

WHISPERS OF THE
FORSAKEN WILDS

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CHAPTER ONE

Shannon

The dark water rippled gently, streaks of blood seeping into the depths and dissipating like a mist. Lugh lay motionless on the bank, blood pooling beneath him. Cian struggled against invisible bonds, screaming in agony, calling out hoarsely for me to help. He shouted my name, over and over. But no matter how I tried, I couldn't reach him. My feet felt mired in mud, my limbs leaden and useless.

I saw the woman I now knew as my grandmother, her silver-white hair stirring in a phantom breeze. She gazed at me with such sadness in her eyes. "You have the power to stop this. You let them die." Her voice

echoed strangely, as if coming from a great distance. Or from beyond the grave.

I glanced back to the water and jolted at the floating lifeless form of my mother, tears still tracked across her cheeks through mud and blood. Her pregnant stomach protruded from the water, her white dress clinging to the skin and mottled pink and brown from bloodied wounds.

I wanted to scream at them. To ask them why, ask them what I should do. That it wasn't my fault, that I didn't know how to use my power, didn't know how to be strong. The truth was I could have saved Lugh, should have saved him. I could have saved Cian and myself. If only I'd worked harder at what Riona taught me; if only I'd found myself sooner. If I'd had the courage to embrace my power instead of disbelief, I could have prevented this. If I hadn't been so selfishly obsessed with getting back to a life I didn't even want. If only I'd not blindly trusted a man who I believed would keep me safe, who I believed had cared for me.

I felt the now-familiar heat building within me, my palms tingling. I focused everything I had on Cian, picturing the invisible bonds around him breaking, but all they did was tighten until his limbs snapped one by one. His screams echoed around my head.

"Shannon! Please!" he called hoarsely.

His words rang in my ears as the dream faded, leaving me tangled in sweat-soaked clothes with tears

drying on my cheeks. The bindings cut into my wrists and ankles, and the metal collar rubbed against the raw skin of my neck. I knew with absolute certainty that I would do anything, give anything, to go back and change all that had happened, all the horror.

Whatever awaited me now would cause me to suffer, would cause me pain and heartache. I knew it; there was no hiding from it. I had to be strong now, if I was to survive, if I was to change anything. I had failed, but I would not fail again. I would find that power again. I would force myself to become more, and I would be ready.

Nothing would break me. I would not allow it.

Just keep going.

I awoke to the scuffling sounds of the Fomóraigh moving about the camp, my arms aching from being tied to the thick tree trunk behind me all night. The gnarled bark dug into the skin of my back, and my wrists felt raw and hot against the rough rope bindings. I blinked the sleep from my eyes as I took in the twisted forms of the dark creatures in the small amount of early morning light that managed to seep through the dead canopy of trees.

Closer up, I could make out finer details about them. Their skin was grey and mottled, stretched tight over jutting bones. Some even had short, jagged horns

that curled from their brows and ears that were long and pointed. Sharp, rotting teeth jutted from their lip-less mouths as they hissed to one another in some strange tongue. They moved in jerky, erratic motions, all claws and spindly limbs. Again, they reminded me of birds that landed on the ground, necks twitching back and forth as they looked for food. Some still had remnants of armour - chest plates of leather and metal stained with old blood. Most were nearly naked, only wearing loose fraying breeches or faded leather trousers.

The shadows seemed to follow each of them, lingering along their skin. Or perhaps they were shrouded in it, the shadows a part of their forms and leaving trails as they moved. The shadows writhed and floated lazily, like a faint black mist that was sometimes difficult to spot, and sometimes much more tangible and darker.

I suppressed a shudder, not wanting them to see my fear. My wrists were raw and bleeding beneath the coarse rope. But what was worse was the wound on my arm from the Fomóraigh's claws, the bite it had left on my flesh at my shoulder. It had been two days since the pond. The skin around the wounds was tight, as if it was coated and sealed in thick wax. Each movement threatened to split and crack, and the ache from the wounds was torturous. My head pounded and nausea rose up over and over. I wondered if the wounds were infected. it seemed likely. I didn't want to think about

where those claws and teeth could have been before, the thought would likely make me vomit. I winced as I shifted, trying to see Cian beside me.

He was slumped forward, dried blood matting shoulder-length auburn hair that had fallen from the tie that usually drew half the hair back at the nape of his neck. His right arm seemed to hang unnaturally low, but wasn't as grotesque as his left leg, which was bent still at a horrifying angle. It was certainly broken, but likely in several places. His skin was deathly pale and I couldn't tell if he was even breathing. Panic rose in my throat.

"Cian," I croaked, my voice barely a whisper. I stretched my leg out, nudging his hip with my toe, avoiding the leg. He didn't stir. My heartbeat quickened.

"Cian, please." *Please don't leave me alone.*

I stretched further, trying to reach him. I nudged harder, trying not to feel guilty about the pain it could cause. He needed to wake up, didn't he? Or perhaps he would be in incredible pain and it would be better if he was out of it. But I needed to know he lived.

I managed to kick out, his body jerking with the impact. Slowly, so slowly, his eyes cracked open and he drew in a few short gasps. He managed to see me, I hoped at least. His mouth tried to form words, but he couldn't get them out. His lips shaped around my name, and then his eyes shut once more.

My blood turned to ice as one of the twisted creatures darted towards us, its movements

unpredictable and terrifying. Before I could react, it grabbed me, wrenching me away from Cian with strength that seemed impossible for its frail, skeletal limbs. I was twisted around the tree and my legs dragged under me.

I cried out as its claws dug into my arm, already aching from the wound. The thing's grip was iron, despite looking like it could be snapped in two. Its grasp was so cold.

It opened its lipless mouth to speak, revealing rows of jagged, rotting teeth. "Stay quiet," it hissed, flecks of spittle hitting my face. Its raspy voice sounded like stones grinding together, but there was something undeniably humanoid to it. "Or we will peel your companion's skin from his bones while he still draws breath."

I shuddered at its threat, but didn't cower or look away. My fear was slowly being replaced by realisation: I would not show weakness to these monsters, but they would use Cian to control me. The creature's claws dug deeper as I stayed silent, a wordless challenge in my eyes. I tried to summon magic, to feel any sort of tingle in my skin, my fingertips, to feel that power soak into me from the earth like it did at the pond, but the iron collar Cathal had clamped around my neck restricted it entirely. It was obvious to me. The collar felt unnatural. It was heavy, but that weight went deeper, beneath my skin.

"Well?" The Fomóraigh rasped, giving me a shake. "Want to watch him suffer?"

I opened my mouth to respond, though I wasn't sure what I would say. I was saved from answering as a familiar voice cut through the morning air.

"Release her."

My stomach dropped to my feet as Cathal strode towards us from across the camp, fixing the creature restraining me with a cold stare. The creature immediately let me go, stalking back into camp.

Cathal barely glanced at it as it retreated. He only had eyes for me, his gaze trailing across my body in a way that made my skin crawl. I quickly looked away. Too many memories intruded. Memories of how warm he'd felt, how passionate when we were together, how fiercely he tried to claim and protect me in front of others, and then how he'd flicked a switch and stabbed Lugh in the back, literally.

The taste of betrayal and rage was ashy on my tongue, and I fought to swallow and ground my jaw as I forced myself to look up into his face, familiar and stranger all at once.

That smirk appeared, lifting one corner of his mouth that made one of his eyes squint.

How I fucking hated it now.

His eyes were as blue as an ocean as he squatted down in front of me. The Cathal I thought I knew. The one who had held me close, who had whispered sweet

and filthy words in my ear. His smile didn't reach those eyes now. Here was the stranger.

"Why?" I ground out through clenched teeth. It was all I could manage to say.

He tilted his head, regarding me like one would an interesting insect. "Why what, Flower?" His voice was mocking.

I yanked against the ropes securing my wrists, ignoring the bite of pain. "You know damn well. Why all this? Why betray Lugh?" *Why betray me.* My voice broke on Lugh's name. Betrayal - it still caught words in my throat like shattered glass.

Cathal leaned in close, his breath hot on my cheek. I turned my face away in disgust but his hand shot out, grabbing my chin and wrenching my head back around. His fingers bit into my skin.

"I had to get close, of course." His lips stretched into a cruel smirk. "I desired you anyway, before I even knew your origins. But when you let slip that you came through the portal, and then that power..." He trailed off, eyes raking down my body. "You will be quite useful to us, to me.

"I wanted you, but as soon as you spoke the truth when I brought you before Lugh, I knew I had to *own* you."

I jerked my head from his grasp, feeling sick. All the whispered words, the tender embraces - lies crafted

to get close to me. To *own* me. My stomach churned with rage and humiliation.

"So that's it?" I seethed. "You wormed your way into my bed for... for what? What do you even want me for?"

Cathal clucked his tongue as he straightened up. "As if it was hard to get into your bed, you made it embarrassingly easy. Though, I had a little help the first time. Something slipped into your wine. You were so trusting of me, I barely had to lift a finger." He ran a finger up my arm from the bindings and to the wound there, pressing into the sore and crusted skin. I didn't gasp at the pain, but I twitched, and that was enough to make that smirk come back. I wanted to claw it off him.

He rose and began to turn away but glanced over his shoulder, malice glinting in his eyes. "I'd behave if I were you. We've got quite the journey ahead. You'll find out why soon enough."

With that he strode away, an ease and swagger to his step that made fury boil in my veins. I ached to feel that storm again, to watch a strike of lightning burn him from the inside out, but the iron collar remained fastened tight and heavy around my throat. Cian remained slumped unconscious beside me, battered and broken. My heart twisted at the sight of him.

I started to worry, to feel the weight of concerns that I would die, that Cian would die; that I wouldn't

reach that power again. I started to feel helpless, but I shook my head as those thoughts took hold.

I would find a way to call that power back to me. I would become that storm again, and blow through it all. I would not be weak. No matter what.