

LOST SONGS OF THE
BRIAR CROWN

RHANA MCKENNA



CHAPTER ONE



Cathal

The healer spoke in hushed tones around my bed, as if volume itself might shatter what remained of my sight, or drive me to rage. His whispers to Saran crawled across my skin like insects. One eye nearly gone completely - Shannon had seen to that. The other, a blur of shadows and light that sharpened with each passing day, though I had been warned not to hope for a full recovery.

I pressed my palm against the ruined socket, feeling the ridged scar tissue beneath the bandage. I touched it every day to remind myself what she did. The phantom pain pulsed with my heartbeat, a constant reminder of my failure. Of her.

"Drink this." Saran pushed a wooden cup into my good hand. The bitter draught burned my throat, but I welcomed it. The taste distracted from the rage that threatened to consume me whole.

Shannon. My little Flower. The pet name tasted like ash now, becoming something cursed and perverse.

I'd played the devoted protector for so long. Every gentle touch calculated, every worried glance rehearsed. The way I'd hover when she walked down the stairs at the Keep, how I'd pour her drinks for her, make sure there was enough food on her plate, the soft words when nightmares woke her - all of it designed to make her trust me. Depend on me. She was meant to be loyal to *me*.

The cup cracked in my grip.

"Easy." Saran pried it from my fingers. "You need rest."

Rest. As if I could close my remaining eye without seeing her face. That moment when she'd realised, she had the upper hand. The shock that morphed into something else - not fear, but fury. Pure, pulsing rage that matched my own.

She'd fought me and took pleasure in it. No hesitation, no pleading. Just violence, swift and brutal. My fingers found the other wounds: the gash along my ribs where the stones had tried to force their way into my skin, the marks on my forearms and neck that had required stitches.

I'd watched her for so long, catalogued every flinch when Lugh had made her uncomfortable, noted how she'd position herself on the edge of her seat, the way her shoulders would tense when anyone stood too close. Anyone but me. Broken things were supposed to be easy to control. Give them safety, they'd never leave. Show them kindness after cruelty, they'd take it for love.

But she had no love, and no fucking loyalty. She was clearly incapable of it. She was druid *and* raised a human. There could be no filthier combination.

The settlement's Great Oak groaned outside in the courtyard. The druids claimed it held wisdom and promise, but what wisdom was there in this? I'd lost her. Lost everything. My position compromised, my body maimed. My King's faith in me was damaged. This war's greatest general tucked into bed and being fed medicine like a fucking child.

"Your sight improves." The healer's voice cut through my thoughts. An old male, bent with age, always studying me with eyes that saw too much. He had been captured long ago and was made compliant. *He* had proved to be worth the hassle. My kind was vicious

and powerful, but we were not the best healers. "The other wounds heal well too. It shouldn't be much longer."

"Good."

"You'll have scars."

"I don't care about scars. Leave me."

The healer left the room, and I was alone with Saran once more.

"What word from T'éanmordh?" I asked once the healer's footsteps faded down the corridor.

Saran pulled a stool closer to my bed, the wood scraping against stone. "He grows impatient. The human's escape has... complicated matters. She saw too much and has removed any element of surprise. None were meant to leave Carnothlin alive."

"Complicated." The word sat bitter on my tongue.

"The scouts that never returned from the hunt indicate they clearly went North; this, we know. But the party that went in the aftermath returned yesterday."

Shannon. They had been looking for her. My jaw clenched, sending fresh waves of pain through my ruined eye socket.

"The site was... incomprehensible. It was like meteors had destroyed them. Despite this knowledge of the girl's power, Balorath wants us to press the advantage," Saran continued. "We got word that many ships sailed the Inishmaraeg Strait. The Slaughán are

ready to move on the northern villages. The remaining druids will scatter like snowflakes up there."

"No." The word came out sharper than intended. "We should wait."

"Don't be stupid-"

"We wait until we know where *they* are." My fingers found the edge of the bandage again, pressing against the hard scars beneath. "Have there been sightings of *him*?"

Saran shifted on the stool. "No. But they are likely headed south."

"To the abandoned settlements?"

"Unknown. Our scouts can't penetrate the Godswood, you know this."

Wherever Lugh was, the bitch would be there. Lugh wouldn't abandon her. Not after everything. The way he'd looked at her, possessive and hungry - no, he'd keep her close if they had reunited. Unless she'd run from him too. The thought sparked something dark in my chest, a mixture of hope and fury.

I still couldn't believe the bastard was alive.

"We should increase the patrols at the border to the Godswood, and send more to Dunhalach," I said. "Tell them to watch for signs of human passage. Broken twigs at waist height, footprints with that tread pattern their boots leave."

"You taught them our tracking methods," Saran observed accusatorily. "They'll know how to hide."

I'd taught them many things. How to move through hostile territory, where to strike to disable an opponent, which plants could heal and which could kill. Every lesson meant to bind them closer to me, make them dependent on my knowledge. Instead, I'd armed my enemy. I had been a fool and had gotten complacent in my position as Captain.

"They're foolish and proud. They'll make mistakes." My good eye focused on the ceiling beams.

"Balorath won't wait much longer," Saran warned. "He's already questioning your... attachment to the human girl. Some whisper you've grown soft for her."

"Fuck you." I pushed myself up, ignoring the protest of healing wounds. "When I bring her head to Balorath myself, their doubts will die with her."

"And when their King protects her?"

"Then I'll take his head too. *Again.*" The words came easily, but we both knew the truth. Lugh commanded forces I couldn't match, not alone. Not weakened like this. I needed to get stronger, and fast.

Saran stood. "The other Generals want to see you."

"Tell them I'll report when my sight returns fully. Not before." I lay back against the pillows. "And Saran? If you find them, you report to me first. No one else. Understood?"

"You're pushing your luck, *boy*. I do not answer to you. You might have proven yourself useful to our King, but that does not make you his equal. Your obsession

needs to end, or I'll see you punished myself." Saran hissed as he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

I let out a long sigh, grinding my teeth until my jaw ached. I hated being in this place; it felt too much like home. But I'd never had one of those, not really. My skin itched to fly among the clouds, feeling the wind in my feathers. Perhaps then I could be useful again. Perhaps *I* could find them.

Reaching out, I felt around the bedside table for the tonic the healer had left, gripping the cup and knocking it back.

I lay back in the pillows as I waited for the brew to pull me under into sleep, and reached for my shadows to caress me. The cold magic of my ancestors was a balm to my aching bones; it twisted over my skin like the hands of a lover, and I writhed lazily with it and let it pull me into familiar darkness.

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The dream always began the same way, with the scent of burning sage and wet stone.

I stood in the courtyard again, a small boy. I had snuck through the crowd once more, and they didn't flinch in my presence like they did in hers, like she was something dirty and contagious. They didn't know what she was to me; my blood was so diluted, you couldn't

see the shadows. The Seers had arranged themselves in a crescent, their white robes catching the morning mist like cobwebs. Mother knelt in the centre, her dark hair, so unlike the gold of mine, hung loose around her shoulders.

"She carries their taint," a Seer's voice boomed across the stones. "The blood of the Fomóraigh runs through her veins like poison through water; like their rot! Abomination!"

Mother lifted her head. Even stripped of her traveling cloak, even with iron shackles weighing down her delicate wrists, she held herself with dignity. The half-moon scar beneath her left eye stood out stark against her pale skin. Even dirty and beaten, she was so beautiful.

"I came seeking sanctuary." Her voice carried despite its softness. "I renounce violence. I chose peace. I am half druid, half of *you*."

"Peace?" A younger courtier stepped forward, brandishing his pointed finger like he could cut her with it. "Your kind slaughtered thousands at Brennodair. Children burned in their beds!"

"I wasn't there. I fled before-"

"Silence." The Seer raised his hand. "You will submit to the cleansing or face execution. Choose."

Mother looked directly at me then. Her blue eyes, druid eyes, filled with something worse than fear. Hope.

She still believed these people might show mercy. That the Gods might reveal her for what she was: one of *them*.

"I submit."

They began with the wheel of binding, pressing the sacred bronze disc against her forehead while chanting in the old tongue. Her body convulsed. Black smoke rose from her skin where the metal touched. The smell of burning flesh mixed with sage. Her shadows writhed and twisted in agony as they burned.

Next came the white poplar wands, each druid taking turns striking her shoulders, her back, her legs. Not enough to mortally wound. Just enough to break. To *cleanse* her body. With each blow, wisps of shadow bled from her like mist from a morning lake. Tears were streaming down her face, and her whimpers and cries echoed in the silence alongside every lash. Each strike was like a knife to my heart.

"S-stop." My voice cracked as I whispered. "Please."

The Seer glanced at me with cold pale eyes. "Watch, boy. Watch what comes of corrupted blood. We *must* rid her of this taint."

They thought I was one of them; that they were protecting me. I couldn't tell them what I was. I was afraid.

They poured some liquid down her throat next. She fought then, thrashing against the hands that held her, knowing what it meant. To forget was worse than

death for our kind. To lose the ancient memories, the connection to the Otherworld, the very essence of what made her shadow-born.

She frothed at the mouth, nails clawing into her own hands as her talons struggled to free themselves. She suffocated on her own spit, veins popping and eyes trailing tears of blood. It lasted for hours. When she stopped struggling, they released her. She collapsed onto the stones, trembling. The half-moon mark seemed even more stark against her pallid skin. Her eyes, when she opened them, were vacant.

I ran to her then, falling to my knees beside her.

She looked through me. No recognition. No love. Nothing.

They kept her alive for three days after that. Fed her, gave her water. But she wouldn't eat. Wouldn't speak. I wasn't allowed to see her.

On the third night, they said she simply stopped breathing. The servants found her at dawn, curled like a child on the floor.

"Natural causes," the Seers had declared. "The corruption finally left her body. There clearly is no saving them from their nature."

In the dream, I was no longer twelve. I stood over my mother's body with my grown hands clenched into fists, my trained muscles taught with rage, my knowledge of exactly where to place a blade for

maximum damage. The druids still stood in their crescent, but now they were the ones kneeling.

"Mercy is a lie," I told their corpses. "You taught me that."

The dream shifted, as it always did at the end. Mother's eyes opened, solid black now, and finally she recognised me.

"Good boy," she whispered.