimed. Actually she had heard every word quite clearly but she had no idea what prompted the idea.

“A palace,” Brian said very matter-of-factly. “That spot should command an absolutely unbelievable view.”

“Why do you want to build a palace for me?”

“You don’t expect us to live with your Mother, do you?”

“What?”

“Oh,” Brian shook his head. “That’s a bad joke even in the Humani world. Never mind.”

Alainn just laughed but then stood up in wonder as Brian created an illusion of a beautiful palace on the spot he had indicate.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“It’s beautiful.”

“All I need to do is find the people to build it.”

Alainn just stood looking as the illusion began to fade.

“As I was sitting here sipping my coffee I started thinking about the whole ‘with great power’ thing.”

As the illusion of the palace faded completely, she looked back at Brian. “What about it?”

“I want to do two things – protect the forest with its animals and people, and build hospitals that will be free and do research to fight things like heart disease and cancer.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“If I can buy this land, it will start here. I’ll buy land starting with wooded areas that border government parks. That way it will not only protect those areas but will help protect the parks from companies that might buy adjacent land which ultimately harms the park – like strip mining companies.”

“That’s going to be quite an undertaking.”

“Yes, so I figured that we’d start a foundation,” Brian continued. He had obviously been giving it a lot of thought. “We can call it the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Foundation. One part of the foundation would do nothing but buy and manage land. The other part would build hospitals and recruit researchers.”

“Reality orientation,” Alainn laughed. “There’s a thing called ‘money’ even in the Draiochta world.”

“No problem,” Brian looked at Alainn with a gleam in his eye. The excitement in his voice was contagious. “The Headmaster is teaching me alchemy.”

“Oh. Okay.” Alainn sat next to Brian on the fallen tree, sipping her coffee and listening to Brian share his dream. He was so excited and he really did have a good handle on what he needed to do.

By late morning they decided that they really should return to Flaitheas Scáth. Anastasia had been using telepathy to look for them last night and Alainn let her know that they were safe, but she and the others might start worrying if Alainn and Brian waited too long.

Dressed again in their running clothes, Brian and Alainn started the short run back to Flaitheas Scáth. There wasn’t much talk on the run back because the forest

floor was still quit slick from the storm and they needed to concentrate. The entire run was downhill which made it even worse.

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“Well, where have you two been?” Devin asked as they came through the tree.

“Out running,” relied Brian.

“Sure,” said Devin smiling.

Brian and Alainn looked at each other. Devin was a tease but they wondered what he knew that they didn’t. They headed on to the castle where they encountered Anastasia heading toward the family rooms. Anastasia looked at them and sudden broke into a grin.

“Finally!” she exclaimed.

“I told you that we’d be back today,” Alainn responded.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Anastasia continue to grin and look from one to the other of them.

“What?” they both demanded.

“You finally . . .”

“Anastasia!” Alainn yelled, not letting Anastasia finish. “I can’t believe . . .”

“I’m an adult, Mother.” Anastasia said.

“You’re still my daughter and I won’t be discussing such matters with you especially in public.”

Anastasia just laughed. “Okay, Mother,” she conceded. “But you two should probably go to the conference room before you do anything else. The Minister of Defense is there with Grandmother. Evidently it’s something big. They called all of us in.”

Alainn and Brian headed toward the conference room adjacent to the family rooms. As they approached the door they met Neala.

“Whoa!” she exclaimed. “Alright!”

Brian rubbed his hand across his forehead. “Do we have something written there?”

“No,” said Neala laughing, “it’s all over your faces!”

Alainn and Brian just shook their heads. Brian gave Neala a little shove toward the conference room door.

“Oh,” she said, “I’m not privy. I’m just waiting, but Dad and Prince Stephan just arrived a few minutes ago and are in there.”

Brian knocked loudly and Lawrence opened the door, indicating for them to enter.

Queen Maethoriel was sitting at the far end of the conference table. Next to her was a man Brian assumed to be the new Minister of Defense. Across from him sat Prince Stephan. They all looked quite somber.

The Queen looked up at Brian and her daughter and her expression changed. She smiled broadly and said, “Finally! I’d almost given up on you two.”

“Oh, for pity sake, Mother!” By this time Alainn was becoming annoyed. “Not you too!”

The Minister of Defense looked puzzled and Prince Stephan looked embarrassed. Queen Maethoriel motioned for them to join the group.

“We’ll talk about that later,” she said. “Unfortunately Minister Arandur has brought some very disturbing news and we have no idea what to do.”

The Queen had Minister Arandur explain the situation. Just north of Knoxville, Tennessee, near where the Humani states of Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia meet, there was a large parcel of public land that was being sold. A mining company known for strip mining and topping mountains was the leading bidder. It was right among a half dozen state and federal parks and reserves. The mining would be devastating not only to many Draiochta who lived there but to the entire environment.

“Couldn’t the kingdom buy the land?” Brian asked.

“The problem is – we don’t exist,” said Queen Maethoriel.

There was a long gloomy silence.

“Brian exists,” Alainn suddenly shouted. Everyone looked and one by one a glimmer of hope shown in their eyes. “Tell Mother about the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Foundation.”

All eyes turned to Brian.

“Well,” Brian said, “I was thinking about the saying ‘with great power comes great responsibility’ and came up with this foundation as a way for me to exercise that responsibility. It is to have two divisions – one to protect the forest, animals and Draiochta and the other to build free hospitals that do research. It would be great in such a situation but it isn’t yet established and I don’t have the money.”

“We could give you the money,” said Stephan.

“That would be great but people – especially government type people – would start to wonder where a man like me came up with so much money. They would, with good reason, surmise that I either stole it or I had been cheating on my income taxes for a very, very long time. No, I need to borrow the money.”

“He’s right,” said Anastasia who was now standing behind her husband, “but we don’t have anyone who owns a Humani bank, do we Grandmother?”

“No,” said Alainn, “but Auntie Elizabeth does.”

“I can’t ask Elizabeth,” said the Queen.

“Why not, Mother? The two of you have been life-long friends. It’s not like we’re not going to give it back.”

“We are in dire straits,” added the Minister.

“Okay, I’ll talk to her,” said Queen Maethoriel.

From that the plan was hatched. Draiochta attorneys would quickly create the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Foundation and open a bank account. Other Draiochta

attorneys would offer the government more money the next morning. They were going to need at least fifty million dollars since they figured that the mining company would not give up on the first contest.

“How many ounces of gold do I have to make to come up with fifty million dollars?” Brian wondered.

“I don’t know,” said Alainn, “but I bet it’s a lot.”

Brian fiddled with his cell phone. “Oh my! I need to make a ton of gold.”

“I said a lot,” Alainn repeated.

“No,” Brian looked shocked. “I mean that I must make two thousand, one hundred and twenty five pounds of gold!”

Everyone laughed. “We’ll all pitch in.”

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By the next day the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Foundation had been created, a bank account opened, a line of credit for up to €58 million established through the Bank of England, and the mining company outbid. As it turned out the mining company was only offering \$8 million so the Foundation offered \$10 million.

Brian was shown as the CEO of the foundation. His children and their spouses, although they were totally unaware, were listed as board members since the board had to be card-carrying Humani – Social Security Cards that is.

Alainn and Brian sat down with a team of Draiochta – mostly Elves, Witches and Wizards – who would start systematically buying wooded land especially if it was near a government park or reserve. This way, Brian explained, the Foundation protects the parks from the encroachment of mining companies and developers. The new team was also given the responsibility to watch for government leasing. Brian asked them if they would start by trying to buy the land between the Humani road 79 and the Skyline Wildlife Management Area. He looked over at Alainn when he

mentioned this. She lowered her eyes and blushed. The others gave a quizzical look and then went on with their meeting.

Brian had no idea how many Draiochta lived and worked in the Humani world. Most of them were witches and wizards but there were a significant number of Elves and a surprising number of Hogboons who, like Turloch Goodraven and Chovuv Darksorch, had become friends with Humani who worked in or near the forest.

After their meeting Brian went to meet the Headmaster on the third floor of the tower.

“Cara tráthnóna maith,” Brian greeted the Headmaster cheerfully.

“Then it’s true,” said the Headmaster.

“What’s true?”

“You and Alainn finally, well, er . . .”

“Does everyone in Flaitheas Scáth know our private lives?”

“Yes,” said the Headmaster very matter-of-factly.

“I can’t believe this,” Brian was shaking his head.

“Evidently you two were the only ones who hadn’t figured it out.”

“What do you mean we hadn’t figured it out,” Brian demanded.

“Well,” said the Headmaster, “by the time I got here everyone knew that eventually the two of you would get over your fear or your guilt or whatever it was that was keeping you apart and be a couple.”

“Was someone following us when we got caught in the storm?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then how does everyone seem to know that we did more than kiss good-night? Is it written on our foreheads?”

The Headmaster laughed heartily. “It might as well be.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the look on your faces, the way you walk, the way you are so much more at ease standing next to each other. Everyone knew that only one thing was keeping you from that, so as soon as you walk into a room we notice. We know.”

By this time Brian was standing with a look of total incredulity on his face.

“What were we the subject of group analysis?”

“Yes.” The Headmaster laughed and turned toward his desk.

“Okay, so if I understand this correctly, the entire Flaitheas Scáth was analyzing us, concluding that we needed to have sex, and when we returned everyone was able to take one look at us, know that we had sex and said ‘finally?’”

“You got it!”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Chreideann sé toisc go bhfuil sé an fhírinne!” said the Headmaster holding a large book.

“Okay,” said Brian, “but I’ve got a change in plans.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve got to concentrate on alchemy.”

“Why, might I ask.”

“Because I just took out a seventy-five million dollar loan with the Bank of England and I have to make two-thousand, one hundred and twenty-five pounds of gold . . . soon!”

“Now we are joking . . . right?” said a very befuddled Headmaster as he sat down on the nearest chair.

“Nope!” Brian said. “I need a ton of gold.”

“I can see Alainn being so love-struck that she’d let you do this,” the Headmaster was really talking to himself at this point, “but why didn’t Queen Maethoriel stop you?”

Brian went on to explain how he had come up with the idea of the foundation the morning before and how they had returned to find that a mining company was going to buy government land and do mountaintop removal mining. He explained that the only way they could come up with to stop them – other than using magic in an evil way – was to out-bid the company for the land, and the only one who could do that was him. He told the Headmaster all about the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Foundation and how he had planned to fund it through alchemy all along. He just needed to get busy and start making some gold.

“And the Queen went along with this?”

“Not only did she agree, she helped get me the line of credit from the Bank of England through a friend they call Auntie Elizabeth. And we have a group of Draiochta attorneys who have already established the foundation and outbid the mining company.”

“Next subject,” the Headmaster said turning back to his desk and exchanging books. He turned back toward Brian and holding out an equally large volume, said “Alchemy.”

“I’ll start this lesson with almost the same question as I did when we started working on magic . . . do you know what alchemy is?” The Headmaster stood and waited.

“My understanding is that Alchemy is the art of liberating parts of the Cosmos from temporal existence and achieving perfection which, for metals is gold, and for man, longevity. This is why the primary goal of alchemy is the transmutation of common metals into gold and re-create the Philosopher’s Stone.” Brian grinned as the Headmaster stood shocked searching for words.

“Where? How? I mean”

“Sorry, Headmaster,” Brian said. “Before I met Alaiinn I had always wanted magic to be real. I wanted there to be a Harry Potter and Nicholas Flamel. That first

day when you asked me ‘what is magic?’ I knew what I believed was the outcome of magic but I didn’t really know the how and why of magic. I always knew that the end result of alchemy was gold and the elixir of life but I didn’t know the how and why. Knowing that you would probably ask, I looked it up.”

“That was very clever of you,” the Headmaster laughed.

“Did you know,” Brian went on, “that a great deal of Humani science and medicine owe a lot to alchemy. Alchemists developed a framework of theory, terminology, experimental process and basic laboratory techniques that are still recognizable today. Robert Boyle, who is called the father of modern chemistry, was an alchemist. And Wikipedia said that it is a popular belief that alchemists contributed to modern techniques of things such as ore testing and refining, metalworking, production of gunpowder, ink, dyes, paints, cosmetics, ceramics, preparation of extracts, and liquors.”

“Yes, I knew much of that except what is ‘Wikipedia?’”

Brian laughed, “that an internet encyclopedia. It’s really quite remarkable.”

“It had alchemy?”

“Oh, yes! It has an extremely lengthy article with hundreds of references and links. Most Humani may not believe in alchemy and magic, but, if they were truly honest, most of them would like to.”

“I’d love to read your Wikipedia. It sounds enlightened. However, in light of your commitment, I think we first need to solicit the assistance of the academy alchemy professor. In the mean time I believe we can start learning the basics until he can help us. What do you know of the Periodic Table of Elements?”

“Oh, no!” groaned Brian. “I hated memorizing the Periodical Table when I was in school. Must I?”

“Afraid so,” the Headmaster smiled. “As you pointed out, Robert Boyle was an alchemist.”

Chapter 7.

It was early in the morning. The dew was still heavy on the grass as three figures could be seen heading toward the exit from Flaitheas Scáth. Their steps left marks on the wet grass as they passed. If one was watching them they might say that there was something conspiratorial about their behavior. All three wore grey cloaks with hoods pulled up. The largest of the three, standing a good head taller than the others, was constantly looking around.

On the forest side of the tree Lawrence was the first to throw back his hood, followed by Queen Maethoriel and Sadron. Maethoriel looked around, took Sadron by the hand, and the three of them headed off to the east.

They made their way to a small barn across the highway from the parking lot from the Wall of Jericho Horse Trail. Lawrence stood guard at the man door to the barn while Maethoriel and Sadron entered. Inside the barn were two wardrobes and a car. Maethoriel and Sadron opened one of the wardrobes and were soon changed into Humani clothes. When they came out of the barn Lawrence entered and also changed in the Humani clothes. He then opened the large doors and pulled the car onto the gravel drive that lead to the highway. Upon hearing the engine, Maethoriel and Sadron went around the building. Maethoriel climbed into the backseat of the car while Sadron closed the barn doors and took his place next to Maethoriel.

Lawrence pulled onto Alabama State Highway 79 and headed north. In a short distance they would cross into Tennessee and it became Highway 16. Lawrence skillfully maneuvered the sleek Lexus along the winding mountain road to the town of Winchester, TN where he turned right onto US 41A. He would follow 41A through Sewanee to where it intersected Interstate 24 at Monteagle. This was the highpoint of the famous Eagle Pass. Getting onto the eastbound lane of I-24 Lawrence smiled to himself as the fine car responded to his touch. He pushed the accelerator and was

soon cruising along just under 70 miles an hour. That was the speed-limit and Lawrence knew that he didn't dare exceed it even though he really wanted to let the powerful metal beast 'have its head'. He would stay on I-24 until it reached I-75 just east of downtown Chattanooga and would follow I-75 North. From there it was a short distance to the Volkswagen Drive exit where he would get off the interstate highway and turn right onto Apison Pike. A short distance from the interstate he would turn left on Branston Road and then almost immediately right onto Finney Point Drive.

They were in what one might call, for lack of a better term, a very 'high-end' subdivision. The homes were very large, expensive, sitting well back from the road on enormous heavily wooded lots that made most of them out of sight of the road. Lawrence followed Finney Point Drive to their destination – a very large, two story white frame house that sat far back from the road on the north side of the street.

Two hours and change since they left the barn. Lawrence had made this trip many times. He had never done it under two hours, nor would he ever. He pulled around the east side of the house, pushed the button on the control panel of the Lexus and pulled into the garage. His quarters were just above.

He held the door for Queen Maethoriel, who always sat right behind him. She had to stretch a bit to give the Torc captain a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you," she said. She always did that.

Lawrence smiled. Although Maethoriel thought that she gave up queenly ways when they were here, she would always be a queen. She would walk, talk and act like a queen even if she didn't think she was. He watched as Maethoriel and Sadron went into the main house. Lawrence would go upstairs to his rooms and relax. He enjoyed Humani television and sports. Lawrence particularly liked soccer and was anxious to see how his two favorite teams were doing – Tottenham in the English Barclay's Premier League and Seattle in the United States MLS. He rarely left his apartment

unless Maethoriel or Sadron needed him. Even though Maethoriel had invited him to join them for meals, he declined and would either fix something for himself or join the cook/housekeeper who worked for Dr. and Mrs. Niall O'Connell, the owners of the house. Niall and his wife, Mary, were Draiochta and life-long friends of Maethoriel and her late husband, Justin. Lawrence and the O'Connell's were the only three people who knew about Maethoriel and Sadron.

Actually Alainn, her family and most of the castle staff would have guess that there was something between them, but no one but these three knew about their time on Finney Point Drive. It wasn't too hard to come up with the idea that Sadron was more than Maethoriel's servant. How many queens have a valet instead of a Lady in Waiting? Sadron had been her husband's valet. Everyone knew that he chose Maethoriel's clothes just as many valets do for their masters. And everyone agreed that Sadron did an excellent job. Some conjectured that he was homosexual but the family were fairly sure that wasn't true and Maethoriel could guarantee that he wasn't.

While Lawrence grabbed an American beer, for which he had developed a fondness, and headed toward the television, Maethoriel and Sadron wasted no time making their way to their bedroom. Lawrence had been bringing the two of them to this house for almost ten years, so he was long over being embarrassed knowing what they were doing. Lawrence had been King Justin's personal guard, so he had known Maethoriel and Justin for many years. It always made him feel good and smile to see how happy she was when she was able to be alone with Sadron. Even though they spent the majority of every day within feet of each other at the castle they could rarely have an intimate moment. The chances of a servant happening in at an inopportune time were too great.

Probably most of the people in the kingdom would be thrilled to know about Maethoriel and Sadron's relationship and would encourage them to be open and get married. However, there were far too high a percentage of the old school who would

find such behavior totally unacceptable and greatly debilitate Maethoriel's ability to lead clan Coillearnach through the often treacherous waters of the twenty-first century. It wasn't so much that a queen was too good for a valet but that it weakened the chain of command and, at times, fragile social order. What the more conservative of clansmen would find objectionable would be more akin to fraternization among members of the military. In any cases, for almost ten years their love affair had been their secret shared only with Lawrence and the O'Connell's. Maethoriel really wanted to at least tell Alainn but Lawrence had counseled against that on the grounds of plausible deniability. The term 'plausible deniability' was coined during the American Humani presidency of John F. Kennedy and used originally by that government's Central Intelligence Agency. The term most often refers to the denial of blame in a chain of command or authority. In the case of the CIA those at the top of the agency would assign responsibility to the lower ranks, and records of instructions given did not exist or were inaccessible. That meant that independent confirmation of responsibility for the action was nearly impossible. In turn that meant that if something went wrong the senior ranking person could deny any knowledge. In the case of the CIA and government agencies it was devastating to lower echelon employees but protected the leadership. In Maethoriel's case it was reversed. Alainn might figure out that her mother and Sadron were having an affair but since she was never told she could truthfully report that – 'they never told me.' Bad publicity about their affair could make Maethoriel politically impotent. By protecting Alainn from backlash, Alainn could take Maethoriel's power and carry on. It was the price she paid for being queen. Most people don't think of what kings and queens must often give up in order to do the best job for their subjects.

Maethoriel was understandably devastated at the death of her husband, Justin, even though he had been fighting the cancer for years. They had been married almost sixty years when he died. At that time Sadron was Justin's valet. He had been with

Justin many years and so had also spent a great deal of time in the company of the queen. Maethoriel had a relatively new Lady in Waiting – a woman by the name of Rachael. Rachael was good and kind and quite compassionate but she didn't have the long relationship with Maethoriel at the time of Justin's death that Sadron had. Sadron knew both Justin and Maethoriel well. Rachael didn't, so it wasn't a lack of kindness or compassion that caused Maethoriel to turn to Sadron but familiarity. Actually Rachael was sensitive and compassionate enough to understand that and she became Lady in Waiting to Alainn and is now Alainn's companion and confidant in the same way as Sadron was to Justin and is to Maethoriel.

The transformation from comforting servant to lover was almost unperceivable to both of them. Sadron was probably the first to recognize the transition. He was sincerely fond of both Justin and Maethoriel. He had liked her very much and enjoyed her dry sense of humor and tendency to be a bit of a tease. Even though he came, as the saying goes, 'from under the stairs' they had a lot in common and could talk for long periods of time. He had spent many hours physically holding Maethoriel as they both grieved the loss of King Justin. As she tried to put her life back together she would call Sadron to help. When he first realized that he had fallen in love with his master and best friend's widow he was mortified. He was certain that he was some horrible monster and was determined to distance himself from Maethoriel. That backfired. The more he tried to move away the more Maethoriel pulled him near even to the point of calling him for his opinion about a dress or jewelry.

Finally Sadron confided to Lawrence that he was falling in love with Maethoriel. It was Lawrence who told him that if his motives were pure there was nothing wrong with his feelings. However, no matter how he felt he could not tell anyone.

It was a short while later that Maethoriel began to realize that having Sadron around was more than moral support to help her deal with the death of her husband

who, by this time, had been dead for over three years. She realized that she wanted him around because she enjoyed being near him. She realized that, for some indiscernible reason, Sadron made her feel whole. He made her feel feminine and attractive. She liked that.

They finally came together on a fateful night almost ten years ago. Rachael had been given a couple of days off because of illness in her family so Maethoriel had called for Sadron.

She was standing in front of a mirror wearing only her dressing gown when Sadron knocked. She called for him to enter. At that point, while she was becoming more and more aware of her fondness – nay, desire – for having Sadron around, she was totally clueless as to the effect of such situations as this where she was barely covered. Sadron had always been such a gentleman that she didn't know that seeing her like that was emotionally and physically difficult for him. This evening was no different as she was standing there holding up two dresses.

Sadron entered and bowed deeply. Looking at his lovely Queen he took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Don't be so formal here," Maethoriel said. She had told him that many times.

"Yes, ma'am."

She waved that off and asked his opinion about the two dresses for the evening's affair of state.

"Honestly," Sadron began, "I wouldn't recommend either."

Maethoriel gave him a puzzled look. They were both beautiful.

"Tonight is a rather stately affair," Sadron continued. "Both of those dresses are lovely but are formal more in the 'let's have a party' sense. You need something that says this is 'court formal' and I'm the Queen."

Maethoriel smiled. "That's why I always ask you," she confided. "I love Rachael but she's too frightened to tell me like it is."

“Yes, ma’am,” Sadron smiled. It made him happy that Maethoriel appreciated his opinion and candor.

She shot him a ‘lighten up’ glance when he called her ma’am which she made sure Sadron saw. “Yes, M’lady”, he corrected.

“I’ll accept that,” she teased.

For some reason this evening they were both more aware of their feelings toward the other and wondering if the other could sense them. Sadron stepped around Maethoriel and up to the large Edwardian wardrobe on which the mirror she was using was mounted. This put him physically extremely close to Maethoriel. He was distracted to the point that as he was opening the door to the wardrobe Maethoriel was standing so close that the back of his hand opening the door touched her left breast. He quickly pulled his hand away and Maethoriel took a step backwards.

That was the tell. Over the last few years, since Justin’s death, Sadron had spent a lot of time either extremely close to or actually holding Maethoriel. There had been many, many occasions where they were so physically close or entwined that others would have felt embarrassed or uncomfortable but they felt neither. Suddenly, after all that, a simple brush of his hand against her body made them both jump. What was different? What was different was that both of them wanted more. They were reacting to their own carnal desires and afraid that the other knew. But the other didn’t notice because the other was working so hard to handle their own longing.

They stood frozen looking into each other’s eyes. Sadron babbled something to which Maethoriel babbled in return – neither of them having any idea what they or the other one said. Be the truth known, neither of them probably made an intelligible statement. They just stood looking. One of them had to make a move. Who would flinch first?

To this day neither Maethoriel nor Sadron could tell you who moved first. Perhaps it was one of those situation where they both started to move at the same

time culminating, when they realized that the other person was likewise moving, in both reaching out to the other. In any case, the end result was that they found themselves in love's embrace not locked in a single passionate kiss but smothering each other with kiss after kiss after kiss until they had to stop to breath.

They looked at each other. Their sudden realization of the absurdity of the situation – namely, that they both wanted the same thing – caused them to laugh. It was a loving laugh – if there is such a thing – which caused them to look closely and passionately at the other person's lips and come together in a kiss of tremendous desire.

Their desire for each other was so intense that the zenith of their passion did not end up on the bed in the next room but on the floor in front of the great Edwardian wardrobe. To this day Maethoriel thinks of that night every time she stands before that mirror with her beloved Sadron helping her pick a dress.

Shortly after that night Maethoriel asked her daughter, Alainn, who needed a Lady in Waiting, if she would like to invite Rachael. Maethoriel really liked Rachael, but she wanted Sadron.

On occasion the two lovers would actually make love in the castle, but the fear of discovery was so intense that it usually diminished some of the joy of their union and such trysts were generally more for physical gratification than a true sharing of love. These times, when they could get away to what had become known to them as Finney Point, became a time when they could relax, forget the pressures of their station and roles in Flaitheas Scáth, and truly revel in their love. When Maethoriel had to go on a clan business trip they would stop at Finney Point either coming or going or both.

While they were at Finney Point they would sometimes actually leave their bedroom, put on wigs or clothes so that they would not be recognized by any Draiochta who might be living in or visiting Chattanooga, and go out on the town.

Chattanooga had a great selection of restaurants, clubs, theatres and other entertainment venues. On such occasions Lawrence tried not to let his disappointment at being called away from a great soccer match show and would dutifully drive and follow the lovers. If someone really questioned him about it he would have to admit that, after getting over missing a match, he enjoyed watching the two. They definitely knew how to have fun. There was also the sad side to it; namely that it was sad that such a beautiful pairing had to go unknown.

The combination of Lawrence's bright red hair, almost florescent blue eyes and tremendous physique was what some young men would call 'a chick magnet.' Maethoriel always thought it was hilarious that while Lawrence was trying to tag along and protect Maethoriel and Sadron, he almost always ended up with two or more young females vying for his attention. One term from the Humani vernacular that Maethoriel learned and loved to use to tease the poor, loyal Torc Allta, was 'cat fight'. "How many cat fights did you start this evening?" she would ask the embarrassed Lawrence. He would always try to tell the women about his wife and grown daughter, but that didn't seem to bother them at all. But above all Lawrence was a gentle-Torc. He tried to show respect, be polite and demonstrate sensitivity.

This evening, however, Lawrence didn't have to worry about going out. He was able to spend the entire evening sipping beer and watching soccer matches that Niall kindly recorded for him. This was the only destination for this trip because, after everything that had happened in Flaitheas Scáth, Maethoriel and Sadron just wanted some time alone.

While Lawrence enjoyed his beer and soccer, Maethoriel and Sadron were enjoying a relaxing soak in the sauna in their bathroom after which they gently and sensually dried each other with giant soft towels. This time, unlike their first union, Sadron would lift Maethoriel in his arms and carry her to their king sized bed with the Egyptian linen sheets and down pillows and comforter. With their bodies joined as

one in love's embrace they were oblivious to the trouble, test and trials of the world.
For now the world was perfect.

Chapter 8.

Ex-minister Moricon was pacing like a wild animal in the dungeon cell where he had been confined since the fateful audience where he was exposed and Tiarna Brian exonerated. He kept going to the heavy oak door and looking through the small window as though expecting something or someone. The room was almost eight feet by ten feet. It was furnished with a simple bed, table and a chair. The walls were large stone blocks. That was because his cell was well back into the mountain at the base of the castle keep. It smelled musty. After all, the castle as built in 1725 and no one could remember the last time the dungeon cell was occupied.

He could hear Torc Alta guards talking in the room directly across a small ante-chamber from his cell. He suddenly stopped and listened carefully and a devilish smile crossed this face.

Moments later Moricon could see a Torc guard leading a small timid looking man across the ante-chamber that separated the cell from the guard's room.

"Tiarna Moricon," said the guard, "you have a visitor. Please step into the middle of the room so I can see you before I let him in."

Moricon followed the guard's instructions and stood so that he could be seen through the small window. The guard opened the door and admitted the man.

"Finally, Raymond," Moricon's greeting was not friendly but the frightened man, who had been called Raymond, didn't expect a pleasant reception.

"Sorry for the delay Tiarna," Raymond said in a pleading voice.

"Is everything ready?"

"Yes, Sire." Raymond was dressed in a black cassock with a black floor length cape. He removed his cape and pulled a string on the collar which came away easily exposing a small pocket which contained two rings. Raymond removed the rings and

handed one to Moricon who put it on the index finger of his right hand. Raymond followed suit with the remaining ring.

“Let’s go,” Moricon commanded. “Guard!” Moricon yelled.

The guard looked through the window. Both men were standing in the middle of the room where they could be seen.

“What is it, Tiarna Moricon?” asked the guard.

“Escort my visitor out,” Moricon demanded.

The guard opened the door. As soon as he did Moricon raised his right hand and shouted “mharú!” There was a flash and the Torc Allta guard grabbed his chest as he fell to the floor. The second guard came rushing through the opposite door only to be hit in the shoulder by a plasma bolt from Raymond’s hand.

“Why didn’t you kill him?” screamed Moricon as they crossed the adjoining room and entered the guardroom.

“I didn’t see any reason to kill him,” said Raymond.

“Weakling,” Moricon retorted.

Moricon looked out of the guardroom into the hallway. There was no one in sight. Quickly and quietly they headed toward the stairs which led up to the ground level where there was a door.

The stairs opened into a large room with the door to the outside on the opposite wall. There were several Torc Allta guards. Moricon didn’t feel that they would be able to fight their way out so, pointing his hand at the center of the room he mumbled an incantation that produced an explosion in the middle of the chamber similar to what the Humani police call a “flash-bang”. The flash was of such intensity that the guards were temporarily blinded, while the percussion was so powerful that it rendered most of them unconscious and the rest sufficiently stunned that Moricon and Raymond passed through the room unchallenged.

When they came out of the keep they were standing about a third of the way down the steep hill. The Cucumber Magnolia was at the top of a steep hillside covered with small trees and shrubs. Before they were half way up the incline the alarm had been sounded and Torc Allta were appearing from all direction.

Before the guards at the gate could react, five Jotnar – three males and two females – following a small man came through the tree's portal and struck down the Torc guards. Jotnar, which means 'man-eaters', are related to gygjar giants. They are large, quite ill-tempered and fierce fighters.

The Jotnar formed a perimeter around the passage through the tree as the wizard with them watched for Moricon and Raymond.

Moricon and Raymond arrived at the tree about the same time as the Torc Allta. A horrific battle ensued. Just as Moricon was about to be surrounded by the Jotnar and whisked off through the tree to freedom a Torc who had fallen from a terrible blow by one of the Jotnar made one valiant dying effort to stop Moricon. Raising on his left elbow he swung his sword at the fleeing wizard. He hit his mark and Moricon gave a great scream of pain. A Jotunn female picked him up like a rag doll and began backing toward the passage through the tree. Once she was through the opening with Moricon the others followed closely pursued by the Torc Allta. However, since there was no room for the Torc to engage the Jotnar in close combat in the passage it was relatively easy for the Jotunn female to retreat and carry Moricon off down the mountain.

Mountains are the natural habitat of the Jotnar. Once in their natural element there was no way the Torc Allta could catch them. In their natural were-boar form the Torc were quite fast but because of their size and bulk they were not able to maneuver on the steep slopes sufficiently to maintain their speed. In a short while they had lost the Jotnar, Moricon and the two wizards.

The battle was over by the time Brian and Neala heard the alarm and ran to the Cucumber Magnolia. Three Torc Allta guards lay dead with several badly wounded. Two of the Jotnar – a male and female – also lay dead. Captain Lawrence looked up from tending to one of his wounded warriors.

“What happened?” Brian asked.

“Moricon escaped,” replied Lawrence, patting the Torc Allta on the shoulder and standing up. He was dirty, sweaty and covered with blood. His armor showed the signs of several blows that must have resulted in painful injury. If Lawrence was hurt he wasn’t letting on. As he talked to Brian, Neala and the others who arrived he would pause and give orders or reassurance to a wounded guard.

“How?” asked Neala.

“I don’t know,” said Lawrence, “but somehow he got a ring.”

A short while later they received word that there were two more dead and several seriously injured in the dungeon.

While Captain Lawrence, Brian, Neala and Manwé tended to the wounded and attempted to discern how Moricon was able to escape, the Jotnar, Moricon and wizards arrived at High Point Rock. Two more wizards awaited them. Raymond had seared Moricon’s wound but he was still quite weak.

The group had a Portkey. A Portkey is a magical device that will transport one who touches it to a predetermined location. They wasted no time using the Portkey to transport to a cave sanctuary far to the north.



A few days later Moricon sat brooding as he looked at the prosthetic leg that replaced the injured leg that had to be removed. Had it not been for that wizard,

Brian, he would now be preparing to destroy the royal family of Clan Coillearnach, take control of the kingdom and make the name Pendragon one to be feared.

Unknown to anyone in the kingdom, Moricon was the great-grandson of Morgana Pendragon. No one knew that Morgana had a son by an unknown lover. That son, Soselius, and his son, Kreon, would arise some years after Morgana's death and attempt to win the battle she began. These were Moricon's father and grandfather. Moricon's grandfather was killed in a battle. His parents were captured by some of the Hidden Children of Clan Coillearnach and eventually died in prison.

Moricon grew up in hiding living with a Morganian wizard. His anger and hatred of all persons and things related to Clan Coillearnach grew and grew until it totally consumed him.

Evidently at some point during the transformation he was sufficiently 'normal' or at least he was civil enough to court and marry a young woman named Euneas Weyn. They had a daughter, Balesio, whom Moricon worshipped. At first Euneas could understand Moricon's anger. After all it was three generations of his family that had been destroyed. But as his anger and hatred turned to obsession Euneas became worried and then frightened for their safety and welfare. Moricon's magic became darker and darker. Finally Euneas could not handle Moricon's fixation, anger and brutality any longer and fled to Europe with their daughter. Even though she left a letter explaining why she had left, Moricon blamed it on the Clan Coillearnach. He spent several years looking for his wife and daughter before giving up and returning to his plans for revenge.

Moricon, as a pure aura wizard, had become very powerful. He also studied alchemy and was able to use Philosopher's Stone – sometimes called 'red earth' – not only to make gold but to create the Elixir of Life. The Elixir of Life was a potent that required Philosopher's Stone. The person who consumed the elixir would not grow old and die as long as they consumed about 60 milliliters – around two ounces – each

month. His sole purpose was so that he would be able to live as long as it took to find and destroy the royal family of Clan Coillearnach and gain total power over the world.

Moricon spent hundreds of years honing his wizardry skills and searching for the Clan Coillearnach. It was in the town of Dhún nan Gall, known in English as Donegal, where he got the decisive clue to the disappearance of the clan.

It was in the late 17th century. Moricon was trying to track down some of the descendants of the Hidden Children when he met a sailor in the tavern. In those days taverns often had beds that they would let out to travelers. Many times the beds were in one large room on the second floor. The travelers were eating a meal together when the sailor started talking about sailing to the New World and encountering a witch living in the forest. The witch didn't look like the natives and while her skin was like the settlers she dressed very differently. She wore a kirtle, or long gown, a long tunic and a long cloak with a hood that hung down her back. Some of the settlers had said that she was there when they arrived but no one really believed that.

For Moricon this encounter was an epiphany. The sailor was describing an Irish woman from the early Medieval period. As he thought about it, it made sense. The clan seemed to have suddenly just disappeared. If they had gone to the New World as a group it would make it seem as if they had suddenly disappeared.

Moricon decided that it was time to visit the New World and to make the trip he would use the ley lines. Ley lines are lines of spiritual and magical energy that crisscross the globe. The Chinese call them feng shui. The lines align monuments, megaliths, natural geological features, graves, cities and much more. Where the lines cross there is a leygate allowing one to travel instantaneously from one leygate to another. All Moricon had to do was learn where there was a leygate that would take him to the New World.

It didn't take very long for Moricon to find a leygate. An Irish witch knew of one that went from Cruach Phádraig – Patrick's Mountain – to a mountain in the New

World. Soon Moricon was in the English colonies and had made friends with a witch whose family had come to the New World with the Clan Coillearnach.

The witch told him that the clan had established a kingdom. They had withdrawn into the mountains as settlers from England began to arrive. Her family had decided to stay and settled in Salem. She was, however, thinking of moving into the mountains with the others because the Christians that ruled Salem were very closed minded and difficult to live around. If you didn't look, act and think as they did you were severely persecuted. It was ironic, she mused, that these same people had come to the New World to escape the very behavior they were perpetrating on others. According to Draiochta she had met there were several shadow realms in the mountains to the west.

It had taken time but Moricon had found the Coillearnach. In one of his more rational moments he decided that his best chance of destroying the Clan Coillearnach would be to become a trusted part of their community, work his way into a position of power and authority and then take over. He moved into the community and even helped build the castle at Flaitheas Scáth. By the 19th century there were few, if any, who remembered that he came from outside the community and had just appeared one day. By the end of the 20th century he had become a trusted leader and soon became the Minister of Defense.

Moricon had made a secret alliance with a group of Jotnar, Goblins and disgruntled wizards. He had been very close to being ready to make his bid for power when Brian arrived and it was discovered that he was Draiochta. When it turned out that Brian might be a silver wizard, Moricon had no other choice than attempt to stop Brian from being trained as a wizard. When he was called to the castle as the Minister of Defense to deal with the matter, his plan was to discredit Brian. When that plan appeared to be in jeopardy because the witch, Sorcha, was tracing Brian's lineage back to the Hidden Children, Moricon was forced to attempt to kill Brian. He would also

likely need to kill Sorchu since she was the only person in Flaitheas Scáth who was old enough to know that Moricon was not born in the kingdom.

His plans had failed and now he was hiding in a cave trying to figure out what he was going to do next. He had to come up with another plan to wrest power from Queen Maethoriel.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet startling the others who were gathered around him.

“I am no longer Moricon,” he shouted. “From this moment forward I am Apollyon, the Destroyer, and I will avenge the name of my great-grandmother, Morgana Pendragon!”

Chapter 9.

Morfindien Aldalinde was one of the finest and most sought-after architects in the eastern United States. His creations ranged from magnificent palatial hotels to yurts that appear to be hanging on the side of a cliff. His own home was a magnificent creation based upon a Swiss chalet perched on the side of a mountain near the small Tennessee town of Pittman. After all, Morfindien was Elfin and had lived his life in those mountains.

Morfindien was the epitome of the Elf not only being able to survive in the Humani world but prospering. His creative imagination, artistic talent and head for math and science made him a natural at architecture. He did attend Draiochta Academy but left Thuaidh Scáth, a shadow realm in the mountains of north central Pennsylvania, when he was twenty years old. He had to take the Humani GED test so that he could get into college. He started at a community college because a GED might get him into college but it wasn't going to get him into a major university. After continuously demonstrating his skills and talent along with many interviews, portfolio and awards, Morfindien was finally accepted into the University of Virginia, the number seven architect school in the United States. At UV he again excelled and graduated with just about every honor awarded by the university. He went to work for a large New York City firm for a little over five years before he got to the point that he emotionally and physically could no longer tolerate the giant concrete jungle. That's when he hung out his own shingle and moved to the mountainside near Pittman.

It didn't take long for clients to find him and his reputation soon grew so that he was in constant demand.

Brian stood looking at the beautiful house which seemed to fit so perfectly into its surroundings that it was a part of the forest. Neala stood next to him. "Wow," was all

she had to say. They had come to Morfindien's home by a Portkey he had sent them. The only ones in Flaitheas Scáth who knew that they were here were Lawrence and Manwë. If this meeting was successful, Brian would secretly build Alainn the most beautiful house on Bear Den Point. Work had already begun on the village of Cigam and Alainn was totally unaware of Brian's communication with the famous architect.

"You said that you want a house fit for a princess that is anything but conventional," Morfindien said to Brian as the three of them sipped Miruvor on his deck which hung out over the mountainside.

"Yes, sir," responded Brian, "and I understand that if anyone can design such a place it is you."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," smiled Morfindien.

"Yes, that's right," said Brian, "but it's even better when it's true."

"Okay," Morfindien returned to the subject, "I have a house in mind that I think will fill the bill." Morfindien flipped his wand and a large white board appeared. Using his wand like a marker he started drawing.

"If you look at this house from the hollow or the other ridge, you will see these two octagonal rooms here on the ends which are predominantly glass and should shine like gigantic jewels. They are connected to the atrium by glassed veranda." Morfindien pointed to an octagonal room that connected to the body of the house at a 45 degree angle and was marked 'family room'. On the opposite side was another octagonal room 45 degrees in the other direction marked 'master bedroom'.

"When you are approaching from the front it has the traditional balance of a palace - that is, a large central house with wings on either side." Morfindien smiled. "That's the extent of the traditional look. You can see that the central portion has a great deal of glass and is curved back to where it intersects the wings. This means that while things appear square from this view and the rooms are mostly rectangular, there's almost nothing inside that is squared off to the adjacent room." He pointed to

two large rooms on the front of the central portion of the house that were labeled 'dining room' and 'parlor'. They intersected a central rotunda at a 45 degree angle mirroring each other and the wall opposite the rotunda was bowed inward. That was the exterior curve.

"Oh, yes, there is one more traditional touch," Morfindien sat looking at his drawing as though studying it for the first time. "I just realized that the formal rooms - formal dining, formal parlor, and great room are all here in the middle. Your master apartment is the right wing and the family room, morning room, kitchen and servant quarters are in the left wing. You see here that the library is completely interior and you can access it either from the formal parlor or your apartment."

"This house has angles and glass galore. You enter by way of these circular steps. I took this idea from houses in Savannah." He chuckled at the thought of the story he was about to tell. "In the early days of Savannah there was nothing wrong with a man seeing a woman's breasts but he was a total cad if he looked at her bare ankles and was punished severely for doing so. To help gentlemen avoid seeing the lady's ankles they used circular stair and steps." Brian laughed at the story. Neala laughed as well although she did blush a bit. Open talk about such things as breasts was not common among the Torc Allta and she thought about her daonna form.

"Once you enter the house there is a foyer. Right here," Morfindien pointed at a spot on the drawing at the top of the circular steps. "I have put a cloak room on one side, since I figure you'll have a lot of visitors and probably some state affairs, and a room for your Torc guards across from it." He glanced at Neala who was watching intently. She looked up and smiled.

"I know," she said. "You've never seen a female Torc guard."

Morfindien smiled sheepishly. That's exactly what he was thinking.

"She's quite outstanding," Brian interjected.

"Aren't all Torc Allta?" Morfindien said very matter-of-factly, which made Neala

blush again.

"The guard room very subtly located across from the cloak room is a good touch," Neala said. "But I noticed that the guard's quarters are on the opposite side of the house from the master suite."

"No problem," said Morfindien as though he was anticipating this observation. "You not only have a straight shot across the main floor but there is a private stairway here," he pointed at a corridor on the second floor that appeared almost like a secret passage with a stairway leading down into the master suite. "You can be in their apartment very quickly and without being observed, if necessary." Neala smiled approvingly.

"There are four guest suites on the second level," Morfindien went back to his description. "I understand that you have four married children and several grandchildren." Brian nodded. "There should be plenty of room. You will notice that the dining room, parlor and great room are all two stories high and the rotunda goes above them, so the upstairs suites are above the guard's quarters, house staff's quarters, and extend out beyond the two veranda which provides the cover for the veranda. Other than the private stairs I just showed you, there are two ways to access the apartments. Family can use either the front circular stairs which go up to the balcony around the rotunda or they can get to the second floor by way of a stairway just behind the morning room. That's also the stairs the staff will use when they tend to their duties on the second floor. Staff can also go from the service area and their quarters to the master suite without passing through any activity going on in the main rooms of the house."

"It's marvelous!" Brian exclaimed. "What do you recommend as the facade?"

"I would use limestone with red brick," said Morfindien. "That ties in very nicely with the setting. Those mountains are limestone and have great stone outcroppings."

"How long do you think it will take to build?"

"Are you going to use magic?"

"Of course," Brian laughed. "I would like to have it done before my family comes to visit."

"Of course," Morfindien agreed. "If you use magic you should be able to have it done in a week or so."

"I figured that I'd let Alainn do the interior."

"That's a nice idea. In that case it shouldn't take more than a week if you have plenty of help."

"Oh, I'm not going to do any of it myself," said Brian. Even Neala was laughing at this point. "I want it done correctly."

"From what I understand," Morfindien looked seriously at Brian, "Tiarna is a very powerful and talented wizard."

"Thank you," said Brian. "That was very kind, but I know you to be one of the best architects both Humani and Draiochta. Would you do surgery?"

"Point well made." Morfindien smiled.

The three went over Morfindien's drawing in great detail. With almost unbelievable speed and accuracy Morfindien calculated materials and the number of builders and artisans that would be required.



Back at the castle Brian excitedly showed Lawrence and Manwë the drawings of what would eventually be called Ferguson Pálás. Progress was already being made on the village of Cigam. Manwë recommended an Elf by the name of Baradharmon to be the project manager for the house. He would coordinate with Morfindien when necessary and make sure that they had the necessary workers and artisans. Secrecy was also of prime importance so everyone working on the house had to be in on the

secret. Headmaster Schaunessy showed Brian a spell that cloaked the project from those working on the village.

The village was progressing quite well and the area Draiochta were all excited. A lot of Draiochta are rather solitary individuals but there were many Elves and even a number of Hogboon and Dwarf who were excited about living in the village. It provided a security that those living outside of Flaitheas Scáth never experienced.

It was very difficult to see the small road that lead to Cigam even if one knew where to look. That was, of course, intentional. If one did turn onto the road they would pass through some heavy forest and go around a gentle curve that opened into a large meadow. This is where the village was built.

Immediately upon entering the meadow there was a cottage that looked like a typical Irish cottage. It was, in fact, the guard houses for the Torc Allta guards who had responsibility to protect the residents. A short distance down the road was what might be described as the main street. It was lined on both sides with row houses typical of an Irish or English village. The only way one was able to tell one home from the next was the color the front was painted. Shops were only recognizable by signs hanging by the door and the fact that they usually had large windows – some even bow windows – so that they could display their wares.

There was a cross street at the end of the row. The southern row of houses went around the corner making a backwards L. The rest of the village consisted of individual cottages all made to look as if they were quite old and had been built over a period of many years. If one turned right at the first cross-street and followed that street to the end they would come to the Cigam Inn.

The Cigam Inn was a real operating hotel and restaurant with the primary purpose of providing room and board for Draiochta who were traveling. They were prepared, however, for the occasional Humani who might wander into town. The inn

was overlooking the Gifford Hollow and would be a tourist magnet if the Draiochta had wanted a lot of Humani to visit.

Realizing that they would undoubtedly come into contact with the Humani world there were two issues which had to be addressed. The first was the Humani automobile. This was easily remedied by having a car-park across from the Torc cottage and asking any Humani to please leave their cars because the village streets were not capable of handling automobile traffic. The second issue was that when a Humani did visit they would want to use their Humani money. The exchange bankers had to come up with a way for the merchants of Cigam to take Humani money and credit cards.

The Coillearnach kingdom used copper, bronze, silver and gold coins as currency. Exchange bankers were individuals who enabled Draiochta who lived and worked in the Humani world to move funds back and forth just like Humani bankers who enable their customers to change US currency into Euros or Yen. To do this without being discovered, the exchange banker would open one or more accounts in a Humani bank. The money in the Humani bank came from the sale of Coillearnach coins. With the increased possibility of Humani actually visiting a Draiochta community and wanting to make purchases, the exchange bankers had to figure out a way to accept the Humani credit card. They had to create credit card accounts. The funds would go into the Humani bank account and the merchant would be paid in Coillearnach coin. An account was maintained by an exchange banker on behalf of the kingdom for times when an exchange banker needed to buy Coillearnach coin. The accounting wasn't hard. Keeping the system from attracting the attention of Humani authorities was what was hard. To do that each account had to be attached in some way to a Draiochta who had been born in the Humani world and had a Social Security number. After a Humani corporate identification number was obtained the risks were greatly reduced.



As teams of craftsmen, artisans and workers scurried around the growing village, building began in earnest on Ferguson Pálás. Building a house or other structure with magic is not as easy as one might think. From basic theory and what we know of the art and science of magic it would seem that one would need only a good picture of the desired structure, some raw materials and a wand or staff. Then with a few incantations a house would appear. That isn't how it happens.

The builders need a very good set of blueprints or drawings. The detail is probably more important in magic building than in Humani building because the detail will determine the success of the magic. One might remember that using the quantum physics illustration, material objects are the product of manipulating the raw materials whether they be as small as an atom or as large as, say, a tree. In the case of building a house the raw materials that must be manipulated are things such as trees, stone and other natural materials. This means that, in the case of building Cigam and Ferguson Pálás, they had to find trees when those that had to be cut to make room for buildings were all used. This was time consuming because they practiced selective cutting for two reasons - it was good ecology and they didn't want Humani to notice. All trace of the tree had to be removed.

Brian discovered that brick making was quite a magical art of which the Draiochta masons were very proud. In fact there was such competition among the masons that the formulas used to derive the various colors and styles were often carefully protected family secrets passed down from one generation to the next.

It turned out that because limestone was so close to the base elements it was actually easier to buy blocks from a Humani quarry.

The artisans and craftsmen who build houses and other buildings had to be able to do magic without specific incantation - i.e. they might use the incantation

"balla" to produce a wall, but they would have had to have a very detailed mental concept of the dimensions and appearance of the wall. They had to know and visualize if the wall was going to be solid or open so that the plumbers and electricians could do their magic.

Nevertheless, highly skilled Draiochta builders could do a cottage in less than a day, and a two-story, multi-room house in 2-3 days. The Ferguson Pálás would take over a week with a large number of artisans working together.



The day soon came that the Pálás was completed. Alainn and the royal family had made frequent visits to the watch progress on the village. They used a Portkey that took them to the Cigam town hall. There was never any reason for them to venture further down the road where sat the Ferguson Pálás.

Brian encouraged the entire family to visit the village giving them a story about a special new building. When they arrived Brian told them that the new addition was down the road a short distance.

As they came out of the forest into the clearing in front of Ferguson Pálás Brian paused a moment to watch them looking around for a building. Then he lifted the spell that hid the house.

The royal family stood and looked in awe at the magnificent house. Brian beamed. Alainn looked from Brian to the house and back. It was as though she was afraid to ask the obvious. Neala, Manwë and Morfindien came out of the front door and waved from the top of the steps.

Brian, still beaming and finding it hard to speak, turned to Alainn and said, "This is for you." She burst into tears and hugged Brian. Well, in fact, all of the women in the family began to laugh and cry including Queen Maethoriel.

“Well, come on in,” said Brian. “It isn’t finished because I wanted you to do it the way you want but you’ll find artisans enough inside to quickly do it anyway you want.”

All of the workers, artisans and craftsmen were gathered in the rotunda and great room to enjoy the surprise. Brian introduced the renowned architect who had designed the home and thanked everyone who had made it a reality.

It was Morfindien who gave the royal family the tour. Alainn spent the entire tour with her hands in front of her mouth crying with awe and delight. Anastasia had gone to Brian and given him a kiss and spent the tour holding tightly to his arm. Brian kept trying to ask Alainn what she would want to do with the different rooms but she was so speechless that all she could do was shake her head and babble something through her laughter and tears.

The surprise had been a success and soon Ferguson Pálás was a major attraction for Draiochta near and far. After Alainn had a while to regain her composure she was quick to start decorating. She spent hours with the artisans to design the furnishings that would have the traditional elegance that the house demanded while being unique and fitting the style of the building.

The village had been finished and was alive with activity as though it had existed for generations. Alainn spent almost as much time decorating Ferguson Pálás as it took to build but she was thrilled with the house and totally satisfied with the interior. Now all that remained was to have Brian’s family visit.

Brian contacted each of his children and after several calls each and a lot of email a date was set. Brian told them that they would never find the house on their own and insisted that he be permitted to provide transportation. After considerable resistance Brian prevailed. He arranged for Phillip and Celina, who lived in Jacksonville, Florida, and Seamus and Martha who lived in Carmel, Indiana, to fly to Chattanooga where Brian would have a car waiting for them. He didn’t tell them that

the car would be a limousine with driver, Torc guard and an escort to answer questions. Brenda and Thomas; who lived in Huntsville, Alabama; and Mary and Edward; who lived in Nashville, Tennessee; would be picked up at their homes by a limousine.

As Brian waited for the day his children would visit he spent more and more time worrying about their reactions to his new life and his marriage to Alainn. He could find nothing objectionable. Of course they didn't believe that Elves and other Draiochta were real but he felt they were open minded enough to handle reality. But how would they accept the fact that their father was a wizard? What would all this do to their relationship which heretofore had been so close? How would they respond to the reality that all those directly related to him by birth were probably witches and wizards? Alainn was sympathetic with his worries and fears. She was worried that, while they had been very friendly and accepting when she was just the woman who showed up at a race, they might not be as accepting of her as a step-mother. The night before Brian's family was to arrive the two sat on the master bedroom veranda, sipping on Flaitheas Scáth wine and talking about their fears.

"Are you sorry that you did all this?" Alainn concluded their discussion.

"Never," Brian said emphatically. "Never in a million years. I just want them to understand how happy I am and be able to share our joy."

Alainn smiled, went to Brian and gave him a kiss, then retired to their bedroom. Brian followed. They lost their fears and concerns in each other's embrace.



It was Cathy Beaulac who answered the door that morning. One can only imagine the look on her face as she opened the door to find a young elfin woman dressed in a simple dark green tunic with white trousers and green slippers, and a tall

man with bright red hair, piercing blue eyes wearing a black military style tunic, tight trousers, knee-high boots with a sword hanging from his side.

“Good morning,” said the young Elfin woman. “My name is Melda, and this is Hérion. I believe you were expecting us to escort you to your father.”

Cathy gave a weak and confused smile and leaned out the door to see what type of vehicle two such characters out of a fairy-tale might be driving. There sat a stretch limousine.

“Oh,” Cathy suddenly said, realizing that she had left the two standing there. “I’m sorry. Yes. Please come in.” She stepped back and allowed Melda and Hérion to enter.

Cathy couldn’t take her eyes off Hérion. He was young and handsome, and what teenage girl wouldn’t like a young, handsome man who dressed like a fairy-tale prince.

Melda and Hérion got the same reaction from Brenda and Thomas except this time Melda curtsied and Hérion bowed.

“I’m Melda and this is Hérion,” Melda repeated. “We’re here to take you to your father. We have a car outside. If you show us your luggage we’ll be on our way.”

“We haven’t finished packing,” said Brenda a bit embarrassed.

“That’s okay,” Melda smiled. She was picked for this mission because she had a wonderful way with people and could put them at ease with her smile. “You really don’t need any. We have absolutely everything you’ll need at Cigam.”

“That’s very nice, but . . .”

“It’s okay,” Melda reassured them. “Really. We have everything you’ll need. Actually you’d probably just spend all that time packing and never use any of it.” Again Melda’s smile. With gentle encouragement from Melda they locked the house and left.

The same scene had taken place in Nashville, Tennessee about an hour earlier where Rodwin and Aegnus had loaded Mary and Edward's suitcase in the trunk of their limo and were heading east on Interstate 24. The trip was just over 100 miles and would take them almost two hours because of the curvy mountain roads between the interstate and Cigam.

As the Beaulac's were heading east on highway 72 it was Kevin who got the conversational ball rolling.

"You look like an Elf," he said to Melda, "and he looks like a prince."

"You're very observant," Melda said with a smile. "I am an Elf, but I'm afraid Hérion isn't a prince. He's a famous Torc Allta guard who protects the Queen and her family and all the people in the kingdom."

"Wow, really!" exclaimed Kevin. He wasn't as impressed with Melda being an Elf as he was with Hérion. "Can I see your sword? Have you ever killed anyone?"

"Kevin!" said Brenda.

"That's okay," Hérion said looking through the divider that separated the passenger from the driver's compartment. "Perhaps I'll show it to you when we get to Cigam. It wouldn't be safe in the car. And, no, I haven't killed anyone. While we are fierce warriors we are taught to try to avoid a fight."

"You must have children," said Thomas.

"Not yet," Melda smiled, "but I'm going to be one of the staff taking care of the young ones during your visit, so I'll get to see a lot of Kevin."

"Is my Dad at some sort of medieval fair?" asked Brenda.

Melda cocked her head. She had no idea what Brenda meant, and then it hit her. "Oh, our dress!" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"No, this is the way we always dress."

"It is?"

“Yes,” again Melda applied her magical smile. “When your Father was talking to all of us about coming to get you, we talked about whether we should try to look and act Humani or be ourselves. He felt that seeing us as we really are might be a bit of a shock but that trying to hide it might make you think we weren’t telling you all the truth. I have strict instructions from Tiarna Brian – your father – to be completely honest with you. If there’s something I can’t properly explain, he said that we should refer it to him.”

“So,” said Thomas, “you have taken on the persona and life-style of an Elf.”

“No. I am an Elf,” Melda said matter-of-factly. “I was born in Flaitheas Scáth – that’s a shadow realm near where we’re going. You’ll get to see it.”

“Oh,” both Brenda and Thomas said giving each other one of the ‘oh-boy’ looks.

“I know,” said Melda affably, noticing their look. “I didn’t believe in Humani’s until I was a teenager.”

Brenda and Thomas laughed. Even if Melda just thought she was an Elf, she was a nice Elf-want-to-be and they liked her.

“Are Torc Allta like in Nicholas Flamel?” asked Cathy.

“Yes,” replied Melda. “Wasn’t that a great novel. They are proud, fearless, strong and as trustworthy as they come.”

“Thank you,” said Hérion without turning around.

“It’s the truth. Tiarna Brian said that we were to tell it like it is. Hérion is my buddy. I’ve known him most of my life. When we were kids he would let me ride on his back and we’d race through the woods.”

“In Nicholas Flamel they were all killed,” said Cathy.

“That is a novel,” said Hérion. “But even in fiction there is some truth. There are ancient stories about creatures called ‘Elders’, just like in the book, and Torc legends tell about a group of Torc Allta who protected one of those Elders. It’s a

legend so we don't know if there's any truth to it. The battle in the book is just made up. I always wondered if Mr. Scott actually knew some Draiochta."

"Draiochta are magic creatures and folk," Melda interjected to explain the term.

"He knew so much about us," Hérion continued.

"I don't mean to seem rude," Thomas started with a disclaimer, "but I'm almost fifty years old and I haven't believed in Elves and magic creatures since I was a child."

"No offense taken," Melda shot him a smile. "That's partly your fault and partly our fault."

Hérion looked over the partition at Melda in a reprimanding manner. Seeing his look she said to him, "well, Tiarna Brian told us to be truthful. I'm not being disrespectful."

She turned to Thomas and Brenda. "Humani don't believe that there are any other intelligent creatures on earth. How can I say this nicely?" she looked desperately at Hérion who gave her a 'you-started-it' look in reply. "Humani are known to be rather violent." Melda paused to see if she had spoken the unspeakable. But Brenda and Thomas gave her a 'yes-that's-true' nod. "Because of that the rest of us have rather kept out of sight. That's what I mean by that's partially your fault and partially ours."

"You've done a very good job," said Thomas.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it," Melda said before she thought. "But I think I'm going to have your father explain the rest."



It was getting close to noon. That was when all four limos would meet at the parking lot for the Walls of Jericho Trailhead. The two who had picked up the family

at the airport were already there and the kids were running off some steam while they waited for the other two.

The car from Huntsville and the car from Nashville pulled in almost at the same time. After the family had a chance to say 'hello' to each other the escorts gently gathered the children and got everyone back into their cars. One by one the limousines turned north on the highway and then almost immediately right into the dense forest. When the last limo had stopped inside the tree-line and out of sight of the highway the escorts explained to their families that Cigam wasn't designed for automobile traffic and that they would finish their journey by carriage. That excited the family members but looking around they didn't see any carriages. Each of the escorts pulled out their wand and with a flick of the wrist and soft incantation each of the limousines changed into a beautiful landau carriage. While the families sat stunned by what they had witnessed the Torc Allta guards in each carriage got into the passenger compartment and put down the top so that the carriages were open.

The landau was one of the early convertibles. It had a soft top which could be raised in bad weather. These four landau were done in brown tones with burnt orange and yellow wheels. There were four large and very ornate crystal lanterns attached to the sides. The passenger compartment was red velvet while the top, which the Torc guards had put down, were black. The landau is the type of carriage in which the English royal family still rides to special occasions.

The procession moved into a large clearing while the families still sat speechless at what had just happened. To their left they saw a small parking lot across from what appeared to be an Irish cottage. The road was lined with people. As the family looked at the people they were certain that they were either in some sort of fantasy convention or they had been transported to a fairy-tale realm. The people waved and cheered. Not knowing what else to do, and not wanting to be rude, Brian's family smiled and waved back.

The procession entered another short stretch of woods and then into the clearing where they got their first glimpse of Ferguson Pálás. The clearing was filled with cheering people. It was hard for the family to wave at the same time they gawked at the magnificent house.

The four carriages stopped in front of the house. Each of the escorts explained that Princess Alainn and Tiarna Brian would be out to greet them in a moment.

“Is this the Princess’ palace?” one of the grandchildren asked.

“Oh, no,” the escort said laughing, “this is the house that your grandfather built for the Princess. The castle is in Flaitheas Scáth just across the hollow.”

Before the conversation could go any further the doors of the house opened and two formally dressed Torc Alta guards stepped out and stood to attention. Right behind them were Alainn and Brian. A cheer immediately went up from the crowd. It was understandable that the family didn’t recognize Alainn at first, but it was hard for them to comprehend that the man standing there was their father.

Alainn wore a simple yet graceful gown of sapphire velveteen that fit tight to her body with sheer silver half-sleeves and silver piping. There were pleats at the waist to allow for walking. The gown was accented by a silver belt that hung loosely around her hips and down the front almost to the ground. Her long dark hair was accentuated by a silver singlet decorated with sapphires. She was beautiful and elegant.

Brian stood next to her beaming and waving at his family sitting in the four carriages. Yes, they thought, he was dressed very differently than they’d ever seen him, but there was also something about the way he stood there. He was obviously happy but he had a comportment which was new. He looked good. He was dressed in a full-length silver silk dupioni tunic embroidered with dark emerald green floss. The dark emerald green silk dupioni obt and sash were embroidered with metallic silver thread. His cloak was green velvet.

The fact that they were holding hands wasn't lost on Brian's family. As the crowd cheered and screamed their names, Alainn and Brian lost no time in descending the steps to the awaiting carriages.

By this time Torc guards had taken up position next to the carriage doors and were helping Brian's family get out. The young children, totally uninhibited by the pomp and splendor around them, jumped out of the carriages and ran to their grandfather. They had seen so many things they wanted to tell him about. Brian had hugs and kisses for everyone.

Alainn looked at Brian. He was beaming. He was happy. He was content. She watched as his children and grandchildren greeted him. The love and affection was so evident. She hoped beyond hope that some of that could be shared with her.

She had no more thought than one of the daughters gave Alainn a big hug. "I don't know if that's permissible, your highness," they said. Alainn just laughed and said, "absolutely!" hugging each of the children and grandchildren in turn.

"Let's get inside so that we can talk," Brian tried to say over the din of the cheering crowd.

Alainn and Brian led the way back up the curved steps.

As they came close to the bottom of the steps Cathy was the closest to the crowd. A man which she thought reminded her of a hobbit stepped out of the crowd and took her by the arm. It was a gentle hold but he definitely wanted her to stop.

"I'm Ghorpas Spikeback," the man shouted above the noise. "Your father is a great man. He has given us beautiful places to live and a dignity outside of the Flaitheas Scáth that we never had before. I want his family to know how much he has done for all goblins and how much we appreciate it."

"Thank you," said Cathy politely.

"You know I'm a banker just like in Harry Potter," Ghorpas said proudly.

“Oh,...” but before she could say more Captain Lawrence was at her side and had removed the Hogboon’s hand.

“I’m sorry, Ghorpas,” said Lawrence, “but she does need to get inside. You’ll get a chance to talk to her more at the party at the castle tonight.”

“Be there a party?” replied Ghorpas.

“Of course! Where have you been?”

“Believe it or not in the Humani city working on the foundation accounts.”

“Sorry, but we have to go,” said Lawrence.

Ghorpas bowed, Cathy waved and Lawrence led her up the steps to catch up with the rest of the family.

Inside the house the house staff was gathered in the rotunda. Brian introduces his family to the staff. The staff bowed and curtsied. Brian explains this to his family as it had been explained to him when he first arrived.

Brian lead the way to the family room with its panoramic view of Gifford Hollow. The table in the morning room was covered with food and drink. There was both Humani foods with which the family would be familiar and Elfin foods like Lembas Bread and Honey cakes along with foods made from roots and berries that come from the forest. The adults were served Miruvor, a clear, warm and very fragrant cordial that the Elves make. It gives the drinker renewed strength and vitality. The children were given berry juice and honey tea.

The servants buzzed around the family making sure that everyone had enough to eat and drink while the family looked out at a world they’d never seen and chatter excitedly with Alainn, Brian and amongst themselves.

It was time for Brian to ‘spill the beans.’ “Okay, everyone,” Brian said in a loud voice. “Everyone find a seat. I have some things I want to share.” Melda and another Elfin woman took the younger children out to play. Kevin was given the option of going out to play or staying with the adults. He opted to stay.

“As I’m sure you’ve notice, you’re not in Kansas.” Everyone laughed. “Actually you are still in northeastern Alabama, but across that hollow on the far ridge,” he pointed out the window toward Flaitheas Scáth, “is another world . . . one which, up to a couple months ago, I would have said could have never existed. Even here you are seeing people and things which most Humani never see. That’s partially because the magic folk you see around you – who are called Draiochta – purposely stay out of sight.” He went on to explain why Humani don’t ‘see’ the Draiochta.

“This dashing gentleman here is Captain of the Guard Lawrence Clainn Torc. He is the head of the Torc Allta guard who protects the royal family and Flaitheas Scáth – the shadow realm. Yes, that’s a shadow realm similar to the one in Nicholas Flamel. Captain Lawrence has been Alainn’s protector most of her life and he has become one of my dearest friends.” Everyone clapped and cheered for Lawrence who acknowledged them with a stately, graceful and charming bow.

“And this charming, pretty young girl is Neala Clainn Torc.” Neala blushed at Brian’s introduction and acknowledged the family. “But boys don’t be taken in by her youth and beauty. She is one of the finest sword fighters in the kingdom and she’s saved my butt on at least one occasion.” By this time Neala was so embarrassed that she didn’t know what to do. It was made worse by her father laughing at her discomfort.

“Neala is Captain Lawrence’s daughter and my personal guard. She was assigned to guard me when ... well, I’ll tell you that story later. In any case, I asked her to be the head of our house guard.”

“And yes, they are Torc Allta just like in Nicholas Flamel but a lot more personable.” Again they all laughed, especially the Torc. “Neala, would you mind showing my family your natural form so they’ll know who you are if they run into you in the woods.” Neala steps into an open area of the room. “You’d better give her more room. She’s rather large.”

Neala looked daggers at Brian to which he replied, “Oh, come on. You know what I mean.” In an instant there was a were-boar standing in the room. Brian’s family looked on astounded. “She can’t speak to you in her natural form but if you see a creature that looks like her, he or she’s one of the good guys.” Neala changed back to her humanoid form.

“So that’s who you really are?” asked Phillip.

“Sort of,” Neala had never had to explain herself. “We are a type of shape-shifter but we can only shift between humanoid and were-boar form. What you see is also really me, but my natural form – the form in which I was born – is the were-boar. Your father and Princess Alaiinn are the only two people I know who can actually tell us apart when we are in our natural form.”

“It isn’t very likely, because things are generally quite peaceful around here, but if this woman ever tells you to do something in a very serious or stern voice, don’t ask questions . . . just do it.”

“All I ask of you while you’re here are three things. First, try to keep an open mind about what you see and hear. There are going to be a lot of things that are going to challenge everything you think you know. Ask questions. Everyone here has been given directions to answer you totally honestly. If they are concerned that they can’t adequately answer your question they will direct you to me. Second I want you to give me the chance to prove to you that I’m not crazy and that I’m happy and safe even if you don’t believe what you see. Lastly, I know that I don’t really have to ask you this, but just a reminder to show respect to my friends and their way of doing things even if you don’t believe that they’re real or think they’re just dressed up. Can everyone live with that?”

The family acknowledged Brian’s wishes and each tried, in their own way, to assure him that they didn’t think he was crazy, were quite well aware that he was happy, and would do their best to be open minded.

“I have three important things I’m very excited tell you about. I’ve tried and tried to think of neat ways to share this but haven't come up with any, so I'm just going to blurt them out and then I can go back and fill in the details and answer questions. Is that okay?”

"Shortly after I arrived it was discovered that I'm a wizard.” A murmur went through the family. “During the Morganian War the Ferguson clan took and hid a lot of the children of wizards who supported Merlin. My grandparents, 51 generations ago, were two of those children."

Alainn, who had been watching with great admiration at the way Brian’s children were respecting him by not challenging what he was saying, had planned to say nothing but she had to correct him. "Your father is being modest. He is not just a wizard but a silver aura wizard. There are only a couple of silver aura wizard every two to three hundred years which means that he's one of the most powerful wizards in the world."

The family looked at Brian and sat speechless. After all, what can you say when you’ve been told that your father is a powerful wizard? Brian could see them wanting to ask questions but they didn’t know how.

"When this was discovered,” Brian continued, “the Draiochta Academy headmaster reminded me that with great power comes great responsibility. To fulfill this responsibility I built the village through which you passed and Alainn and I started the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Foundation. Obviously Bridgette in honor of your mother and Prince Fionn in honor of Alainn's late husband. The foundation has two branches - one is a conservation branch to protect the wilderness, wildlife and Draiochta who live in the forest. The other branch is going to fund free hospitals and research centers. To fund this I had to learn alchemy. Bottom line, I'm currently richer than the NFL. I want all of you to serve on the foundation’s Board of Directors, and I’ll talk to all of you about that later."

"Lastly, but far from least, I wanted to tell you that Alainn and I are going to get married and I want you all to be here."

There was a brief moment of silence as the family assimilated what they had just heard. There were some looks of surprise but then cheers and congratulations to both. They all became so engrossed in talking about the wedding that it was as if they had totally forgot the first two things Brian had told them. All they wanted to know about was the wedding and the happy couple. This made both Brian and Alainn feel very good.

About that time Anastasia came rushing into the room. She was so intent upon her mission that she was totally unaware of the happy chatter going on about the announced engagement. She rushed by her mother, giving her a quick kiss, and went running up to Brian. Throwing her arms around him she asked, "Have you told them?"

Without waiting to hear what Brian said Anastasia turned to his family and began to plead her case. "When my mother first told us that she was bringing a Humani to Flaithias Scáth I was worried and ready to do anything to protect her and get rid of him, if necessary."

"I was so worried about your Father's intentions and my Mother's happiness that I purposely got my Mother out of the way and confronted Brian about why he was here. His answers were so honest and sincere that I melted."

"I never knew about that," Alainn said with mock severity.

"Opps," said Anastasia. Everyone laughed. "I have come to know and love your father very much and I sincerely believe that they are meant for each other despite your father being a wizard and my mother being Elfin. It doesn't matter. I want nothing more than for my mother to be happy. I haven't had a father for over 30 years, and I really want to call Brian 'daddy'. Please! Please accept and support them."

Mary was the first one to speak up for the children. "That was very touching but you didn't have to put yourself through it. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we're thrilled." The other children nodded and verbalized their agreement.

"Okay," said Seamus, "I'm going to be the one brave enough to ask this. How long ago did your father die?"

"33 years ago. Why would you have to be brave to ask that?" Everyone else in the room knew exactly what he meant and to increase Anastasia's perplexity a roar of laughter filled the room.

"How old are you? You don't look a day over 20."

"That's exactly what Brian said. I'm 49 years old, married and have two children who are both over 20 years old."

"If you're 49..." one of the children starts to say.

Alainn interrupted, "Okay! Yes, I'm the one who's - what's the Humani saying - 'robbing the cradle'." Brian's children looked at her in total disbelief. There were a lot of things they had seen in the past few hours which were hard to believe, but this was beyond that. "I'm 70 years old."

The room was totally silent. The children just sat and looked. "You're kidding! You look like one of Cathy's schoolmates," one of them finally said.

And so Anastasia was assimilated into the conversation which centered around their parents, the wedding and children. It was as if they'd never been told that Brian was a wizard. Two families were being brought together, as they had through the ages, by two people falling in love.

As the time began to get late, Brian had to bring the happy party to an end. He explained that they were to have a formal audience with the Queen and then a party. He told the story about how he had tried to refuse Manwë's services and explained that they would each have a valet and lady in the same way as Lawrence had explained to him, concluding by having Manwë come out. "This," he said, "is Manwë. I asked

him to come with me and be the head of my house staff. Do you think I could have come out looking like this without him?” The children laughed and clapped for Manwë, who bowed graciously.



Manwë introduced the family to their staff who in turn show them to their apartments. The plan was for the staff to help them get dressed for the formal audience and party but Queen Maethoriel sent word that the weather was getting bad and suggested the formal audience be postponed until the next day. She said she wanted the family to see the Flaitheas Scáth at its best.

The Queen arrived a short while later and met the family in the family room of Ferguson Pálás. She could not have been more gracious as she met her new family. Lawrence smiled to himself. It was just like when they go to Finney Place. She thought she wasn't acting like a queen but she would always be a queen. She didn't really know how not to be a queen. She would walk, talk and act like a queen even if she didn't think she was. Nevertheless Brian's family took to her immediately and within minutes she had the young children calling her Grandmother Maethoriel.

Brian's reunion and the meeting of the two families went better than either of them could ever have dreamed. If Brian's children didn't believe that they were really among Draiochta they weren't letting on. Anastasia, Stephan and Brian's children chattered and laughed. They were obviously comparing notes about their parents since every time Alainn or Brian got near there seemed to be a change in the subject. Cathy and Riona quickly became fast friends and were making plans to go out and enjoy time with other youth that evening in Cigam.

The little ones were having a great time and, not being old enough to have developed doubts and prejudices, accepted everyone and everything. They hung on

every word that Grandmother Maethoriel said, most especially stories about magic and Draiochta.

“I’m going to risk,” Maethoriel addressed everyone in general, “but I have to ask how all of you felt when you encountered Draiochta and were told that your father is a powerful wizard.”

Thomas was the first to respond. “My son, Kevin, didn’t waste any time asking Melda and Hérion about their appearance. I must confess that it wasn’t until Melda changed the limo into a carriage that I considered believing that she really was magical. Then Neala changing into a were-boar, well, it’s still hard to believe but harder to deny.”

The others expressed similar experiences and feelings.

“It’s interesting,” the Queen smiled, “so many Humani believe that there is a supreme creator of the universe with less scientific or tangible evidence.”

“You’re right,” said Seamus, “but Christianity and the dominant religions in the United States all teach that magic either doesn’t exist or is evil or both. So we’ve grown up in a society that tells us we can’t believe in magic.”

“Interesting,” the Queen said as she pondered Seamus’ explanation. “So you’re saying that it isn’t an issue of science or evidence.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Curious. Really curious.”

“But you know,” Phillip interjected, “Christianity didn’t always deny the existence of magic and there is a Jewish cult that practices magic today.”

“Yes,” Edward added, “in the middle ages there were times that Christians were put to death if they denied magic.”

“You do realize,” Maethoriel said, “that all of you who are directly related to Tiarna Brian by blood are probably also Draiochta - witches and wizards.”

“I don’t understand how we can be witches and wizards without knowing it,” Brenda showed the same perplexity as had her father. “Wouldn’t something happen that would tell me? Even Harry Potter had things happen that were out of the ordinary.”

Her reference to Harry Potter brought a laugh.

“I can’t explain that,” the Queen replied. “We’re guessing that it has been buried for so many generations that it took an unusual situation to bring it to light. If your father had not touched an Elfin sword we would have never known. How many of you have had the opportunity to touch a magic sword?”

Again laughter.

“I always wanted magic to be real,” confessed Mary. “But I always thought that I was just being childlike.”

“Actually we haven’t seen our father do any magic,” Phillip said.

“A lot of what we do is so much of our daily life that it doesn’t really seem like magic,” Alainn answered.

“Do something for them,” Anastasia said to Brian.

“Everything I can think of seems like a cheap trick,” Brian looked bewildered.

“Most Elfin people practice what is called therianthropy – changing into an animal. We can change into one animal which is determined by our inner traits. I can change into a Bobcat.” Alainn demonstrates. “This is how Brian and I met. But your father is a true shape shifter.”

“You mean like in Harry Potter?” asked Kevin who hadn’t been paying too much attention until this point.

“Yes,” said Alainn. “Would you like to see?”

“Would I!” Kevin was excited.

“I don’t know,” Brian started to object.

“Oh, don’t be a stuffed shirt.” That brought a laugh. “Someone give me a name of a famous person.”

One of the girls came up with the name of a movie star whom Brian didn’t know. Seamus called out “President Obama.”

Brian stood quietly. “Is that too hard?” asked Seamus.

“No,” said Alann. “He has to visualize first.”

Then Brian started to change and within a few moments, to the ‘oohs’ and ‘awes’ of his family, President Obama stood before them. “But unlike in Harry Potter, the voice doesn’t go with the physical change,” Brian said in his own voice.

“I’m related to Grandpa by blood,” Kevin said. “Can I become a shape shifter.”

“Very few Draiochta are true shape shifters,” replied Queen Maethoriel, “but you might be a powerful wizard some day.”

“Can I go to school at Hogwarts?” Kevin wasn’t about to give up.

“Well,” Maethoriel looked at Kevin’s parents whose faces showed both amusement and fear. “It would be up to your parents. Hogwarts was made up for the Harry Potter books, but we do have a Draiochta Academy.”

“Wow! Really!”

“I’ll introduce you to the Headmaster, if it’s okay with your parents.”

Kevin looked pleadingly at his parents. Queen Maethoriel gave them a ‘I-know-what-you’re-going-through’ look. They were obviously very apprehensive.

“I guess,” Thomas finally said.

“You’ll like Headmaster Schaunessy. He won’t do anything you don’t want. Actually,” addressing all of Brian’s family, “you’d probably all like to see the Academy.”



The conversation went through diner and well into the evening. Throughout the evening Alainn looked like a little girl dying to tell a secret but there was so much going on Brian complete missed it. After diner Riona and Cathy asked if they might be excused to go meet some of Riona's friends.

The two girls headed down to the very old looking but very new pub in the village of Cigam. It had become the community gathering place where people of all ages met and visited in the evenings.

Riona introduced Cathy to two Dwarf girls – Isla and Caraid - an Elfin girl named Arwen, and a Torc girl named Ultana. They were anxious to have Cathy tell them all about Humani life and Humani boys. Cathy had to admit to them that she was surprised that they found her life so interesting. She thought it was rather 'normal' and not very interesting. The Draiochta girls confided that that is the way they think of their lives.

"It kind of like the time I went to Quebec," said Cathy. "I had learned French in school and wanted to practice it with the French-speaking kids I met in Quebec, but they wanted to practice their English." The group laughed. "They outnumbered me so they won."

"Well, we out number you too," said Arwen. "I say that we let Cathy take us to Winchester."

The other Draiochta girls looked around to see if anyone had heard Arwen say that.

"Are you crazy?" Riona whispered. "My grandmother would have us in the dungeon on bread and water if we got caught."

"We won't get caught," Arwen continued. "Cathy knows the Humani ways and we know magic."

The girls all sat quietly and considered the proposition. The curiosity was too much.

“Okay,” they all said.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble.” Cathy was still a bit concerned.

“Don’t worry,” said Ultana. “We’ve done things like this before and after she scolds us the Queen always asks for a detailed account of our adventure.” Everyone laughed.

“How are we going to get there?” asked Cathy.

“How about brooms?” replied Isla.

“Ah, get serious,” Ultana scolded. “Even Witch Sorcha doesn’t use a broom any more, and you wouldn’t know which end to sit on.” All the girls laughed.

“Besides,” said Arwen, “I want to attract the Humani boys, not scare them.” More laughter.

“Does Tiarna Brian still have the landau by the Pálás?” asked Caraid.

“I think so,” Riona replied. “You’re not suggesting . . .”

“Why not?” insisted Isla. “If they’re cars that have been changed, then we can just change them back.”

“I think they were Landau first,” said Riona.

“It doesn’t really matter,” interjected Caraid. “We can either change them or we can’t. The big question is whether Cathy can drive one.”

“They were awfully long, but unless they’re stick shift, I should be able to handle them.”

“If they were originally Landau, why don’t we just try to change them into something smaller?” Isla gave a shrug.



What the girls did not know was that an off-duty Torc guard, named Ardan, overheard the girls at the Cigam pub and told Neala. Neala grabbed a nearby Elfin

man, named Turin, and asked if he and Ardan would please follow the girls and be sure they were safe.

“Don’t let them know you’re following them unless you must,” instructed Neala. The young men smiled and headed off after the girls.

Within an hour the girls were pulling into a McDonald’s in Winchester, Tennessee.

“This is a fast-food restaurant,” said Cathy. “It isn’t fine dining but most Humani, except for people like my Grandfather, eat in one of these places from time to time.”

“Do boys hang out at McDonald’s?” asked Arwen with a ‘hey-I’m-a-teenage-girl’ smile. She was the youngest of the five Draiochta friends.

“People don’t hang out at McDonald’s very much,” Cathy replied, “well, except for the senior crowd who come here to drink coffee and visit in the mornings.”

“I’m looking for boys,” admitted Arwen.

“I really don’t know where the kids in Winchester would go,” apologized Cathy. “Every town is a bit different.”

They went inside. Cathy helped them order Big Macs, fries and a coke. She laughed hysterically at the variety of looks on their faces as they sampled Humani fast food. Ultana rather liked the hamburger, none of them liked the Coke and they all liked the fries.

While they were eating, watching the people come and go, and asking Cathy questions, a group of teenage boys entered. Arwen smiled broadly. The others just shook their heads and laughed. Cathy warned the girls that the boys looked a bit “rough”.

“What does that mean?” asked Riona.

“It means that they’re not very desirable.” Cathy shook her head. “In the Humani world we have all sorts of jerks.”

“Jerks?” questioned Isla.

“Ruffians, brutes, bullies, . . .” Cathy didn’t have to finish her list before all the girls were telling her that the Draiochta world has their share of such people too.

They went back to their people watching and discussion of where they might go next when Caraid got up to go to the restroom.

As she crossed the restaurant one of the boys called out “Hey look. A Dwarf.”

She was a Dwarf and, not realizing that the boy wasn’t using the word ‘dwarf’ in a nice way, she looked at him and smiled.

“Damn, ugly, I didn’t mean it as a compliment.” The boys laughed.

Caraid returned to the table in tears. Cathy was furious. She had never put up with bullies like this and wasn’t going to let them get away with it. She got up and walked to the boy’s table.

“You obnoxious, loudmouthed little toad,” she said to the boy. “That’s my friend and I don’t put up with people hurting my friends.”

The boy stood up. He was a good head taller than Cathy but she didn’t budge.

“And what are you going to do about it?” the boy laughed as he looked at his friends who joined in the laughter.

“You’re going to apologize,” said Cathy emphatically.

There was a roar of laughter from the boy’s table. Cathy didn’t budge.

No one noticed the two young men enter the other side of the McDonald’s. The tall red headed Torc started to move toward the confrontation but was stopped by his companion.

The offensive boy reached out his hand and started to take hold of Cathy. In a flash Cathy had him pinned to the floor.

“Now about that apology,” she said to the startled boy.

The others got up from the table. That’s when Ardan and Turin stepped forward. They were larger and older than the Humani boys.

Ardan, who was 25 years old and in his Humani form could hold his own with any professional linebacker, said to the Humani boys, “I think you would be wise to either sit down or leave.” It didn’t take the boys any time to realize that they were far out-classed and left their smart-aleck comrade still pinned to the floor.

Holding the shocked boy by the arm, Cathy walked him to the table where the Draiochta girls were sitting watching in awe.

“Apologize,” said Cathy.

“I’m sorry,” the boy spat the words.

“You can do better,” she said putting a bit more pressure on his arm. “Try again. This time nice and sincere.”

“I’m really very sorry,” the boy almost pleaded.

She walked him to the counter where the manager was standing with phone in hand.

“Apologize to these nice people for causing a fuss in their restaurant.”

“I’m sorry I caused a fuss.” The boy was working very hard not to cry.

“Now get out, and if I ever see you in here again you’d better be an absolute gentleman, do you understand?”

The boy nodded understanding and fled.



Standing a short distance from the McDonald’s the girls and the two young men saw a police car pull up. Cathy smiled. She hoped that the boys would have some serious explaining to do.

“Does that happen to you very often in the Humani world?” asked an admiring Turin.

“I’ve never had that happen in my life,” Cathy laughed.

“You’re kidding me!”

“No,” said Cathy. “I’m a bit surprised at myself.”

On the way back Cathy tried to tell the girls that while that type of behavior unfortunately isn’t unusual, there are really lots of very nice Humani and she’d like to take them somewhere where they could have a good experience of Humani life.

Neala met the group at the Torc guard cottage on the edge of Cigam. Ardan told her what he had seen. Cathy explained how the Humani boys were being obnoxious and had been extremely rude to Caraid. She didn’t know why she reacted like that but something snapped and she wasn’t going to put up with her new friend being humiliated. She wanted the other girls to have a pleasant taste of the Humani world and that loathsome boy had spoiled it.

Turin explained how Cathy had handled the boy. “She reminded me of you,” Turin laughed. He looked at Cathy and said, “that’s the biggest compliment I can give you.”

“My Grandfather told me about Neala. Thank you.”

Neala could see the sparks between the two. She felt like her mother reprimanding the girls. She’d never had to do anything like that and suddenly she appreciated and admired her parents even more.

“I’m really sorry things turned out so bad! Will you all come see me tomorrow?” Cathy asked as the group was disbanding.

“We have the formal audience and welcome party tomorrow,” Riona reminded her.

“We’ll see you at the party,” the girls assured her.

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Caraid. “I believe you that all Humani aren’t like that. And I really appreciated how you stood up for me. You called me ‘friend’ and that means a lot.”

The two girls hugged and they all agreed to get together again. Turin asked if he could walk Cathy back to Ferguson Pálás. Even though that's where she was going, Neala smiled and said "sure." Now she really felt old!

The Ferguson Pálás staff was no different than the castle staff. By the time breakfast was finished they all knew about the girl's adventure the night before. But Alainn and Manwë were too busy fussing over what Brian was going to wear to the formal audience and welcome to pay any attention.

"What is with you two?" Brian insisted.

"What?!" Alainn was trying not to show her excitement.

"What?" Brian repeated. "The fact that the two of you are niggling about what I'm going to wear."

"It's for your children," Alainn insisted. Brian gave her a questioning look.

"Tiarna," Manwë jumped in to help Alainn. "Her Majesty has told us that she really wants to - what's the idiom - 'put on the cat' today."

"You mean 'put on the dog'," Brian laughed.

"Yes, put on the dog," Manwë corrected. "In any case, my reputation is on the line. If you don't show up looking perfect I'll never be able to show my face."

"Relax," Brian reassured him. "You've always made me look good."

"Yes, but you've never seen an event like this," Alainn said.

"Okay! I know when I'm outnumbered." Brian stood quietly and let them fuss. The final result was a blanched almond silk tunic with Gaelic lacework on the breast and sleeve ends done in gold and red threads. The belt and sash were red silk and kept quite simple so as to not distract from the lacework. His robe had wrapped petal shaped sleeves and was a brilliant red silk velvet. His slippers were red and he wore a simple gold singlet with one large ruby.

Alainn and Manwë stood back and admired their work.

"You look presentable," said Manwë teasing Brian.

“You look beautiful,” exclaimed Alainn.

“You’re the beautiful one,” said Brian. “I’m an accessory.”

Chapter 10.

Most modern day American Humani hear the word magic and the words ‘black magic’ come to mind since their religious backgrounds define all forms of magic as evil and therefore ‘black’. A lot of modern American Humani describe anything of which they disapprove as ‘black’. This is obviously not universal since in areas of southeastern Asia black is the color for a wedding while white is the color of death. In Ireland a black cat is lucky. Even those who are open minded enough to accept the presence and practices of wiccans and other Draiochta will use the term ‘black magic’ to describe magic used for evil purposes. Again ascribing ‘evil’ to the word ‘black’. Two problems – black is not, by nature, evil and no one can really define ‘black magic’.

Now there have been efforts. One Wikipedia article points out four universally accepted evils that define ‘black’ magic: true name spells, immortality, necromancy and curses/hexes. In reality, however, each of these can be shown to have positive and humanitarian aspects. For example, ‘true name’ spells use knowing the true name of a person to control the person. What if that control is required to keep them from harming themselves or others? Taoist and some religions believe that trying to live forever – or at least well beyond the norm – is evil. Is it? If one is trying necromancy to bring a loved one who has died at the hands of evil, very young, etc. back to life, is that evil? It might be fruitless. It might be poor judgment. It might not even be in the deceased’s best interest, but it’s intent surely isn’t evil. Curses and hexes are mean and nasty no matter how you cut it, but religious people curse and hex others every day. While many will agree that revenge is evil, it is a commonly accepted practice among all western religions. Bottom line – ‘black magic’ can’t be defined. ‘Evil’, on the other hand, can be universally defined – although each culture will attempt to add items

specific to their culture and dominant religion. Apollyon definitely fell within the universal definition of evil.

In his cave sanctuary in the northern Appalachian Mountains Apollyon had been brooding and plotting. He had been spending his days studying an ancient codex of which no one knew. It was the spell journal of his great-grandmother, Morgana Pendragon.

The Pendragon Codex contained detailed accounts and instructions for some of the most sinister magic ever performed by a Draiochta. Pouring over his great-grandmother's accounts, experiences, trials, successes and failures his attention fell upon a most insidious magical tool - jar na marbh beo. Even the great Morgana had gone no further than study its potential and made a notation "Fiú seasamh mé i eagla an ollphéist" – which translates "even I stand in fear of this monster."

Jar na Marbh Beo was a living source of evil power. It was an earthen vessel which, when containing the essential elements, would suck the life and magical power from anyone at whom it was aimed and allow the Draiochta who controlled it to use that power. It would make the wizard who controlled it the most powerful wizard to ever exist. What Morgana feared was that the Jar na Marbh Beo would become so powerful and, being a living source of evil power, would attack its master and become free. Morgana is often looked upon as being evil for the sake of evil, but many believe that she was greatly maligned. She had no reservations about the use of evil to gain her objectives, but she would never just unleash pure evil on the world. Hence Jar na Marbh Beo was never tried. It had remained an unknown theory for fifteen hundred years. Until now. Now Apollyon was considering unleashing Jar na Marbh Beo to reek his vengeance upon Clainn de Coillearnach. In his anger and delusion he felt that he could control Jar na Marbh Beo.

Morgana had, unfortunately, made note of the creative incantation as well as the incantations needed to control its attack and to take power from it. All Apollyon

had to do was come up with the three key elements: a vessel made from nimh cré, the heart of a magical creature such as a Unicorn, and life source of a female virgin who had lived 228 cycles of the moon.

Nimh cré was the soil upon which a vile act had been committed. Many Draiochta felt that soil under such acts was contaminated by the evil and there are those witches and wizards who feel that it is their civic duty to go to such places and perform purification rituals. Apollyon had to smile at the thought of how many Humani would see witches and wizards going to such places to perform the purification ritual and ignorantly think that they were some sort of perverted individual. That type of ignorance was what perpetuated the prejudice against magic. All Apollyon would have to do was to get to the site of a murder before some goodie-two-shoes witch or wizard and gather enough earth to make a vessel large enough for a heart.

Since the lunar year has 354.37 days, Apollyon calculated that he must find a virgin born on June 13th., 1994. That definitely wasn't going to be easy.



As Manwë and Alainn fussed over Brian's clothes, Headmaster Schaunessy was receiving some disturbing news. A colleague who specialized in protective magic had heard from friends in New York City that there had been a particularly violent murder in Central Park several days before. While murders in New York City are, unfortunately, not uncommon, what caused his friends to report was that, when they went to do the Ritual of Purification to heal the earth, they found a rather large hole. They didn't know what to think of it. Who would want nihm cré?

"This is curious," said Headmaster Shaunessy to his colleague. "And for some reason I find it rather unsettling."

“I agree,” said the protective magic specialist. “If ancient lore is correct, nimh cré would have evil properties. That’s why our ancestors started the Ritual of Purification.”

“I always thought of the ritual as some sort of religious ‘hocus-pocus’,” admitted the Headmaster, “but someone obviously thinks otherwise. You’d better report this to the Minister of Defense, and we’d better stay alert.”

Chapter 11.

The family met in the rotunda. Oohs and ahs filled the room as they saw each other for the first time in Elfin finery. There was an audible gasp followed by silence when Brian and Alainn entered the room. Even the child could only stand and stare.

Brian, in his blanched almond tunic and bright red velvet cape with the wrapped petal shaped sleeves, looked like something out of a fairy-tale.

And then there was Alainn. Beauty was a totally inadequate word. She wore a ‘robe à la française’ style gown in shades of blue with gold embroidery. With elegant engageante sleeves and a stomacher embroidered with gold thread the full skirt had a matching golden pattern and had an overskirt of cornflower blue. The train was a light blue and hung from her shoulders in the traditional loose box pleats.

The silence was broken by Phillip and Celina’s four year old daughter, Kaitlin, who walked up to Alainn, and after a few more moments of admiration said, “you look like a fairy princess.”

With tears in her eyes Alainn bent forward as far as her restrictive formal would allow and reached out to stroke the child’s head. “Mamaw Alainn would love to give you hug and kiss but I can’t move in this dress.”

Neala entered the rotunda from the foyer. This was the first time anyone had seen her dressed in the formal garb of the Torc guard officer. Brian knew her well enough to know that, while she was enjoying the admiring looks and comments, she was very self-conscious and a bit uncomfortable. The only remnants of ancient armor that continued as a part of their formal garb was the pauldron, gardbrace and breast plate. Although only a small portion of medieval armor it was sufficient to give the impression of wearing armor. She wore black leggings with green knee-high boots. In deference to her gender she had a very short skirt in the colors of the Clainn Torc and her breast plate had more breast to it than her male counterparts. That, of course,

embarrassed the young woman knowing that she was going to get teased about it by her companions. Her full-length cloak with hood was a dark green – the color of Clainn Coillearnach – and emblazoned with the coat of arms of Coillearnach. A sword hung at her left hip. Brian had seen Neala's sword many times. This was a different sword.

For a moment she too had to stand and stare at Alainn and Brian, but quickly she recovered and bowed deeply and formally. She had obviously taken lessons from her father whom Brian always believed had the 'bow and exit' down to a fine art. No one, thought Brian, could make a bow look more eloquent than Lawrence, but Neala was almost as good.

"The carriages await," she announced, trying to be as formal as possible and not show her nervousness at her first time in charge of such an auspicious procession.

Surrounded by Torc guards in formal attire and to the cheers of the house staff on the balcony above and in the adjoining rooms, the group moved out to the awaiting carriages.

As Brian was near Neala he said quietly, "I see you have a new sword."

Even with partial armor she seemed to swell with pride. "My Father gave it to me." She put her hand gently on the hilt. Brian has seen that same sort of reverence when Lawrence touched Cosain.

"Is it . . . ?"

"Yes," Neala said anticipating his question. "It's a Dwarf blade named Dylis."

"Marvelous! You deserve it," Brian said quietly and with a great smile as he stepped away.

The four carriages were the same Landau that had brought the family to Ferguson Pálás, except this time there was a driver and two footmen standing on a platform on the back of the carriage. Torc Guards in their formal uniforms stood at attention on either side of the path leading to where the first carriage was ready for its

passengers. At least twelve Torc were in their natural were-boar form. They were the escort. Their comrades in human form had put scarves with the combined Clainn Torc and Clainn Coillearnach colors around their necks. Just beyond were the people of Cigam waving and cheering. They would be invited to the party that would follow the formal audience at the castle.

The procession began to move towards the forest. As the carriages gained speed Brian's family admired the power and speed of the Torc's running alongside. They were suddenly aware that there was no road ahead. How, they wondered, were these carriages going to travel through heavy forest. Magic. Of course.

As the first carriage approached the dense forest a road opened. It was as though the trees stepped back to allow the procession to pass. They had no sense of bumping or jostling which one would expect riding a carriage along an unpaved forest road. In fact, there would have been more motion than they were experiencing if they had been going down a street at home.

The trip was short and soon Brian's children were admiring the giant Cucumber Magnolia in all its splendor. A large crowd of Elves, Dwarf, Hogboon and other Draiochta who lived in the mountains around Flaitheas Scáth had gathered to welcome the family.

With great pomp and pageantry Neala approached her father who was standing in full military splendor before two Torc guards on either side of the spot where the magical portal into Flaitheas Scáth was located. There was a formal exchange in the ancient common language after which Lawrence stepped to one side of his daughter, bowed one of his magnificent bows in the direction of the carriages, and called out in magic-voice – i.e. a voice which can be heard by all without artificial amplification – “in the name of Her Majesty, Queen Maethoriel Ailene an ti de Coillearnach, I bid you welcome to Flaitheas Scáth.”

Having said that, Lawrence stepped to one side and a giant passageway opened up through which the carriages could pass. Even Brian had never seen this. Queen Maethoriel was certainly pulling out all the stops. Alainn looked over at him, squeezed his hand, and smiled. His family just continued to look in wonder and amazement.

The carriages passed through the opening and into the glen below the castle. Brian thought that he had never seen the castle look so beautiful. He wondered whether Maethoriel had done something. But, then again, the castle was beautiful without any special help and its beauty wasn't lost on Brian's family. With the people who lived in Flaitheas Scáth cheering along the road, the procession moved up to the front of the castle.

The family was led to the Queen's sitting room to wait for their official presentation. The excitement was electric. Brian's children chattered among themselves about what they had seen and experienced. However, it was Alainn who manifested the greatest excitement.

"Wow, are you excited," Brian exclaimed.

"Yes," replied the Princess who appeared to almost jump when he spoke to her.

"What gives?"

"Do you realize what is happening?" she asked.

"I'm going to formally present my family to your Mother."

"This is the official point of connection of our two families." Alainn was speaking the truth but that wasn't why she was so excited. The real excitement, totally beyond anything Brian might imagine, was yet to happen.

Alainn left the group to take her place next to her mother at the ceremony.

Brian turned to his family. "Well," he said, "it's about time. Obviously this is a very formal event. Try to follow my lead. If I bow, gentlemen should bow and ladies curtsy. We'll all try to give you clues. Don't worry about the children. People here just love the pomp and pageantry. If someone makes a mistake, that's okay. It's going to

be very different from anything you've ever experienced but I want you to have a good time with it. And if she hands you something that starts to spark when you touch it, hang on to it and don't worry. It won't hurt you."

He didn't have time to say any more and left them with some very puzzled looks. Neala appeared and led the group to the giant oak doors of the Great Hall. Again, it was her father who was waiting with two guards.

"Captain of the Guard," Neala spoke in magic-voice, "I have Tiarna Brian an ti de Ferguson who wishes audience with her Majesty, Queen Maethoriel an ti de Coillearnach, to present his family."

Captain Lawrence turned. The two guards opened the giant oak doors. For the first time Brian's family could see into the magnificent Great Hall. It was packed with people formally dressed. The crowd turned and faced Lawrence as the doors opened.

Lawrence bowed toward the dais which was out of sight to those outside the door and said, "Your Majesty. Tiarna Brian an ti de Ferguson is at the door seeking an audience for his family."

The Queen could be heard, "Bid them welcome and bring them forward." A cheer went up from the crowd. Lawrence turned toward the door and nodded to Neala.

Neala stepped to one side where a guard had appeared holding a standard with the colors furled. He handed her the standard. She stepped inside the Great Hall and unfurled the banner. It was a Ferguson tartan, blue and green squares with red lines crossing in each direction, with a large red dragon in the middle.

Turning toward Brian and giving him a great grin she said, "we had it made for you family. We knew you love dragons so we put a red dragon on one of the Ferguson tartans. Do you like it?"

"It's magnificent," Brian said over the roar of the cheering crowd.

As Neala held the banner high, magnificent music began, that sounded like there was a large orchestra playing. Neala led Brian and his family toward the dais where the Queen, her family and a number of dignitaries were waiting. As they got closer Brian could see that they were all smiling broadly. This was a great moment for them too.

The dais was three steps above the floor of the Great Hall. Queen Maethoriel's throne was as resplendent as any that could be imagined. The Queen was wearing a dress almost identical to Alainn's except that it was all in gold and white. Alainn and her family stood on the second level above the floor with dignitaries on the first level. Neala bowed deeply to the Queen and stepped to one side where she handed Brian's standard to a guard who was waiting. Brian stepped forward and got down on one knee. His family, except the youngest children, followed suit behind.

"Please rise," said the Queen cheerfully. "We are so happy to have you here, Tiarna Brian an ti de Ferguson. Please introduce to us those whom you have with you."

"If it pleases your Majesty," Brian started, "I bring my children and grandchildren to meet your Majesty." He went on to call each person forward and introduce them to the Queen.

After the introductions the Queen said that she had gifts for the children and grandchild. A team of servants appeared from the family rooms carrying the gifts and as his family began to move as instructed toward the gifts Brian tried to whisper to them, "if it sparks, it won't hurt you."

Maethoriel gave each of Brian's sons and sons-in-law beautiful Elfin swords, Kevin received a short-blade and for the ladies there were beautiful tiaras. Just as Brian suspected there was a flash of the witch's or wizard's aura when they touched their gift. Even though they were surprised they kept ahold of the gift and gave Brian

a ‘how-did-you-know?’ look. They looked even more perplexed when a cheer went up from the crowd and Maethoriel’s smile grew each time there was a flash.

“I don’t know whether your father warned you,” the Queen said, “but these gifts are all magical. Only a Draiochta – a magical person – causes them to spark with the wizard’s aura when touched.”

The only one who seemed to really understand what the Queen was saying was Kevin. Unable to contain himself he almost shouted “alright!” and thrust his short blade toward the ceiling sending up a stream of grey and blue aura. Maeathoriel looked at Brian and beamed.

“As you all know,” Queen Maethoriel said after things calmed down, “this is my new family. Almost instant grandchild and great-grandchildren.” The hall cheered. “But do you realize that Tiarna Brian has never formally asked to marry my daughter.”

There was a gasp from the crowd. Brian knew the Queen to be a prankster and wondered what she was up to with this. He had no idea but he had no choice but to go along with it.

“I apologize, Your Majesty,” said Brian getting down on one knee. He was so intent upon what was happening he didn’t see Anastasia and her family pull Brian’s family to one side with them.

“You’re not going to believe what’s about to happen,” Anastasia whispered to Brian’s family. “Brian has no idea what’s coming.”

“Your Majesty, you know me to be an honorable man of unimpeachable morality and loyalty.” He paused for effect and the Queen nodded. “I kneel before you with the fervent request for the hand of your daughter, Alainn Elizabeth an ti de Coillearnach, in marriage.”

The crowd roared and cheered. Brian waited patiently.

“Tiarna Brian an ti de Ferguson, I do know you to be honorable and of unimpeachable character and I want to say ‘yes’ but a horrible problem has confronted me.”

“What?” Brian could hear himself say in total disbelief as the crowd reacted.

“My loyal subjects, can I allow your future queen to marry a man who is not at least a prince?”

“No!” yelled the crowd on cue.

“Mother,” Alaiinn objected, “you can’t do this!” It was all she could do to keep a straight face. She really felt sorry for what they were putting Brian through. He couldn’t see Anastasia smiling and reassuring Brian’s family that he was just being teased a little.

“What should I do?” the Queen asked.

“Crown him,” the hall echoed.

At that one of Maethoriel’s ministers stepped forward with a great smile. “As you have put the question before the people and ministers of Claiinn Coillearnach we unanimously agree that Tiarna Brian an ti de Ferguson should be crowned as a prince of the kingdom.”

Brian stood in shock. He had heard what was said, but it was taking some time for him to assimilate the message. As Brian stood there speechless two servants came from the family room and stood on the step below the Queen. One was holding a sword and the other a crown. A third servant brought a large red velvet pillow and put it on the step just before the Queen.

“Tiarna Brian an ti de Ferguson,” the Queen said, “do you understand what my counsel has just told me.”

Brian looked at the Queen. The shock was still on his face. He tried to say something but all that came out was “I . . . ugh . . . I . . . yes.”

“You are to protect all people regardless of or race any other difference. You are to help your Queen to make Coillearnach a safe haven for all who would come to us. You are to use your great power with honor, integrity and compassion for all. And above all, you are to love and care for my beloved daughter. Do you accept the responsibility to which you are being called?”

There was a true, unrehearsed silence waiting for Brian’s reply. As the Queen spoke he realized that this was a fairy-tale ending to a story and that he was going to be a Prince but far more than that he got the Queen’s message – this is a true responsibility. It wasn’t a fairy-tale. It was real and hard and demanding. No one knew the cost of position more than the Queen as she glanced at Sadron standing off to one side.

Brian stood erect, took one step toward the Queen and in magic-voice said “yes, Your Majesty, I understand and I accept.”

There was a great cheer through the hall. Alainn stood with tears of joy streaming down her face. She wanted to go to Brian but she knew that she must maintain the dignity of the moment. There would be time for hugging and celebrating later.

Queen Maethoriel took out her wand and with a great gesture and incantation it seemed that the castle disappeared and the crowd and dais were on a large meadow. Crowds of people from both inside and outside Flaitheas Scáth who had been waiting outside could now see and participate. They drew close.

“Kneel, Tiarna Brian an ti de Ferguson.”

Brian knelt down on the velvet pillow before the Queen.

Taking the sword, she placed it upon his head and, in a voice that could shake a mountain, said “As the matriarch an ti de Coillearnach and as the Queen of the Kingdom of Coillearnach, with the counsel and authority of the people and ministers of this land I declare you to be a prince of the Kingdom of Coillearnach.”

The servant with the crown stepped up beside the Queen. She took the crown and put it on Brian's head. "Arise Prince Brian de an Ríocht Coillearnach."

The cheer was almost deafening. As Brian stood up he could see that the Queen was truly moved by what had just happened. Alainn was crying and clapping. His family and his new family were all cheering. "Gach clocha sneachta, Brian" the people called.

A very proud Neala stepped up and put a sword belt and sheath around Brian's waist, took the sword from the Queen and handed it, hilt first, to Brian. When Brian took the blade silver aura burst forth. Brian held the blade aloft and a stream of silver went skyward as the intensity of the cheering increased.

"It's name is Arbellason," Neala said with a smile. "It means 'noble strength'. And you deserve it." Brian wanted to kiss this young Torc woman who had become such an important part of his life. Maybe later. For now he had to show her the respect she had earned. He brought the sword down and held it before him in the position of salute.

Two servants approached carrying a large cape, and behind them was a man with a standard. It was a new standard. The field was divided diagonally with one half being the colors of Ferguson and the other the colors of Coillearnach with a red dragon dominating the center. Brian knelt down so that the servants could put the cape over his shoulders. It was greater than floor length, trailing several feet. It was the dark green of Coillearnach, trimmed in the colors of Ferguson, lined with red silk and with a red dragon almost covering the back.

Brian stood again and turned to the crowd. "Gach clocha sneachta, Brian" they all shouted.



The party that followed was as great an affair as Flaitheas Scáth had seen in a long time. Draiochta came from far away to meet the new Prince and wish him well. The castle was open and the entire Flaitheas Scáth had become one large party. It was a security nightmare but Captain Lawrence and his Torc Allta were up for the challenge. Frequently he would see his daughter, Neala, standing proudly and professionally near Prionsa Brian and be filled with pride. He had originally been opposed to her becoming a member of the guard but she had proven her skills and demonstrated her ability to command. Male Torc Allta had accepted her without question. It didn't really matter but he sometimes wondered whether that was because she was his daughter or because she was a good leader and they all knew she could take them in a fight.

Brian had been standing in the same place for hours receiving well-wishers. He was feeling tired. He looked at Alainn standing next to him. She appeared as fresh as that morning. From time to time he would get a moment to look around. Both Neala and Manwë were nearby. If he even looked like he wanted something one of them would step forward ready for instructions. The rest of the family – both his and Alainn's – had scattered into the crowd. He wasn't worried about them but it gave him a lift when he would see one, make eye contact and wave.

Brenda and Thomas Beaulac were standing on the Grand Veranda sipping Maethoriel's prize wine and looking out over the panoramic view of Flaitheas Scáth as the sun set.

It had been hard for any of them to tell when court ended and the party began. Although none of them was without a Torc Allta guard and one of their staff, they were free to move around and explore the castle. Of course not much exploring took place because there was a steady stream of people wanting to meet them, tell them stories about their father and ask them questions about the Humani world. Time to

relax, take in and try to make sense of what they were seeing and experiencing, was scarce.

It was one such moment for Brenda and Thomas but it didn't last long. A young Elfin man approached them.

"Tiarna, M'lady, my name is 'Turin," the young man said as he bowed. Still having a bit of trouble with the bowing instead of hand-shaking, they fumbled a bit and acknowledged the young man's greeting.

"Good evening, Turin," Thomas said. "It's nice to meet you."

"I had the pleasure of walking your daughter, Cathy, home from Cigam last night," Turin said.

"That was very nice of you," Brenda smiled.

Across the room Cathy was standing with her new friends. They were having a good time. Especially Arwen, who had already danced with just about every young man at the ball. As they laughed and talked with other young people around them Cathy noticed Turin approach her parents.

"Oh, my god!" she exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Riona asked.

"Look!" she pointed at Turin who was now bowing to her parents. "What's he doing?"

"Asking for your hand in marriage," Riona said in a totally matter-of-fact voice.

The other girls laughed hysterically at the idea but Cathy, having no idea of Draiochta customs, didn't laugh. "He's what!" she almost screamed.

"Take it easy," Riona said. "I was just teasing you. I have no idea. He might just be trying to make brownie points with your parents."

"Why would he do that?" Cathy was still concerned.

"Duh!" exclaimed Ultana. "And they told us you were smart."

Cathy looked at her friends. She was obviously clueless.

“Look,” Ultana tried to explain. “I don’t know how it is in the Humani world, but a young man doesn’t ask a Torc Allta officer to walk a young lady home when he knows that’s where the Torc is going.”

“What?” Cathy was still confused.

“What our Torc sister is trying to tell you,” interjected Riona, “is that Turin is obviously smitten with you, or however you Humani would say that. Last night he very subtly made sure he was always standing next to you and then he asked your grandfather’s chief Torc officer for permission to walk you home.”

“No he offered,” Cathy correct.

“No!” Riona insisted. “He asked permission. It just looked like an offer to you.” Riona shook her head and smiled. “Neala lives in the Pálás. It would have made more sense for you to walk home with her. So Turin was asking permission.”

“Oh,” was all Cathy could say.

“He’s really cute,” said Isla.

“You can say that again,” Arwen confirmed the obvious.

Cathy blushed as she watched the cute young Elfin man talk with her parents. In her Humani world that didn’t happen often.

“I would like to ask permission to take Cathy for a walk through the village down there,” Turin pointed at the village just below the castle.

“Why would you ask us?” Brenda and Thomas weren’t accustomed to young men asking them first. In fact, it had never happened to them.

“I am trustworthy and an honorable man,” said Turin somewhat puzzled at the Beaulac’s reaction to his request.

“I’m sure you are,” said Brenda. “We’re just not accustomed to being asked. Usually it would be Cathy coming to tell us that you had asked her to go for a walk and at her age we really wouldn’t have any choice.”

“The Humani world is strange to me,” Turin said politely.

“She’s pretty independent,” Brenda continued. “I think it would be best if you asked her.”

“Then I can assume that you have no problem with me asking her?” Turin was still looking for parental approval.

“That’s right.” Lifting their wine glasses to the young man, they said, “have a good time.”

“Thank you.” Turin bowed, took two steps backwards before returning to an erect posture, turned and headed off to find Cathy.

Cathy saw Turin looking. She was hoping that he was looking for her.

“What do I do now?” Cathy asked her friends.

“I know what I’d do with a lovely young man like that,” Arwen laughed.

A few moments later Turin had spotted Cathy and was asking her to go for a walk.



Everyone had a great time at the party. Everyone except for a wizard named Conan. His master needed to know what had happened and as soon as possible. As soon as he could, Conan left the party and made his way to High Point where he used the portkey to go to his master.

Apollyon was furious at the turn of events.

“Queen Maethoriel gave him Arbellason, and when he held it aloft it spew out silver aura.”

“Silver?” Apollyon looked startled. “Are you sure it was silver?”

“Yes, master,” said Conan.

“If he is a silver wizard, I must press on with my plan before he becomes too strong.”

Chapter 12.

While the party had been a success and the two families had taken a couple of days to get to know each other and bond, there was important business waiting. Brian had been addressed as “Your Highness” for three days and was still looking around for Alainn every time it happened. It was going to take some time for him to adjust to the title. Cathy had had a visit from Turin each day. There was definitely romance in the air. Cathy was a bit frustrated by the fact that Turin was being so ‘old fashioned’ and putting out almost as much energy trying to win her parents as he was trying to win her. Brian tried to explain but failed.

The entire family took a tour of Draiochta Academy and were sufficiently impressed. A few of the family were disappointed to find that Quiddich wasn’t a real wizard sport, but they found that all of the students had read Harry Potter and thought it sounded like a neat game. The problem was that riding broomsticks wasn’t something they did. Kevin, of course, wanted to start right then and wasn’t happy when he was told that he had to be at least fourteen years old. He pouted for hours. The females of both families spent every spare minute planning Alainn and Brian’s wedding. From what Brian overheard it was definitely going to be a fairy-tale event.

This morning Brian started early. As he slipped quietly into his dressing room to grab some clothes a broad smile crossed his face. Manwë was always a step ahead. He hadn’t said anything to Manwë about getting up early but there, neatly laid out, were clothes for the day. Since Manwë did know that Brian had two important meetings he had laid out a just-short-of-formal outfit that definitely said ‘royalty’. Brian still felt a bit ostentatious in the clothes Manwë selected for him, but he knew that Manwë was right and always knew what to have him wear. Today he had Brian in

Coillearnach green fall-front trousers and a silver double-breasted waistcoat with a collarless white shirt. ‘Victorian royalty,’ Brian thought to himself as he dressed. ‘Just what the Draiochta love.’

Brian didn’t know how the staff did it but they always seemed to anticipate what Brian needed and wanted. He guessed that it was Manwë’s tremendous skills as a house-staff manager. When Brian arrived in the kitchen prepared to make himself a cup of coffee and bowl of oatmeal he found one of the cooks already at work.

Mrs. Thurston curtsied almost without looking at Brian and said “Good morning, Your Highness.” Whether or not she heard Brian respond didn’t matter, she was intent upon finishing his breakfast. She did smile as Brian looked over her shoulder at the pot of porridge she was finishing and made an appreciative noise, but she didn’t allow him to get in her way. “If you’d like to sit down, Your Highness,” she said politely indicating the table in the morning room.

Within moments of sitting Mrs. Thurston had placed a cup of coffee – with sweetner and cream just as Brian liked it – and a beautiful bowl of porridge before him. She stepped back and smiled. Brian described the porridge as beautiful because it was always perfectly fixed. The first time Brian put brown sugar and raisins in her porridge Mrs. Thurston had raised an eyebrow, but she was accustomed to it now and both raisins and brown sugar were already in small bowls on the table. Actually coffee, sweetner, and brown sugar were foreign to the Draiochta in Flaitheas Scáth but the kitchen staff at both the castle and Ferguson Pálás now kept them on hand.

Brian hated to rush but it was going to be a busy morning. Mrs. Thurston frowned and said, “Your Highness really should take more time eating,” as Brian quickly consumed the porridge and headed off to the study with coffee in hand.

“We’ll probably be needing tea and coffee around quarter past or half-eight,” he said walking backwards and blowing her a kiss. Mrs. Thurston just shook her head and

waved him off with both hands. She may be calling him ‘Your Highness’ now but that’s because she likes it. She still treated him like a mother hen.

Brian knew the schedule but, out of habit, he checked his calendar. He had a land acquisition meeting at eight and a meeting about the research hospital at nine-thirty. The land acquisition meeting was because the Foundation found itself in a bidding war over some forest in southwestern West Virginia. He was anxious to hear from the committee that was working on a hospital site but he realized that he also needed to talk to his children about being Board members which meant that they should probably not be sleeping all day. He would like them to meet these people.

Magic can be very handy and quite subtle. Brian had used a bit of magic to ‘help’ his children get out of bed at a decent hour – okay, earlier than they would like. Since he had finished his porridge and was sipping coffee by seven he figured that he’d let them sleep-in until eight and then ‘encourage’ them. The family started coming down the back stairs into the morning room about eight thirty. More kitchen staff were now up and working and Mrs. Thurston was taking tea to the library.

The kitchen staff were fixing breakfast for the family when Manwë entered.

“His Highness is working in the library and would appreciate your presence when you have finished breakfast,” he announced.

“Was that a polite ‘get-your-butts-in-gear?’” Brenda teased.

“By jove, I think you’re right,” replied Celina with a decidedly fake English accent.

Manwë had spent too much time with Brian to go without response. “Yes, ma’am,” he said smiling impishly and bowing to Brenda. “it indeed means move your ass.” Ass came out ‘awse’ as he imitated Celina’s fake English accent. The room was filled with laughter. “But really,” Manwë said as the laughter subsided, “he is anxious to see you.”

It was 8am exactly when Manwë announced that Jefferson Riley had arrived. Jefferson was the Draiochta attorney who was the head of the Foundation's acquisition team. The Foundation and a coal company were in a bidding war over a large tract of mountain and forest in West Virginia. The land was up against a national forest and a state park. That wasn't an unusual scenario in that area. In this case the acquisition became more important because of its location. Brian and the others didn't like seeing the mining companies literally cut off the top of mountains, destroying everything around them, but such mining techniques in this location would be devastating to the adjacent park and forest.

The Foundation also had to be sensitive to the local Humani who would benefit financially from the mining company even if it did destroy their land, heritage and health. People in this part of the country were unbelievably poor and were willing to give up just about anything so that their children could survive. When Brian and the others were first confronted by this reality they had set up a department within the Acquisitions Section whose job it was to find ways of giving the local Humani better and healthier living conditions than if they became a 'company' town.

In this particular scenario this had been the easy part. There were several natural features that could be developed into tourist attractions and the recreational possibilities were almost limitless. They could employ most of several area communities to work developing and maintaining the tourist and recreation industry. The team had figured that after only a couple of years of Foundation financial support, other industries – hotels, resorts, restaurants and the like – would start investing in the area and the communities would become financially independent.

But preparing to help the local communities had been the easy part of this situation. The coal company was not giving up easily. Brian and Jefferson had been strategizing for over an hour with the only interruption being Mrs. Thurston coming

in with tea at 8:30. Now, almost 9:20, Manwë slipped in to tell Brian that his children were ready.

The study was basically a square room with the corners snipped off for doorways. One door led directly into the formal parlor, another into a hallway that led to the master bedroom and veranda, and a third which opened into Brian and Alainn's private sitting room. The north wall was dominated by a large desk. On the east wall there was a gigantic stone fireplace that was large enough for a child to walk into without ducking. The remaining walls were floor-to-ceiling elegant walnut bookshelves. The floor was classic parquet covered by Persian rugs. Easy chairs were grouped near the books while the center of the room was dominated by a large table with eight chairs where Brian and Jefferson Riley were sitting. The room gave Brian's family the sense that they were walking back in history.

Brian introduced his children, their spouses and his granddaughter to Jefferson. Jefferson had met several of them at the party.

"I think we've got a plan," Brian said.

"Yes, Sire, it really should work," Jefferson looked pleased. "I'll get the number crunchers to work on figuring out what price per acre would be too much for them to make a profit and then I'll go ten percent higher." Both men smiled at their scheme and Brian gave Jefferson the thumbs up.

"Great," Brian exclaimed. "But don't forget – don't go above twenty million without checking with me first."

The two men bowed to each other. Jefferson bowed to Brian's family then turned and left. Brian's family was standing there looking astonished.

"Twenty million dollars?!" Phillip exclaimed.

"Yes," said Brian already getting things out for the next meeting. "But I don't think we'll have to go that high."

Brian explained what the Acquisitions branch of the Foundation did and was explaining the specifics of the West Virginia parcel when Manwë announced that Tari and Ghorpas were in the parlor.

At 9:30 Manwë escorted a tall blond Elfin woman and a middle-aged Hogboon into the room. The woman curtsied. The Hogboon got down on one knee.

“Get up, Ghorpas,” Brian said good humoredly. “We’re not at court.”

With that the Hogboon got up, went to Brian and gave him a hug. “That’s better,” said Brian.

Brian introduced the tall Elfin woman as Tari Anwarunya, the head of the legal department for the foundation’s Hospital and Research Branch, and Ghorpas Spikeback, the head of the finance department for the Hospital and Research Branch. Everyone knew Ghorpas and they greeted Tari warmly. Some of them had met her at the party.

They were reporting on the committee progress of trying to find a location for the research hospital.

“I know a lot has happened since I first told you about the Foundation,” Brian started his explanation. “The Hospital and Research Branch will operate a free hospital and provide facilities, grants and resources for medical research. We’re not finding it as easy as we had thought to find a place for the hospital.”

“Did you say it is going to be free?” asked Mary.

“Yes,” replied Brian. “Even if someone has the money to pay, there will be no charge. They can make a donation.”

“How are you going to pay for it?” Seamus questioned.

“Remember I told you that I had to learn alchemy?”

“I thought you were joking,” said Seamus. The others agreed.

“Afraid not.” Brian looked at them and laughed. “Before I learned alchemy I borrowed seventy million pounds from the Bank of England. Had to pay it back somehow.”

“The Bank of England,” they all exclaimed in unison.

“Yes. Queen Maethoriel has an influential friend whom Alainn calls Auntie Elizabeth who arranged for it.”

“You’re not kidding, are you.” Seamus, like the other, was bewildered.

“Nope,” smiled Brian. “Not in the least. That’s why I wanted you guys here today. We need you on the Board. But let’s hear what Tari and Ghorpas have to say. They have a busy day ahead of them.”

The two had been sitting patiently waiting. It was Tari who started.

“Your Highness, this is really so much harder a task than we thought. Why don’t you just tell us where you want the hospital.”

“You know I don’t want to do that,” Brian said. “What’s the problem.”

“We have three issues,” Ghorpas explained. “First there is the matter of legality. We will need licenses, permits and all sorts of other matters of legal compliance. The Humani sure make life complicated. Some states and even local jurisdictions are more cooperative than others.”

“And then there’s the location,” Tari added. “Is the site near other hospitals, other research facilities, medical schools, or other resources. How far away are we willing to go to find the best mix?”

“And we can’t forget the cost despite your alchemy skills,” Ghorpas smiled. “We still have to make the best use of our funds.”

“And?” Brian asked.

“And we’ve come up with seven cities without getting too far away,” Tari started. “Nashville and Atlanta came up because of their proximity to medical schools and other resources. The Tennessee State Department of Health appears to be

cooperative and anxious to have another research hospital. There are two major medical schools nearby but the land cost is rather high.”

“Atlanta is a similar story,” Ghorpas interjected, “but the land costs are outlandish.”

“We talked about nearby cities that aren’t so big but close by – Chattanooga and Huntsville,” Tari continued. “Both of them are very competitive and would probably give significant support to bring such high-tech services to their communities, and it would be nice to be close for our own people.”

“I understand the draw of closeness,” Brian interposed, “but since we can use portkeys we could put the hospital on the moon with no problems for Draiochta patients. How do they compare otherwise?”

“Not so good,” Tari admitted. “They don’t have the medical schools and other research resources.”

“I’m not saying to throw them out because of that, but be honest with yourself about why you’re drawn to a site,” said Brian.

“We also put down three other cities that already have major research hospital that aren’t excessively far away,” said Ghorpas. “Cincinnati, Indianapolis and Memphis all have major research facilities and being near other large research facilities might be beneficial. We could share.”

“So what city is the favorite?” Brian asked expectantly.

“We don’t have a favorite,” Ghorpas looked embarrassed.

“Okay,” said Brian shifting into leadership mode, “here’s what I suggest. Come up with some sort of point system and see where the top sites rank. Also consider the idea of buying an existing hospital. Then sit down, duke it out, and boil your list down to two or three and we’ll have the next meeting after that here.”

Tari and Ghorpas both smiled. It was like Brian had opened a relief valve. Ghorpas especially liked the idea of buying an existing hospital. After some much

more relaxed discussion of what they had learned the two excused themselves and left.

Brian started explaining to his family how he needed them to serve on the Foundation's Board of Directors. He pointed out that they could actually work for the Foundation if they wanted. "It would pay quite well, and the perks would be outstanding." They all laughed but he knew what was going through their minds.

Unfortunately Neala interrupted before he had a chance to address their questions and concerns.

"Your Highness," said Neala bowing, "I'm sorry to interrupt but my Father has received a report of a unicorn being killed in Pennsylvania and he felt that you should know immediately."

"That's horrible," Brian exclaimed. "Who would do such a thing?"

"It's heart was removed." The group gasped. Neala continued. "A Hogboon who was watching for poachers saw a group of men kill the unicorn. The leader was Moricon."

"Moricon!"

"Yes, Highness, but those with him called him 'Apollyon.'"

Everyone was upset but Brian and Neala appeared to be most disturbed by the leader.

Brian turned to his family. "I hadn't had a chance to tell you about Moricon but you've heard the story about how we discovered I was a wizard. Well, Moricon was the Minister of Defense and he tried to kill me. It was Neala's great skills that saved my life. Later he escaped from the dungeon and we haven't seen him since. Now he's taken a new name. Apollyon means 'the destroyer'."

"The Hogboon said that he has an artificial leg now. Guess our Torc guard got him better than we thought," Neala smiled. But her smile faded quickly. "Oh, yes. The

wizard, Conan Lefler, was with him. I guess we now know who our spy is. He was here at your party.”

“Yes,” said Brian. “he came and congratulated me.”

“The Torc Allta from Thuidh Scáth are looking for Apollyon and his followers. Father has the guards watching for Conan. If he thinks that he got away with being a spy, he might come back. If he does, we’ve got him.”

Brian tried to lighten the mood without success. Even if there were things about their Father’s new world that they found hard to believe . . . even if they didn’t believe in Unicorns, the thought of one so evil as to kill such a creature was upsetting.

“You know he’s up to some serious evil,” said Manwë who had come into the room while they were talking.

“Yes, but we can’t let this start a panic,” said Brian. “Whatever he’s up to is obviously going to be aimed at me.”

“You!” Phillip exclaimed. Brian’s children all started talking at once, demanding that he explain why he would be the target of such a dastardly man.

“First, I stood up to him. No one had evidently ever done that before. For some reason it was very important for him to discredit me, so when his attempt to kill me fell through and I was able to exonerate myself he was not only foiled and humiliated but ended up in the dungeon awaiting trial. He had been a very, very powerful man in the kingdom and the way he must look at it, I’m the reason he lost all of that. I’d say he’s out for revenge.”

“What do you suggest, Highness?” asked Neala.

“I suggest that we need to keep this among those who ‘need to know’ and simply catch the guy so that people can go about their lives. I don’t want to put anyone in danger but I also don’t want people going around looking over their shoulder.”

“We’ll try.” Neala bowed, took two steps back before becoming erect, did a military about-face and left.



Conan entered Apollyon’s chambers and got down on one knee. “You called for me, My Lord?”

“Yes, Conan,” said Apollyon looking up from his writing table. “I have a task for you.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I understand that there’s going to be a wedding in Flaitheas Scáth.”

“Yes, My Lord. Prince Brian and Princess Alainn.”

“Don’t call that Humani ‘prince’ around me again!” Apollyon screamed.

“Yes, My Lord.” Conan almost hid his head waiting for some painful blow which, thankfully, never came.

“When do you think it would be most inconvenient for me to drop in and pay my respects?” Apollyon said with an evil smile.

“In the middle of the wedding?”

“Oh, you’re a smart wizard, you are. But I don’t know when that’s going to be, so I need someone to go to Flaitheas Scáth and gather information. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes, My Lord.” Conan smiled. As far as he knew no one suspected his true allegiance and the task was simple and safe. He smiled because he had made it through an audience with the master without being punished with some sort of painful spell.

“Well,” said Apollyon looking back at his writing desk, “get out of here.”



It was mid-day when Conan arrived at the giant Cucumber Magnolia, put his hand to the tree and recited the incantation. As the tree opened two Torc Allta guards stood smiling.

“Well, if it isn’t wizard, Conan Lefler.”

Conan thought maybe he should leave. As he turned there was another Torc Allta guard behind him.

“You wouldn’t be thinking of leaving again, would you, wizard Conan?” said the guard behind him.

“No,” Conan didn’t know what to do. He knew that it would be fruitless and most likely extremely painful to attempt to fight a Torc Allta. “I was . . . well, I mean . . .”

“You mean that you’re so happy to see us that you want to go with us to talk to Captain Lawrence?”

“Captain Lawrence? What have I done?”

“You’ve been a very bad wizard,” said one of the guards. “You were seen helping to kill a Unicorn. You know that’s a very, very bad no-no!”

Conan stood frozen. Two of the guards took him by the arms as the third took away his ring and searched him for wands or other magic devices. Then they led him toward the castle. Conan had a hard time keeping up with the two guards and much of the time they were carrying him with his feet swinging frantically in mid-air.

Conan was either so terrified of Apollyon that he wouldn’t talk or he was exceptionally loyal. It didn’t take long for Lawrence, Brian and the others to conclude that he was very much more terrified than loyal. The problem that they faced was bypassing the fear and getting him to talk.

It was Neala who came up with the idea of hypnotism.

“But you know that hypnotism doesn’t work like that,” said Brian.

“Of course I do,” Neala said with a devilish grin, “but Conan doesn’t.”

“Oh!”

“Right,” she continued. “We tell him that we’re going to hypnotize him so that he’ll tell us the truth. We have Anastasia there so when he starts thinking about the things he’s afraid he’ll tell she can learn them.”

“Clever girl!” exclaimed Lawrence. “Clever girl.”

“But she won’t be able to get any of the detail,” said Brian.

“She doesn’t have to. She just needs to get one good detail. Then we tell him that if he doesn’t tell us the entire truth we’ll start the rumor that he immediately turned on Apollyon and mention that information. He’ll cave because he knows how heartless and unforgiving Apollyon is.”

“Wow, are you devious,” Brian mused as he considered her plan. It should work.

The four of them visited Conan in his cell. He sat quietly and refused to look at them nevertheless speak.

“I say we use hypnotism,” said Neala when Conan refused to speak.

Anastasia had sat down beside Conan. Without looking at him she simply quietly said, “Do you know what hypnotism is?” Conan didn’t answer but had she been able to see, he had taken a quick look at her expecting her to do something to him. His eyes were filled with fear. “It’s a Humani brain torture. They put you in what they call a trance state. You can’t do anything but they can make you do whatever they want.”

“You know what we should do,” Neala addressed the others as though not hearing Anastasia speak to Conan. “I think after he tells us everything we should send him out dancing around the woods shouting ‘tá Apollyon dúr’ and see how long he lives.”

Conan's fear got the better of him as he shouted at Neala, "You wouldn't do that!"

Giving him a look Brian and the others found frightening, Neala got close to his face and said, "Do you want to bet your life on that? Those were my friends who were killed when your master escaped. You're going to tell us where he is and what he's doing."

Suddenly Anastasia jumped up and shouted, "Got it! He's hiding in the mountains of north central Pennsylvania and working on a spell that is a living source of evil power."

"I didn't tell you that," exclaimed Conan.

"No, but you thought it," laughed Anastasia.

"And if you don't give us the details we're going to throw you out of Flaitheas Scáth and tell everyone that we know where Apollyon is hiding because you told us."

"He wouldn't believe that!"

"Are you sure?"

Conan sat for a long time. It was ironic. If he was faithful to his master his master would kill him. His only chance at surviving was to actually betray his master. Then again, Conan thought, these people's weakness is their regard for life. They wouldn't send him out to certain death. He sat quietly.

"Okay," Lawrence said breaking the silence. "Guard!"

A Torc Allta guard hurries in from the next room.

"Cheannasaí," said the guard coming to attention.

"We're going to release Wizard Conan."

"Yes, Cheannasaí."

"You are to escort him outside an flaitheas and turn him loose."

"Yes, Cheannasaí."

“Oh, and tell everyone to be nice to him because he just told us everything we need to know.” Conan couldn’t see Lawrence grin.

“Yes, Cheannasaí.” The guard looked a bit puzzled but politely took Conan by the arm and started out the door.

“Good bye,” said Brian, Lawrence, Neala and Anastasia.

Conan just looked. He still believed they wouldn’t do such a thing but as they got closer to the great tree he began to worry. The four of them hadn’t even bothered to come along.

“What are you doing with that scum?” the Torc Allta guard at the tree asked.

“Oh,” said Conan’s escort, “we supposed to treat him nicely because he told Captain Lawrence and Prionsa Brian everything they wanted to know.”

“Wasn’t that nice of him,” the guard at the tree still didn’t look very friendly.

“We’re supposed to put him outside an flaitheas.”

“You do realize that that’s as good as a death sentence,” Conan tried to sound matter-of-fact but it didn’t really work. It came out more of a whine.

“Yes, but we have our orders,” replied one of the guards. “Okay. Out you go Wizard Conan,” indicating the passageway through the giant tree.

“No! No!” cried Conan. “I didn’t tell them everything. Take me back! Take me back!”

“I don’t know. I’ve got my orders.”

“Oh, please,” Conan fell on his knees begging.

“It’s okay,” said Brian who suddenly appeared. “Take him back to his cell.”

Back in his cell the blubbering Conan told Lawrence, Neala, Anastasia and Brian everything he knew. He told them that Apollyon was hiding in the mountains of north-central Pennsylvania and gave them as much direction as he could. He told them all about Apollyon being the great-grandson of Morgana Pendragon, Morgana’s

Codex and about the spell Jar na Marbh Beo and how he still needed a virgin born on June 13, 1995.

“That Apollyon is a sandwich shy of a picnic,” Brian said shaking his head as the four of them sat down in the conference room.

“He’s Morganian. What do you expect?” replied Neala.

“He may be ruthless and vicious, but he’s not crazy,” said Queen Maethoriel as she walked through the door. Everyone stood and bowed. Witch Sorchu was right behind her. “Witch Sorchu has brought some interesting information to light.”

The group’s attention turned to the small, frail witch.

“There was always something about Moricon that bothered me,” Sorchu started even before sitting down. “I knew that I had seen him but it would have been impossible unless . . .” She paused to choose her words.

“Unless what?” the group demanded, not having patience.

“Unless he’s a great deal older than we thought.”

“What do you mean by a ‘great deal older?’” asked Brian.

“I realized that Moricon was around when I was a young girl and he looked the same then as he does now.”

“Then he’s older than you?!” said Anastasia.

“Oh,” Sorchu looked at her with a seriously concerned expression. “There’s more. When I realized how I knew him I talked to some of my colleagues who helped on Prionsa Brian’s ancestry. We soon learned that Moricon suddenly appeared in the Coillearnach Kingdom in the late 17th century. He’s been here for over 300 years.”

“How can that be?” Lawrence questioned.

“Philosopher’s Stone . . . red earth,” Queen Maethoriel answered.

The group looked back to Sorchu. “Yes, he must have learned how to make a life elixir. That’s the only explanation.”

“That also means that he really could be the great-grandson of Morgana Pendragon,” said Brian.

“Yes,” said Sorchá. “I’m afraid so.”

“That also means that we’re facing a tremendously powerful adversary,” Lawrence added. “Torc Allta from Thuaidh Scáth are going to go to the place Conan told us about. I must warn them about this.”

“That would be a good idea,” said Maethoriel as Lawrence bowed and took his leave so he could send a message to Thuaidh Scáth.



Lawrence’s warning to the Torc Allta of Thuaidh Scáth was too late. They had already left for the location Conan had given and were engaged in a gruesome battle with Apollyon and his followers.

The wizards and other followers were no match for the Torc Allta but the Jotnar were not only equally fierce warriors but much more adept to fighting in the mountains. That was their natural terrain. They continued to outmaneuver the Torc Allta notwithstanding being outnumbered.

Despite the efforts of his followers and the ferocity of the Jotnar, Apollyon realized that it was just going to be a matter of time before the Torc Allta reached him. Taking a small group of faithful followers and a few Jotnar, a frustrated and angry Apollyon withdrew from the battle, entered the cave and disappeared.

Chapter 13.

The news of the battle in Pennsylvania and Apollyon's escape travelled rapidly through the kingdom. Realizing that they had been abandoned by their leader, the Jotnar fled the battle leaving a band of wizards and a few goblins who were no match for the Torc Allta. Once the Jotnar fled, the battle was soon over.

Those who were captured were quick to tell their captors that Apollyon had gone into the cave. Upon investigation the Torc found a recent cave-in. It was too much to hope that Apollyon had been trapped on the other side and was gone forever. No. The consensus was that the reason for his being in this cave in the first place was probably because of a leygate, and that he had probably used the gate to escape and caused the cave-in to keep others from following. Unfortunately, no one had any idea where the gate might lead.

The library at Ferguson Pálás had become a war-room. Brian stood looking out the door into the master suite sitting room. As he stared at the mountain through the great windows he took a sip of the golden nectar from the highball glass he held. He took but a brief moment to look at the decoration on the glass – ‘Paddy. Old Irish Whiskey. Cork Distilleries Co. Product of Ireland’ it read. Brian smiled and held it up to the light for a moment. The room was a reddish-gold from the light of the setting sun still visible above the mountain. Every time Brian saw that he couldn't help but recite his grandfather's saying, “red sails at night, sailor's delight. Red sails at morning, sailors take warning.”

“What was that, Your Highness?” Lawrence asked looking up from the library table that dominated the center of the room and now was covered with maps and ancient books.

“Nothing,” said Brian returning his attention to the activity around the table. “Just an old mnemonic about the weather.”

“Okay,” replied Lawrence, going back to his book. “From what I can glean from this book, there is a leygate about where Apollyon’s cave is.”

“Oh,” Brian moved quickly to Lawrence’s side.

“Yes, but I can’t really get an exact position.” Lawrence sat back in his chair and looked up at Brian and across the table at Prince Stephan who had been pouring over another ancient book of ley lines. “I would bet anything that that is how Apollyon got in and out of that mountain.”

“But where would he go?” Brian said, not particularly to either man.

“From this it seems that he could go northwest toward central Canada, or southeast all the way to central Africa, or southwest into Mexico or northeast to Greenland.” Lawrence leaned back and threw up his hands. “Take your pick.”

“What’s that?” Stephan asked, leaning across the table and pointing to a spot in the book before Lawrence.

“It’s an unconfirmed gate somewhere in the Humani state of West Virginia.”

“My money’s on West Virginia,” said Stephen.

“I’d have to agree,” said Brian.

“It’s as good a place as any to start looking,” Lawrence said with a sigh.

Anastasia entered the room through the door to the west veranda. “Okay, boys,” she said as she entered. “your family is ready to sit down to dinner. Grandmother is here, and you know how she hates to be kept waiting.”

At the mention of Queen Maethoriel the three men jumped to their feet. Lawrence started toward the door into the formal parlor and the front door.

“Join us,” said Brian.

“No, I shouldn’t.”

“Forget protocol. Do I need to make it an order?”

“Please don’t,” Lawrence smiled. “I would really like to go home and see my wife.”

“Oh! Yes!” Brian said apologetically. Lawrence was a faithful leader and was always there for the royal family and the Scáth. It made Brian feel bad when he would forget that Lawrence had a family. “Give Aoife our regards.”

Brian had taken a liking to the name Aoife, pronounced ‘ee-fa’. It meant beautiful, radiant and joyful. One Aoife in history was known as the greatest woman warrior in the world. Brian always thought that was appropriate for the wife of a Torc Allta captain and a mother to a woman like Neala. Aoife Dearg (Red Aoife) was the daughter of a king of Connacht in Ireland who supposedly had her marriage arranged by Saint Patrick himself.

Lawrence bowed and left. Stephan and Brian headed toward the dining room at a trot.



While Brian and Stephan joined their family for dinner, Apollyon stood at the entrance to yet another cave holding a poorly cooked piece of animal carcass and looking out over the mountains of West Virginia. They didn’t look all that different from north central Pennsylvania. He was looking at the same beautiful sunset, but he didn’t see it. He was obsessed by the hatred and anger that drove him compounded by yet another humiliation at the hands of Clainn Coillearnach.

He looked back into the cave. On a large table lay piles of books, binders and files. These were the only thing he had brought from Pennsylvania. It had taken a lot of work but he had found that there were 4,912 females born on June 13th, 1995. With a modicum of bribery and significant skullduggery Apollyon had the names, place of birth and parents’ names for over half of them.

He had created several rings with red stones. The rings would turn white when touched by a virgin. Apollyon had sent his agents across the country to find the girls

born on June 13th. When they found them they would create a situation where they would shake hands with the young woman. If the ring's stone turned white, it meant that she was a virgin. To this point no stones had turned white. Apollyon or his agents had met over one hundred of the girls. Despite the fact that he knew that statistically 19% of these woman would have had sexual relations by this time and 10% of them would actually have already had children, he felt frustrated and irritable.

"Lord Apollyon," a servant said softly. They were always afraid to address Apollyon, especially when he was standing like that.

"What is it?" Apollyon snapped.

"We just receive a message from Willard," the servant said as Apollyon turn and faced him. He almost froze as his master took a 'this-better-be-good' posture. "He has found one of the young women in the Humani state of Mississippi. She appears to be what the Humani call 'mentally retarded.'"

"So!?" Apollyon exclaimed.

"Should he attempt to make contact?"

"Why do you bother me with this?" Apollyon shouted. "Tell him to move on." Then Apollyon had second thoughts. "Wait! If she is not what they consider 'normal' her parents might not be able to find anyone willing to mate with her or they are afraid to let her mate because she might spawn another like herself." Apollyon didn't realize that his logic was medieval and absurd but unfortunately it came to a correct conclusion. "She is the most likely woman we've found to be a virgin. Tell Willard to make contact."

Apollyon stood smiling. A very relieved servant fled the room and hurried off to do his master's bidding.



Kevin and Arno looked at each other across the table. Arno's mother was on Brian's kitchen staff so the two best friends often ate breakfast together. Arno's father was on Prince Stephan's staff. Unknown to those around them, today was special for the boys.

"And what are you two mischief-makers up to today?" said Cathy cheerfully as she sat down at the table with the two ten-year old boys.

There was an almost unperceivable delay as Kevin shot his sister one of those 'how-do-you-know' looks before saying, "Nothing!"

The delay, however, didn't get past Cathy's notice. That, with the exclamation 'nothing' that came out like a denial of something, caused Cathy to give her little brother a quizzical look. "I was teasing," she said.

"I know," said Kevin motioning to Arno that it was time to go.

Cathy sat and watched the two boys leave. She saw Kevin look over his shoulder to see if she was still watching them. She laughed, shook her head, and turned her focus to breakfast. There was no doubt in her mind that they were up to something. But, she thought, weren't ten-year-old boys always up to something?

Arno and Kevin ran the short distance from Ferguson Pálás to the Cigam Inn where Maldor was waiting. Maldor's parents were the innkeepers. He was a Daonna-wizard. His family had lived in the Humani world until Brian built Cigam. His parents had owned a hotel in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania just outside the Worthington State Forest where a lot of Draiochta live. When they heard about Cigam they contacted Brian and asked if they could run the inn. They wanted their children to grow up in a Draiochta community.

The three ten-year-old boys, an Elf and two wizards, immediately became fast friends. And as boys will do, their conversation soon turned to sports, monsters, heroes and warriors. Arno, of course, knew all of the statistics on wizard dueling while Maldor and Kevin told stories of super-heroes and martial arts from the

Humani world. However, they all had one experience in common – they were all Harry Potter fans.

When Arno and Maldor learned that Kevin had actually won martial arts competitions, a pack was soon made. While Draiochta children are not permitted to practice magic before the age of fifteen – the average age after one year at Draiochta Academy – it was common knowledge that most did. Almost all Elfin children practiced therianthropy and were quite competent animagus long before being of age to attend the academy. Maldor, who had grown up in the Humani world, had made a wand. Most of the magic that he had practiced were ways of thwarting and tormenting the Humani school bullies. The boys made a pack to teach each other their skills.

Arno couldn't teach Kevin therianthropy until he knew how to use magic, so it was up to Maldor to teach Kevin how to use his innate skills. Kevin, on his part, turned out to be a good martial arts teacher and Arno and Maldor were soon practicing martial arts drills.

Each day the boys would go off into the forest to practice. Arno and Maldor agreed that Kevin needed a wand. For that matter, Arno also needed a wand.

Maldor explained to the other two boys that the best wand is one that the wizard makes for himself. When the wizard makes his own wand, the wizard and wand become as one and are more powerful.

Kevin had found a broken branch hanging from a walnut tree. Each type of wood is known for certain magical properties and what might be called their personality. The walnut tree is good wands because it is very versatile and will do anything for its owner. On the other hand, it can be a very lethal weapon because it will not resist anything its user asks of it.

Maldor told him to ask the tree permission to take the branch, so Kevin asked the tree if he could cut the broken branch. He promised the tree that he would use

the wand for good. As he looked to Maldor for what to do next, a tremor went through the tree. Kevin just stood and looked. Had it actually answered him? Maldor nodded and Kevin cut the branch.

After each boy had a branch, they cut a piece about ten inches long, cleaned and removed the bark. Kevin decided that he would leave his plain and coated it with a sealant.

The next step was to dedicate the wand. They had found a peaceful, calm and safe place, as per their instructions, held up their wands, and facing in the four cardinal directions said “Mé tiomantas seo brainse leis an cabhrú le agus costaint gach dhaoine ina gcónaí.” When Kevin asked Maldor and Arno what he had said, they told him it means ‘I dedicate this wand to the aide and protection of all living beings.’ He then drew a magic circle around himself and said ‘Glachadh dom más maith leat’ and sat down, holding the wand with both hands, waiting for it to glow, vibrate or otherwise acknowledge him. A few moments later the wand began to glow. Kevin looked at his friends and smiled. The adventure had begun.

The three friends spent their time practicing magic and learning martial arts. They were able to teach Kevin magic because at his age he didn’t need the mind-opening ritual. That is only necessary for a Draiochta who had passed the age of eleven without being introduced to magic and how to be more aware of one’s surroundings. They taught Kevin spells and how to focus his magic through his wand. He learned quickly and was soon excelling at dueling and a Draiochta version of paint-ball called Clib that used harmless plasma. None of his friends were surprised at Kevin’s power or skill. After all, he was the grandson of a silver wizard. One of the boys fell out of a tree while playing Clib. Kevin stopped him before he hit the ground. If the friends weren’t sparing or playing clib they were dueling. But Quiddich was still a dream.

Their talk of Quiddich had led to talking about flying and broomsticks. Kevin wanted more than anything to fly. He had gone to the Witch Sorchia and asked her about flying on broomsticks.

“Why would an underage wizard like yourself want to know about flying on a broomstick?” she had asked.

“My friends and I have read Harry Potter,” Kevin had told her, “and we had an argument about whether or not it was even possible.”

“And you believe?”

“Yes, ma’am, I think it can be done. But Maldor doesn’t.”

“Well,” Sorchia smiled as she sat back in her rocker, “you’re correct. It didn’t use to be uncommon, but the modern world has made it an obsolete skill. I can’t remember the last time I saw anyone fly on a broom.”

“Then there could be such a game as Quiddich,” Kevin exclaimed.

“What is Quiddich?” asked Sorchia. Kevin explained.

“I guess,” said Sorchia laughing, “but it wouldn’t be easy. You see, you don’t straddle a broomstick. You actually sit side-saddle. The broom is just used for lift and forward momentum. You hold on to the top of the broom and rather lean up against it. When you’re flying you look like your lying on the broom or being dragged along by it. It was more of the latter.”

“Oh,” said Kevin disappointed. “Then you wouldn’t be able to catch or throw a ball.”

“Well, you would have one hand free, but that’s all.”

“Do you use spells?”

“After the broom has been enchanted you only need the command words.”

“What are those?”

“Wait a minute,” Sorchia suddenly stopped and smile. “I think I’m being used.”

“What do you mean?” Kevin gave her his most innocent look.

“I mean I can imagine three underage wizards out there trying to fly and play this game called Quiddich.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Kevin had to try a different tact.

“What’s wrong with that is that flying is dangerous and you’re all still too young.”

The Witch Sorchia had refused to tell him how to fly a broomstick, but she had told him that it was possible and gave them some idea of what they needed to do.

Maldor’s parents had some old spell books. The boys had spent many evenings going through them until they found an article about flying a broom which said that it was actually a combination of levitation and moving the broom forward.

This day the three boys raced from the Inn to their secret place in the woods. This was the day they were going to try to get their brooms to fly.

Maldor was the first to try. He used the levitation command ‘suas’ and began to rise. However, because the broom was so narrow, he quickly fell off.

They all laughed but the other two didn’t fare any better. Time and again they would successfully levitate only to fall off.

It was Kevin who finally tried the levitation while standing upright and holding the broom against his side. With the command ‘suas’ he began to rise with the broom to his side. After that success there were countless failures to achieve the horizontal position they assumed was required to fly.

Arno was the one who came up with the idea that perhaps you didn’t fly horizontally. Kevin pointed out that the Humani helicopter could only move forward when its noise was dipped down.

There were many more failed attempts before Kevin rose off the ground, leaned only slightly against the broom, putting it at about a forty-five degree angle, and commanded ‘ar aghaidh!’ Kevin began to move. The more he leaned, the faster he moved.

They had discovered the secret of flying on a broomstick and from that point on flying practice was given as much time as magic or martial arts. They were soon proficient enough that they couldn't fly in the woods and they didn't dare go above the trees and be seen. They found a meadow on nearby Buffalo Mountain that was big enough that they could practice without being seen.

They weren't going to play Quiddich, but they were flying. That made the boys happy.

Chapter 14

Karen Hester almost bounced out the door toward the family pickup parked by the farm house near Mill Lake. She looked around and started waving at her father who was walking from the barn toward the house. He waved back.

“Daddy, we’s goin’ to Wa-Mart,” Karen called.

“Have fun, sweetie,” the man called back.

“Do you wantta go with us?”

“No,” said the man as he drew near, “don’t reckon I should. I smell like the hog pen.”

Karen’s mother had come up behind her and was waiving her arms as though to clear the air. “Oh, my! You ain’t kidding! Go get a shower! We’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

The farm was about eight to ten miles south and west of Hickory Flat, Mississippi and Wal-Mart had been one of Karen’s favorite places to go since it was built a few years before.

“Okay,” her father agreed. “Would you stop by Allis-Chalmer and pick up that part I ordered last week?”

“Sure,” Karen’s mother said as she slipped behind the wheel of the family Ford F-10. Despite its appearance – through the rust, patches and mud one could just tell that it was a two-tone red and white 1980s vintage – it kicked over quickly and Karen and her mother were on their way.

Sitting in a rented Honda Accord, Willard watched from a distance and followed the pickup.

Willard had met many of the young women born on June 13th 1995 but he had never been in the situation where he had to worry about parental protection. Having lived most of his life in the Humani world he knew that the parents of a special needs

child would be very protective. He couldn't just walk up to her as he had the others. Getting an idea he looked up social services in Mississippi on his smart phone and soon knew that it was called the Department of Human Services.

Karen was looking through racks of DVDs while her mother was across the aisle in the notions department. Willard decided that that was as good a time as any. He approached Karen.

"Are you Karen Hester?" Willard asked.

"Yes." Karen turned and smiled at Willard. He was struck not only by her innocence but by how pretty she was. For a brief moment he almost hated what he was going to do. 'Perhaps,' he thought to himself, 'she won't be a virgin.'

"I thought I recognized you from your photo," said Willard.

Almost immediately Karen's mother was by her daughter's side.

"Who are you?" Mrs. Hester said in firm but not unfriendly tone. She had obviously done this type of screening before.

"Oh, you must be Mrs. Hester," said Willard. "I was just introducing myself to your daughter. I'm Willard McAllister with Mississippi Department of Human Services."

"I told your office we don't need you," Mrs. Hester said somewhat defensively. Willard hadn't picked the right government office.

"Oh," said Willard, "I'm just introducing myself. I don't want anything. I just recognized your daughter from her picture and wanted to say 'hello'".

Mrs. Hester relaxed a bit as Willard gave her his most charming and innocent smile.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be unfriendly."

"No. Don't worry. I understand." Willard held out his hand to Karen who shook hands with him. He glanced at the stone as he extended his hand to Mrs. Hester. It was white. "Have a nice evening."

As Willard walked away he looked at the ring again. Karen was the virgin Apollyon was seeking. He toyed with the idea of telling his master that she wasn't a virgin, but he didn't figure that Apollyon would believe that and knew that the consequences would be dire if he was caught. No, he'd have to let Apollyon know about Karen Hester.

Apollyon was, as would be expected, thrilled with the news. He decided that he wasn't going to trust abducting the girl to Willard. Apollyon felt that Willard, like most wizards who lived among the Humani, was weak. He wasn't going to trust such an important mission to anyone.

Apollyon found Willard at the Motel 8 near the US-78 interchange.

"It doesn't take much to keep track of them," Willard tried to tell Apollyon who was angry that he wasn't watching the farm. "They rarely leave the farm unless they are coming here for supplies. They start their day at 4am and are in bed by 8 or 9pm. When they do leave the farm, Karen is always with one of her parents."

"Is she ever far enough away from her parents on the farm that we could snatch her?"

"No. She tends to be with her mother most of the time. Sometimes her mother does things out side without Karen but Karen is in the house. She likes to help her father around the barn. Oh, yes! She does go out alone a couple of times a day and does something in the pig pen."

"That's the type of thing I need to know," said Apollyon with an evil smile. It was enough to make Willard shudder.

Apollyon got a large bowl. While moving his ringed hand around the rim of the bowl he recited incantations. Soon Willard could see images appearing in the water. They were inside the farmhouse.

“I can’t get in but mice can,” Apollyon looked up at Willard. “I’m trying to hear through their ears but that’s a lot harder. Mice don’t generally pay much attention to Humani sounds.” A few minutes later voice could be heard.

Apollyon tried to keep the mice still, which was an extremely difficult task. He watched the bowl intently.

“Karen,” her father said, “the sow has just about weaned this batch and you can start taking care of that piglet you picked for the fair.”

“Oh, can I . . .” Karen’s sentence was cut off because the mouse’s attention was caught by the family cat. The cat was just across the room and had evidently spotted the mouse. As hard as Apollyon tried to control the mouse, survival was taking control. Apollyon became angry and forced the mouse into the room. The last image in the bowl was of the cat. Then things went black.

Willard shuttered. It was just like Apollyon. There was no reason to kill the mouse but it had made Apollyon angry and that’s how he handled anyone who made him angry – human or mouse.

“We have enough,” said Apollyon. “The girl is going to take care of a piglet for a fair. That’s all I need. Let go to the farm.”

Without question Willard drove Apollyon to the Hester farm. The farm was on county road 10 just a short distance from the intersection of country roads 1 and 10. For all intent and purpose it was a dead-end road. A short distance north of the farm it became an undeveloped gravel track that went to the reservoir’s dam. Young couples would occasional venture up their road but few others. The farm was bordered by county road 10 on the west, county road 1 on the south, Rochester Creek on the east and a track of woods on the north. Dan Hester was a subsistence farmer. He cultivated the low lands on the south portion of his property and grazed animals on the north between the barn and the tree line. Apollyon had Willard turn off his

lights before he turned onto county road 10 and drove slowly by the farm to just past the tree line where he stopped.

Willard watched fearfully as Apollyon conjured up a likeness of Karen and talked to it as though he were talking to the girl.

“Karen your piglet needs you,” Apollyon said to the likeness. The girl looked concerned. “But you don’t want to worry your parents about it. You want to go to the pig pen quietly and alone.”

“Let’s go,” Apollyon said to Willard. “Turn the car around and wait for me here. I’m going to wait for the girl in those trees. When she gets to the pig pen I’ll tell her to go to the trees and grab her.”

Willard did as he was told. He didn’t really want to know any more than he needed.

A short while later Karen could be seen slipping out of the house without her parent’s knowledge. She went straight to the pig pen on the far side of the barn from the house. As soon as she went around the end of the barn she was out of sight of the house.

“Oh, my, Karen,” said Apollyon with one of his evil smiles, “your piglet has gotten out of the pen and is over by the trees. You can see her over there, can’t you? You need to go to the trees and get her.”

The real Karen could be seen turning away from the pen and heading toward the trees where Apollyon was waiting. A short while later Apollyon was at the car with a frightened young woman. She opened her mouth as though to scream but nothing came out. Her eyes showed the terror she was experiencing. Willard didn’t want to think of the horrible restraints Apollyon might be using on her.

Willard moved quietly past the farm, turned right onto county road 1 and made his way to the gravel road leading to Mill Lake. Apollyon had decided to finish the magic at the lake because it was close, secluded and had all of the elements he needed.

He put Karen in a shelter while he started getting things ready. What Apollyon hadn't expected was that her parents would notice her missing so soon and that people would arrive so quickly to help look for the missing girl. There was no doubt in Apollyon's mind that one of the first places the searchers would look would be the woods and the lake. He not only did not have time to complete the spell but it was going to be difficult to get away from the lake without encountering searchers. He would be hard pressed to come up with a good excuse for being there.

Willard sped past searchers on the road. As he came to the stop sign at County Road 1 he looked left. There was a police car moving slowly along the road. It sped up as Willard came to a stop. Willard turned right and hit the gas. Almost immediately the police car's red and blue lights came on. Willard pushed the gas harder. The police car started to catch up.

Apollyon looked casually out the back window at the approaching police car which, by this time, had its siren wailing. He pointed his ring at the car. Instantly both front tires of the police car exploded and there were flames coming from the engine compartment. The car nose-dived into the pavement causing it to flip end over end, skidding on its top into the ditch along the road.

Apollyon simply smiled. Willard watched the police car in his rear view mirror. Shortly after it came to rest fire erupted. Willard didn't see anyone get out.

"As soon as you can, get going the other direction," Apollyon instructed, "just in case he had time to tell anyone about us. Then find a place we can stop."

□ □ □

Willard followed County Road 1 to an unmarked road heading south and followed that until it came to an east-west state highway where he turned east. The highway went through Holly Springs National Forests so was deserted even at this early hour of the evening. Willard pushed down on the accelerator. He wasn't sure which was driving him more – escaping capture by the police or getting this

reprehensible deed over. They soon came to the US-78 interchange. Willard got on the four-lane highway and sped south. A few miles down the road there was a rest area. Apollyon had Willard exit.

Apollyon sat in the back seat of the Honda with the terrified girl and studied a map of leylines and gates. There were only two available. The nearest one was in a place called Dismal Canyon near Hackleburg, Alabama.

Suddenly Apollyon began to laugh. “Guess where one of the leygates on this line is?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “High Rock Point right by Flaitheas Scáth. Isn’t that ironic.”

“We’ll finish the spell right under their noses. Once I have this young lady’s life force we’ll destroy Clainn Coillearnach once and for all.” Apollyon laughed a most ghoulish laugh as he stroked Karen’s cheek. The laugh and the site of petrified girl was more than Willard could handle. He got out of the car and fled the sound of the laughter. When he stopped he bent over and vomited.

Watching Willard, Apollyon was now laughing at Willard’s distress. He pointed his ring at the helpless wizard, quietly said “mharú”, and Willard fell dead. “Weakling!” Apollyon spat in Willard’s direction as he got out of the backseat and slid into the driver’s seat.



Brian, Alainn and their children were sitting on the east veranda sipping Miruvor as they worked out the details of their involvement in the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Foundation. They had pretty well come to the conclusion that what they were experiencing was real, that the foundation was really functioning and becoming a force with which to be reckoned in the Humani world, and that, if it could financially support them, it would be a good life in which they could do a lot of good.

As they talked Manwë approached Brian and whispered in his ear.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Brian looked up in shock.

“No, sire,” Manwë said. “It is evidently all over the Humani news. They call it an Amber Alert.”

Alainn knew about what they were speaking, and the shock on her face caused concern among the others who didn’t know about Apollyon’s ‘jar na marbh beo.’ She held up her hand as they began to clamor for answers.

“I assume that a virgin has been taken,” she said to Manwë.

“Yes, Highness.”

“And she meets all of criteria for Apollyon’s spell?”

“Yes, Highness. She was born on June 13th 1995.”

“And we know she’s a virgin and not just a young woman having run off with a boy?”

“She’s a special needs child,” said Brian. “That’s why they put out an Amber Alert for an eighteen year old.”

“Oh, no! Poor girl! Do you think she’s still alive?”

“I hope so,” said Manwë. “From the way the news stories sounded Apollyon wouldn’t have had time to do any complicated magic. A car fled the area a short time after she was noticed missing. A police car started to pursue but somehow both front tires blew out and the engine caught fire causing the car to flip over and kill the police officer.”

“That sure sounds like Apollyon’s handiwork,” interjected Brian whose family was getting particularly restless waiting to learn what it was all about. “Get Lawrence and Neala and have them meet me in the library while I explain all this to my family.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Manwë bowed and left to do as he was instructed while Brian explained the rest of the Apollyon story to his shocked and frightened family.

“What are you going to do, Dad?” asked Celina echoing all their sentiments.

“We’ve got to find him and stop him, and hopefully that means saving this young girl’s life.”

“Is there anything we can do?” said Mary.

“I don’t think so, at this point, but I’ll let you know. You’re all welcome to join us in the library.”



The family had gathered in the library where Brian was showing them maps of ley lines and gates, explaining how they worked, and how they had been looking for Apollyon in West Virginia because of ley gates. Lawrence and Neala arrived together followed shortly by Stephan, Anastasia, Derek and Riona.

“Here’s where the girl was abducted,” Manwë pointed to a spot on a large map lying on the table.

“He must have gone there by some means other than leygate,” noted Derek. “None of the lines going out of West Virginia go near that part of the country.”

“Your right,” said Lawrence. “But with this thing the Humani call an Amber Alert, and what he did to that police officer, I’d imagine that the Humani police are going to be working hard to find him.”

“What does he need to complete his spell?” asked Martha.

“I would assume,” Headmaster Schaunessy started to answer the question as he entered the room, “that he would only need his great-grandmother’s codex and his jar made of nihm cré containing the Unicorn heart. How long it takes is another matter.”

“Look here,” interrupted Neala pointing at a spot on the map. “Very near the farm and where the police officer was killed is a rather isolated lake. That would have been a good place to finish the spell, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” said the Headmaster. “He evidently didn’t have time or he would just have used the Jar na Marbh Beo.”

“So our problem is to figure out where he would go from there,” concluded Martha as they all stood staring down at the large map. Nods and grunts acknowledged her conclusion as they all silently concentrated.

“Those leygates, or whatever.” Edward said. “Are they the fastest way to go somewhere?”

“Just about,” answered Brian.

“So where’s the nearest gate?” Edward asked.

Stephan had one of the giant books of leygates open almost before Edward finished his question. “One is on the other side of a town called Little Rock, Arkansas, a long way away. The other is in a place called Dismal Canyons near the town of Hackleburg, Alabama, which is not too far away.” Only a moment later Stephan gasped.

“What is it?” was the group reaction.

“One of the places the leygate at Dismal Canyons connects to is High Rock Point!” He looked up from the book with a look of abject horror on his face.

“Our High Rock Point?” Neala’s question was really much more of an exclamation. Stephan just nodded.

“He’s in our own backyard,” Lawrence said softly looking down at the map on the table.

“And since we’re his target, it makes sense that he’ll take the leygate to High Rock Point.” said Headmaster.

Everyone stood in shock. One by one they all directed their attention to Brian who had his hands on the map, leaning over and looking down at where Flaitheas Scáth would be on the map.

Looking up at the Headmaster, Brian said, “it looks like we’re going to see if I’m ready.”

The Headmaster merely nodded.

“What does that mean?” demanded Mary.

“It means that I need to send you guys away,” replied Brian.

“Like hell,” said Thomas. “We’ll send the women and child and anyone who wants to go with them . . .”

Brenda started to object when the Headmaster interrupted Thomas. “We may not have that luxury.” He paused as all eyes turned to him. “You know that he’s going to finish the spell as soon as he can. I have no idea what that entails, but it won’t be long.”

“We need to prepare,” interjected Lawrence.

Brian dropped his head. Neala, who was standing next to him, put her hand on his shoulder. “We’ll keep your family safe,” she promised gently.

“Thank you,” he said without raising his head. ‘Is my fairy-tale world coming to an end?’ he thought. He tried to sneak a peek at Alaiinn but their eyes met. He could see the fear in her eyes.



Chapter 15.

With Apollyon in their backyard everyone around the table knew that no one was safe. Lawrence sent word that everyone should move into Flaitheas Scáth. The Torc Allta patrols around the Scáth were doubled and there was no longer a simple password to pass through the tree. Individual scouts patrolled outside Flaitheas Scáth. They had two purposes – early warning and to try to find Apollyon so they could strike first.

Brian's children and granddaughter, Cathy, were given the option to have their minds opened and learn some defensive magic. Brian explained the experience in great detail. It had to be their decision and he didn't want them doing it without knowing what was going to happen.

All of them decided to try. Sorchá and Headmaster Schaunessy performed the ritual while Brian, Aláinn, Anastasia and Riona sat with them during recovery. When they heard what Cathy was going to do, Isla and Craid asked to help. They felt that they would be able to help Cathy because of their bond.

Headmaster Schaunessy had to admit to Brian that he was a bit surprised that they were able to finish before Apollyon attacked. Hearing what was happening Herenyonnen and the other faculty members at the academy came to help.

The faculty members worked with Brenda, Mary, Phillip, Seamus, and Cathy to teach them some basic defensive magic. Plasma bolts and shields were the order of the day.

Elves and Dwarfs went into ancient places in the mountains where the famous Elven and Dwarf swords and bows were stored. Torc Allta were the first to receive the magic swords.

Edward, it turned out, was quite skilled with a broad sword. He was a member of a Humani group called the Society for Creative Anachronism. Evidently at his home he had a sword and full set of armor. He obviously received a magic Dwarf

broadsword. Thomas, Philip and Seamus were coached on the use of a sword by Thomas, Neala, and a couple of other Torc. Fortunately they seemed to take to the sword more quickly than Brian.

Elves are known as fine bowmen, but little known to others, many Torc Allta are also excellent bowmen. The bows brought out of hiding were the finest quality Elven long bow. The Elven long bow is a magnificent bow. It is not only a beautiful piece of craftsmanship but a powerful and accurate weapon. Each bow must be matched to its user, so master archers spent their time matching bows to archers. The Elven bow is balanced and the limbs can be adjusted for the user's maximum draw. Thomas asked for a bow because he had actually done a bit of archery many years earlier. The master archers were a bit perplexed when Cathy stepped forward and requested a bow. They looked at Neala who gave them an affirmative nod.

"But Neala," they said quietly, "she's but a girl and we need all of the bows in the hands of warriors."

Hearing what was said, Cathy challenged the archer to a competition. The master archer picked up his bow, turned toward a target and sent an arrow straight to the bulls eye and penetrating deep into the bail. Cathy complemented the archer on his fine shooting. She took some time picking a bow – drawing back on several. Picking a bow she drew back her full draw, aimed carefully and let the arrow fly. It hit less than an inch to the side of the master archer's, still in the bulls eye, and penetrated almost as deep.

Turning to the astounded group she said, "Society for Creative Anachronism." Then looking back at the bow said, "I really like this bow. I'll take this one."

The master archer in charge gave Cathy a deep bow and then looked at Neala.

"No," said Neala, "she stays in the castle."

"But," the master archer said, "we will need such skill."

“I can fight,” Cathy insisted. “I didn’t ask for a bow to wait inside.” She took a defiant stance next to the master archer.

“Okay,” said Neala, “I’ll ask father if she can shoot from the tree. She would be better up there as a sniper anyway.”

“Yes,” the master archer bowed. “Yes. That would be wonderful.”

“But!” Neala took Cathy, who was admiring her new bow, by the arm. “If they get close, you **will** fall back into the castle. Is that understood?” Cathy just smiled.



Lawrence had to decide how to organize his army made up of his well-trained Torc Allta and many untrained and untested volunteers.

He divided all of his warriors into three cuideachta, which is like a US Army company and distributed his Torc Allta equally between them. Neala had proven to be a natural leader and the Torc Allta often looked to her even if she didn’t have the rank. He decided to put Neala in command of Cuideachta Haon. Another young and clever Torc was Ardan. He was put in command of Cuideachta Dó. Devin was placed in command of Cuideachta Trí. Cabhan, who had been Lawrence’s second in command for many years, would command an elite group, called a Buíon, of Torc dedicated to the protection of the royal family.

Thomas, Edward, Phillip and Seamus asked to be assigned to a Cuideachta. Phillip and Seamus would be able to go with Brian since they now knew the common language. Lawrence couldn’t risk a communications problem in the heat of battle, so he assigned Thomas and Edward to the Buíon. Later, after he heard about Cathy and Neala asking that she be permitted to snip from the tree, he put Thomas with her. All of this was, of course, with the understanding that, if Cabhan or any of the other commanders gave the command, they were to take a defensive position with the family. If it came to that, Lawrence explained to them, protecting the family would be the most important position one could have.



The only reason that Flaitheas Scáth had so much time to prepare was that Apollyon had been unable to collect Karen's life force.

The life force which Apollyon was attempting to take from Karen is best described as the life-process or flow of energy that sustains living beings. Most people have heard of Qi, which is the Chinese term. Qi isn't just a Chinese or Draiochta philosophical position. It is 'prana' and 'cit' in the Hindu religion, 'mana' in Hawaiian culture, 'lüng' in Tibetan Buddhism, 'ruah' in Hebrew culture, and 'Vital energy' in Western philosophy. The Qi concept can also be found in Western popular culture. In the movie, 'Star Wars,' for example, there is "The Force". Notions in the West of *energeia*, *élan vital*, or "vitalism" are similar.

An interesting antidote is that Western scientist shunned the Chinese idea that Qi flows through specific paths in the body that the Asians call 'meridians'. Suddenly in the late twentieth century western scientists discovered what they described as an electro-chemical signal that flows through the human body. Funny, these signals corresponded to the ancient Chinese meridians.

What Apollyon's great-grandmother didn't know about taking one's life force was that it must be strong and healthy to make the transfer. If the life force is weak or unhealthy it will not transfer because it is having enough trouble obtaining balance where it is.

Karen was ill. Originally she was suffering emotionally. She had never been away from her parents, and being taken from them by force had dire consequences. Her emotional suffering was manifest in physical illness. There was noticeable general weakness, lethargy, pale complexion and weak pulse. Sadly it was her weak life force, or Qi, that was keeping Karen alive. She was at serious risk either way.

Apollyon didn't have time to find another virgin. He knew that he had made the opening gambit and it would be just a matter of time before the Clainn

Coillearnach found him again. It took him time, but he finally learned that he needed to make a Qi Tonic from American or Chinese Ginseng. What he didn't realize was that Karen was probably never going to recover as long as she was being held captive and spending her days in fear.

The time it took for Apollyon to try to nurse Karen's life force back to equilibrium gave Flaitheas Scáth time to prepare to defend themselves as well as continue the search for Apollyon's hiding place. Scouts went out each day from Flaitheas Scáth in their animal forms and searched the forest around High Rock Point.

Apollyon was well aware of the search. He would not have expected less. With the loss of most of his Jotnar and the failure to harvest Karen's life force Apollyon was very cognizant of his vulnerability. He had to find some way to replace his army. His only requirements were that they be senselessly loyal. In his research Apollyon stumbled upon the Manawydon.

A Manawydon is a mindless minion who is created by a powerful witch or wizard from debris and organic waste. Many Draiochta believe that the creation of a Manawydon is only theoretical since their actual creation requires both a powerful wizard - at least a single aura wizard - and a wizard who is so possessed by evil that she/he can visualize such abject cruelty and the total lack of respect for life required. Many doubted that such a Draiochta exists. Few knew Apollyon. The creation of a Manawydon requires a lot of magical power but not a lot of time or resources. The wizard needs only a pile of debris and organic waste - perhaps from a pit-type outhouse. With the proper amount of materials in front of him/her the wizard visualizes the creature that is violent and cruel and will do anything its creator says. No one knows how much debris is required to bring forth a Manawydon. With the vision clear in his/her mind, the wizard points the wand at the pile and chants "Manawydon cinn". The chant is continued until the creature stands up and faces its creator. Since this is all theoretical, no one knows how long that might take.

Apollyon soon learned that it didn't take a great deal of waste to make a Manawydon. In fact, he found that the ratio was amazingly small – only about one ounce of waste for one pound of the creature. He was able to make several Manawydon from a single outhouse or portable toilet. The Draiochta at Flaitheas Scáth missed the newspaper article about one of Chattanooga's solar drying ponds, where the sludge is dried for disposal, being mysteriously found empty. Of course, they would not have known what it meant until after one of the scouts found Apollyon's sanctuary.

An Elf, in the form of a ferret, had been searching the woods northeast of Flaitheas Scáth. Because of his size he went under a log instead of over it and happened to discover the presence of a cloaking spell similar to that which Brian had used to hide Ferguson Pálás while it was being built. He returned to Flaitheas Scáth immediately to report what he had seen.



Manwë escorted the excited young Elf into the conference room – the new war room. He saluted Lawrence and bowed respectfully to Brian.

“We understand that you have located Apollyon,” said Lawrence.

“Yes, Cheannasaí,” came the reply. “His camp is just west of High Rock Point. He has it protected by a cloaking spell. My animal is a ferret. I just happened on it because I went under a fallen tree instead of over it.”

“Can you show us on the map?” Brian asked, pointed at the large topographic map on the table.

“Yes, Sire.” The Elf stepped forward and pointed at a spot between a Humani trail and the geographic feature known as High Rock Point. It was a perfect place even without the cloaking spell since it was surrounded by extremely steep rock walls almost 400 feet straight down on three sides with the only flat terrain being that facing the exposed Humani trail.

“And what did you see in this camp?” asked Lawrence.

“There were some Jotnar, but not many, and a number of wizards, and a handful of goblins and other Draiochta. But there was an army of creatures the likes of which I’ve never seen.”

“Describe them.”

“They were probably the size of a Humani but very stocky and they all looked almost identical. Their faces almost appeared like they had been painted on.” The Elf paused to try to find words. “They had no expression and they stood perfectly still unless given a command. They just stood there in great ranks.”

“How were they dressed? Did they have armor? What type of weapons did they have?”

“I couldn’t say that they were dressed.”

“What?”

“They were just brown and black figures. And when I got near one, they smelled like sewage.”

Cabhan, who had been sitting to one side listening, suddenly stood up. He looked perturbed. “Sire, they sound like a magical creature called a Manawydon.”

“How could that be?” questioned Lawrence. “Those are just hypothetical. There is no record of one ever actually being created. It would take . . .”

“a very powerful and evil wizard?” Cabhan finished Lawrence’s sentence like a question to which they all knew the answer.

“Apollyon,” said Lawrence.

“Would you mind enlightening me,” said Brian.

They described the Manawydon, explained that it required an extremely powerful and absolutely evil wizard and that heretofore it had been considered only hypothetical because no one believed that such a powerful and evil wizard existed.

“Apollyon has shown that he is an extremely powerful wizard. Perhaps he inherited his great-grandmother’s power as well as her codex,” said Lawrence.

“And anyone willing to unleash the Jar na Marbh Beo on the world must be sufficiently evil,” concluded Brian. The other two nodded.

“Can you tell us anything else?” Lawrence returned his attention to the Elf.

“I saw the girl. She looked very ill and frightened. It was pitiful.” The young Elf shook his head sadly at the thought.

“I wonder why he hasn’t taken her life force?” Lawrence pondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” replied Brian, “but obviously there is a missing element and we have to get there before he finds it.”



Princess Alainn took one look at Brian as he entered the room and knew it was time. It was the moment she had dreaded since they discovered Apollyon’s plot.

“It’s time, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes,” Brian took her and held her tight. “We have to strike first. The girl is still alive.”

“I’m so happy she’s alive,” Alainn said through her tears. “I hope you get there in time.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Brian tried to reassure her.

“I can only live in that hope.” Alainn held tight. “He’s so powerful. Be careful.”

“I will. I’ve had the best teachers a wizard could want.”

“Just come home,” she began to sob. There was nothing Brian could say.

“I will,” he whispered. “I will.”



Lawrence was standing over the large topographic map when Brian entered. He quickly acknowledged Brian but without taking his concentration off the map.

Brian went to the table and looked at the map Lawrence was studying. It showed Cuideachta Dó along the northeastern ridge of Pruitt Ridge making a “j” around the southeastern point. Cuideachta Trí was along the eastern ridge of Bear Den Point to protect against any flanking and to protect anyone who might still be in the village. Lawrence could also quickly move them either to Pruitt Ridge or have them swing around like a giant mouse trap. He hoped that he didn’t need to do either, but they were there.

Cuideachta Haon, under Neala’s command, would go with Lawrence and Brian to rescue the girl and hopefully capture Apollyon once and for all.

“You’ve made a good plan,” said Brian, putting his hand on his commander and friend’s shoulder. “Now let’s go do it.”

Neala lead her Cuideachta as quietly as possible up Bear Den Ridge and parallel to the Humani highway until they were northwest of the Buffalo Mountain ridge. Some of her Torc Allta took their natural form and carried warriors on their backs. Others pulled wagons with warriors.

As they stood poised to strike Brian realized that this was almost the exact spot he had first met Alaiinn. ‘What irony,’ he thought. ‘if I’m not up to the task, my adventure could end almost exactly where it started.’

Neala moved around quietly giving last minute instructions and encouragement. Brian could feel the tension. The entire Cuideachta was like a giant serpent coiled to spring. Neala looked at her father and nodded.

“We’re ready,” Lawrence said to Brian. “On your command, Sire.”

“Let’s make it happen!” Brian exclaimed.

The Cuideachta started moving forward. At first it remained quiet but by the time it arrived at the flat top of Buffalo Mountain a short distance from High Rock Point they were moving at a trot. They didn’t completely catch Apollyon’s army off guard, but it was enough to give them the decided advantage. Suddenly the cloaking

spell dissipated and Neala's men got their first look at the Jotnar and Manawydon. For a brief moment it was though they were suspended.

The Torc attempted to engage the Jotnar because they knew that their volunteers were no match for the enormous creatures. The Manawydon, it turned out, were fearless and would do whatever they were told, but they were not good fighters. It was their sheer numbers. Neala's Cuideachta pushed slowly forward.

There was no way Brian was going to find Apollyon in that melee. He took to the air as an eagle and soon found Apollyon dragging Karen to an altar on High Rock Point. He was going to use the power of the leyline to assist his spell.

Brian dropped to the ground and took his normal form. Apollyon had his back to Brian. Two Manawydon were holding Karen down on the altar while three wizards stood by to assist. The wizards noticed Brian, but not before he sent a sizzling bolt into the altar just inches from Apollyon.

Apollyon swung around and threw his right hand out toward Brian with a deadly bolt of plasma. Brian merely held up his hand and the bolt bounced off.

"You have become quite strong," he said.

"Strong enough to stop you," replied Brian.

"Now that's a point of contention." Apollyon smiled a wicked smile. Thinking that he was distracting Brian by talk he quickly raised his hand and sent another deadly bolt. Again Brian deflected the attack, but this time he sent it right back at Apollyon. Apollyon ducked and it hit one of the wizards who staggered backwards until he fell off the cliff.

"Let the girl go," Brian said firmly.

"Let her go, or you'll what?" Apollyon laughed. "You're not going to take a chance hitting her. We can stand here all day throwing plasma bolts at each other and in the end," he looked over his shoulder at the girl, "she dies."

"If she dies, you die," Brian responded.

“Oh, you Humani all say that.” Again Apollyon laughed his evil laugh. “Maybe and maybe not. You could end up dying trying to save her. You’re all talk and no action.”

Brian tried his faint to the left. Apollyon deflected the bolt from the wand that Brian held in his left hand and moved quickly enough that the bolt from his right hand just grazed his shoulder. He let out a yelp of pain but turned to Brian with the same sadistic smile.

“That was good, boy,” said Apollyon. “It might have worked had Conan not seen you use it in your wizard duel.” He paused to rub his shoulder. “And I’m impressed that you don’t really need that wand, do you? All that power and you can’t save a retarded girl.”

Brian could hear the battle going on behind them. He had no idea how it was going. He could see that Apollyon was looking at it from time to time but gave no expression. The look on the faces of the two remaining wizards told him that Coillearnach was prevailing.

Apollyon knew that he was not only not going to be able to complete the spell but he was no match for Brian and his Manawydon were losing the battle. He was going to have to retreat yet again. He needed a way to distract Brian.

As the two stood facing each other sparring with words and plasma bolts, Brian realized that Apollyon was right about one thing; viz. that he wasn’t going to save Karen like this. Apollyon had the decided advantage. He didn’t care what he hit while Brian had to avoid hitting Karen. ‘If I’d been a Morganian,’ Brian thought, ‘I’d have hit him in the back with a bolt when I landed and it would all be over now.’ He wondered why he ever thought that Apollyon would surrender. Apollyon wasn’t afraid of him. Apollyon was probably enjoying this, like a cat playing with a mouse, because he knew that Brian would not risk the girl’s life.

Both of these powerful wizards were facing each other trying to think of what to do next.

Brian noticed one of the wizards holding the nihm cré jar. He wondered what would happen if he destroyed the jar. There was some extremely powerful magic in that jar. Would it explode, killing everyone near it? Was Karen's life force connected in any way?

There was another volley between the two powerful wizards. Apollyon was powerful enough that he didn't need to recite a spell or verbalize in any way, but he did need his ring. As a result Brian always knew how to block.

"You've got something up your sleeve," taunted Apollyon. "I can see it in your eyes." He spoke to the two remaining wizards over his shoulder. "Give me your rings!" he demanded.

They looked at each other with terror in their eyes but they complied. The one nearest Apollyon took the ring from his compatriot and handed the two of them to Apollyon.

As Apollyon put one ring on his right hand and one on his left he asked, "did dear old Fergus Schaunessy tell you what happens when a wizard as powerful as me has multiple rings?"

"Make you feel like hot shit?"

"No!" exclaimed Apollyon as he began a barrage of deadly plasma and spells from both hands and yelling "I become powerful enough to destroy a wizard-want-to-be like you!"

Brian put up a shield. It would hold but it didn't allow him to strike back. There was only one thing he could do. Brian dropped his shield and like two martial arts masters exchanging blows, the two of them fired and blocked volley after volley until Brian sent one of his bolts straight at the Nihm Cré jar.

The jar exploded with a tremendous force sending the wizard who was holding it screaming over the mountain precipice. It also destroyed the Manawydon holding Karen's feet and blowing her off the altar.

"No!" screamed Apollyon. "No!" In the brief moment he looked away, he was knocked down by one of Brian's bolts against his shield. He rolled over and grabbed the girl, holding her between himself and Brian. Brian immediately stopped his barrage.

"Keep back," he said to Brian. "I now have nothing to lose!" Apollyon began backing toward the edge of the cliff.

Brian stood watching. He said nothing. It was over four hundred feet almost straight down, but Brian felt that Apollyon was too self-absorbed to jump. He realized that, again, Apollyon was going to play Brian's sanctity of life against him.

Suddenly, without prelude or warning, Apollyon screamed "If I can't have her life force, neither can you," and literally threw Karen Hester into the abyss.

Brian had played and re-played this scenario in his mind a hundred times. In an instant a giant red serpentine dragon filled the sky and reached out and caught the screaming girl.

When Neala - covered with sweat, blood and the dung of the Manawydon she had destroyed - saw the dragon she knew it was Brian. She screamed "Ta se Prionsa Brian! Slanaitheoir!" The warriors picked up the cry. "Slanaitheoir" became their battle cry as they pushed harder against Apollyon's forces.

Hovering above the battle Draco Rufus, the red dragon, was holding the terrified Karen Hester as gently as a dragon can hold anything and trying to comfort her.

"You're safe," he said. "I'm a good dragon and I won't let anything bad happen to you. Do you understand?"

Karen nodded, still wide-eyed with fear.

“But you’re still a bit afraid,” Draco Rufus said gently.

Again, Karen nodded.

“Well, right now I’m going to fly down there and get one of those men and then I’ll take you to a fairy-tale castle. Would you like that?”

Karen nodded. As Draco Rufus held her gently close to his body, her fear begins to subside.

They landed near Neala. Apollyon’s army was beginning to retreat down the southeastern slope of Bear Mountain toward Rich Bench and Neala was keeping the pressure on them. Lawrence ran up to Draco Rufus.

“Beannachtaí, Draco Rufus, Slanaitheoir,” Lawrence hailed the dragon.

“I don’t think this is over,” Draco Rufus said to the two leaders. Hanging his great head he said, “I saved the girl, but I lost Apollyon.”

“You always knew that he would use your regard for life against you,” said Lawrence. Looking at the girl now snuggled against the great dragon he smiled and said, “and you made the right decision.”

“Climb on my neck just behind my head, so I can hear you. I’ll fly you up so you can see what Apollyon is doing.”

Lawrence climbed up on Draco Rufus’ neck and hung onto a giant scale as Draco Rufus lifted off the ground. It only took the Torc Allta commander a moment to see what Apollyon’s army was doing. “Take me to Devin,” he called to Draco Rufus.



Draco Rufus gently put Karen on the ground by the giant Cucumber Magnolia tree and returned to being Brian. Karen looked at Brian with her mouth wide open. Brian just smiled as he led the girl through the tree.

As they emerged from the tree, Brian pointed to the castle and said, “and there’s the fairy-tale castle I promised.”

Karen just squealed with glee. It was as though she had not been held captive and terrorized by Apollyon. Her color was returning and she smiled broadly at Brian. He took her to the castle. He explained that the red dragon had to go back and help the others but he was going to leave her with a very special lady – a queen. She appeared a bit apprehensive at first, but by the time Brian had brought everyone up-to-date on the battle and was kissing Alann before leaving he looked over and Karen was carrying on a lively conversation with Queen Maethoriel.



Cuideachta Trí under Devin's command was still situated along the northeast side of Bear Den Point. Apollyon had left enough of his forces, mostly Jotnar, at High Rock Point to keep Neala's Cuideachta Naon busy. From the air Lawrence had seen the rest of Apollyon's army snaking down onto Rich Bench and from there down the west side of Rich Bench toward Pruitt Ridge where the tree was located. He figured that Apollyon was going to attack Pruitt Ridge from the southwest since that was the easiest climb and most difficult to defend.

Lawrence had Ardan put the bulk of his Cuideachta facing the oncoming hoard, leaving a minimal force along the steep ridge just in case. At the same time he had Devin send some of his Cuideachta Trí to support Ardan and personally lead a large portion of his cuideachta along the southern side of Pruitt Ridge and flank Apollyon's.

The initial clash between Apollyon's army and Ardan's Cuideachta Dó took place, as expected, along the eastern side of Pruitt Ridge. The cuideachta held against the mindless onslaught of Manawydon but at great cost.

Before Devin's forces came along the southern side of Pruitt Ridge, Apollyon had taken a few of his wizards and some Manawydon and entered Flaitheas Scáth through a magical tear.

Here was evidence of Apollyon's great power. To be able to create a tear between the dimensions – a tear that opened the shadow realm directly to the human world – required not only exceptional perception to know where to create the tear but tremendous power. Apollyon had both. Using the power of the wizards with him, he was able to expose a portion of the shadow realm and cause a tear big enough that a flood of his Manawydon could enter.

Apollyon's point of entry was on the far side of the castle from the tree. A Torc sentry spotted the Manawydon and sounded the alarm. Cabhan had only his Buíon but they advanced to meet the approaching hoard to keep the Manawydon having to fight up-hill and to keep them as far away from the castle as possible. He sent word to Ardan, who had his hands full with Apollyon's main army attacking up Pruitt Ridge. Cathy and Thomas were ordered from the tree to help defend the castle.

Mary and the others could see the battle drawing near the castle. Edward and the others were fighting valiantly but they were vastly outnumbered. For every Manawydon they destroyed two or three more came through the rent in the Scáth wall.

The royal women wanted more than anything to join the battle, but they had to protect the children. If Apollyon had broken in here, no one could say that he couldn't do it somewhere else and have his goons at their very door.

As they watched, feeling more and more helpless as the intrepid Buríon tried to hold the every growing Manawydon hoard, they saw three black figures flying toward the battle.

Brenda screamed, "Oh, my God, it's Kevin!"

"What?" asked Alainn, trying hard to make out the figures.

"It's Kevin and his friends," Brenda repeated. "What are they doing?!"

It was only a moment before Brenda and the others got the answer to her question. As the three boys approached the battle they began to swoop down on their

broomsticks and shoot plasma bolts at the Manawydon. After their first pass a number of the Manawydon had been destroyed. Time and again they flew over the Manawydon raining down destruction.

The boys were helping turn the tide. Besides the number of Manawydon they were destroying with each pass, the Manawydon were being distracted. They were looking up and throwing things at the boys. Those that were distracted were easily destroyed by a warrior on the ground.

It was then that Mary saw Edward fall. A Manawydon flanked him and struck him broadside.

Mary could be heard screaming “no!” as she literally jumped from a castle balcony onto the field near Edward. She had no idea how she had done that and she didn’t care. She hit the Manawydon with a bolt so hard that it flew back many yards and exploded. A nearby goblin raised his ax to finish what the Manawydon had started. Before Mary could raise a defense an arrow penetrated the goblin’s chest. The goblin stood motionless with his ax over his head. A second arrow struck and with a roar of pain and anger the goblin fell over backwards. Mary looked up the hill. There stood Cathy.

Now holding Edward’s head in her lap, Mary looked at the approaching hoard and, holding up her hand, yelled “get back”. A power came from her hand that pushed the approaching Manawydon backward. She then started hurling deadly plasma bolts that destroyed one Manawydon after another.

Apollyon had entered the Flaitheas Scáth and was watching the boys turning to make another pass over his army. With a wave of his hand the boys were knocked from the sky and disappeared in the trees. Alainn grabbed and held Brenda as she searched the horizon for her son and then slumped to the floor.

Then Apollyon turned his attention to the powerful witch who had practically decimating his army on her own. When he approached Mary hurled a bolt at him which he easily deflected.

“What a prize!” Apollyon exclaimed recognizing Mary. “What a prize! Brian Ferguson’s daughter!” Immediately he attacked with a plasma bolt. Mary was able to defend against this first attack, but there was no way she was going to do more.

In searching for Apollyon, Brian had discovered the tear in the dimension and saw the battle going on at the castle. As he entered the Scáth through the tear he saw Apollyon attacking Mary and Edward. Apollyon was not aware of Draco Rufus in the Scáth, and before he could strike again the dragon swooped down and grabbed him. He held the wizard’s arms against his body so that he could not cast any spells and took him back out through the tear. He hovered above Apollyon’s army and gave a great roar. They all looked up.

Draco Rufus had their master and they watched as the dragon took him to a large outcropping high above Tate Springs. The Coillearnach and Torc Allta start chanting “Slanaitheoir”. Everyone, except those in the thick forest or Scáth, could see.

Draco Rufus put Apollyon down on the outcropping and drew back a short distance where he returned to his human form. Apollyon immediately attempted a deadly plasma bolt which Brian easily blocked. Time and again Apollyon cast spells and each time Brian reflected them, drawing closer with each attack until he was within feet of Apollyon.

“You have two choices,” said Brian in wizard voice for all to hear, “surrender and live or continue to fight and die.”

Apollyon threw more bolts at Brian. Occasionally Brian would hurl a non-lethal bolt at the wizard, knowing that he would block it. Apollyon was frantic. Brian stood – the essence of calm.

“This is your last chance,” said Brian calmly and quietly. Brian’s calm made Apollyon even more angry. “Give me your answer. Do you yield?”

“Never!” screamed Apollyon. “Never! Never! Never!”

“I’m sorry for that,” said Brian.

Brian dropped his left shoulder as he always did with the faint left and strike right ploy. Seeing the tell-tale signs, Apollyon blocked the attack from Brian’s left hand and immediately prepared for the attack from the right. It never came. Brian sent a second bolt from his left hand as soon as Apollyon moved. Apollyon never saw it coming.

The bolt was so strong that, for a few moments, it seemed that Apollyon was suspended in air. Then, with a great scream, he went crashing into Tate Hollow below.

Lying broken the powerful wizard raised his head in one last defiant attempt, but it was over. He put his head down and died. As soon as Apollyon took his last breath the Manawydun collapsed into piles of organic garbage. The battle was over.

Those who saw Apollyon defeated immediately threw down their weapons and put up their hands in surrender. Those who could not see knew, when the Manawydun collapsed, that Apollyon was dead, and they too surrendered.

Brian again took the form of Draco Rufus and rose high into the air where he gave a great roar while the Draiochta below cheered. Word of what had happened quickly made its way to the castle.



The price of victory had been high. A great number were seriously wounded and many were dead.

Phillip had been injured at Pruitt Ridge but wouldn’t go back into Flaitheas Scáth. He was seen leaning up against the great Magnolia hurling plasma bolts at the advancing Manawydun like footballs. He just kept throwing until he passed out.

Seamus had been knocked out and left by the Manawydón for dead. He played dead until they passed and then joined Neala and Ardan's cuideachta that was driving the Manawydón into the narrow valley.

Ardan was killed when he led the attack from Apollyon's southern flank. Turin was seriously injured. Cathy sat with him for several days and nursed him back to health. Edward had taken a nasty hit to the head but awakened with nothing more than a serious headache. Neala, Devin, Cabhan and Lawrence were all pretty beaten up, but no serious injury.

The three boys had been hurled into the trees but, except for a few bumps and scratches, were not hurt. The power of Apollyon's attack had been diminished by the boys being suspended in air, so they were just carried along by the force and not crushed by it.

Kevin, Arno and Maldor walked proudly to the castle carrying their now broken broomsticks. They knew that they had disobeyed. At the same time they knew that their disobedience had saved many lives. Standing in front of the castle waiting for them were three women experiencing a conflicting mix of emotions. They were proud. They were angry. But most of all they were overjoyed that their boys were alive.

As the last of the Coillearnach army entered Flaitheas Scáth to the cheers and hugs of those who had waited inside, Brian stood on the edge of Pruitt Ridge looking into the valley of death. The stink of Apollyon's Manawydón burned his eyes. He looked at the rows of bodies – wizards, goblins, Jotnar and Apollyon himself who had died for Apollyon's anger, hatred and revenge and now lay covered with white cloth awaiting cremation.

'This is why I hate war,' Brian thought. 'There was no reason for this.' He thought about Apollyon's scream as he died – filled with anger and hatred to the end.

He thought about how he knew as he let go of that last plasma bolt that it was going to kill Apollyon. The memory made his stomach hurt.

As he mourned for those whom he had to lead to their death as well as those who had been misled by Apollyon's hatred and anger, he felt a soft touch on his shoulder. It was Alainn.

He turned to her trying to show strength, but he had had to show strength throughout this grisly day and there was no more strength left to show. He fell to his knees, leaned up against her and began to sob. There was nothing she could say. She just held his head against her.

Chapter 16.

Even though Brian didn't feel like celebrating, he realized that the people needed to celebrate. They needed to show respect to those who had died. They needed to express their relief and their joy that the battle was over. They needed to give praise and thanks to those who had won the day. They needed to bring closure to some very dark and terrifying hours.

Brian had taken Karen home through the leygate and then let her ride on Draco Rufus' back until she was home. On the way he tried to think of what to say to her parents. He finally decided that there was no way Karen wasn't going to tell her story. Since he didn't want her parents all worried about her 'fantasy' he decided that he wanted them to see him. Who would believe them if they told anyway?

Dragons the size of Draco Rufus don't land quietly and Karen's parents were soon rushing out the door. He wasn't sure which caused them the most shock – coming out and seeing their daughter safe and smiling or seeing their daughter safe and smiling while sitting on a giant red serpentine dragon. They froze in their tracks as they came out of the farm house.

"Mommy. Daddy!" Karen called excitedly as she climbed down from Draco Rufus' back. "Come meet Draco Rufus. That means 'red dragon'," she said proudly. "He's my friend and he saved me. And I went to a fairy castle and saw a real fairy queen, and . . ."

By that time Karen's parents had decided that they didn't care if there was a dragon in their yard, they wanted their daughter. They ran up and enveloped her in their hugs.

Draco Rufus sat quietly during the reunion and waited for Karen's parents to turn their attention to him. When they did, he explained what had happened to Karen as they stood holding tightly to their daughter.

“I let you see me because I didn’t want Karen going through her life trying to tell you about these things and having you believe that she was suffering from some sort of delusional disorder. Everything she will tell you will be true. I’m really sorry for what Karen had to experience. Magic folk are really very nice and peace loving. You’d be surprised how many of your friends and neighbors might be magics. All I ask is that you don’t try to convince anyone of our existence. If Karen slips and tells a story to someone, just tell them that she has a great imagination.”

Karen’s parents thanked Draco Rufus profusely. He lay on the cool grass and listened to them share the fear and sorrow that they had been experiencing and the joy at seeing her alive. Karen played on the dragon while her parents brought closure to their ordeal.

Chapter 17.

Brian stood with a glass of his favorite single malt looking out the great windows of their bedroom watching the sun set over his beloved mountains. It was their silver wedding anniversary. Manwë approached.

“Your Highness,” he said politely, “the guests have arrived and you’re not dressed.”

“Sorry, Manwë,” Brian apologized. “I was just thinking about all that has happened in the past twenty-five years.”

“What’s the humani saying,” Manwë queried, “time flies when you’re having fun.”

“We have had fun, haven’t we, Manwë?”

“Most certainly, Highness,” Manwë laughed. “I remember unpacking that backpack of yours and thinking I’d been given the impossible task.”

“And you still have to tell me what to wear.” Brian said giving his old and dear friend a bear hug. Turning back to the setting sun, Brian said, “It’s been quite a ride, hasn’t it?”

It had been quite a ride. The royal wedding had been an unsurpassable social event the likes of which Flaitheas Scáth would not see for a very long time. It had, indeed, been a fairy-tale event. The Witch Sorchá, as promised, had a front row seat right next to Auntie Elizabeth.

Brian learned why Auntie Elizabeth had been able to get him such a giant loan from the Bank of England. Auntie Elizabeth was Queen Elizabeth II of England. She and Maethoriél had become best friends when they were girls. That friendship had lasted through both their lifetimes as fate put both of them on a throne.

The wedding would be the last time that the two dear friends were together. Elizabeth died a short while later and

Maethoriel had passed away at the age of 112. Sadron died a year later. Some say he died of a broken heart. She had passed the throne to Alainn when she turned 100 years old. After that the truth about Sadron was revealed. It was not only well accepted but they became a very beloved couple in Flaitheas Scáth and Cigam. They had 12 wonderful years being able to openly be a couple.

Manwë had Brian dressed to the tee. On their way into the rotunda Brian said, “Manwë, I want you to forget being a servant for the rest of the night and join the party.”

“You never have figured it out,” Manwë smiled. Brian gave him a quizzical look. “Even when I was the consummate servant I always enjoyed what I was doing. I felt like I was a part of the party or the meeting or whatever was happening because of the way you’ve always treated me. I’ll be there tonight and it will be special for me too.”

Brian stepped into the rotunda. The crowded room became still and then they began to clap as Alainn came up, gave him a kiss and stood next to him acknowledging the crowd.

She was as beautiful as ever, Brian thought. Alainn now reigned as Queen but this evening she would announce that, as an anniversary gift to Brian and herself, she was passing the scepter and the throne to Anastasia. They were moving back into Ferguson Pálás.

Looking around the room almost everyone had a story. There was his grandson, Kevin. He had grown into quite a man. After being scolded for their risky air attack on the Manawydon in the Battle of Flaitheas Scáth, Kevin, Arno and Maldor were also rewarded for their bravery and allowed to go to the Academy the next year when they were eleven, and the allowable admission age was lowered for everyone. After graduation Arno had joined his father as a forest steward and Maldor had become an inn-keeper with his parents. The three boys never gave up flying on

broomsticks and were still seen, now in the open, trying to figure out how to play Quiddich.

All of Brian's children and grandchildren turned out to be fairly powerful wizards and witches, but Kevin was probably the most powerful. With the encouragement of Headmaster Schaunessy, Kevin focused on why magic worked and understanding the science. But he didn't spend his entire academic career studying. Kevin became the reigning wizard dueling champion after becoming the protégé of his grandfather's dueling mentor, Herenyonnen. He also started teaching martial arts as a means of discipline and control. Kevin became one of the youngest professors on the Academy faculty. There he was with his beautiful bride of almost ten years. Their children were playing with the other children in the family room. Brian could feel the tears welling up.

Oh, and standing next to Kevin was his sister and her husband. While Cathy had sat nursing Turin she had felt lost and rejected. She had been so certain that he was in love with her but in his sleep he would call out for someone named 'Manwathiel'.

One night when he was well on the mend he had called for Manwathiel in his sleep. Cathy decided that it was time for her to step aside. When she told Turin he laughed. She was hurt by his laughter but he grabbed her and kissed her – even without her parent's permission.

"Silly girl," he had said. "Manwathiel is Elfin for Cathy!"

The two of them were married a year later. They went to medical school together and became physicians working in the foundation hospital along with Cathy's Dwarf friend, Isla, and her boy-crazy Elfin girlfriend, Arwen. Brian was sure they were in that crowd somewhere.

An existing hospital was finally purchased on the north side of Atlanta. It wasn't easy at first to get top researchers because the hospital didn't have a reputation.

That's when they discovered that there were a lot of really fine medical students and researchers who weren't getting the grants and jobs because they perhaps didn't go to the most prestigious school or their grade-point average was 3.8 instead of 3.9. After that it didn't take long for the hospital's reputation as a quality research institution and outstanding care provider to grow along with the reputation as a place that really cared. Even after their reputation made them one of the premier research facilities, Thomas, who took leadership of the research department, made sure that they were always open to those excellent students and researchers who were being overlooked by others.

From a single one-hundred and fifty bed hospital, the Bridgette-Prince Fionn Hospital grew until it had over one-thousand patient beds and a campus that covered two square city blocks.

Yes, there were his kids standing together with Anastasia and Stephan. They were still his children even if they were now the age he was when he came to Flaitheas Scáth. They had done a fine job building and managing the Foundation. Anastasia and Stephan couldn't be listed on the Board but that was just a technicality.

Brenda had become the hospital administrator. She and Thomas, who was the coordinator of research, lived near the hospital. Mary and Edward also lived near the hospital. Mary was the head of public and family education while Edward was in the finance department. Edward watched after the Foundation at large and worked closely with Ghorpas Spikeback, head of finance for the hospital. Phillip was now in charge of land acquisitions and Celina worked as a fundraiser. Phillip worked closely with Stephan and Derek, who was his father's assistant. Derek didn't know it yet, but by the end of the evening he would be the new Forest Steward when his father became Prince Consort. Brian looked around the room. Derek and his sister, Riona, were there with their spouses. After seeing her mother and the hypnotherapist in action,

Riona had become a psychiatrist and used hypnotherapy to help cancer victims deal with their life situations as well as pain.

Brian could hardly believe that Seamus and Martha's children were now in their late twenties. Seamus was in charge of the giant super-computer at the hospital and Martha was the director of nursing services.

Looking back at Alainn, Brian noticed Cabhan and Neala standing behind her. They were smiling and clapping with the rest. Brian couldn't look at Neala without thinking of her father, Lawrence. She was so like him. Lawrence had passed away almost six years ago. His death had been very hard for Brian. Lawrence had been his dear friend and mentor. Cabhan had become the commander of the Torc Allta. He asked Neala to be his second in command. At first she declined because of her loyalty to Brian, but Brian encouraged her to take the position. Brian had chosen Ardan, who was just behind him, as his Torc guard. Neala was in her formal uniform. Brian's mind flashed back to that day, in this very room, he first saw her in formal wear. He had to give her a wink as he remembered how self-conscious she was of her breastplate having more breast than the others. After her promotion to assistant commander Brian made sure to routinely embarrass her by saying "Ardan's not as pretty as my original Torc guard, but he'll do."

With happy tears running down their cheeks, Alainn and Brian acknowledged the love of their family, friends, staff and subjects gathered in the room. As the cheering and clapping began to subside inside the pálás Brian and Alainn were aware of cheering coming from outside. The crowd parted and bowed as they crossed the rotunda to the front door. Outside the meadow was filled with Draiochta from all over the Coillearnach kingdom cheering.

"This is probably as good a time as any," Alainn said looking at Brian. Brian nodded understanding.

Alainn looked over her shoulder. Her family was gathered behind her. As they waved to the crowd, Alainn motioned for Cabhan to come near.

“Cabhan,” she said quietly. “I’m going to announce that I’m abdicating the throne in favor of Princess Anastasia. Please be ready to escort her forward to be acknowledged.”

Cabhan looked shocked. Nevertheless he quietly replied, “Yes, Your Majesty,” bowed and stepped back.

Alainn held up her hand. The meadow became quiet.

“My dear friends,” she said in wizard voice. “I can’t tell you how touching it is to see all of you here to wish us well on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.” The people clapped and cheered. “I have been your queen for eighteen years. It has been a privilege beyond words to express.” She paused again as the people cheered. “There is nothing in this world that I lack. I do however have one wish – to live out my life quietly with my beloved husband here in this wonderful home Prionsa Brian built for me twenty-five years ago.”

There was no cheering or clapping. Just silence. It was as if everyone knew what was coming next and were in shock.

“There is only one way I can accomplish that, and that is by abdicating my throne.” A murmur went through the crowd. “I have loved being your queen but the time has come for me to pass that privilege on to the next generation. Therefore I am announcing that in a fortnight Princess Anastasia will be crowned Queen of Coillearnach. Please welcome your new Queen.”

There was a shocked moment as everyone digested what they’d just heard. Alainn turned to Anastasia. She was standing there with her mouth open. Cabhan stepped up to her and knelt. Brian was the next to kneel before the new Queen, and soon everyone on the porch and inside the pálás were kneeling.

When the shock passed the crowd began to clap and cheer. Alainn motioned for Anastasia to come forward. Captain Cabhan stood and offered Anastasia his arm. With tears running down her face she stepped forward, curtsied before her mother, and then the two embraced. The cheers of the people became even louder as Anastasia turned toward the crowd and waved.



Alainn awakened early, but still not before Brian. He was sitting on the balcony of their castle apartment looking out over Flaitheas Scáth and sipping a cup of coffee.

Sitting down next to Brian she said, “that smells good.”

“Would you like a cup?”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t know how you every got me started on that stuff.”

Brian held out the cup and with a simple hand movement another cup appeared. “Headmaster Schaunessy told me that I needed to practice whenever I can.”

Taking the cup Alainn laughed. “Yes, and you’re still giving me the same partially filled cup.”

Brian looked at her cup. It was a duplicate of his even to being only partially full. “I’ll get that right someday,” he said as he passed his hand over the cup and filled it with fresh coffee. They both sat back and laughed.

“In two weeks we’ll be doing this back in our own home,” said Alainn. “That will be so nice.”

“I agree,” Brian replied. “But are you sure you want to do this?”

“I can hardly renege,” said Alainn. “Anastasia needs to be Queen before she’s too old. She’s already 74.” Alainn paused and sipped her coffee. “I should have made her queen when Mother died.”

“You’ve been a good queen,” Brian insisted.

“Thank you, and you’ve been a wonderful Prince Consort.”

Again they sat silently sipping their coffee and looking at the beautiful valley below.

“What are we going to do first?” Alainn asked.

“Nothing,” replied Brian. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Oh, I like that!”

Afterward

There is no way that Brian Ferguson would have ever dreamed, as he started that fateful trail race, that he would soon learn that he was a powerful wizard and become the prince of an Elfin kingdom. How often does our reality prove greater than our fantasy?

Anastasia reigned over Coillearnach for many peaceful and prosperous years. Brian and Alainn enjoyed their retirement and frequently ran through the woods and along the top of Buffalo Mountain. They would stop and kiss at the place where they first met. And they would always stop at High Rock Point and think of those who had given their lives for the great peace Coillearnach enjoyed.

Brian loved becoming Draco Rufus. Often late at night he would become the giant serpentine red dragon and fly high into the night sky. Alainn would scold him and tell him that he needed to do that inside Flaitheas Scáth or someone was going to see him. He would just give her a kiss and say “yes, Your Majesty.”

It probably seems too fantastic. I’m sure, you, dear reader, don’t believe a word. But remember Brian and Alainn as you drive down Alabama Highway 79 and see the people sitting at night in the Wall of Jericho car park watching for the red dragon that locals say is seen flying from time to time. Remember their story when you visit Cigam and stay at the quaint little inn with the inn-keeper who loves to talk about Quiddich, the willowy young chamber-maid who has pointed ears, the handsome gate-keeper with his bright red hair and florescent blue eyes, and the short, bald guide whom you suddenly realize is barefooted and has very hairy feet.

We Humani know that there are no such things as Draiochta. Don’t we?!