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**Weapons of the Gods: Sword of Victory**

A THESIS

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By

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**Weapons of the Gods: Sword of Victory**

A THESIS  
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## ABTRACT OF THESIS

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When eighteen-year-old Edana's father, King Cian of Eire, dies, the gods visit Edana in a dream and warn her of the struggles that she will soon face, claiming that Edana must be the one to assume responsibility if Eire is to have any hope of surviving. Fal, the god of Fate, tasks Edana with finding the four treasures of Eire to accomplish this feat. Shortly after King Cian's funeral, it is discovered that Edana's mother, Queen Bidelia, is missing, and a stranger is captured sneaking around the citadel. Through this stranger, Phelan, whom Edana believes to have seen in her dream, it is discovered that the key to rescuing the queen means leaving home and finding the first and most powerful weapon of the gods: the Sword of Victory. Edana and Phelan set out on their own to reach the sword before anyone else can beat them to it.

Complicating Edana's mission to find the first treasure is Morfram, once King Cian's chief advisor. His attempts to capture Edana and Phelan result in an uneasy friendship between the two travelers as well as the discovery of Phelan's divine lineage. During

their journey, Edana's sister, Ianna, and Kyl, a close friend, catch up to them and assist Edana in retrieving the sword and rescuing their mother as they try to prevent war with Morfram's forces. When war is inevitable, Edana and Phelan gather an army and confront Morfram on the field of battle. Morfram is temporarily defeated, but soon forms an alliance with the god, Miledh, who wants to defeat Fal and his brothers. Morfram vows that he will rebuild his depleted army before he makes another play for the throne of Eire.

## INTRODUCTION TO THESIS

*Weapons of the Gods: Sword of Victory* is a young adult fiction work. Geared toward readers sixteen and over, its themes include familial struggles and responsibility, as well as faith in the Celtic gods. The struggle of family relationships is demonstrated most notably between Edana and her mother, Queen Bidelia. Mother and daughter are uneasy with each other. Neither one really knows the other, nor are they terribly inclined to get to know each other better. Bidelia is angry, assuming that Edana considers her weak-willed and capable of little of value. Edana, however, just considers that she and her mother are too different to have formed a close bond. She considers their regard for Ianna, Edana's younger sister, the only thing she and her mother share. Ianna eventually becomes a point of contention when she is forced to choose sides between Edana and their mother.

The theme of responsibility is prevalent throughout the entire work. This can be seen in Edana's desire to assist the poor citizens of Eire when she feels no one else will. She goes to great lengths—raiding the treasury of her dowry and stealing from Morfram—to ensure that her people will be taken care of. Also, when war is looming, Edana understands that she must be the one to assume control of their forces if they have any hope of defeating Morfram.



Before King Cian died, he taught Edana the skills she would need to rule and instilled in her a strong sense of duty, but it is inevitably up to Edana to decide whether to honor his teachings.

The issue of Edana's faith in her gods materializes through her sense of responsibility. When Fal claims that she must assume power and go in search of the four treasures of Eire, Edana can decide to ignore the god's pressures. Instead, she chooses to honor Fal's dictates in order to save her country. Similarly, Phelan learns at a young age to respect the teachings of Fal, allowing that the god, his grandfather, knows more of destiny than he does.

The primary goal of *Weapon of the Gods: Sword of Victory*, aside from simply creating an entertaining story, was to create characters, like Edana, who are strong without being too perfect and who are relevant to young readers despite the fantastic nature of other elements in the story.

Similar characters in the young adult genre include Tamora Pierce's heroines from her *Song of the Lioness* quartet, her *Immortals* quartet, and her *Protector of the Small* quartet. Also similar is Maria V. Snyder's Opal Cowan from the *Glass* series in which she struggles with self-doubt and guilt when her glass creations turn deadly. Throughout the series, Opal learns that every action has consequences, and that all self-doubt does is create more problems.

Elements of sexuality, including the threat of rape, are also prevalent in this series and motivated me to include similar events as sexuality is a popular theme in the young adult genre.

To create a more realistic Edana, it was important that she be surrounded by other characters that were just as strong and compelling as she was. The male protagonist, Phelan, is introduced to serve as a foil for Edana. Where she is temperamental, he is more composed. Where she is focused on fairness and justice, his morals are flexible. By having these and other contradictions between the two central characters, Edana and Phelan are strong enough to stand on their own, but are more interesting when paired. Similarly, Edana's sister, Ianna, begins as a very insecure character but soon develops a sense of confidence over the course of the story, creating her own character arc, while highlighting similar traits in the other characters. Even though Ianna can be considered a minor character, it is important that she is distinct enough to gain interest as an individual character with her intelligence, patience, and determination.

With *Weapons of the Gods: Sword of Victory* and the other books that I hope will follow, it is my intention to push the boundaries of character relationships in young adult fiction, to create characters that are memorable—whether they be heroes or villains—and to fit them into little-known myths and legends of the Celtic culture, following Rick

Riordan's example from his *Heroes of Olympus* series in which he incorporates modern characters into traditional Greek myths using a similar narrative style. This gives readers a better grasp of main characters' personalities.

***Weapons of the Gods: Sword of Victory***

## PROLOGUE

*The bells rang out.*

*Three times the sound echoed across the hills. High, sharp, and clear.*

*Despite the clarity of its call, it was not the call that most were accustomed to. It was not the sound that rang out at mid-day and then again dusk. It was not the merry song that had become so much a part of daily life that it eventually became unnoticeable. Indeed, there was something darker about its cry today.*

*For some reason, this sound signaled the coming of grief and loss. All who heard the bell's cry would understand that death had come to Eire. This time, the bells wouldn't go unnoticed.*

*Edana ignored the horrible sound as she sat and stared out over the hills of her father's land, running her hands through the lush green grass as she did. For miles in every direction, that same lush, green sea of grass rolled on interrupted only by the darker green of the trees and a great stone protruding from the highest hilltop.*

*She knew it was the Hill of Tara, just as she knew there was something missing from the rest of the scene.*

*Where was her home? The large stone and wood buildings that made up the city were gone. Where were her friends? Her family? She thought these questions in the same way she often heard children*

*asking why the sky was blue. Mere curiosity. It was strange though. Edana knew that she should be feeling something, yet she experienced only numbness.*

*It just didn't seem to matter.*

*The place where the city of Tara once sat was now empty. The seat of the High King of Eire was gone. The citadel that had stood in the city's center for hundreds of years was now gone. The small buildings and shops that surrounded it were gone. Nothing was left. Not even the people. There were no laughing children playing in the place where the square had once been. No merchants selling their wares.*

*The only thing that remained was silence.*

*It was then she became aware of a faint, strange humming that filled the air. She turned her head, trying to locate its source. It seemed an impossible task. The air around her was saturated with the sound. The humming enveloped everything her mind took in.*

*She saw smoke on a distant hilltop and rose, the white of her dress fluttering in the wind, her long, black curls dancing. Until that moment, she hadn't realized there was even a breeze.*

*The emotion she hadn't felt before now flooded her. She had to get there. She ran toward the smoke, lured by the gray tendrils rising into the blue sky. As she drew closer to the hill, she noticed that the*

*humming grew louder, deeper--the sound at once, haunting and beautiful. As it did, her fear and elation grew as well. How both emotions could be drawn out by the peculiar sound, she couldn't say. Instinct, she would later think.*

*As she came to the top of the last hill, she found a small campfire surrounded by four men. She stopped. It seemed the world was gone and only they remained. Normally, she wouldn't risk approaching anyone she didn't know--her father had always preached caution--but she needed answers. Caution would have to wait.*

*Three of the men stood as she approached. One, tall, with dark hair and even darker eyes, stepped back, separating himself from the others, to lean against the white stone.*

*Funny, she hadn't realized until that moment that the smoke and the stone were so close together. And what were these men doing here? The stone was off-limits. Only a few were allowed to touch it. It had been the law of Eire since the first in the line of kings had penned the laws of this country. The Code of Kings still existed to this this day. Yet, here they were. Who did these men think they were?*

*As if reading her thoughts, the dark-eyed man smiled and touched the Stone with a gentle brush of fingertips, the caress possessive and sweet. Immediately, the humming took on a deeper timbre.*

*The stone! She thought dumbly.*

*The sound, the beautiful sound, was coming from the stone! And now, with the large, dark-eyed man touching its surface, the stone seemed somehow--content, as if it were indeed secure under the man's control.*

*The dark-eyed man continued to smile, his dark locks tossed about in the breeze. He was dressed in black breeches and a loose black tunic that he didn't bother to belt. He appeared to be the stone's antithesis, though they seemed made for each other somehow.*

*Edana shook her head but continued her approach, pulled closer by some unseen force. Her eyes never wavered from the man and his stone until two of the men shifted to block her path.*

*They were nearly identical to the dark-eyed man, save for the color of their eyes and the weapons they held. Both stood well over six feet in height, dressed in the green and brown of forest workers.*

*Looking at them didn't bring forest workers to mind. Everything in their bearing told her these men were soldiers--elite soldiers if their weapons were any indication.*

*The man on the right carried a large sword. It was the most beautiful weapon she had ever seen. It was clearly meant for fighting, rather than decoration, though it was obvious that its owner took great care with its condition. The polished blade gleamed brilliantly in the*



*sunlight, highlighting small circles embedded in its steel surface. Edana remembered the blacksmith telling her that the circles were a result of a technique the old masters had used to create their weapons. Not many of this caliber existed anymore. The only noticeable adornment on the sword's surface was a small emerald on its hilt.*

*Edana was somewhat surprised at how closely the man's eyes mirrored the color of the gem. She couldn't shake the feeling that the sword was made for this man. Or was it the other way around?*

*The man on the left carried a spear, also beautiful in its simplicity. The shaft was made of a dark wood she didn't recognize. The spear's point was covered in small, strange writing, interrupted by another emerald. It was the writing more than the jewel that grabbed her attention. It wasn't Gaelic that much she was sure of. But it was so familiar.*

*You know this, her mind whispered. The answer was shadowed on the edge of her consciousness. What could it be?*

*Both men continued staring at her with cold, hard eyes. Neither said a word. They didn't need to. Their silence told her all she needed to know. They would use their weapons at the slightest provocation. Best to avoid that if at all possible.*

*The man who remained seated had his head lowered. Long*

*blonde locks hid his face from her gaze. He was busy stirring a large, black cauldron, his attention never shifting from his task. The cauldron's contents smelled delicious, causing her mouth to water. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. She wondered what the hulking twins would do to her if she moved toward their dinner.*

*"Mo leanbh," the dark-eyed man said, drawing her eyes back to him. He was every bit as large and dangerous looking as the others, even with the kind smile he had on his face. "Do you know who we are?"*

*Edana shook her head, too stunned by the sound of his voice to speak. Beneath his words, she could detect a humming resonance similar to the song of the stone.*

*"I am Fal," he said. "Nuada, Lug, and Dagda," he pointed to his companions. His smile widened as Edana's jaw dropped open.*

*It seemed her previous fear had been warranted.*

*"I see that you know of us."*

*Edana merely nodded. This couldn't be happening.*

*"You may speak to me leanbh. My brothers and I are here for you, after all."*

*"Ehm." She cleared her throat as if the action would somehow put words into her head. But really, she thought, what do you say*

*when you come face to face with the gods? Perhaps the obvious was the best course to take. "I don't understand. Why are you here for me?"*

*"Your home is in danger." His foreboding words were softened by the kind smile on his face.*

*She looked around pointedly. "My home is gone."*

*"This is not what is, only what could be. Your home is safe in this moment, but it will not last."*

*"Why not go to my father, then?"*

*"Ah," Fal said, sympathy in eyes. "You heard the tolling of the bells. We both know that the duty must now be passed on. You are next."*

*Edana shook her head, trying to deny what she suspected was coming next.*

*"Your father is dead, leanbh. Until the next leader can be chosen, the responsibility falls to you."*

*Child, he'd called her, and not for the first time. The tears were gathering in her eyes. Did he use that term because her father once had? Ever since she could remember, her father had only called her leanbh when she was in trouble. Was she somehow in trouble with the gods? Even the fear that thought inspired couldn't suppress the grief coursing through her. Tears were now streaming down her cheeks,*

*but a small part of Edana knew that if her father had truly sailed through the gates to the Isle of Man, then she must take his place-- or at least help her mother-- until the next leader could be chosen.*

*Her father would expect it of her.*

*If it were true, if her father was truly gone, then she had a duty to her people. That was one point her father had stressed since the day she was born.*

*"Duty," he'd said, "Must flow uphill and down." Meaning, she'd come to learn, that if the weak must rely on the strong, then the strong were required to protect and care for those who relied upon them.*

*Child or not, she was still her father's daughter, she told herself. Until the next leader could be chosen, she would be one of the strong. She would do what was required of her. Grief would have to wait.*

*Edana straightened her spine as she focused on Fal. "I'll do what I have to."*

*Fal smiled and laughed merrily. "There is fire in you, leanbh. You will do very well, I think."*

*"What would you have me do?" Edana asked.*

*"Danger approaches Eire. There is one who seeks to take everything from you and yours."*

*This wasn't exactly a new concept. She had watched her father*

*deal with more than his fair share of angry nobles and corrupt warlords. Now, in this moment, Edana felt like she could deal with them too. "I won't allow anyone to take anything from me and mine," she said hotly. Just the mere thought had her clenching her fists against the anger coursing through her. Was the loss of her father not enough? Did they think her heart would be too broken to fight back?*

*If so, they were wrong.*

*Fal nodded sadly. "Before you can save your home and your people, you must first leave them."*

*"Leave my home?" she asked, incredulous, too surprised to hold on to her anger. "You just told me we were in danger, and now you want me to leave everything I know? How can I leave my home knowing my family and friends will be in danger?"*

*"Not to worry, the danger will follow you. To take what is yours, it must find them first."*

*The man was speaking in riddles. Maybe this was the way the gods spoke. If so, it explained why people were so often confused about their beliefs.*

*Edana shook her head again. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to laugh or cry some more. Oh sure, some unidentified danger is going to follow you around. Nothing to worry about, though. She raised her hands and let them fall to her sides again. Maybe arguing*

*with the gods wasn't the wisest thing to do, but she needed answers. "I don't understand," she enunciated. "What danger? And find what first?"*

*"I can't tell you any more about the danger. You must learn that for yourself. But the 'them' I am referring to is not a what. It is a who."*

*More riddles, she thought.*

*Fal stepped forward and laid a hand on Edana's cheek. As he did, the stone began to hum louder and louder until it seemed she would faint from the oppressive beauty of its song.*

*"You must find us, leanbh, my brothers and me. But I must caution you. If we are not found, Eire will be lost to you. If we are not found, Eire will be lost to us as well."*

*Just another loss on the horizon. Tears filmed her eyes once more, and Edana struggled to hold them back. "But how am I supposed to find you?" she asked.*

*"Look to the Druids. They will give you aid."*

*"The Druids," she began, confused. "I thought they were gone. No one's seen them in years."*

*"No, they would not leave their home. People have not been looking in the right places for them. Find them. Find us."*

*The doleful ringing of bells drowned out her next words. This*

*time, the sound seemed to pierce her heart so that she doubled over with the pain of it. Now that its meaning was clear, she was no longer able to ignore it.*

*Edana did the only thing she could. She lowered herself to the ground and wept.*

*When she was finally able to lift her head, the sun was gone and her world was dark. Fal and his brothers were gone, as was the fire and the cauldron--as if they were never there.*

*Instead, she sat alone on the hill with the stone monolith twenty feet away and now eerily silent. She brushed the tears from her cheeks and rose.*

*Even in the absence of sound, Edana found herself drawn toward the stone. She placed one foot in front of the other, slowly trying to make her way to it. Fascination and fear ran side by side in her. Its song had lured her in, but its silence was equally mesmerizing.*

*There was an indrawn breath, a shocked sound, from the other side of the hilltop.*

*Edana jerked her head up, startled that she was no longer alone. He stood perhaps ten feet from the stone, hand outstretched, mirroring her own position.*

*She couldn't make out his features clearly. She had only the impression of angry golden eyes that seemed to glow in the*

*darkness... Wolf's eyes, she thought, even as she began to sprint the short distance to the stone.*

*Everything in her told her to get to the stone. She knew that she needed to reach it before he could.*

*The man apparently had the same idea as she did.*

*They touched the stone in the same moment, but were thrown backward by the concussion of sound that emanated there. The world was now an explosion of sound.*

*Edana landed on her back but managed to rise up to her knees despite the weight the stone's song pressed down upon her. What she saw amazed her. The surface of the stone itself had now changed. A blinding halo of light surrounded it, pulsing with each changing note. It was beautiful. Unbelievable.*

*In the center of the Hill of Tara in the region of Meath, the stone of Fal was singing. The song was both beautiful and terrifying--a thousand voices ringing out in one song. Harmonies and melodies twined together to form words her mind couldn't understand but that her heart and soul seemed to ache for.*

*Edana saw that the strange man was struggling to his feet and seemed similarly awestruck. As he tore his gaze from the stone, their eyes met.*

*The bells rang out again.*



\*\*\*\*\*

Edana jerked awake. Her heart was racing while tears of both wonder and sadness stained her cheeks.

The bells rang out their sad song. This time, their meaning was unmistakable. The king was dead.

Her *father* was dead.

Edana buried her face in her hands and wept out her broken heart.

\*\*\*\*\*

Phelan sat up in his bed, rubbing his calloused hands over his face, the stubbled contours of his jaw scraping against his palms. He couldn't muster the energy to untangle his legs from the disordered bedcover.

It was only a dream, he assured himself. He had nothing to worry about. Yet his heart was pounding, spreading the echoes of wonder and anger through his body and mind. He had not been alone on that hill. One moment he had been approaching the silent stone, and the next he had been racing the girl across the hilltop. Her long black locks stood out against the white of her dress. Her blue eyes had been every bit as desperate as his own.

He shook himself. Nothing to worry about, he assured himself again. Nothing and no one would stop him from taking what was

rightfully his.

He tilted his head as the bells rang out. Three times the sound echoed into the silence of his room.

So it was true. It had finally happened. After a year of waiting, the king was dead.

Phelan rubbed a hand over his heart and smiled. The real work was about to start.

## CHAPTER 1--EDANA

A number of curious citizens flocked to the city center to see the funeral procession of a king. Most didn't give much thought to the pain caused by the king's death, Edana thought bitterly. They just wanted to see their queen and her daughters so that later, while they sat in their taverns with their ale, they could say, "We were there."

The nobles from the five regions--Ulster, Leinster, Munster, Connacht, and Meath, itself--were there, most of them concerned about one-upping the others. They would talk about the fashions of the mourners. Was someone wearing a new cut to their dress? A new style of hat? What jewels were the nobles wearing? Was this person there? Was that one not? Were they intentionally trying to insult the royal family?

Eventually, they would discuss the death of the king. They would say that there had been murmurings of an illness, but no one believed that what ailed him had been so severe. He had only taken ill a short week before his death. Such a shame, they would concede.

Then they would discuss the type of king he was. Some would say that he was a noble ruler who did much for his people in his short life. They would admire the way he increased the sentry numbers in the Navan, the most dangerous of the four districts that made up Meath. Then, there was the foundation he'd started to give food to the

poorest families in each district, not mentioning that the foundation had lapsed in recent months due to his illness. These people would admire who and what he was, saying that he showed compassion for all and was thus worthy of their respect.

Others, the worst and most bitter, would say scornfully that he was nobility. Surely, one less nobleman could only be a good thing, never taking into consideration that as well as a king, chosen by the gods, he had also been a husband and father.

Regardless of what would later be said, Edana tried to focus on what she could do to get through this horrible day. Dark thoughts about people she'd known her entire life wouldn't bring her father back. Setting these dark thoughts aside, she held her head high, standing between her dry-eyed mother and gently-weeping sister whose tears streamed down her cheeks.

In the three days leading up to the funeral, Edana had emptied herself of tears. Now, she only felt empty. Empty and numb. She would stand by her mother and sister until they too were numb.

When the procession reached the Hill of Tara and she saw its giant stone centerpiece, Edana thought briefly of her dream. Her grieving period had started the moment Fal had spoken to her.

Today the stone was silent. She had to consciously push thoughts of gods and war out of her head.

Gods and war could wait one more day while she mourned the loss of the best man she had ever known.

The Hill of Tara that had been so beautiful and green in her dream now seemed ugly and harsh with the funeral pyre erected only a short distance from the Stone of Fal. In Eire, fire was the way to cleanse the body and soul to prepare the dead for the afterlife.

King Cian, draped in the white and red colors of their house, was laid atop the pyre while flowers were strewn over his body.

He looked so much like he was sleeping, his raven hair cropped short and covered by his gleaming, golden diadem. He looked like someone need only reach forward and nudge him to have him sitting up and smiling his big smile, laughing his big laugh. But he wasn't sleeping. He would never smile or laugh again.

Never again would Edana see his intelligent blue eyes sparkling with life. Life was gone. Only the afterlife awaited him now.

Normally, the King's chief counselor, who happened to be her father's closest friend, Morfram, would light the fire with a torch blessed by the priest of Eiru, the patron goddess of all of Eire. It was believed that the chief counselor aided the king in life, and that he would aid his body into the afterlife. This ritual had always been used.

Today though, Edana felt something pulling her forward until she found herself taking the torch from the stooped priest even as Morfram

moved to do the same. She felt it was her duty to light the pyre.

Not even the shocked gasp from the other mourners could stop her. Tradition be damned, she thought.

The priest's gaze met hers and she had only the brief impression of approval from his sad eyes.

As she stepped closer to her father's body, torch held aloft, Edana offered up a silent prayer.

*Let the fire cleanse his body, Eiru, so that he may take his place in the Hall of Kings on the Isle of Man.*

Edana lowered the flaming torch to the pyre until the fire caught and began to dance its way upward to the king's body. While the flames enveloped the red and white of the king's shroud, she kept her gaze riveted on his body. She would remember this day for the rest of her life.

As Edana stepped back into the embrace of her family, a single tear escaped her. She thought, with a combination of sorrow and relief, she wasn't empty after all.

## CHAPTER 2--PHELAN

They could feel pain too, Phelan thought.

He had to admit, it was nice seeing someone other than the poor bleed. He had seen the despair and hunger burning in the eyes of the lower classes since his return to Tara. And still more would suffer before the end of the day. This city held too many secrets, not the least of which was that King Cian had been assassinated, and the culprit was still out there. It was his duty to expose them--by any means necessary.

As the fire began to wane, Phelan studied what was left of the royal family. The Queen, Bidelia, was still a beauty. Though her skin was ashen, her eyes were dry. Her copper hair offered a stark contrast to the black of her mourning dress. He'd never met the woman, but from all accounts she was a gentle soul, more concerned with her gardens than affairs of state.

The younger daughter, Ianna, was a younger version of her mother--pale and lovely with large green eyes. Everything about her looks was quiet, but even through the tears clouding her eyes, a sharp intelligence shone. She was well-known as the scholar of the family. It was possible she could have come across something dangerous in her books, something she could have used against her father, yet her grief seemed genuine.

The older daughter, Edana, took after her father. She had the raven-black hair and blue eyes the northern clans of Ulaid, King Cian's birthplace, were known for. The only similarities she shared with the other two women were their large eyes that contrasted interestingly with otherwise small features.

Her face was exactly as he remembered it from his dream. Her eyes shone with a combination of grief and determination, her expression fierce.

Rumors said she was a little warrior, often seen following her father and his warriors through training exercises. Some believed Cian had been preparing her to assume the throne. Phelan knew that wasn't true. It couldn't be.

It was said she had quite the temper as well, though he'd never had occasion to see it firsthand. In fact, he'd been prevented from seeing it. Perhaps her temper was something he would be able to exploit.

When the fire finally died and the queen led the procession back into the city, Phelan found himself staring at the stone. In his dream, it had sung. Beautifully.

And she was there, he thought darkly. When he ran toward the stone, she had too, her face mirroring his own resolve.

She wouldn't beat him. He couldn't let her. He had too much at



stake. Lives were at stake. Lives that couldn't afford to rely on some spoiled princess who knew nothing about the world.

When it came down to life or death, he would do everything in his power to win. Everything.

His resolution set, he turned to join the procession.

## CHAPTER 3--EDANA

Edana and Ianna sat on the rooftop of the bakery overlooking the deserted square below, the full light of the moon the only witness to their pain.

This was the only place in the city they could be alone. The old ladder leading to the rooftop was too weak to hold up under the weight of their guards. Left with no other choice, the guards were left to monitor the area from the ground. Because this tradition had gone on so long, the guards knew to find something else to do until Edana and Ianna came down. The guards didn't consider that there were other ways to get to the rooftop. The buildings were so close together that jumping from roof to roof was a simple matter. Edana had learned the secret paths through the city long ago, to this building in particular.

It was their spot.

Edana still remembered the first time they had climbed to the roof four years before. Many of the other children excluded them from their games. Because they were the daughters of the king, many of the children were afraid of them--afraid of what might happen if one of the princesses was injured or displeased with them. It was just something they had to deal with.

On that particular day though, a young boy had lost his fear and pushed Ianna. Edana, always trying to protect her sister, had pushed

the boy back causing him to trip and hit his head on the ground. Afraid of getting in trouble, they ran away. They found the rickety ladder in an abandoned alley and climbed. Only their father had been able to talk them into coming down.

That wasn't going to happen today.

After returning to the citadel after the funeral, Edana had convinced their mother to take a tonic to help her sleep. The dark circles beneath her eyes had been clearly visible against the pallor of her skin. The queen's eyes had been dull and lifeless. Normally, their mother was the bane of the servants' existence, insisting on perfection in all things. Today, she was more subdued. Though sleep wouldn't erase the pain of loss, she hoped it would restore her mother's energy enough to deal with her pain properly.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Ianna asked into the silence, the worry in her voice clear. "She's not eating well and she's been wandering around the castle at all hours of the night."

Edana sighed. She thought it was too early to tell but was afraid to voice her fears. Their mother hadn't been the same since their father took ill. They'd spent the last year with a shell of the woman they'd once known. "She'll be fine. She just needs time." She gripped her sister's hand tightly in her own. "We'll be fine."

Ianna nodded, fighting back the urge to cry. "He told me, that

day, that I would always be his pretty girl." The first tear fell. "I thought he was teasing me because my birthday's nearing. I never thought it would be the last thing he ever said to me. All I can think is that I'll be turning seventeen soon." She turned her face to meet Edana's eyes. "I'll be seventeen, and he won't be here."

Edana put her arm around her sister's shoulders, offering what comfort she could. The one thing she'd learned about death was that words, no matter how kind or well-meant, couldn't soothe the ache of loss.

They sat there, hoping the silence could do what words couldn't.

"Ladies," a deep voice said from behind them.

Edana and Ianna sprang apart and stood, turning to face the speaker.

Kyl, Edana's closest friend, smiled at the two sisters. Edana stood braced for a fight, while Ianna stood behind her.

Seeing who had snuck up on them, Edana relaxed. Kyl was a tall man, nearly a hand's breadth over six feet. His face, and a strong face it was, would have been considered handsome had his smile not had two dimples winking out on either side of his mouth. The dimples softened his face considerably, lending a boyish charm to his appearance. His mahogany hair hung down to his shoulders and seemed much darker under the light of the moon.

He held his hands up, palms out, to signal his surrender.

“Easy now,” he laughed. “If we have to fight up here, we’d probably all fall off the roof. Then where would we be? I’d probably be in the dungeons while you were left to convalesce in your big comfy beds.”

Edana smiled at his rambling. He’d always been long-winded and rather than annoy her as it should, she only found it charming. On this day especially, it was good to be able to smile about something. His devotion to her and her sister was one cause. A fear of heights had plagued Kyl since he was a child, yet he climbed to this roof with them whenever they needed him. In Edana’s experience, friends like him were rare.

“Missed you today,” Edana said, stepping into Kyl’s waiting arms.

As a soldier and a member of the king’s guard, Kyl had been assigned the duty of watching over the king’s body, so while he’d been present at the funeral service, there were strict protocols regarding their public interaction.

It didn’t seem to matter that they were raised together, he the son of the general of the southern province of Munster.

Kyl’s mother had died when he was a small child, leaving his father, General Sloan, with little choice but to turn to his close friend, King Cian. He received permission to have Kyl schooled with Edana

and Ianna.

Because Edana and Kyl were the same age, both eighteen, nearly nineteen now, they had bonded quickly. That bond was one of the strongest parts of Edana's life. After his father was injured by an Ottoman raider five years ago and retired to the family estates in the south, Kyl had chosen to stay behind in Tara. It would have been a simple matter to move south with his father, but he had stayed for her, Edana knew.

"I'm sorry I couldn't switch duties," Kyl said, still hugging her. "My father arrived yesterday and mentioned it was probably best that we not cause any more gossip. Today of all days. He also said he'd be leaving first thing tomorrow and he expected me to *comport* myself with more discretion." He smiled. "He actually used the word comport."

Edana pulled back, angry eyes flashing. She didn't see the humor in this.

"My father's dead and people are worried about my relationship with you! You would think they had more important things to worry about, not the least of which is that a new ruler will be chosen within the next month."

"I think that's the point," Ianna interrupted. "If you're chosen and you eventually marry Kyl, Eire will have a career soldier as consort

and king." She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I'm fairly sure that's never happened."

Edana and Kyl turned to regard her as she spoke. Ianna made it seem like Edana was likely to be chosen as ruler. As far as she knew, a woman had never been chosen before. And more, that Edana and Kyl were likely to marry. Whether she was queen or not, Edana couldn't see that happening.

Edana and Kyl turned to look at each other before bursting into laughter.

"Surely you're joking," Edana wheezed when she could bring herself to speak.

"Hey now, I'll have you know I'm quite the catch. Any girl would be lucky to have a handsome man like me. Princesses and peasants alike. Besides," he said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "We did have one really memorable kiss."

More laughter ensued while Ianna glared at the two.

"It seems perfectly logical to me," she hissed. "If you don't want people gossiping about your clearly peculiar relationship, then you shouldn't be so intent on excluding everyone else's company. You," she said pointing at Edana. "Mother wanted to betroth you to that Kerran lord's son."

Edana bristled at this as she always did. "Mother had taken

leave of her senses. I was only sixteen at the time.”

“Exactly. Some girls would have been married by then, but you managed to talk your way out of that one. And you,” she said turning to Kyl. “No one’s ever seen you walk out with another girl. The other soldiers walk out, some with several women at a time.”

“And how do you know that?” Kyl asked with a smirk.

“I know all sorts of things.” Ianna offered a smug smile. “I even know about Donal taking you to see the dancers.”

Edana clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter. The dancers were women who claimed to follow the old ways of the Druids. In reality, they were just women who would dance naked in a clearing close to the city wall, hoping a wealthy citizen would take them in. By claiming to be Druids, the unsavory characters usually left them alone, afraid of what might happen on the off chance that there might actually be a Druid in their midst.

“I-- no, I-- it’s not--” Kyl stuttered before clearing his throat. The full moon made it easy to make out his blushing cheeks.

“Donal said it was a rite of passage. I hardly think I’m the first, nor will I be the last to admire the dancers,” he said stiffly, all dignity. “I think we’re getting off topic now.”

“Oh yes,” Edana grinned. “Definitely off topic. I won’t be marrying Kyl, though.” She reached over to pat his hand. “I wouldn’t



dream of it, especially now that I know of his weakness for the dancers.”

Edana and Ianna laughed merrily while Kyl scowled. A slight twitching of his mouth had her suspecting he was trying hard not to join them.

Abruptly, Edana realized that this was the first time they had laughed--really laughed-- in more than a week.

When their father had taken ill, they'd been too worried and too busy trying to do what little bit they could. Then his death had left them sad and angry.

Now, here they were, laughing on a rooftop on the day of their father's funeral. Perhaps this was a sign that things would get better.

Edana stretched her hands out to Ianna and Kyl, who then linked hands in turn. I can get through anything, Edana thought, as long as I have them with me.

“Did you bring it?”

Kyl untied a small leather pouch from his belt and tossed it to her. “One of these days, one of us is going to get caught. You can't keep stealing from the treasury like this. It's one thing for them to catch you with all this gold, but if *I'm* caught, I'll be executed on the spot.”

“What else am I supposed to do? Someone has to do

something.”

“Maybe that’s what we should do. Find someone else to do this.”

“He’s right, Edana.” Ianna’s tone was gentle. “We just lost our father. At least take a break for a few weeks. You can’t take risks like this.”

“We lost a father, but the people lost their king. I won’t sit back and watch them struggle to feed their families when I can help. The new taxes were unreasonable. Besides, I’m only taking what would have been my dowry.” So far, she thought. The time had come when more was necessary.

Kyl sighed. “Fine. Take the money to the baker. We’ll wait here.”

Edana smiled and dropped down over the roof’s edge. A year ago when the taxes on the poorer families increased and her father stopped offering assistance to those who needed it, Edana had taken it upon herself to do what needed to be done--especially since her father’s advisor’s ignored her pleas.

She stole. She justified her actions by saying it was for a good cause and the money would have been hers or her future husband’s. It was funny, she thought, that she didn’t start trying to justify anything until Kyl and Ianna found out what she was up to and decided to help.

She didn't feel guilt for the money she stole, but she did feel fear that one day they might be caught and Kyl or Ianna would have to pay the price with her. At this point though, it couldn't be helped.

When she slipped through the window, she laid the bag of coins on a table with a note instructing the baker to distribute the bread the money paid for to the families of Tara who needed it. The note was unnecessary. Alastair, the baker, had been helping Edana for most of the last year. He knew what needed to be done.

When she had climbed her way back to the roof, she stood with her sister and her closest friend and felt at peace for the first time in nearly a week. Even if bread didn't seem like much, any small way she could help would benefit the people until the taxes were repealed.

There was only one way to make Morfram and the rest of the King's advisors reconsider their stance. They had to make a statement. An example had to be set.

"I think we need to make an example of Morfram," Edana blurted it.

Ianna and Kyl gaped at her as if she were mad.

"Have you lost your senses?" Ianna demanded.

Edana sighed. "No. I've had a moment of clarity." She help up a hand to forestall an argument. "Let me finish. We won't be able to do this indefinitely. A new king will be chosen and we'll lose access to

the treasury. We need to do something now. This may be our last chance to convince the advisors to repeal the tax. *Now* is the time to act. We may not get another chance.”

## CHAPTER 4--IANNA

Edana's lost her mind, Ianna thought.

"We would have to get into his private suite," Kyl pointed out.

"It could be tricky."

"Don't tell me you agree with her," Ianna groaned.

Kyl shrugged. "After a new ruler is chosen, we may not have the same access. We can't just sit around and do nothing."

Ianna moved a few steps away to pace. The space on the roof was limited so she couldn't go far.

Despite being the youngest of the trio, Ianna considered herself to be the voice of reason. Edana didn't always consider the consequences of her actions, often charging right in and relying on dumb luck and her strong personality to get her way. Kyl's sense of loyalty and desire for adventure often had him following along in Edana's schemes.

"Edana, I don't think this is the best time to try something like this. We haven't planned. We haven't prepared."

Edana waved this aside. "No one knows the citadel better than we do. How much more prepared can we be?"

"Your arrogance is going to get us all into trouble," Ianna pointed out. "There are so many things that could go wrong. We don't know if Morfram has guards posted around his rooms, for one

thing.”

“That’s not exactly true,” Edana said.

“Which part? The arrogant part or the rest?” Kyl asked with a grin.

Edana glared at him. “All of it. I’ve been thinking about this for a while. Morfram keeps the majority of his personal money in his office desk. There’s a hidden panel in the side of his desk.”

“And you know this how?” Ianna asked.

Edana shrugged. “I’ve been paying attention.”

Ianna regarded her calmly. “You have been thinking about this. I’m not sure what worries me more, the fact that you’ve been thinking about this for so long, or that it’s Morfram you want to steal from. He’s practically family, Edana.”

The flash of unease in Edana’s eyes was brief, but Ianna had been looking for it. If she hadn’t seen it, she would never have agreed to go along.

“It’s the right thing to do. It isn’t personal. We have to do *something*, though. Our people are suffering.”

Ianna couldn’t fault her sister’s motives. If there was one thing that never changed about Edana, it was her desire to help her people. Her willingness to do whatever was required of her for the sake of others. Ianna didn’t know if the rumors circulating about Edana

becoming Eire's next ruler were true, but she thought the people could do a lot worse.

Ianna looked at Kyl. He was grinning at her, likely guessing her decision. She sighed. "Fine. What do you want me to do?"

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Ianna crept across the dark room in silence, her black clothing helping her blend into the shadows. Even though she'd agreed to help, she hadn't expected to be the one doing the stealing. In the past, Kyl or Edana had taken the role of sneaking into the treasury in case any fighting became necessary. Ianna knew her strengths, and fighting definitely wasn't among them. Edana, on the other hand, had been training daily for the last five years and knew how to take care of herself. Which was why she and Kyl were standing guard in the corridor. If anything came up, they would be able to handle it without drawing too much attention, especially since they were often seen wandering the halls. Whereas, Ianna usually limited herself to her private chambers and the library.

Morfram's desk stood in front of a wide window overlooking the central courtyard. Likely this was so he could keep an eye on who came and went in the citadel. The moonlight pouring through the window provided enough light for her to move about freely. It didn't do much to soothe her nerves though. She stopped her forward

motion with every slight noise she heard, looking in every direction for the culprit.

After the third time she stopped, she realized *she* was the cause of the noise. She was breathing too fast. She was getting light-headed, making her clumsy.

Relax, she told herself. If anything had gone wrong, Edana or Kyl would have let her know.

All she had to do was find the hidden panel and take whatever was inside. Simple.

She crouched down in front of the desk, pushing on each section. When she reached a loose board, she worked her fingers under it until she could lift it out. Inside was a dark-colored cloth pouch that jingled when she lifted it.

She looked over her shoulder to make sure no one had heard the noise as she tied the drawstring on the pouch around her belt. When she moved the wooden board to replace it, she noticed a small book inside. She lifted it out and turned so the light hit the pages.

It appeared to be some sort of accounting book. Page after page was filled with numbers. Deeming it unimportant, she replaced it and righted the desk. Standing and turning, she began slinking her way back toward the door, much more quickly than she'd entered. When she reached for the door handle, a loud peal filled the air.



Her breath backed up in her chest and Ianna thought she would pass out from the strain. The bells were ringing, and she couldn't seem to move.

As she stood there, paralyzed with the fear that someone knew what she'd just done, she heard the city's bells ring out twice more.

Three times the bells rang. The signal for death, all too familiar from the last time they heard its call, only days before. Who could it be this time?

Finally able to move, she threw open the door to find Edana and Kyl moving quickly toward her.

"What's going on?" Ianna breathed.

Edana shook her head as she grabbed Ianna's arm and pulled. "We don't know. Come on. We need to find out."

Without a word, the three turned down the corridor and ran. Fear was too sharp in their minds for anyone to voice the one thing in their minds.

Who was it? Was the queen dead too?

## CHAPTER 5--PHELAN

Phelan didn't bother struggling against the guards who held his arms. It wouldn't matter how hard he pulled, he wouldn't be able to budge them without doing serious damage. It wasn't quite time to tip his hand.

He sighed and hung his head, thinking he would most likely be in a cell by the end of the night. This wasn't the way he had wanted his night to go. He had been on his way to her room, the first part of his plan, when the casualty bells rang out.

Did someone beat him to her? He hadn't anticipated any interference. He glanced briefly at his guards. Obviously he had made some mistake in his planning.

When he heard footsteps coming quickly down the hallway, he lifted his head. There she was, black hair flying behind her as she ran, worry clear in her blue eyes. Aside from the dark clothing she wore in her mourning, she looked just as she had in his dream.

How he hated her for it!

Her sister and another soldier he recognized as the man named Kyl followed closely behind her.

Upon seeing him, she froze.

Phelan smiled as he saw the recognition flicker in her eyes. Being captured might not be the worst way to meet her. She would

likely feel a small measure of security, thinking she was in control.

“I thought you were dead, Princess,” he smirked.

She opened her mouth to reply when Morfram, the king’s chief advisor, came hurrying into the room, his dark robes flowing out behind him.

“Thank the gods you girls are okay,” he breathed, enveloping them in a hug. “I was so worried.”

The action surprised Phelan. Morfram didn’t strike him as the affectionate type.

“What’s happened?” Edana asked, pulling away. “Where’s my mother?”

“She’s gone,” he said rubbing her arm in a comforting gesture. “She’s still alive, that you can be sure of. One of the serving girls noticed she wasn’t in her room and came to find me. I’m not sure how someone managed to get past the guards, but I suspect this one here had something to do with it.”

All eyes turned to Phelan once again. Anger and fear were clearly visible in the eyes of his captors.

He found his eyes drawn to Edana’s. Along with the anger and fear, speculation clouded her eyes. Perhaps things would be more interesting now that he knew she was alive.

Phelan gave what passed for a mocking bow, as the guards still

held his arms. "At your service, my lady."

Edana glared at him. Today, especially in this moment, provoking her was probably not the wisest course to take. But he just couldn't seem to help himself.

"Where is she?" she growled at him.

"Where is who?"

Edana lunged for him. Kyl wrapped an arm around her waist to hold her back. "You know who!"

Phelan watched her carefully as she struggled to regain her composure. "I learned your mother was missing at the same time you did, Princess."

"You're a liar. I know why you're here."

He offered a sly smile. "Ah, I can't discuss why I'm here in front of all these people. What would they think if they knew of our history together?" His suggestive tone caused an angry Kyl to step forward. Phelan knew he was being a prick, but he needed to gauge the mood of everyone present.

Edana moved to block the man's path. "Kyl, no. It's alright." She glared at him. "He and I have much to discuss. I can't do that if you kill him.

"Take him to the dungeon," she directed the guards, never taking her eyes off his. He smiled one last time as he left the room.

They did have a lot to talk about.

## CHAPTER 6--EDANA

I remember those eyes, Edana thought as the stranger was led out of the room. Wolf's eyes, she thought again. She'd known the moment she saw him that it was the man from her dream.

What in the name of the gods was he doing in her home? If he wanted to kill her, then why would he take her mother? Nothing made sense in this moment.

When the man was out of the room, she turned to regard those gathered.

"Are you sure she's gone?" she asked Morfram.

"We didn't ring the bells until we checked everywhere." Morfram shook his head sadly. "She's gone, but there was no sign of struggle. It's likely she was drugged first. I doubt they could have gotten her out any other way."

Edana took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Still the panic crept into her thoughts. This can't be happening, her mind screamed. First, her father, then her mother. She couldn't deal with another loss, especially not this soon. Horror coursed through her at all the possibilities.

No! She told herself resolutely. Stay calm. Be strong. Maybe if she was strong enough she would find her mother. She needed to think. Her mother didn't have any enemies capable of doing this that

she knew of.

She turned to Ianna and Kyl. "I'll meet with the prisoner. When I finish, we'll discuss what comes next. First," she said to Kyl. "Coordinate with your captain. I want watches placed around the city. There's a chance that whoever took her didn't make it past the wall. Then, interview the guards on the wall. I want to know if they saw anything suspicious.

"Ianna, I need you to go with Kyl--"

But Edana," she interrupted, "we should stick together."

Edana stepped forward and took her sister's face in her hands. "I need you to go with Kyl," she said slowly. "I need to talk to the prisoner and I can't afford to be worrying about you as well. Please just go with Kyl." She stared intently until her sister nodded. "Good girl. I'll find you both when I'm done."

She turned and walked from the room, Morfram striding along beside her.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked. "The man looks dangerous, and they caught him approaching your rooms while armed with several knives."

"I'm sure," Edana said, not slowing her pace. "Wait here. I'll speak to him alone."

Morfram stopped at her commanding tone.

When she reached the dungeon, the guards were just finishing shackling his legs to the stone wall. He was dressed in dark clothing that she suspected had been black at one time, though now it was faded and torn. His hair was as dark as her own, hanging down just past his shoulders. The sharp line of his cheekbones, jaw, and aquiline nose contrasted severely with the softness of his sneering mouth. Dark brows were sharp over his shining amber eyes. The result was the cruelly beautiful face of what she suspected was a very dangerous man.

“Leave us,” she ordered. “You, what’s your name?”

“Phelan.” He gave her an insolent smirk. “And you are?”

Edana raised an imperious brow. “You know very well who I am. It would be wise of you to not to play games with me right now. I’ve lost my father, and tonight, my mother was taken from me. At this point, I’m likely to kill you and seek my answers elsewhere.”

Phelan laughed. Her bravado obviously amused him. “I don’t think you could kill a spider, your highness, much less a chained person.”

His laughter died abruptly as Edana stepped forward, pulling a dagger from a small sheath that had been concealed on her hip and placed the tip to his throat.

“Let’s get something straight, Phelan. There isn’t anything I



wouldn't do for my family. I don't think I would lose much sleep over your death." The cold gleam in her eyes gave credence to her threat.

"Very well, Edana. You don't mind if I call you Edana, do you? It appears we won't be getting rid of each other anytime soon."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that while I don't know *where* your mother was taken, I do know *why* she was taken."

"And?"

"And," he said, smiling once again. "You'll need my help to get her back."

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Edana paced across the cold stone floor in what used to be her father's study. By rights, it should be used as her mother's, at least until their next ruler could be chosen. But she was gone. Edana supposed that left her momentarily in charge.

Unlike other monarchies, Eirish leadership didn't always pass down through a bloodline. It did happen. Frequently for that matter, but not always. Instead, it was customary that before a king's death, he would submit the name of who should succeed him on the throne to the people of Eire as instructed in the Code of Kings. That person would then go to the Stone of Fal, also known as the King's stone and the Stone of Destiny. It was called by those names for good reason.

If the gods considered the man worthy, the stone would tremble and that man would be crowned king. If it didn't, which had only happened on one occasion that Edana knew of, the nobles would vote on the next name to go to the stone.

Because of her father's illness, many people, herself included, had expected the king to name a successor. Yet his death had come and he hadn't named anyone.

As far as Edana was aware, that had never happened before. She supposed that like the king's study, the right to submit the first name went to her mother.

Only her mother had been taken. Did the duty now fall to her? There was no precedent for this. Maybe Ianna would know.

"Edana, are you listening to me?" Morfram asked. His pale blue eyes, framed by full dark brows, showed worry that had not carried through in his tone. If Morfram was worried, it was for good cause.

"I'm thinking," she responded brusquely. "If what this Phelan says is true, then Mother was taken to draw me out of Tara."

"Keep in mind that your source is also a prisoner who came into the castle heavily armed. He's probably setting you up."

Edana resumed her pacing. "I realize that, but the fact remains that she's been taken and he's our only lead. Besides, why would he tell me that? Wouldn't he expect me to stay here if I thought I was in

danger?”

Morfram sighed and ran his hand through the inky blackness of his hair. Though he was a few years older than her father had been, the age gap often felt much greater. “We can’t just leave the city undefended. If what the prisoner says is true, then we must be cautious.”

She knew this, but it didn’t change what needed to be done. “Then I’ll go,” she said, suddenly sure of what came next. “I’ll take the prisoner and a small contingent with me to find my mother.”

“That isn’t being cautious!” he exploded. “You could be walking into a trap for all we know.”

“Or,” she said reasonably, “they could be hoping I’ll stay here. They were able to get to her here, after all.”

“Which begs the question, *how* were they able to get to Bidelia here? She should have been guarded. No one was injured. No one is missing from duty. I think we need to consider that the culprit may be someone on the inside.”

Edana felt her stomach drop. The thought had crossed her mind, but she just didn’t think it could be true. There was no motive for anyone to take her mother unless--

“Is it possible that she was taken to be forced into naming the next in line?”

Morfram scratched his chin and considered. "I suppose it's possible. Whoever took her must realize that your name will be submitted."

"My name!" Edana abruptly stopped her pacing to drop into the nearest chair. "She can't pick my name! I know people have been talking about it, but a woman's never been chosen before."

"Just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean it *can't* be done. It's common knowledge that your father was considering you as well."

"There's a big difference between rumors and common knowledge! This wasn't common knowledge to me."

"Edana," he interrupted harshly. "How dense can you be?"

"I assumed that he spent so much time tutoring me because he had an important match lined up for me."

"Hardly. He decided a long time ago that he would make you a leader. Which," he considered calmly, "is why I can't let you go after your mother."

Edana dropped her head into her hands. This was all beyond ridiculous. Yes, Eire had queens. Some had even been known as great warriors, but one had never been crowned on her own. That's the way it had always been done.

It was nice hearing that her father believed in her enough to

suggest she would make a good queen. But there was a difference between considering someone for the role and actually submitting her name. It was a big responsibility. The *biggest* responsibility. She was too young, too inexperienced, too *everything* to rule in her father's place.

Father thought you were good enough, her mind whispered. Surely, he saw something in her that made her worthy of that kind of faith.

It still made no sense, though. If her mother was taken to keep her from submitting Edana's name, what was to keep Edana, who would be next in line, from submitting her own name? Especially if that's what her father had wanted.

The realization struck her like a blow to the chest. She couldn't submit her own name. It was against their laws in the hopes of avoiding regicide in the name of power. This meant whoever took her mother not only wanted to prevent Edana from going to the stone, but also to ensure that their name was the one submitted to the people. If it was someone likely to be chosen on their own merit, then surely they wouldn't bother to kidnap the queen.

Slow down. You're getting ahead of yourself, she thought. This was all just speculation. She needed answers, not just more questions to worry about.

This left Edana with one choice as she saw it.

"I'm going."

Morfram stood from his chair, ready to argue against her decision, but a raised hand from Edana stopped him.

"I've already made up my mind. I'm going after her. I'll take Kyl and Donal and anyone else they think necessary. The prisoner, Phelan, will be going with us, as well."

Morfram arched a questioning brow.

"I don't trust him," Edana clarified. "You may be right about his motives. In fact, you probably are. He's hiding something. Which is why I'd rather keep him with me where I can keep an eye on him. I don't know how long we'll be, so Ianna will be left in charge while I'm gone with you serving as her chief advisor. I'll sign everything I have to tonight, but we'll be leaving at dawn. I don't want to waste any more time."

Edana took a deep breath, not quite used to issuing orders to anyone. It seemed to her that she had issued more orders in the last hour than she had in her entire life. It couldn't be helped. It actually felt pretty good to be able to command Morfram. In the past year, she had been unable to since Morfram had been working for her father. As the oldest member of the royal family, Morfram now worked for *her*. "Any questions?"

Morfram stared at her, unblinking. His features were a composed mask, but there was a small hint of anger in his eyes that he couldn't quite hide. "Just where are you planning to look first?"

Edana considered the possibilities. Her mother's captors could have taken her anywhere. They weren't even sure *who* her captors were for that matter. Phelan already said he didn't know where she was taken. That left her with a lot of possible starting points.

Inspiration struck. "Look to the Druids," Fal had said. Could this be the trouble he had referred to? If so, the gods were bastards for not telling her that her mother would be taken. She would have done whatever she could have to protect her if she'd only known.

She prayed that whether this was the trouble Fal had warned her about or not, the Druids would be able to help her find her mother. The only thing she had left in this moment was hope. She would cling to it with everything she had.

"I'll find the Druids." She was proud of the confidence in her tone.

Morfram was clearly annoyed with the course their conversation had taken. "The Druids are gone."

"No, they're not." Of this one thing she could be sure. The gods may be bastards, but surely they wouldn't lie about their chosen people. Fal said they were still here, so they must be.

“And how can you be so sure?”

Have faith, she told herself. Edana gave Morfram a cocky grin.

“The gods told me so.”



## CHAPTER 7--PHELAN

He'd been in worse places than this, Phelan thought as he looked around the dank cell. It was a sad thought. Dungeons were supposed to be the scariest places imaginable. This was nothing compared to the cell he'd found himself in the last time he visited the Ottoman Empire. Phelan smiled ruefully at the memory. The emperor hadn't been too pleased with a comment he'd made about the man's son. Luckily, he hadn't been in that cell for long. He'd learned at a young age how to get himself out of tight spots.

Here, straw covered every inch of the floor that he could see in the dimly lit room, a concession to the imprisoned so they wouldn't have to sleep on the cold floor. No doubt this was an attempt to show the dungeon's inhabitants that they were considered little better than animals. A small lantern had been lit, its flickering glow shining through the ugly iron bars. He saw no other source of light--no windows, no candles. Nothing.

Though to be fair, arming prisoners with fire when the entire dungeon floor was covered in straw made his jailers smarter than he gave them credit for. Judging by the silence, he was most likely the only prisoner down here. Giving him even something as small as a candle would be a grave mistake on their part.

Phelan mentally shrugged the thought away. No matter. Edana

would try to rescue her mother, and he would be taken along. He would, selflessly, pretend to help her.

At the first available opportunity, he would get rid of her guards. She wouldn't leave the walls of the city without some kind of escort, after all. After her guards were taken care of, the Princess Edana would have a lot to answer for.

Phelan had been looking forward to this day for a long time. Most of his life, in fact. It was his ill fortune that he needed the brat to get what he wanted.

The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs snapped him out of his reverie. He hadn't expected her to come back this soon, but it seemed the princess was in a bit of a hurry to get started.

He couldn't really blame her. If he'd been given the chance to save his mother, he would have done anything and everything in his power. He'd been ten when his mother died and hadn't gotten the chance to save her. His own grief wouldn't change anything. He still had a job to do. He wouldn't be stopped now.

The footsteps grew closer. Edana led the way, followed by four guards. One, he recognized as the man Edana and her sister had arrived with when they received news of their mother's capture. Kyl, he recalled. Reports claimed Kyl was very close to Princess Edana, but the exact manner of the relationship hadn't been verified.

The bearing of both, before and now, as he sat on the floor looking up at them, indicated a close personal relationship. He smiled to himself. Maybe this was something he could use.

Phelan rose from his seated position, his chains and manacle clanking. The sound echoed in the silent room. If the sound reassured them, it could only benefit him.

He offered what he knew was his most obnoxious smile and gave Edana another mocking bow. Just knowing that it irritated her was reason enough to do it. His mother, if she lived, would likely be disappointed in his behavior, but until he completed his task, Phelan couldn't afford to be diverted by the girl, especially since he'd been warned against it.

"Edana, my love. I knew you'd come for me," he teased breathlessly. "Is it time for us to finally run away together?" He gestured to the guards. "Are these to be our wedding attendants?"

"Donal." Edana motioned to the closest guard who moved forward to unlock the heavy cell door. "Phelan," she said coolly. "You're going along because I don't trust you enough to leave you behind."

"And because you'd miss me," he interjected. His smile never wavered.

Edana's expression never changed. "You can make all the jokes

you want, but if you make one false move toward me or one of my men, I will, personally, kill you." She held her ground as Phelan exited the cell, his hands now chained in front of him. She kept her eyes locked on his. "Don't think for a second that I'm not capable of it."

The cold gleam in her eyes and the firmness of her tone surprised him. I'll be damned, he thought. She really means it.

This would be interesting.

## CHAPTER 8--EDANA

Edana entered her sister's room before the sun had even risen followed by Phelan, Kyl, and Donal. The room itself reflected everything she loved about her sister. The color was a quiet blue. The bed cover was trimmed in a delicate white lace, lending the room an easy femininity. The bright flowers on her table offered a hint of boldness that reminded her of Ianna's quick temper.

Ianna, still in the clothes she had worn the day before, sat on the edge of the bed, making a lovely centerpiece to a lovely room. Though she'd undoubtedly spent days crying over the death of their father and now, hours worrying over their mother's capture, the puffiness surrounding her eyes was the only sign that she was anything other than serene.

She stood as they entered, eyes flashing angrily, no longer serene. "What's he doing here?"

Phelan, apparently less antagonistic to Ianna, made a small bow, his trademark sneer conspicuously absent. The ass!

Kyl rolled his eyes. "He's going with us."

"He's going *where* with you?"

Edana sighed. It was too much to hope her sister would take this well. "We're going to find Mother. I know," she said, holding up a hand, hoping to forestall the argument for a few more minutes. "I

know you want to come with us, but I can't let you."

"Why the hell not? You're taking an attempted murderer with you!"

Phelan leaned forward. "Whoa, whoa, now. Let's not sling accusations like that around. For all you know, I was trying to save her."

Was this guy serious? Ianna's look clearly asked the same.

"I think you should just kill him and get it over with."

Kyl and Donal laughed at this. Even in dire circumstances, Kyl and Donal would find humor. It wasn't very often Ianna surprised them like that. Phelan, not knowing Ianna, didn't seem surprised by this sentiment at all. Maybe he was just too used to death threats to mind much. Edana imagined they were an everyday occurrence for him.

"We can't kill him. Yet," she said with a smirk for Phelan. "Right now he's our only lead to finding out what happened."

"You can't be serious! For all you know, he's going to wait until you get him out of the city and then slit your throats."

Phelan threw his head back and laughed. "She's smart. I like her." He met Ianna's angry glare. "Would it help if I promise not to kill your precious sister?"

Ianna ignored his sarcasm. "Yes, it would. Swear it."

Phelan seemed taken aback by the sharpness of her demand. He composed his features quickly, tilting his head as if considering her more closely. After a brief moment, he nodded. "I swear I won't kill your sister."

Edana couldn't have said who was more surprised by his response, she or everyone else in the room.

The silence stretched for several awkward moments. Finally--thankfully--Kyl cleared his throat to shatter the stillness. "Well, I hope that clears things up. We're wasting time." He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Ianna. "I'll look after her," he whispered against her hair. "I swear it."

Ianna hugged him tighter before pulling away. She nodded at Donal and gave one last glare in Phelan's direction before turning to face Edana.

"Give us a moment," Edana said to Kyl. "I'll meet you at the stables."

Kyl nodded and led Donal and Phelan from the room.

Edana moved to sit on the edge on the bed. Thankfully she'd had the forethought to change into breeches and a tunic. She pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging them to her. When Ianna joined her on the bed, she took her hand in her own. "I'm sorry I can't take you with me, but I need you to stay here. Until I find out where they

took Mother, you'll be in charge. I've already spoken to Morfram. He'll advise you until we get back."

"I need to believe you'll be back."

Edana squeezed her sister's hand. "Believe it. I won't let you down."

Ianna shook her head sadly. "I'm not worried about you letting me down. I'm worried about you dying." She paused. "Which I guess is the same thing."

"You don't need to be. I can take care of myself."

"How can you be sure? You've never dealt with anything like this before."

Edana lifted her hands helplessly. "I have faith."

"What does that even mean?" Ianna exploded. "Stop acting like everything's going to be okay! Do you even know where to look for her?"

"Not exactly, no. But I know where to start."

Ianna prodded her on. "Where? And how do you know? You didn't say anything earlier." The flash in Edana's eyes warned her to tread softly. "I'm not trying to make you angry. I just want you to be honest with me. You're leaving me here. I don't know when or even if I'll see you again, and whenever I ask a question, all you give me are these cryptic responses." She stood, turning to face her sister.



“Edana, please.”

She’s right, Edana thought. This was her sister. If she couldn’t be honest with her sister, then who could she be honest with? She heaved a breath. Chances were, Ianna would think she was crazy anyway. “I had a dream. No, don’t interrupt. Let me get this out.” She needed to get this out.

“The day Father died, I had a dream. I met Fal. We were at the stone. Lud, Dagda, and Nuada were there too. All of them. They told me he was dead then warned me that something, or someone, was coming, and I’d have to leave soon. They said the only way to make everything right, would be for me to leave here.” She sighed. “And I’m being cryptic with you because he was cryptic with me. And that’s not all. Phelan was there. He was there in my dream.

“I can’t quite figure out why, though. After Fal disappeared, Phelan and I were both running toward the stone. I just knew I needed to reach it. We both touched the stone and it was like the world exploded. The next think I knew, I was waking up in bed and I could hear the bells ringing.” Edana made a face. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but...I feel that it’s true,” she finished lamely.

Ianna was silent for a few seconds before nodding to herself. “I believe you. But gods or not, I need you to be careful.”

“I will be. I swear. I need you to be careful too.”

Ianna smiled sadly. "Swear."

The sisters moved forward to embrace each other, squeezing tightly. If this was the last time they ever saw each other, they wanted to make it count.

"Love you," Edana whispered.

"Love you too."

Edana gave one last squeeze before pulling away. "I need to go now. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Ianna nodded. "Be safe."

Edana smiled and turned to leave. *Please don't let this be the last time I see my sister*, she prayed silently. She didn't think either one of them could deal with another loss.

She took a deep, bracing breath. Have faith, she thought again.

When she walked out of the room and a wave of anxiety washed over her, she couldn't help thinking that she really needed the gods to be right about this.

## CHAPTER 9--PHELAN

For someone who had seemed like she was in such a hurry only hours before, Edana sure was taking her sweet time now, Phelan thought. The sooner he got her out of the city, the better. These chains were starting to chafe his skin. Just another thing he needed to discuss with the princess.

His chafed skin was the least of it.

Where the hell was she? They'd been waiting for nearly an hour. The horses were saddled. Two soldiers whose names he didn't even know were taking advantage of their free time by dozing against a nearby tree. He smiled to himself. Soldiers learned to sleep anywhere, he knew.

The others, Kyl and Donal, stood near the horses, no doubt discussing what they would do with a prisoner along. Not that it really mattered what security measures they would take. When he got these chains off his wrists, they would probably all be dead.

Maybe it wouldn't come to that if he could get them to listen.

"So," Phelan said to Kyl, "What's going on with you and our favorite girl?" He grinned. Might as well get the man's attention, he thought.

Donal snorted back a laugh as Kyl glared at Phelan.

"*Our favorite girl* is none of your damn business. You'd do better

to worry about helping us find the queen before you're executed."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I doubt Edana would be willing to part with me just yet." Phelan shrugged nonchalantly. "You can ask her. She and I have a very...special relationship."

Kyl's eyes flashed dangerously. "Watch your step or I'll kill you now and get it over with."

Phelan laughed. Who would have thought people in the city of Tara would be so bloodthirsty? He'd been threatened by not one, but two princesses of Eire as well as a member of the royal guard.

He held up his chained hands. "Surely you wouldn't kill a man when he's at a disadvantage." He clucked his tongue. "Not very sporting of you."

Kyl walked forward until he was nose-to-nose with Phelan. "Understand something," he growled. "If I want to kill you, I will. Chained or unchained, it doesn't mean much to me either way at the moment. You're playing games with people I care about. Sporting or not, if you step out of line, I'll gut you where you stand. We clear?"

Well, you had to admire the man's honesty, Phelan thought. In his experience, the people most likely to kill you didn't tell you, calmly, that they would murder you in cold blood.

He smiled to himself. If the circumstances were different, he could probably like this man.

But there was too much at stake. "We're clear," he said. "Just as long as you know that the same goes."

Before Kyl could respond, Phelan noticed Edana approaching. She was dressed in the dark colored breeches and tunic of a forest worker, a recurve bow in hand and a quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder.

Even with the bow and several knives he saw strapped to her body, she still looked like a princess. A very dangerous one, he conceded. He knew she'd been trained by a local battle master, but if there was one thing he knew, it was that there was a world of difference between training and actual life-or-death combat.

But it had him rethinking his strategy. After this was done, there could come a time when he would need her. *If* he could determine her innocence.

"Are we ready?" she asked as she reached them.

The two sleeping guards were now up and gathering their things.

Donal, who had been busy enjoying the brief scene with Phelan and Kyl smiled. "You just missed the show."

Edana gave him a questioning look.

"The boys here were about to come to blows."

"Does that really surprise anyone? The best and worst usually do."

Kyl grinned, an expression Phelan hadn't seen on the man before. "When she says the best, she means me."

Phelan snorted. He would regret it if this man had to die.

## CHAPTER 10--EDANA

"So where exactly are we going?"

It was the third time Phelan had asked. Once again, however, Edana chose to ignore him. She didn't have to answer him if she didn't want to. She didn't even have to *speak* to him if she didn't want to. *He* was still a prisoner. And prisoners didn't deserve the luxury of a response. She nodded to herself as the thought settled in her mind. Ignoring him was definitely the best course of action.

"Are you going to answer me?" he nagged.

Enough was enough.

Edana growled and turned on her horse's back to glare at him. "Notice that the others present aren't asking questions," she pointed to the rest of the group. "Do you want to know *why* they're not? It's because, and I understand this may be hard for you to grasp, but I don't have to answer to *anyone* here, least of all you."

With a final glare in his direction, Edana turned back in the saddle, her braid swinging wide as she did. "I'll tell you where we're going when I want you to know."

Phelan shrugged and offered an innocent smile. "You do know where you're going, don't you? I mean, I've traveled this land before," he said, ignoring the dangerous glint in her eyes as she whipped back around. "If you need directions, you just have to ask."

"I don't need directions," Edana hissed.

"Wait a minute." Phelan held up a hand. "Do you even have a specific destination in mind? Do you have a plan?"

Edana lowered her head and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, trying to relieve some of the ache Phelan's incessant nagging had caused. She counted to ten. Slowly.

When she raised her head again, she noticed that Kyl was grinning at her. Her gaze narrowed angrily.

The bastard, who was supposed to be her best friend, found this amusing!

Kyl shrugged, lifting his hands and letting them fall again as he did so. "He has a point."

"Ha," Phelan said, pointing a pleased finger at Kyl. "Thank you!"

Before Edana's temper could boil over, Kyl raised a conciliatory hand to her while addressing Phelan. "You need to keep your mouth shut. You aren't making things any easier here. Edana," he said, turning back to her. "I--we," he motioned to himself and Donal, "can't protect you properly if we don't know where we're going, or even what we're doing."

"We're finding my mother," Edana said angrily. She hated that she couldn't give them a specific answer. Maybe Ianna had been right about her. She *was* arrogant. She *did* rely more on instinct than



logic. This whole thing could end in disaster, but she had to at least *try*.

“Yes, I know that, but we need to know where to start looking. Is there something specific we need to have our eyes open for, or do you already know where she’s being kept?”

Edana jerked her arm up, pointing at the still-smiling Phelan. “If I knew where she was being kept, do you think I would have brought that--that annoying horse’s ass along?”

Kyl and Donal were taken aback at the vehemence of her words. True, Edana had always been considered hot-tempered, but she very rarely lost control so easily. Clearly, Phelan brought out the worst in her. For that alone, she decided she would kill him before this journey was over.

Once her mother was safe, all bets were off. Perhaps *he* was the danger Fal had warned her about. Maybe this whole thing was about one of them killing the other.

She could only hope so.

When Phelan threw his head back and laughed heartily, Edana decided that she could be grateful for one thing. She always thought more clearly when she was angry, and his presence angered her to her very core.

He would give her the focus she needed to find her mother

quickly, and when that was done, he would pay.

“We need to go to the dancer’s clearing,” she finally told them, after trying to reign in her temper. Whoever came up with the idea of counting as a way of finding patience must have been a blithering idiot.

Their expressions were really surprised now. Except for Phelan, who looked only mildly curious.

“Uh, your highness,” Donal said. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. You never know who you might meet in that area. It’s no place for a lady.” He said the words, but his eyes gleamed with delight.

Edana snorted. “Don’t think I don’t know what goes on there and who goes to see it.” She eyed him meaningfully. “And there are more important things to worry about than my delicate lady’s sensibilities.”

Phelan and Kyl both chuckled at this.

“Your “delicate lady’s sensibilities” have been missing for quite some time now,” Kyl laughed. He turned to Phelan as if they were suddenly the best of friends. “There was one time when the son of some visiting Welsh lord told her she wasn’t allowed to ride horses with the men. He was nice enough to suggest some other things women were good for. Mind you, she was only thirteen or so at the

time," he clarified, "but she punched the man right in the face and knocked him out cold," he mimed a punch and smirked at Edana. "Then while all the other young men and guards were gathered around and too stunned to say anything, she grabbed a rope and tied his feet together. *Then*, she tied the rope to her saddle and started to drag the boy behind her horse. I don't think she made it more than ten feet before her father and the Welsh lord came running out." He smiled at the memory. "I don't think she sat down for at least a week after that. That was the day that all her 'delicate sensibilities' fled her. I don't think she's exhibited them since."

While Phelan, Donal, and his men laughed, Edana couldn't help but be saddened by the memory. That was the last time her father ever called her his little princess. After that, he had only addressed her by her name. She began battle training the very next day.

She'd always been close to her father, but in that one moment of temper, she'd stopped being his little girl. It was also the moment her mother had given up hope that she would ever be a proper lady. It was a hard memory to deal with given their current circumstances.

She thrust her sadness away before the memory caused her to do something foolish--like cry in front of these soldiers. She especially couldn't cry in front of Phelan. She sensed that, like a wolf, he would use any weakness he found to tear her apart. Be strong, she told

herself.

“As I recall, you were in trouble for not stopping me,” she said dryly.

Kyl grinned. “Yea, but it was worth it.”

“Back to the issue at hand,” Edana said primly. It was moments like this when she wished dearly for female friends. “I’m looking for someone who can help us.”

“Anyone specifically?” Donal asked.

Edana debated telling them the truth, but she didn’t want to risk Phelan learning what she was after and connecting it back to Fal. “No, but I think I’ll know when I find them.”

The men murmured their assent, though it was obvious that not everyone agreed with the looseness of her plan. She didn’t know if she would have agreed with it if someone else had been calling the shots.

“Edana, can I talk to you for a moment?” Phelan asked, sounding serious for the first time since they met.

Edana rolled her eyes. She could only imagine what this could be about. “Go ahead and talk then. It’s not like you haven’t been doing that since we left.”

“Privately.”

Edana huffed out a breath before stopping her horse. “Alright.

Donal, take Tybal and Rhys on ahead," she motioned to the other two men. "Kyl, stay here."

Edana dismounted as Phelan did the same.

"I don't like this," Kyl argued.

Edana offered him a small smile as she approached him. "Don't worry." She stroked his mare's neck. "I'll be right back." She nodded to Phelan who walked a short distance away into a grove of trees, then turned to follow him.

## CHAPTER 11--PHELAN

These guards were pretty cavalier about letting the princess wander off alone, Phelan thought. Especially when you threw a suspected assassin into the mix. Kyl was a little upset about the princess's decision to follow, but he obeyed just as the other three did.

They were making it too easy. Didn't she suspect anything by this point?

When Phelan reached what he thought was a safe distance where they wouldn't be overheard, he stopped and turned to face Edana.

She stopped as well, feet apart, arms crossed. The stance may have seem relaxed, but Phelan noticed that one hand was resting on a small dagger she had strapped to her arm. It appeared that at least *she* took her safety seriously.

"I need to know why you want to go the dancer's clearing," Phelan said without preamble.

Edana rocked back slightly and eyed him warily. "Does it matter why?"

"It does to me."

"And why's that?" Edana asked.

"I don't have a death wish," he stated flatly.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" she asked, her tone

matching his.

Phelan sighed to himself. Of course, she wouldn't make this easy on him. "By staying this close to the city, you're making it easier for someone to track your movements and set a trap. We need to avoid the clearing."

"No," Edana replied simply. "I need to go there before we take the next step."

"Why?" he asked angrily, losing patience with the conversation.

"Why does it matter? You haven't contributed anything helpful so far to find my mother. You said you knew why she was taken, but I've figured out the why for myself. If you have anything to say--preferably something useful--then say it. Otherwise, keep quiet. I didn't bring you along so you could talk my ear off. You said you could help so help!"

Phelan studied her face. Her cheeks were flushed in anger, her eyes bright with it. He sighed again. She had to make everything difficult. It appeared that the only way to get what he wanted was to share information.

"There's an ambush waiting for you at the clearing."

Edana's face registered shock and doubt.

"How do you know this?"

He wasn't quite ready to share *all* of his information. "I have my

ways.”

Edana shook her head. “You say there’s an ambush, but you won’t say how you know. This comes after you snuck into the citadel and tried sneaking into my rooms on the night my mother was taken. Clearly, I can’t trust you, yet suddenly you expect me to believe this without even knowing where you got your information?”

Phelan nodded. Everything she said made sense. In theory, at least. But if she wanted to stay alive long enough to find her mother then she would have to do what he told her. “You can’t trust me anymore than I can trust you, but for better or worse, we’re stuck with each other. Which means, I’m in just as much danger as you. More probably, seeing as I’m still wearing these chains.”

When she said nothing, he continued. “I have my reasons for helping you with this.”

“Care to share them?” Edana asked, her eyes locked on his.

Phelan shook his head. His reasons were his own. He doubted that she would be willing to listen at all if she knew what those reasons were. Most likely, she would have left him in the dungeons to rot. It probably wouldn’t matter that none of this had been his doing. “For now, let’s just say that you and I want the same thing. We need each other to get it.”

At least that much was true. She knew it too, whether she



wanted to admit it or not.

The silence stretched on for several minutes. The only sounds were the trees rustling in the breeze and their horses whinnying in the distance. Edana's brows were lowered in concentration.

Occasionally, Phelan would see her lips move as if she were speaking to herself. He might have smiled if everything wasn't resting on her answer. He needed her to avoid the clearing if at all possible. He needed her to get what he wanted, and no matter how much it pained him, he needed her alive and well to do it. That had been made clear to him from day one.

Finally, she spoke. "I need to find the Druids."

Phelan's mouth opened in surprise. Before he knew it, he was laughing helplessly. By all accounts the Druids were gone--long dead after a conflict with the king nearly a century ago. Only one person--he used the term lightly--could have told her the truth about the Druids.

"Did Fal tell you to find them?" Phelan asked when he regained his breath.

Edana nodded, but was clearly perplexed by his humor and hesitant to talk about their shared dream. "He said that the Druids would help me."

Phelan laughed again, noting the growing impatience on her

face. He held up a hand to forestall her next question. "I know where we can find one. But she's elderly, so you'll need to be careful with her."

Edana's face lit with sudden hope. "Who is she? Where do we find her?"

"She can tell you her name and everything else you want to know when you meet her. She lives in a small home in the forest northwest of the Navan."

"So close to Tara?"

"Only a few people know who and what she is. There's been no need for her to seclude herself more than she already has."

"Well, let's go then. She can help me find my mother!" Edana turned to leave but was stopped by a strong grip on her wrist.

"You can't tell the others what she is," Phelan said stonily.

"Okay," she replied slowly after studying his face. "Care to tell me why?"

He hesitated briefly before going with the truth. "If people know what she is, she could be in danger. I'm trusting you with this, because apparently, I have to. Since she can't defend herself, I think it's best that this stays between us."

Edana nodded. "If that's what you want, I'll respect it."

Phelan stared at her briefly, looking for any sign that she was

lying. When he was satisfied that she wasn't trying to deceive him, he nodded in return. Only then did he notice that he still held her wrist in his hand.

The chain binding his hands jingled as he released her and stepped back.

"Let's go," he said.

## CHAPTER 12--EDANA

Edana had never seen trees so dense in all her life. They'd been forced to abandon their horses, along with one soldier, Rhys, to guard them on the outskirts of the trees. Now, they wove their way back and forth through the daunting maze of bark and leaves, never finding a straight path that lasted longer than a handful of footsteps, to find the home of some strange old woman on the word of a captured criminal.

If the circumstances for this journey weren't so dire, Edana thought she might appreciate the darkness beneath the trees or the sounds of various animals carrying on with their lives, or even the way the vastness of the land made her feel so small. She'd never had cause to question her place in the world before the death of her father. Now, in the short time since, it seemed like all she did.

With a sad smile, she thought that her father would have appreciated the beauty of the forest as well.

"It's just ahead," Phelan said, interrupting her melancholy thoughts.

Edana's eyes focused on the tiny timber house, barely visible through the trees. Barely visible, she thought, because it seemed to blend with them.

The place was remote enough to offer a great deal of protection.

Who was this woman that needed it? And what kind of woman was it who inspired loyalty in someone like Phelan?

Another criminal most likely, she thought. Whether the assumption was fair or not didn't seem to trouble her. The man was flat-out irritating.

As they entered the small meadow, Edana was struck by the diminutive size of the house. Was it really possible to live in such a small space? It seemed that there was hardly room to breathe.

Phelan, who had been leading the way, turned to Edana. "Just you and me," he said shortly then strode to the door and entered.

Edana sighed. Brusque Phelan was almost as bad as obnoxious Phelan. "I guess you'll need to stay out here then. Set up a perimeter around the house."

"Do you trust him?" Kyl asked, stopping her forward movement with his quiet tone.

Edana gave him a reassuring smile. "I trust him to do whatever's in his best interest. Right now, that's helping us find my mother." She gave his hand a brief squeeze as she passed, feigning confidence.

She didn't doubt that Phelan was the type of man who acted out of his own self-interest, but she did doubt that helping her had anything to do with why they were here. She sensed that if and when the time came and he no longer needed their small band to get what

he wanted, he would leave them for the crows.

As Kyl and the others moved off to take up positions outside the house, Edana walked slowly through the open doorway, noting the simple furnishings spread throughout the small space.

A wooden rocking chair sat in one corner of the room, occupied by an old woman in a simple cotton dress the same brown as the small house. Her grey hair was tied back, away from a face lined with crags and wrinkles. She was looking down at Phelan as he sat on the floor at her feet.

She looked so ordinary. Definitely nothing like Edana had expected. Legend claimed the Druids were beautiful young maidens with the power to tempt any man with their faces and gain power over their minds. Or others with voices like the sirens that, instead of luring men to their death, would help those who were lost. Some stories told of impressive men with power over nature--animals, plants, even the weather. Sometimes, Druids were just known as bards. In all the stories though, they were known as the chosen people of the gods.

Perhaps jealousy over the gods' favoritism or over the mystery of Druid powers had forced them into hiding. Jealousy and misunderstanding were common enough motives for hatred.

Edana had always thought that there was some small measure

of truth in each tale. Even so, she would never have expected this small, fragile-looking woman to be something out of a legend.

As Edana stepped forward, the floor creaked causing both Phelan and the woman to look up. She froze under the harsh gaze of Phelan's golden eyes and the amused, but equally golden eyes, of the old woman.

"Come in, Edana," she said, generously, her voice a high, clear bell. "My name is Moira, and in case you haven't already guessed, I'm the grandmother of this ruffian." She gestured to the still scowling Phelan.

"It's nice to meet you, Moira," Edana said, unable to prevent her smile. "And if this ruffian is your grandson, I'm very sorry."

Moira's laugh tinkled out. "Sit. Sit, child," Moira ordered, pointing to the space on the floor next to a scowling Phelan. "I know why you're here."

How can she know? Edana thought, alarm starting to rise. She had a hard time believing this woman could have had anything to do with her mother's abduction, but the question had to be asked. She couldn't afford to take chances when it came to her family.

"How exactly do you know why I'm here? Did you have anything to do with it?"

Phelan started to rise, but Moira held a hand up to stop him.

She offered a sad smile. "Rest easy, child. That rotten man told me that one day you would come seeking answers. He said you would have the boy with you." At this, she jerked her thumb in Phelan's direction. "I know you're seeking the four treasures, and I've been told to help you in any way I can."

"Who exactly is this 'rotten man' you're talking about?"

"Fal," Moira said simply.

Edana felt her mouth drop open. She didn't doubt that the woman had actually spoken to Fal. After all, *she* had talked to the god and wasn't even one of his people. But never in her life had she ever heard anyone speak out against the gods. She looked quickly around the room, expecting to see some sign of impending divine retribution.

Moira grinned knowingly. Phelan smirked.

The seconds passed by and when nothing happened, Edana began to relax. While her tensed muscles loosened, she thought furiously over everything that had happened in the past week--her strange dream, her father's death, her mother's abduction, this woman who was apparently comfortable bad-mouthing the gods, and Phelan's part in it all.

She needed more information, but feared she didn't have time to ask the right questions.

Her mother was in danger. Her sister was still in the citadel,



thankfully, with Morfram there to keep an eye on her. And here she was, sitting in a shack, listening to an old woman who happened to be the grandmother of the man she suspected was behind all of it. But only one thing mattered to her now.

“The treasures will just have to wait,” Edana said impatiently. “I have to find my mother.”

“You’ve already guessed that the two are related. I can point you to the first of the treasures where I suspect you will find your mother.” Moira’s golden eyes twinkled with knowledge.

The old woman was clearly hiding something.

Edana only looked at her for a long moment, not knowing how to begin to uncover the secrets kept in those eyes. She turned to Phelan. His face was sober as he stared down at his calloused hands. She knew with certainty that his agenda matched the old woman’s. But what she couldn’t figure out was how Moira and Phelan’s plans related to her. She didn’t have a lot of options though. The rotten Fal--and she was starting to appreciate this signifier--told her to find the Druids. She found one. He told her to find the treasures, and rotten or not, he was still a god, and she’d been taught to respect the gods. So she would.

“What am I looking for?” Edana asked finally.

Phelan’s eyes jerked up to clash with hers. She saw dark glee

flash there before he could conceal it.

Moira closed her eyes, giving no other reaction. Finally, with her eyes still closed she began speaking.

“In the southern tip of the Cliffs of Moher,  
In his caves, Nuada placed his sword of fire.  
No one shall lift the Sword of Victory  
from its resting place,  
Save those blessed with a king’s grace.  
Be wary though, for with sword in hand,  
Fire will spread across the land.  
Blood will soak the green hills of Eire  
Until the Wolf haunts the halls of Tara.”

When Moira grew silent, Edana whistled softly. If Moira’s display was any indication, then Druids were also oracles.

Rather than dwell on what the stories had failed to mention, Edana tried to absorb and decipher the riddle. Because clearly, that’s what it was. The first part was obvious. They had a destination. But what about the fire and blood and wolves bit? She turned to regard Phelan who was rubbing the inside of his wrist. He stopped and scowled at her when he noticed she was watching.

She focused again on the riddle. If finding the sword was going to destroy the land, could she justify taking it?

Edana shook herself free of the thought, deciding it was best to decide on a course of action for now. First, she would rescue her mother. Then, she would decide what to do about the sword, strange gods, and even stranger prophecies.

"Alright," she said, addressing Moira. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

Moira shook her head tiredly. "There's nothing else. I'm not allowed to tell you about your journey. But I can caution you. Be brave when the night is darkest. You will not be alone when the time comes to make your choice." She stood slowly, moving toward Phelan as he rose from his place on the floor. She took his face in her wrinkled hands as he bent down to kiss her cheeks, the action seeming very out of character for him. "Be safe" was all she said aloud, but a great deal more was expressed in their glances.

Moira then turned to Edana, who also rose. "Be strong, child," she said, kissing Edana's cheeks in turn.

## CHAPTER 13--PHELAN

"I'd like a moment here," Phelan said.

Edana eyed him skeptically before turning to glance at his grandmother. "Alright. Don't try anything though."

Phelan sneered. "I wouldn't dream of it." As Edana left the small cabin, he turned to Moira and held his bound wrists out. "Are you going to cut me loose?"

Moira cackled happily. "Not a chance. You probably deserve it."

"You'd really leave your darling grandson tied up? At a disadvantage?" Phelan tisked. "I'm hurt."

"You've never been at a disadvantage in your life." She pursed her lips. "I'd say you and that girl are pretty evenly matched. Besides, if you wanted out of those restraints, you would be by now."

He held up his hands. "She keeps threatening to kill me. If I were untied, she might actually try. I'm just biding my time for now."

"She's not your enemy. You know that," she admonished.

Phelan shrugged. "She's not my ally either. She'll try to get in my way. I can't afford to let that happen."

"Does she know who you are?"

"I don't think that would go over very well at this point."

Moira scoffed. "She seems pretty reasonable to me. She's doing what she has to to get her mother back and to help Fal and her

people in the process.”

“We don’t have *time* to deal with her mother right now.”

“You’re wrong. Everything is connected.”

“Don’t *you* start talking like that. You’ll make my head ache.”

She laughed and patted his cheek. Her eyes crinkled with mirth.

“Mark my words, boy. In a few days, you’ll understand.”

“Why can’t you just tell me now?”

“Timing is everything. More destinies than yours are at stake here.”

Phelan paced the wooden floors of the cabin. This was the closest thing to a home he’d ever had. “I have a job to do. I can’t worry about anyone else’s destiny but my own right now.”

“What about the girl’s?”

Phelan laughed. “I’m not overly worried about her. I’m worried about this Morfram and what he’s planning. I’ve never met him before. I’ve only heard stories. You?”

“Just that he’s a very shady man. On the surface, they say he appears charming, but there’s something dark in him. He increased tax rates for the commoners, not just in Tara, but in all of Eire. I suspect the king was too far gone to notice.”

“They can’t have any more to pay.”

“You’re right. Fortunately, some good Samaritan has been

seeing to it that the people are fed.”

“Thank the gods for that. Has it been enough?”

“Every little bit counts. What will you do?”

“All I can. I’ll find the sword. I’ll even help Edana find her mother as I said. When that’s done, we’ll see what’s left.”

He hugged his grandmother one last time.

“Be safe, boy. Take care of the girl.”

“I’ve been trying to, but she’s stubborn.”

She chuckled again. “You’ll do what you have to, but in the end, it may not be enough. Don’t rely on your legacy. Your grandfather. Your father. You need to learn to rely on yourself.”

As Phelan left the cabin, he couldn’t get the thought out of his mind. He didn’t like to fail at anything. Even though he didn’t particularly like the princess, his grandmother had confirmed his beliefs. She wasn’t responsible for Cian’s death. Someone was. He still needed to figure out whom while protecting the girl in the process. He didn’t like the thought of her getting hurt.

He sighed to himself. Just what he needed, one more worry to add to the list.

## CHAPTER 14--EDANA

After their group left Moira's clearing, they traveled west until sundown. If anyone was uneasy about Phelan and Edana's silence, they didn't mention it. Kyl looked concerned but gathered wood and started a fire without complaining when they stopped for the night.

He's a good friend, Edana thought as she watched him crouch to light the wood he'd gathered.

Donal and the others had wandered off to scout the area. Phelan was tied to a tree to discourage escape, so for the moment it was just the three of them.

"Kyl," Edana said, waiting until he turned to meet her eyes. "I've been thinking--"

"Always dangerous," he interrupted with a grin.

She couldn't help but return it. Likely, his smile wouldn't last with what she had to say next. "I need you to go back to Tara."

As she'd predicted, Kyl's smile dropped away and his eyes hardened. "No" was all he said.

When Edana opened her mouth to reply, Kyl held up a hand, forestalling her. "I don't know what happened or what she said, but I swore to protect you. I won't break my oath."

"You swore to protect the king," she pointed out. "Unless I've been wrong all these years about the difference between men and"

women, then I can assure you I am *not* the king.”

Phelan snorted out a laugh but was ignored.

“Don’t get smart with me, Edana. The vow I swore was to protect the royal family. Are you going to try telling me that’s not you?”

“It may not be in a few weeks,” Phelan mused.

Kyl glared.

“He’s right,” Edana said quietly. “But that’s something we’ll deal with when the time comes. For right now, yes, I’m part of the royal family, but I’m not the only one.” She took a steadying breath and ran a hand through her hair. “I want you to go back to Tara to keep an eye on Ianna.”

“She’s fine,” he yelled. “If she wasn’t, you wouldn’t have left her there.”

“I have new information now.”

“Like what?”

Edana shook her head. She’d given her word that she wouldn’t reveal Moira’s identity to anyone, so there wasn’t a great deal she could say without compromising her. Added to that, she hadn’t yet worked the whole thing out in her head, but she knew she was missing something. Someone wanted to rule enough to kidnap her mother--potentially starting a civil war--and mess with treasures and gods they



couldn't possibly understand. There was no telling what else they would do. For all she knew, starting a civil war could be what this whole thing was about. Was that the blood Moira had been talking about? It was possible. Nothing shed more blood than a civil war.

"I just need you to make sure she's safe." Edana stood and walked to her closest friend, keeping her eyes locked on his. "I have a bad feeling about all this and I need you to keep her safe."

Kyl looked pained. He reached out and cupped her face in his hands. "Edana, I don't think I can leave you here on your own."

"I won't be on my own. I'll have Donal, and Rhys and Tynan." She reached up and took one of his hands in her own, giving a reassuring squeeze.

"*I'm* here," Phelan mumbled. "You'd think I was bloody invisible."

They ignored him yet again.

"Please," Edana said, moisture pooling in her eyes.

Kyl sighed and leaned forward to lay a kiss on her forehead before hugging her tightly. "I'll go. When do you want me to leave?" he asked against her hair.

Edana's arms encircled his waist briefly as she returned his embrace tightly. Stepping back she said, "Right now."

He studied her face intently as he often had over the many years

of their friendship.

Edana worried that he would see her fear--not just for herself but for all of them.

Kyl only nodded, hugged her once more, and went to gather his pack.

"Will you be all right until Donal gets back?"

Edana nodded. "He's tied to a tree." She smiled. "I think I'm safe for the moment."

Once Kyl was sitting astride his horse, he wished her good luck, nodded to Phelan, and left.

Edana had never felt more alone in her life than she did watching her closest friend's back as he disappeared into the trees.

"Heartbroken, love?" Phelan drawled.

Edana was too drained to squabble with him right now. Instead, what came out was the truth. "I'm worried about what'll happen when we reach the cliffs. If Moira was right--and as I'm guessing she has the gift of foresight that she is--then it's likely all hell will break loose if someone tries to take the sword. I'd rather he not be there when it does."

"So you sent him away to protect him?" Phelan gave a low chuckle. "I don't think he'd appreciate your reasoning very much."

"I didn't lie to him. I *am* worried about Ianna. I just didn't tell

him the whole truth.”

Phelan was quiet for a moment. “You must really love him.”

Edana shrugged. “He’s my best friend,” she said simply. “And besides, Donal’s here. No point having them both be in danger.”

“It’s nice to know you think so little of my well-being, Princess,” Donal said as he stepped into the glow of the firelight, Rys and Tynan by his side, along with two other men she didn’t know, both muscular, dirty, and clearly dangerous.

When he’d spoken, Edana jerked in surprise before she could school her features as she’d been taught. “Who are your new friends?” she asked calmly. No point in letting them sense her worry just yet. The strangers seemed like the type to smell fear and attack.

Donal smiled his wicked smile. Edana had seen it before, but never with a look in his eyes that made her gut clench as it did now. It struck her just how dangerous he was.

“These are just some friends of mine,” he said, smile still in place. “When the boss told me he’d pay extra to any man willing to take you down a peg, these gentlemen offered to oblige.”

Edana’s heart was racing now as she caught the carnal, predatory light in the newcomers’ eyes. *Take her down a peg?* Realization struck her. These men were going to rape her.

Fear left an icy line of sweat down her spine. ‘Rape’ wasn’t a

word she had often been exposed to, but she knew enough to know that it wasn't about sex. It was about power, the vilest type of power she could think of. Especially if someone had offered some kind of bounty to anyone who wanted it. These men, and likely their employer, wanted to have power over her.

Anyone who tried would be up for the fight of his life, Edana thought.

Her bow and sword were a good ten paces away, leaning against the tree nearest the still restrained Phelan.

She glanced at him briefly. His face was impassive as he watched the scene. Apparently she couldn't count on any help from his direction. Her best course of action would be to distract them long enough to get to her weapons. Her throwing knife that she always kept strapped to her left bicep wouldn't do much good in this situation. Not when she was so outnumbered.

"Tell me about this boss," Edana said to the men across the fire.

Surprisingly, it was Rhys who answered. He didn't look at all pleased with the situation. "It's Morfram, Princess."

Edana gasped. He had to be lying. Morfram was practically family. He had always been loyal to her father and to the rest of her family. He'd taken time out of his days to spend with Edana and Ianna--especially since their father had taken ill.

As she opened her mouth to deny his claim, Donal stepped behind Rhys and slit the man's neck from ear to ear.

"You should have learned to keep your mouth shut," Donal hissed before letting Rhys' body crumple to the ground.

Edana had somehow managed to take a few steps back while the men's attention was locked on Rhys and Donal. Only a few more to go to get to her sword.

"He never could be quiet," Donal said, as his attention locked once more on Edana.

"Why did you do that? If you plan to rape and kill me, does it really matter if I know who's behind it? If I know what kind of spineless coward Morfram is? And he must be. Why else would you have killed Rhys?"

Donal gave her a nasty smile. "Nobody said anything about killing you." The other men chuckled. "Actually, I might as well tell you now. Things might be more fun that way. The plan is that I'm to let my friends here have their way with you, kill Kyl, and offer this one a job." He motioned to the immobile Phelan. "Then we're to take you to Morfram so you can watch as they give your sister the same treatment."

Edana bared her teeth in a growl.

"Now, now, darling. Don't be like that. It's just a bit of fun."

His cronies laughed.

“You’ve made a big mistake here, Donal,” Edana said as she took another step backwards. “I trusted you. I even thought we were friends. My father and mother trusted you. You could have been captain of the guard until you wanted to retire. But now you come after me and my family?” Another step back.

Donal only kept smiling at her. The look made her stomach turn. This wasn’t the Donal she knew. This man was a stranger.

Edana smiled coldly. Fear had given way to a cold, calculating anger. She had never felt its like before. “I’ll kill you before you leave this clearing.” Another step.

One more to go.

“I doubt that,” he said, not caring that she was so close to her sword.

As Edana took the final step, she bumped into a solid body and whipped around to see an untied and unchained Phelan holding her sword.

“That’s exactly why the boss wants you,” Donal said cheerfully. “The boss heard you can break out or break in anywhere. He wants to ask you a few questions about some money that’s gone missing from the treasury.” He looked at Edana again. “Looks like the game is up, Princess.”

His cruel laughter and her pounding heart were her whole world for a brief moment. She stared into the cruelly, beautiful face of her one-time captive. She didn't doubt by his grip on the sword and ready stance that he knew how to use it.

Edana bowed her head, suddenly weary beyond belief. She would die here in this clearing, it seemed. But she hoped by sending Kyl back to Tara she had saved her sister from a similar fate.

Unbelievably cold, she wrapped her arms across her chest, trying to rub warmth back into her body.

"Time's up, Princess," Donal drawled, motioning for her would-be rapists to do their job.

Edana turned to look into the laughing eyes of her one-time friend and protector. Her eyes blurred with gathered tears. Blinking away the unwelcome moisture, the tears slid down her cheeks and she threw the dagger she had palmed while rubbing her arms.

It struck Donal's skull with a sickening thud before his lifeless body hit the ground.

Tynan and the newcomers paused briefly to look at their dead leader before lunging in her direction.

Edana was too numb to wonder why Phelan was suddenly stepping in front of her. Or why he was dispatching the men with quick, violent strokes. When their bodies littered the forest floor, now

stained with blood, he turned back to face Edana.

She lifted her gaze from the corpse of the man she'd killed to see Phelan looking at her with understanding and compassion.

Her first kill must have somehow warped her mind if she was now seeing that look on his face.

As if sensing her thoughts, Phelan gave her a small smile. "You did well."

"He was my friend," she couldn't help saying. "He was Kyl's mentor. Oh gods." Edana fell to her knees, covering her face with her hands. She never liked anyone to see her cry.

Please gods, she prayed silently, let Ianna, Mother, and Kyl be safe.



## CHAPTER 15--PHELAN

Phelan stood over Edana as she rocked herself. He understood what it was to kill and how it tore you up inside. Yes, he'd learned that lesson long ago. But still, he'd never had to kill a friend.

He sighed before crouching down in front of her. "Edana." When she didn't respond, he set the sword aside and pulled her hands away from her face.

Her blue eyes were brimming with tears.

Damn, he thought. Tears were a man's undoing. Especially Edana's, as he sensed that she wasn't much of a crier.

He'd rather she go back to bickering with him or *at* him than sit there and look so defeated.

He gave her arm a comforting stroke. "The first one is always the worst."

She closed her eyes again to stem the flow of tears. "I never thought I'd have to kill anybody," she breathed.

Phelan lifted a brow when she opened her eyes to meet his.

One corner of her mouth quirked up. "Except you."

Phelan laughed. That sounded more like the Edana he had seen. Yet he was still puzzled. "Weren't you trained as a warrior?" He knew she had been, but not why she had never expected to use those skills.

She merely nodded.

“Then what in Fal’s name did you think your training was for?” Phelan asked, exasperated. Most likely, it was some female reasoning he would never understand.

Her hot glare nearly made him smile.

“You might find this hard to believe,” she began angrily, “but a warrior’s purpose is not to kill. The purpose is to protect. Do you know nothing of Eire’s history? The sea raiders? The Romans?” When Phelan said nothing she continued. “The legions were formed, not to conquer other lands, but to defend our own. I understand that fighting and killing goes on amongst our own people, our own soldiers. But that’s not their purpose. At least it wasn’t originally.”

Phelan understood what she was saying, even if it was absurdly naïve. “How noble! And who exactly is supposed to keep thousands of trained men from doing exactly what they please?”

“The king,” Edana said.

Phelan nodded uncertainly. It *was* the king’s job to maintain peace. That had been one of Cian’s biggest failings as king, even if there hadn’t been much he could do about it at the time, especially in the last year. He’d at least tried, and apparently, he’d managed to teach his daughter about the duties of a ruler.

Edana’s mumbling interrupted his thoughts. “If only I’d known when I was training that my father’s advisor would betray us and send

men to rape and kill me, I might have set aside my 'noble' ideas and learned to be an assassin. That would have been a more productive use of my time."

Phelan's mouth quirked up at that. He tilted his head as he studied her. "You'd make a...interesting assassin." He knew because assassinations had been a major component of his life for the last few years--defending himself from them.

"We don't have time for this," Edana said as she jumped to her feet. "We need to get back to Tara."

"No," Phelan said as he rose. "We need to get to Moher so we can get your mother."

"Morfram has my sister."

He held up a hand. "I realize that, but the priority is your mother and the sword."

"The sword? I don't care about the damned sword right now!"

"Think about it. Morfram needs the queen to name him successor before he can go to the stone right?"

"Right," she said, eyeing him doubtfully.

"Even if he manages to get her to submit his name, there's no guarantee that the gods will accept him."

"Okay, but what does that mean for my mother?"

"If Morfram has the sword, he may not need the Stone to rule.

And Moira said only someone of royal blood could lift the sword.”

“Oh gods. He’s going to use her to start a war. And that’s exactly what it would be. He’s taken the rightful queen and is forcing her to make him the new king, one way or another. I don’t think she’d submit his name if she found out what he was up to, but what if she doesn’t know Morfram’s the one behind it?”

Phelan shook his head. The more they talked about it, the more he was coming to understand. He thought he’d had all the pieces at this point, but something was eluding him. “We need to get to Moher before she can lift the sword.”

He couldn’t imagine the kind of destruction that would be unleashed if Morfram had control of the sword.

They both grabbed what they could carry from the camp. Moher was four days’ hard ride. They would need to hurry if they hoped to stop Morfram from taking control of Eire.

“This doesn’t make us friends,” Edana said while mounting her horse.

Phelan barked out a laugh. Apparently the surly Edana was back and not a moment too soon. “No, we’re not friends. For the time being, I guess you’d say we’re allies.”

“For the time being?”

“As soon as Morfram’s taken care of, all bets are off.”

“How reassuring,” she said sarcastically.

They rode from the small clearing, trying to avoid the dead men they were leaving behind.

“What will happen to their bodies?” Edana asked.

Phelan shifted in his saddle to look around the trees. The dying embers of their fire didn’t illuminate nearly as much as he would like.

“Someone will find them.”

After a long silence, Edana spoke again. “Do you think the gods will choose Morfram?” In her voice, he could still hear the hurt and betrayal.

“If your mother lifts the sword for him and he takes it from her, I don’t think there is anything they can do. As for the stone, I don’t think Fal will be choosing him.”

“Why do you say it like that? You sound so sure.”

Damn. Phelan hesitated before answering. “Your dream,” he lied. “Fal came to you and told you what you’d have to do.”

“So why were you there?”

The princess was perceptive. He was quiet for a moment as he considered his options. If she knew the truth, she’d likely shoot him in the back before his horse could take another step. She didn’t strike him as the reasonable type.

No, it would be better for all involved, especially him, if Edana

didn't know the truth.

At least not yet.

But he had to tell her something. "I'm a guardian of the Stone." At her blank stare, he continued. "My family's been watching over it for centuries." At least that was partly true. When her face only registered confusion he continued. "Family legend says that if there's a threat to the kingdom, we can tap into the power of the Stone." Again, partially true. "Which is why I'm fairly certain Morfram won't be chosen. I won't let him." And for a third time.

When they broke onto the plain sometime later, Phelan was beginning to worry about her silence. Maybe he *had* revealed too much.

"Am I a threat?" she suddenly asked.

Phelan threw his head back and laughed fully before he realized she hadn't been joking. Really, this woman said the damndest things. "Why would you be a threat?" he asked, trying to control his amusement.

The effect was ruined as she glared at him. She was all of five feet, two inches and looked like a wood sprite, albeit an angry one. Sure, she'd proved she had deadly aim with a dagger. But a threat?

"In the dream, or whatever it was, you tried to beat me to the Stone. And you just said that you'd intervene if there were a threat to

the kingdom.”

Phelan pursed his lips thoughtfully. At least he could be honest about this. “The Stone is meant for the king,” his emphasis placed on the last word. He shrugged.

Edana sucked in a breath. “So it’s true then. A woman can’t be chosen. But then why did Fal come to me?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Phelan said as he hurried to change the subject. “The important thing is that Morfram doesn’t get to the sword before we do.”

“Even if we beat him there, even if I’m not meant to be queen, I still don’t trust you. And I won’t get the sword for you.”

Phelan couldn’t suppress his smile. Damned if he didn’t like her. She might be spoiled, but at least she had spirit. “I don’t trust you either, Princess. And you’re smart not to trust me,” he couldn’t help saying.

His smile faded as he focused on the land ahead of them. Four days to the cliffs. Likely it would be four days until she figured out the truth. Four days before she realized it was her own father who’d sold her out. Most likely that meant he had four days before Edana tried her best to kill him. And now that he knew what she could do with a knife, he would have to be a bit more cautious.

He didn’t want to die before he became king.

Phelan shrugged the thought away. He would deal with it all later. He would be forced to. The girl could only take so much.



## CHAPTER 16--ARAL

Aral stood watching the most powerful man in all of Eire throw a tantrum like a small child.

"They should have been back by now!" Morfram raged as he strode about the room throwing anything he could get his hands on. At the moment, it was a silver candle holder that had belonged to King Cian's grandmother. "Those idiots had one job to do! Bring me Edana! Was that so hard?"

Aral sighed. He'd served Morfram for close to twenty years now in one capacity or another. He knew the man's temper needed to be placated. "Sir, please. They haven't been gone that long."

"It was a simple task."

"Perhaps those men you sent along with Donal are taking their time with her," he said and for a brief moment let his distaste show.

The backhand he received didn't surprise him in the least. Morfram was known for his control and composure in any given situation. At least, that's what most people thought. They would say he was dynamic and charming, and that his cool head combined with his intelligence made him a great advisor. A few people, Morfram among them, believed he should be Eire's next king.

Aral, who had served Morfram and knew him best, was privy to his temper. His arrogance. Aral believed he was the only one who

knew how truly evil Morfram was. And evil was the best word for anyone who enjoyed inflicting pain the way Morfram did. Sending mercenaries after a young woman for no other reason than that she outranked him? What other word was there?

He didn't always agree with the man's methods, but, more often than not, they were effective.

Aral straightened while keeping his hands to his sides. Any attempt to wipe away the blood that beaded on his lip would only make matters worse. Instead, he looked at his master with a bland expression. Pain or fear or disgust would likely lead to further violence.

"Apologies, Sir," Aral murmured. Really he would have loved to knock the coldly amused look off the smug bastard's face, but he had a job to do.

Morfram waved the apology away. "Never mind. The delay will cost us little. Go check on Ianna. Make sure she doesn't suspect anything's amiss. We may need her in the near future. Edana will be weak when she returns. We'll use her little sister to shatter her."

Aral nodded. "Yes, Sir." He bowed then turned to leave the room.

"You're a good servant, Aral." Morfram said to his back.

With a whispered "thank you, sir," Aral fled the room. He would

do his job. He'd sworn an oath after all, and he was a man who kept his word. Even after the loss of his wife, and when he'd given his child to his mother to raise, he'd kept his word. But the thought of reassuring a young girl whom he had known since infancy and had a genuine affection for that everything was fine when a person she thought she could trust planned to murder her sister left a bitter taste in his mouth. It was almost too much.

His only hope was to pray that the Princess Edana escaped Donal and his men to come after her sister.

Aral feared they would all be lost if Morfram ever became king. He feared that Edana wouldn't be able to hold out against him. But perhaps she was as strong as people said. As strong as Cian had once said.

He hoped these things with all his heart. But his head told him that she was only a girl--a young woman.

A young woman could only take so much.

## CHAPTER 17--MORFRAM

Morfram watched Aral leave the room. He hadn't been lying when he said the man was a good servant. Aral had always served him well.

That didn't excuse his occasional insubordination though. A servant, a *perfect* servant, should serve his master well by remaining discreet and obedient. Morfram knew what it meant to be a servant. Most of his life he had catered to the whims of those above him in station. Never again.

Efficiency was also a desired trait. And on the few occasions when Morfram had sent Aral to serve as his assassin, the man had killed coolly and efficiently.

In one instance, there had been a man from Wales who had mistakenly insulted the young Edana. The princess did a thorough job of humiliating the man. Enough that the young lord had threatened to tell the king that it had been Morfram who had encouraged him to come to Tara. Morfram who had instructed him to shame and humiliate the princess.

He'd failed. Morfram wasn't one to permit failure.

True, the lordling didn't know Morfram's plans beyond that, but it was better to be cautious.

Aral had done well. The lordling disappeared the next morning.

Everyone assumed he had left in shame at being bested by a girl.

Let them think that.

Edana was another matter entirely. One Morfram wouldn't use an assassin to deal with. No, he would have that pleasure himself.

The only problem now was deciding *how* to kill her. He could drop her out of the tower window and tell the people of Eire that she had been overcome with grief at the death of her father and the disappearance of her mother. Or put an arrow in her back as she took her daily ride out over the hills.

No, Morfram thought. Those won't do. He needed to see her face as she died. See the life fade from her eyes as she did. He wanted to see the recognition there that her death came at his hands.

She deserved it, he told himself bitterly. She thought that since her father was King she was above him. That she could give him orders. Morfram had dealt with her commands long enough. And now she thought she would be Queen? He refused to acknowledge that he had been the one to plant that particular seed.

Did she really think that she, a girl, would command him? If so, he would enjoy disabusing her of that notion.

Even if she somehow escaped him, he would still have the sword. Starting a war would prove an interesting diversion. The sound of the keening wails of the dying was so easy to imagine. The

metallic scent of their blood as it soaked the green hills and forests of Eire sent a shudder of anticipation and joy through his body. The fear he would see in their faces as his army marched past. The coolness of the golden diadem when it finally rested on his brow. The taste of victory. The thought of these things hummed in his blood.

Once he had the sword, his enemies would all die.

Any who dared to challenge his right to the throne would die.

And he would save Edana for last.

He couldn't fully explain it, his desire--no, his *need*--to cause her pain. He desperately wanted to know how much pain and loss she could take before he killed her.

Morfram smiled at the thought. She was just a girl. Surely, she couldn't take that much.

## CHAPTER 18--IANNA

Ianna was locked in her room as she had been for days now. Food and drink were brought in, and occasionally, Morfram would dine with her. But any time she tried to leave, the great, hulking guards who always managed to smell of sweat and ale prevented it. "My lord says it's too dangerous for you to leave your chambers." "My lord would prefer you not wander about." And some other variations of the same.

No matter how often she'd tried to remind them that *she* was the highest ranking person left in the citadel, that it didn't really matter what "my lord" wanted. Every time she tried to point this out, she was met with silence.

When she confronted Morfram, he would smile, pat her on the head, and tell her she was only a girl and didn't understand the way the criminals who had taken her mother thought. As the only royal family member left in Tara, it was his job to make sure she was kept safe. Always, he would add, "Until Edana returns."

The more Ianna heard those words, the more dread coursed through her. She couldn't fully explain the sensation, if asked. Only that Morfram had a certain gleam in his eyes when he spoke of Edana's return.

Something was very wrong here.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a light knock on the door.

The door opened before she could even call out for whoever it was to enter.

Sure, she thought, come right in. Never mind that she might require a bit of privacy. For the gods' sake, she could have been naked! Soldiers had no concept of decency.

When Aral walked in, Ianna couldn't hold back a smile. He walked with the easy grace of a dancer, but his movements always seemed predatory. At forty, he was still one of the most handsome men in Tara. He had been her first crush.

His dark hair was cut close to his head with a light sprinkle of grey at the temples. His brandy-colored eyes and chiseled features made for a fine sight.

Then there was his smile. Quick and just slightly crooked, though it had been a while since she had last seen it. It had been that smile that convinced her at the age of thirteen that Aral was the man she would someday marry.

Eventually she'd grown out of it, but a girl's first crush tended to stay with her.

"And what has you smiling, Princess?" Aral asked.

"You," she answered honestly. She'd told him once of her infatuation. He'd flashed his quick smile and told her that one day she



would meet someone her own age and forget all about him. At the time, she'd thought he couldn't be more wrong and she vowed, to herself at least, that she would love him forever with the optimism only a girl of thirteen possessed. Now she knew how right he had been.

If Aral had been her first crush, then Kyl was her first love. And it had been Aral who had been there when she was trying to sort out her feelings. Aral had listened. Not in the way of a servant, but in the way of a friend.

Even Edana wouldn't take the news of Ianna's love for their childhood friend as well.

"You're such a good-looking man," Ianna said. "Why aren't you married and making good-looking babies?"

Aral grinned. "I'm married to my duties."

Ianna wondered at the brief flash of pain she saw in his eyes. Teasing about marriage and family were old jokes between the two of them. Had the sadness always been there at the mention of them and she hadn't realized it? Best to change the subject.

"Do you know why they're keeping me locked in here?"

"For your safety, of course."

"I can take care of myself. I don't need those hulking brutes watching me." Ianna pointed furiously at the closed door. "I'm not

stupid, Aral. Something's going on. It's one thing to double the guards in the citadel. It's another to keep me locked up."

"How do you mean?"

"Who's in charge now that Mother and Edana aren't here?"

"You are."

"You'd think so. But my orders are being ignored in favor of Morfram's. So I'll ask again and I'd appreciate an honest answer, why are they keeping me in here?"

There was a brief hesitation before he answered. "We're trying to keep you safe."

Ianna was taken aback by his cold tone. Even when she'd been thirteen and obnoxious, he'd never spoken to her in such a way--with ice in his voice and anger in his eyes. He'd never lied to her so obviously before. She was right. She *knew* she was right. Something was wrong here, and it looked as though Morfram and Aral were part of it.

"Aral?" Her voice was hesitant.

He shook his head. "I need to return to my duties." He bowed and left. There was no charming grin. No eyes crinkled up at the corners.

Ianna's mind raced with the possibilities. If Morfram and Aral were involved in something, it was likely there were other soldiers and

citadel residents involved as well. If other soldiers were involved, she was in a great deal of trouble. Edana and Kyl could be in danger even now.

The more she thought about it, the more doubt crept into her mind. How would someone get past the guards to kidnap her mother? What if it was the guards themselves who were responsible?

If Edana was right and it was about the succession, then it seemed likely that someone close to their family, someone with the power to command the guard forces in the citadel, was responsible.

Judging from the way the guards kept referring to Morfram as “my lord,” he was the most likely culprit. But Morfram had been part of the family. Or at least *she* had always thought so. It appeared he might not have agreed with her.

If Morfram wanted to be king, he would need Bidelia to name him as Cian’s successor. He wouldn’t need to kidnap her to make that happen though. Her mother never seemed very interested in the practicalities of ruling Eire. Likely, all it would take would be a guarantee that she would be well-compensated for her part in making Morfram a king. It wasn’t that she was a bad queen, Ianna thought. Her mother was just too gentle-hearted to worry about politics. She’d always enjoyed her greenhouse and her flowers more than court functions. What was the point of taking her unless it was to draw

Edana out? Was this all a trap? It would explain Morfram's excitement over Edana's return, but not why he would set a trap for Edana at all. Ianna couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more. Something bigger than setting Morfram up as Eire's king.

There appeared to be only one thing for Ianna to do. She needed to escape so she could warn Edana.

She laughed to herself. Easier said than done. If, by some miracle, she managed to get out of the citadel, she had no idea where Edana had gone. She'd said she was going to find the Druids. Edana could be anywhere. She could have already found their mother and be on her way back to Tara, for all Ianna knew. Added to that, Ianna didn't know how she would survive on the land on her own, which is exactly what she would have to do since it appeared that she couldn't trust anyone. Not even Aral.

Ianna wished Kyl or her sister were there. They'd know what to do.

She told herself to take a deep breath and think. Be smart. First, she would need clothes. Preferably men's clothes, but her riding clothes would have to do on short notice. She would need something to cover her hair. Anyone who saw her long, copper locks would be able to recognize her.

She would need food. There was no way she'd be able to sneak into the kitchens. She'd just have to buy food in the first village she came to. The problem with that, she thought again, frustrated, was that she didn't know which direction she needed to travel.

She would need a horse, but she wouldn't be able to just walk into the stables and pick one out. She snorted at the thought.

Edana had said Fal told her to find the Druids. Maybe Fal had lied. Or maybe he was crazy.

Could gods be crazy?

Maybe Edana was the crazy one.

The thought made Ianna smile. Her level-headed sister probably wouldn't appreciate her lack of faith.

Ianna would pack what she needed now, buy what she needed later, and pray for a miracle.

She didn't have a lot of other options.

## CHAPTER 19--KYL

Kyl didn't mind the ride back to Tara as much as he'd let on. No, he didn't like leaving Edana with Phelan, even if Donal and Rhys were with her.

He just didn't trust the man, and every time he looked at the criminal, he couldn't shake the sense that he knew him. Kyl just couldn't seem to place him. Added to everything else, Edana was hiding something from him.

She knew the man as well, but wasn't saying anything on the matter. "Just trust me," she'd said.

Kyl trusted her completely. He definitely didn't trust this Phelan character or the way he looked at Edana. Predatory, proprietary, and angry all at once. The man was dangerous.

But Kyl had had little choice. Especially after listening in on their conversation with the old woman.

A Druid! Kyl had always believed them to be a myth. Obviously not.

Of course, he'd pretended not to listen and let Edana convince him to go back to Tara. He'd been just as worried as she had, and Edana was more than capable of taking care of herself.

Ianna was another matter.

True, she was the smartest person he knew, even if she was

only sixteen. But she'd never been trained with weapons as Edana had. Never been forced to stand up for herself because Edana had always been there to stand up for her.

The two sisters were mirror images of each other. Where Edana was tough and fierce, Ianna was gentle and sweet.

And gods, he'd been in love with her for years. Despite what his father thought, it was never Edana he'd wanted. After he came home from his military training, he'd taken one look at Ianna, at her copper-colored hair, her grass-green eyes, rose-tinted lips, and felt as if his heart had leapt out of his chest and landed at her feet.

It wasn't like it was something he could act on. She was a princess. He was a soldier.

Edana would probably gut him where he stood if he made a move on her baby sister. Not to mention, Ianna thought of him as a big brother. Not exactly the best basis for romance. If that weren't enough, he'd once overheard Cian mention a betrothal.

But what could he do?

He would make sure she was safe, assign guards to her to make sure she stayed that way, then he would meet up with Edana in Moher. He didn't know where Nuada's cave was, but he suspected that between Edana and Phelan, they would be able to find it.

One of the best and worst things about Tara was its proximity to the woods. If anyone ever decided to attack the city, they would have ample cover to hide their troops.

Troops like the ones that were currently less than two hundred meters ahead of him.

Kyl stopped abruptly. Thank the gods he'd had the forethought to abandon his horse and come the last half mile on foot. There had to be at least fifty men gathered. A party that large was bound to have scouts.

The hand that clamped over his mouth and the knife point he felt at the base of his spine confirmed his thoughts.

"Stay quiet," the voice hissed in his ear.

Kyl did what he was told as he was pulled backwards. When captured, it was best to stay calm and wait for an opportunity. After a few minutes, his captor released him.

Kyl turned slowly, not wanting to startle the man into using the knife.

"Aral? What are you doing here?"

The normally cheerful man was looking at Kyl with a serious set to his features. "What are *you* doing here? You're supposed to be with Edana and Phelan." He turned to pace, his agitation now clear.

When he turned again, Kyl was suddenly struck by the



resemblance.

His hand flashed to the hilt of his sword. "Just how do you know Phelan?" he demanded. "I don't remember seeing you after he was captured."

Aral smiled briefly, knowing he was caught. "He's my son."

Kyl drew his sword but hesitated when Aral didn't reach for his own. "Did you know he was going to try to kill Edana?"

"He did what?"

"The night the queen was taken. He was found outside Edana's rooms. He *told* us he'd come for her."

"He was supposed to protect her."

"Protect her? From what? Or is it who? Whoever you sent to kidnap the queen?"

Aral gave a dry chuckle. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way." He reached into the neck of his tunic and pulled out a gold chain. On the end of the chain dangled the seal of the king--only instead of being blue, this one was set against a field of red.

Kyl's mouth parted in shock. Aral was the king's spymaster! The seemingly carefree man who did little, other than bow and scrape for Morfram, was spy and assassin for Eire's dead king. "What the bloody hell is going on?"

Aral took a deep breath before glancing around--no doubt

looking for anyone close enough to overhear their conversation.

"Morfram has been plotting for some time. He hired mercenaries to take the queen. I'm still not sure where she was taken. Morfram has been careful to keep her location from me. I've got men out looking, but I think our best bet will be waiting for Phelan to find her."

"When I left, Phelan was still tied to a tree," Kyl smirked.

Aral laughed. "I bet he wasn't happy about you and Edana doing all the fighting."

Kyl froze. Terror left him pale. "What fighting?"

"Gods," Aral rubbed his hands over his face. "Donal is working for Morfram. Has been for years. He was supposed to turn Edana over to a couple of brutes, let them rough her up, then bring her back to Morfram."

"What? I just left her with them!" Kyl turned and was planning on running back to his horse and riding like mad to get back to her. He was stopped by Aral's firm grip on his shoulder.

"She'll be fine. Phelan won't let anything happen to her."

"He was tied to a tree! His hands were chained!"

"A lock hasn't been made that he can't pick. Really," he assured, "she's fine. The problem now is getting Ianna out of the citadel before he arranges for something to be done to her too."

"Well why haven't you gotten her out then?"

Aral looked at him as if he were a dim-witted child. "I'm a *spy*. What would Morfram do if his trusted servant was seen rescuing one of his captives?"

"Ok, but what if she's in danger?"

"She *is* in danger. But I've got my orders. You'll be saving me the time and expense."

Kyl stared blankly at the other man. Spies were apparently incapable of plain-speaking. "And how exactly will I be doing that?"

"You'll be doing the rescuing for me, and I won't have to waste time hiring someone else--the right someone else--to do it. A good thing too. Saves me from having to kill the man afterwards."

Kyl was slightly horrified. A man he's known most of his life was standing here calmly discussing killing a man in cold blood. If he tried, he could rationalize the man's intention. If whoever he hired to break Ianna out of the citadel was captured and could name Aral as his employer, the spy would likely be swiftly executed.

Understanding the reasons didn't decrease the horror.

"I suppose I'm just supposed to march into the citadel, through those soldiers--who *are* those men by the way?"

"More of Morfram's goons. He's stockpiling them, buying or bribing palace soldiers when he can and hiring mercenaries when he can't. Most of those loyal to the royal family fled after Edana left the

city.”

“They just left Ianna behind?”

“I convinced them to leave.” Aral shrugged at the stunned look on Kyl’s face. “I can’t keep them safe in the citadel, and I don’t need them getting in my way. They’re rendezvousing in the north. It’ll be up to you to find them. I don’t have to tell you that if Morfram finds out I let them go, I’ll be signing my own death warrant.”

“He’s given you a lot of room to maneuver.” Kyl’s question was implied.

“Of course. I’m his spymaster as well. Which, I might add,” he put in before Kyl could interrupt, “is how I know exactly how and when you can get to Ianna and get out again undetected.”

Kyl rubbed his forehead and hoped the action would allow him to think clearly. This was a lot of information in such a short amount of time. Aral had been Cian’s spymaster. Now, he was working as Morfram’s. Phelan, the man who was now apparently his ally, was also Aral’s son and serving as Edana’s protector. Likely Edana wasn’t aware of this as the hostility between the two had been outrageous. Ianna was trapped in the citadel by a man who was on the verge of starting a civil war. She needed to be rescued. Kyl was the one who was going to do it.

Maybe when this was all over he would have a good laugh.

Or a drink. A big one.

## CHAPTER 20--EDANA

Edana lit the torch and leaned it against the large wooden structure. The hastily assembled building was currently serving as a barracks for the small force of soldiers in the village of Loughrea.

It had taken Edana and Phelan eight days to reach this point, and they still had another two to go before they reached Hag's Head, the southernmost point of the Cliffs of Moher. She shouldn't be here right now, but she had noticed the cruelty these soldiers had inflicted on the townspeople when she and Phelan had passed through earlier.

Apparently it was tax collection day. One man hadn't been able to pay and the soldiers had beaten him before raiding his home. She'd been lucky enough to arrive in time to see the soldiers carrying a money chest into the barracks. When she mentioned stopping to help the injured man, Phelan had argued that they needed to keep a low profile. To an extent, Edana agreed. There was no way of knowing the extent of Morfram's reach.

But she couldn't just leave these people to suffer this type of cruelty.

When she and Phelan stopped to make camp for the night, Edana said she would go and fetch the firewood. Instead, she'd ridden back into Loughrea. If there was no barracks, the soldiers would be forced to leave until their housing could be replaced. It wasn't the

greatest plan in the world, but it would do until an investigation into the soldiers of this town could be launched. She could steal back the people's money and give them a brief respite from their tormentors.

It was the best she could do on such short notice.

When the flames caught, the dry wood of the building went up quickly. Dark smoke rose into the sky, blending into the gray of twilight.

The building only had two entrances that she'd noticed. One at the front, facing the narrow dirt-covered street. The other was located in the rear of the building, facing the northern edge of the town. By lighting the fire near the rear door when the wind was blowing out of the north, Edana ensured the few soldiers inside who had watch duty would flee out of the front door, in front of the flames.

She just hoped none had the presence of mind to retrieve the money out of the commander's office located near the back door.

As she waited for the flames to spread, she heard startled yells rise up from inside.

"Fire!"

"Everybody out!"

When she could hear the sounds of their running boots, she moved toward the back door. A crushing grip on her arm stopped her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Phelan hissed before

she could fight his grip.

“I’m going to a party. What does it look like?” She jerked her arm free and kept moving, her back to him.

Phelan reached out and grabbed the ends of her hair, wrapping it around his hand before spinning her back to face him. “If you’re trying to get the people’s money back, there are better ways to do it. Walking into a burning building is just plain stupid.”

Edana glared and offered a short jab to his solar plexus. He grunted in pain but didn’t release his grip on her hair. His golden eyes were hot and angry. Edana didn’t care.

“It’s the only way I could think of to get that money back and get the soldiers out of the town in the process.”

He snorted. “What happens if something happens and they need the soldiers? They won’t get help because *you* decided to get rid of them.”

“Didn’t you see what happened?” she demanded. “They nearly killed that man because he couldn’t afford to pay these damn taxes. The people here are terrified. No one should have to live like that.” She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. “If you’ll let go, I’ll get their money back so they can afford to feed their families for a little while longer.”

Phelan’s eyes scanned her face. For a moment, she didn’t think



he would free her. What he said next surprised her even more. "Stay here. I'll get it."

With that Phelan turned and ran into the burning building. Despite his interference, her plan was working. The fire had moved south from the point of origin, leaving this back corner of the building unharmed.

"Miss?"

Not good, she thought as she turned to face the soldier approaching her. He was fairly short, but his arms bulged with muscle. His pale hair, cut close to his scalp, framed a wide face and mean eyes. This was the same soldier she'd seen earlier. The bully.

The red and blue of his uniform was singed and covered in ash. "Come away from there," he demanded.

"I'm waiting for someone," she said calmly.

The man sneered as he moved toward her. "That will have to wait."

Edana let him grab her arm. She winced as he managed to grab the same spot Phelan had, where she could already feel a bruise forming. "You don't understand," she whined. "He'll expect me to be here. He'll be so angry if I'm not."

"You should be more worried about making *me* angry." He turned, dragging her toward the street where she could hear voices

raised.

Edana rolled her eyes. "No. Wait." She tried turning to face him. When he shook her, she stumbled. When he tried to jerk her up, she spun quickly, ramming the palm of her hand up into his nose. He released her immediately and lifted his hands to his bleeding nose. She sidestepped him and offered a quick jab to the side of his head. He crumpled over, unconscious.

"Nice," Phelan said from behind her.

Edana turned to see him holding the wooden money chest.

"What took you so long?"

Phelan turned and headed north out of the city. "The barracks' commander was in his office. I had to take care of him."

"Did you kill him?" She glanced behind her as she followed him away from the town. No one noticed their hasty exit.

"No. I dragged him to the entrance and whistled to get someone's attention. Then I went back to get the chest."

"You walked through a burning building to avoid killing someone? I'm surprised." And she was. His actions were contrary to his behavior up to that point.

"My morals may be questionable in some areas, but I'm not a cold-blooded killer."

Edana pondered this a moment, before focusing on the matter at

hand. "Did you happen to find the tax records? I need to know how to redistribute the money."

Phelan stopped and turned back to her then. "We," he said.

"What?"

"We have to redistribute the money. And yes, I have the record book."

Edana was confused. "You'll help me?"

"What did I just do?" He turned and started walking again. The trees where she'd left her horse were now in sight. "If you had told me what you were going to do, I would've helped."

"Oh." She didn't know what else to say. He didn't seem the type to go out of his way to help others. Yet, here he was. Maybe she'd been wrong about him from the start. She'd be the first to admit that gauging people wasn't her strong suit. She felt that was glaringly obvious. She'd been wrong about Morfram, Donal, and who knew how many others. She was willing to concede that she could have been wrong about Phelan too.

"Well, are you coming?" he asked.

Edana focused on his face. He was looking at her expectantly. She nodded and hurried to catch up.

"We have a lot of work left to do," he continued. "We can't afford to waste any more time."

She didn't see them until it was too late. Edana and Phelan just walked right into a trap. If she hadn't been so tired from last night's events, she probably would have been more alert. As it was, she felt it took all of her energy to remain seated on her horse.

They'd finished returning the people of Loughrea's money only a few hours before dawn, giving Edana and Phelan enough time to get two hours' worth of sleep. After riding for nearly another full day, she was exhausted. She'd just been thinking that no hours almost would have been better than two when they walked into this trap. Just that fast, she got her second wind.

Six greasy-haired, dirty men managed to spring an ambush. In hindsight, Edana thought she should have noticed the smell of alcohol and sweat than these men reeked of. The foul odor was strong enough at this distance to make her eyes water.

She looked quickly to Phelan. His expression remained bland, but his eyes were anything but. There was anger there, likely directed at himself. He was probably kicking himself as well.

"Can I help you..." he eyed them each in turn, "gentlemen?" he asked coolly.

One man, heavily built with a body that could once have been muscular but had turned to fat, stepped forward. His hair was stringy

and hung past his shoulders. His beard was scruffy, his clothes equally so. "We want the girl," he said, his eyes hard.

Phelan paused like he was considering this. "How much will you give me for her?"

Edana sputtered while the men laughed. She really didn't like this.

"I don't think you understand, boy. We're not gonna be buying her from you. Either you give her to us and we let you live, or we take her and kill you."

Phelan gave no reaction. "I don't think *you* understand," Phelan drawled. "She's dangerous. Just killed a man. I'm taking her to the nearest town constable."

Edana's lips twitched before she could control it.

"Like you'd really turn in the princess," one man, younger than the others, said, earning a slap to the back of his head.

"Shut up, you idiot," another man growled.

This was getting ridiculous, Edana thought. It made sense for Morfram to send soldiers against her, but these men weren't soldiers. They were mercenaries and thugs. Incompetent ones if she had to guess. He couldn't expect much loyalty from men like these in the long term. He had to be paying them. The good news was that this would most likely limit the number of men he had at his disposal.

Unless he managed to get his hands on the treasury. She desperately hoped that wasn't the case.

"Just hand her over," their leader said to Phelan.

Edana gritted her teeth. They were acting as if she were his captive when clearly, she was sitting on her own horse, carrying her own weapons.

"How much is Morfram paying you?" Edana asked. "I'll double it."

"Who's Morfram?" the leader returned.

"The man you're working for."

"Ha. He didn't give me his name. No wonder, really, since it's that bad."

The men laughed.

"Do we have an agreement then?" Phelan interjected.

"Boy, you need to learn to stay out of men's business. We were told to get her if she came this way. Keep her alive, that's what the man said. Anyone with her is expendable." He spit a brown liquid on the ground at their horse's feet. "That means I'm taking her, killing you, and heading back to Tara. I wasn't lying. If you walk away, no harm done."

Phelan only looked at the man for a long moment before turning to face Edana. "You take the left, I'll take the right."

Edana didn't hesitate. She grabbed her bow slung over her saddle horn, nocked an arrow, and let it fly. The motion as familiar as breathing. The farthest man to the left, the youngest, dropped to the ground, the black-fletched arrow buried deep in his chest. She felt a moment's remorse. He was only a boy her age. He shouldn't have been here. She shrugged aside her remorse as she drew a second arrow. Regrets would be dealt with later.

At the same time, Phelan sprang forward, sword drawn to attack. He was rushed as the men came at him with their own weapons at the ready. His charging horse pushed them back, reared, and kicked out. One man went down as he caught a hoof to the shoulder.

The others didn't seem too concerned about the danger the horse presented, as they continued their attack, slashing and stabbing at anything they could reach. The horse whinnied in pain as a sword cut across his flank.

Edana nocked another arrow, but was struck from behind with a heavy club. The force of the blow knocked her out of the saddle. She used the momentum of the fall to roll away from her attacker. Her horse hesitated between the two before bolting off. Luckily, this gave her enough time to regain her feet.

Her shoulder ached horribly from where the strike had landed.

She gritted her teeth and tried to push the pain aside as she pulled her short sword from its sheath on her left hip.

Her attacker's battle cry rang out as he surged forward, swinging his club wildly. Spittle flew from his mouth as he bellowed.

They had said they weren't supposed to kill her, but the man was so lost in his battle rage, Edana doubted he really cared one way or another whether she lived or died. She dodged his swing and thrust her own sword forward, aiming low, forcing the man to dance out of the way. His big frame moved too slowly to completely avoid the strike as the tip barely pierced his thigh.

The man roared in anger and rushed forward again. This time, his cudgel managed to graze just over her right eye as it swung out. Edana swayed dizzily and blinked clear the blood that was running down the side of her face and into her eye.

Edana started to panic.

Sensing it, the man stepped forward just as Edana threw out her sword in a wild swing. Pure luck had her making contact. Her blade sliced across the man's belly, opening a deep wound. He fell to his knees, crying out in agony, as his blood poured from his midsection.

Thanking the gods briefly, Edana stepped forward and ended the man's life with one clean stroke before she turned to face the next attacker.



Only two remained, and both were locked in battle with Phelan, who still held his position atop his horse. The bodies of the fallen were left in his wake as he pushed the men back.

Edana knew better than to call out. Any distraction in battle was one that could get you killed, or so her father had always said. She ran to her bow where it lay after her fall. She stooped to pick it up just as Phelan's cry of pain rent the air.

Edana looked up to see his attackers pull him from the horse's back. One of the men had gotten past his guard and opened up a nasty wound on his side. Thankfully, his blood was up and he could keep fighting. Likely that would hurt a great deal when his head was cleared enough of the battle lust.

Edana winced as his back hit the ground with a jarring thud. Her respect for him grew as he continued to parry from his vantage on the ground. Once again though, the men were able to get past his guard. This time they opened a shallow cut on his shoulder. When one man thrust forward again, Phelan rolled to his left and thrust upward with his sword. The point erupted from the man's back. Phelan quickly dislodged the blade as his attacker fell and prepared to take on the last.

Edana nocked and let fly another arrow before the last of Morfram's mercenaries had a chance to react. The arrow struck his

side, just under his raised arm, piercing his lung. He fell and after a few labored breaths, was still.

Edana ran to Phelan as he let his head fall back to the ground. She looked around the clearing to check for signs of movement from the fallen. When she saw none, she fell to her knees at Phelan's side. She pulled his tunic up to get a look at his injury. The wound on his side was the result of a thrust, rather than a slice as she'd expected.

This was worse than she'd expected. More dangerous. With a wound like this, it was much more likely that something vital was punctured. Only the most skilled healers could fix something like that. The most skilled healers were in Tara, days away.

"Are you okay?" Edana frantically ran her hands over his stomach and chest before she pushed down on the open wound to staunch the bleeding.

Phelan hissed out a breath. "Easy woman," he snapped. He opened his eyes to look up at her, but they were glazed with pain. "Likely your care will do me in before anything else."

Edana glared down into his golden eyes.

He gave a weak chuckle. "I don't think it hit anything vital. We just need to stop the bleeding and find a healer."

Edana ripped the material of Phelan's tunic and tied it tightly around his body.

“I think you’re supposed to rip your own clothing. That’s what the ladies in the fairy stories do.” He offered a weak smile.

Those ladies in the stories were idiots. Your shirt’s already torn and bloody. Why ruin my perfectly good one?”

Phelan grinned before reaching up to check the scratch on Edana’s head. He wiped the blood away with his thumb. Edana felt her skin tingle, like a gentle hum just under the surface.

“It’s not deep, and the bleeding’s already slowing. Were you hit anywhere else?”

“My shoulder.”

Edana sucked in a breath to scream as Phelan reached up to examine it. He wasn’t a very tender caregiver either. He pulled the material of her tunic aside.

“It’s bruised pretty badly, but I don’t think it’s dislocated.”

Edana released her breath carefully and pulled the material over her shoulder again. When his eyes met hers, Edana thought she’d never wanted to cry so badly. She hurt. She was exhausted, but Phelan needed to see a healer. Sleep would have to wait.

But for one brief moment she let her eyes drift closed as she offered a silent thank you to the gods, followed by an apology for the lives they took to survive. Her guilt didn’t make up for it, but the justification lessened the guilt a bit.

“Edana, I’m not feeling very well.” With that, his eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out.

Edana lifted the makeshift bandage away from his skin to see that the wound was now angry red. She knew basic field dressings--her father had insisted she learn--but she’d never seen a wound go bad so quickly. The only likely explanation was poison.

She had to get him to a healer immediately. What was the best way to pick up a wounded man almost twice her size when she was injured as well?

It seemed her silent thanks to the gods had been a bit premature.

## CHAPTER 21--IANNA

Ianna laughed quietly to herself as she made her way through the dark and damp depths of the tunnel leading out of the citadel. Likely hysteria was setting in, she told herself. She thought Edana would be proud of her resourcefulness. She'd even remembered to grab the money she'd stolen from Morfram's office.

Everyone in the family knew of the hidden passage leading from the King's chambers. It had been opened nearly a hundred years before in case the walls of Tara should ever be breached and the king needed to make an escape. Her father had told Ianna and Edana about the passage years before. Excited and intrigued, they had explored and delved its secrets.

Knowing the way out wasn't the problem. The problem had been getting from her room to her father's. The guards were making it difficult to do anything. Ianna had hidden behind the door and screamed softly. She didn't want to draw guards from other parts of the citadel. When the man ran into her room, Ianna hit him over the head with a leg she'd pried off her dressing chair. After he'd crashed to the floor, Ianna ran. She didn't even bother to check if he was still alive.

She stumbled her way through the tunnel toward freedom, holding a chair leg and laughing. It had been ridiculously simple,

which was why she couldn't help but think that something was about to go horribly wrong.

When fresh air and the muted light of the moon hit her face, Ianna knew that the tunnel would soon end. Her vision was beginning to lighten when a man-sized shadow stepped into her view. She swung out with the chair leg, felt it make contact. With her eyes squeezed shut, she couldn't tell with what or who. Then her target began cursing. Ianna's eyes snapped open and she lunged toward the figure, embracing him as tightly as she could manage. She'd never been so happy to see anyone in her entire life.

"Hey no, Ianna," Kyl said as he pulled back. "Are you alright?"

Ianna nodded and blinked the moisture that threatened to spill over out of her eyes. "We need to get out of here. I don't know how long it will be before the rest of the guards know I'm gone."

Kyl hugged her again briefly and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "You're right. I've got horses and supplies nearby." He stepped back and grabbed her hand before turning to pull her along with him. "Let's go."

After her adrenaline rush left her, Ianna was too exhausted to question what he was doing there. As they made their way to the horses and freedom, Ianna told herself she would be sure to get the full story later.

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“What do you mean you left her with Phelan?” Ianna demanded as they rode west.

Kyl sighed and only irritated her more. Ianna would prefer to have this argument with both feet on the ground. It would have made it easier to give Kyl the beating he deserved for leaving her sister, and his own best friend, with a criminal.

As if reading her thoughts, Kyl explained. “There are some...things I’ve learned about Phelan.” His voice was hesitant.

“Like?”

“Phelan used to work as one of Cian’s spies.”

“What does that matter?” Ianna interrupted. “Morfram just proved that we can’t trust anyone other than ourselves.”

Kyl held up a hand. “Will you let me finish? Phelan is Aral’s son.” He held up a hand again when Ianna started to speak again. “And Aral, who is a sneaky bastard, I might add, is--or was--your father’s spymaster. Aral sent Phelan to protect Edana after Cian died.”

Ianna stood in shock for a moment. Then the questions and doubts began assailing her all at once. “If Aral worked for my father, why is he helping Morfram? And how did we not meet Phelan before now?”

“Aral said it was part of his job. Cian told him to stay close to

Morfram. And I didn't get the full story on Phelan. I was more worried about you."

Ianna offered a smile. It was nice to be worried about. "Ok, but why doesn't Aral just kill Morfram now and end all this?"

"I honestly don't know." Kyl ran a hand over his short brush of hair in frustration. "Morfram's been buying and turning soldiers against the crown. I don't know what would happen if Aral killed him. Someone else might come forward to lead these rebels, or the mercenaries might turn on the civilians in Tara. Who's to say?

"Do you trust him?"

"Who? Aral or Phelan?"

"Both, I guess."

"I trust Aral," Kyl said slowly. "I've known him for a long time."

"But he's a spy. Lying is his job."

"It doesn't change anything for me. A good man is a good man. Aral's helped me out enough over the years to get the benefit of the doubt."

Ianna nodded, considering. "What about Phelan?"

"I don't know exactly. The man's an ass, no doubt about that, but he seems capable enough. If Aral says he'll protect Edana, then I believe him." Kyl hesitated before continuing. "At the same time, there's something he isn't saying. Something important. I know it."



As he told her the rest about the Druid woman sending them west toward the cliffs of Moher, Donal working for Morfram, his meeting with Aral, and planning her rescue, Ianna was consumed with a sense of uselessness. And disillusionment. Not for the first time. Her father was dead, her mother taken, the person she considered an uncle was trying to kill her sister for reasons unknown, and her sister was on a mission from Fal to recover a sacred sword that held unknown powers so she could rescue their mother and defeat Morfram. To top it all, Edana had only the mysterious Phelan for help.

Ianna had thought being locked in her room without a clue as to what was going on outside her four walls was bad. She had once longed for adventure. She'd never dreamed it would be anything like this.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"We're going west. If we're lucky, we can catch up with Edana before she reaches the cliffs. I want to be there in case something goes wrong."

"I'm not a fighter, Kyl. I won't be any help if it comes down to that."

Kyl reached over and squeezed her hand. "You have other strengths. Your mind, for one. You're clever. You think through everything. If we're going to help Edana get the sword and save your

mother, we'll need a plan."

"You don't think Edana will already have one?" Ianna asked doubtfully. "She'll probably have several in case something else goes wrong."

Kyl shook his head. "Edana has blind spots. Morfram knows her and how she thinks. For some reason, this is personal for him, which means he already knows how she'll react to anything he throws at her. She'll need you to think creatively. You weren't trained the same way Edana was, so your solutions could be what save us. Stop doubting yourself," he said firmly. "And stop comparing yourself to Edana. You're not her, and she's not you. Focus on how *you* can help."

Ianna blinked owlishly at his words. Kyl sounded a little angry there at the end, and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why. She didn't compare herself to Edana. At least, not much. It was natural for her to look up to her big sister. Edana was strong and beautiful, after all. She could fight. She'd been included in their father's meetings with his council of nobles. Edana was a leader. Ianna had never needed to be.

She opened her mouth to respond, to explain, but nothing came out. Her throat felt thick. She nodded and cleared her throat. "You're right."

Kyl grinned, letting her know that his anger had passed. "I'm

always right. I've been telling you this for years."

Ianna shook her head in mock disgust as they continued to ride. *Kyl was* right. She couldn't use a sword or a bow as Edana could. That didn't mean she didn't have weapons of her own. Her mind was her greatest weapon. She would use it to destroy Morfram for what he was doing to her family. She just needed to work out a plan.

For one brief moment Ianna felt her heart flutter. They were on the run from Morfram and his soldiers to find her mother and sister. She fervently hoped they would prevent a civil war, as well. Despite all the darkness and fear of the past week, and likely, the near future, there was one bright light that she would cherish all her life. *Kyl*, the man she had secretly loved for years, the man who came back for her when he knew she was in trouble, was riding next to her, his fingers still intertwined with hers.

Ianna *would* find a way to beat Morfram. She had to, because she didn't think she could live without the absolute rightness she felt at that moment.

## CHAPTER 22--MORFRAM

"What do you mean she's gone?" Morfram asked, his voice cold and deceptively quiet.

The soldier, a recent hire, stood before him and held a hand to his bleeding head. "I heard a scream, sir. When I went in to check on the princess, someone hit me from behind. I don't know how long I was out, sir, but when I woke up, she was gone."

"And what did you do next?"

"I came to tell you, sir."

Morfram sighed. Instead of sounding the alarm to lock down the citadel, the idiot had run to tell him that his prisoner was getting away. His actions, or lack thereof, practically guaranteed that she already had escaped.

Morfram stepped toward the man and struck a hard blow to his face, knocking him to his knees. "You've just caused a serious dent in my plans."

"Sorry, s-sir," the man stammered.

"I'm sure you are," Morfram hissed as he took the ornate dagger off his belt. "And your mistakes will serve as a reminder to the others that it would be wise not to disappoint me."

"Sir?" the man asked, confused by Morfram's now out-stretched hand. When his master said nothing, the man gripped his hand and

was pulled to his feet. Before he could react, Morfram's dagger was buried in his stomach.

Driven by the man's obvious pain, Morfram pulled his dagger out and stabbed again and again and again. When the rage cleared, Morfram stared at the bloody heap on the floor at his feet. The soldier was now unrecognizable. His body was torn and mutilated.

Morfram turned and raised the dagger again as his chamber doors opened.

Aral walked in and looked down at the body on the floor. One eyebrow lifted, and he frowned slightly.

Morfram sheathed his dagger and wiped his blood-covered hands on his own tunic. "Have someone clean this mess up. And our timetable's just been moved up. We leave for Moher at once."

"Ah. So you know Ianna's escaped?"

"How very observant you are, Aral. How, may I ask, did you come by this information?"

"I saw her riding north out of the city," Aral answered dryly.

"And you just let her go?"

Aral shrugged. "She wasn't necessary to the plan."

"She was necessary to *my* plan!" Morfram yelled.

Aral only shrugged again. "I was fond of the girl. I would rather watch her escape, where, I might add, she can do no harm to you,

than have your thugs rape her for your amusement.”

“Careful, Aral. I won’t tolerate your insubordination. For your information, I had no such plans for Ianna. I wanted Edana to think that was the plan. I’m pleased even you bought it. Next time, though, when I give an order, you follow it.”

Aral gave a small smile and bowed before leaving the room.

Morfram kicked the body at his feet. In the past twenty-four hours, his spymaster had suddenly gained a conscience, Donal hadn’t returned with Edana in tow, and he’d lost control of his temper.

He glanced down again at the result of his own violent temper. He detested it.

Not the killing. Morfram learned at a young age that killing carried a thrill with it. The heart would pound. Senses could be dulled or heightened depending on the method used. Morfram enjoyed many different methods. But he hated to lose control.

He moved to his wardrobe and took out a clean pair of breeches and a dark-colored tunic. He changed quickly. Order, even in one’s clothing, was a reflection of that person.

Briefly he turned back to the body and smiled down at it. Despite losing his temper, the violence of the act had been cathartic. He suspected that when Edana’s death came, he would know true joy.

The thought made him chuckle. Just the thought of her blood on

his hands, splattering his face, was intoxicating. Only a few more days.

## CHAPTER 23--EDANA

“Wake up already, you bastard,” Edana growled at Phelan’s prone body. He’d been unconscious for nearly a full day.

Luckily, they had been close to the village of Lahinch when he passed out. From there, it had been a simple matter to find the healer since the healer’s wife ran the only inn in the village.

The withered, white-haired man had been waiting for them. He cleaned and stitched Phelan’s wounds and spoon fed him broth, while the man’s plump, younger wife had brought bread and cheese for Edana.

After Edana ate, the healer Gwidd, applied liniment to soothe Edana’s aching shoulder and told her to get some sleep. She’d slept for nearly eight hours. When she woke, she’d hoped Phelan would be well enough to continue.

That wasn’t the case.

“Phelan, please wake up. We don’t have time for this. You’re the one who said you would help me, and I don’t want to leave you here when you’re hurt, but I need to find my mother. It might hurt your feelings--if you even have any--but my mother means more to me than you do.” Edana laughed, but the sound was hollow. “I don’t even know you. The gods and this stupid situation forced you on me. I’m pretty sure I still don’t like you, but for some reason I don’t feel



comfortable leaving here without you. For better or worse, we're in this together." And you were hurt because of me, she added silently.

If she hadn't been so determined to help the people of Loughrea, they would have noticed the trap sooner. Phelan had been the one to pay the consequences. Edana thought again how right Ianna had been about her. Her arrogance was responsible for the situation. Next time, she promised herself, she would stop and think about her actions before she got someone else hurt. For now they were stuck here until Phelan healed.

"There's a reason for your unease, child."

Edana whirled around at the sound of that deep, ringing voice. Fal stood behind her but soon walked to the other side of the bed. He looked down at the sleeping Phelan with an odd look on his face.

"He looks so much like his mother."

Edana looked down as well. Even in sleep, the planes and angles of his face were sharp. His stubbled cheeks made him look rough, as always, but his mouth had softened and relaxed. Edana reached out to brush away a lock of hair that had fallen in his face. "She must have been beautiful then," she blurted.

Fal chuckled. "She died when he was only a boy. She was the most beautiful woman ever born. She was kind as well. People or animals, it didn't matter."

"So you knew her?"

"She was my daughter."

Edana blinked up at him. "What? Phelan's your grandson?"

Fal only smiled.

"Why didn't either of you tell me?" She was slightly mad at Phelan. They'd agreed to share information. This qualified as information.

"He was to be the one to tell you when the time was right."

"What does that even mean? When the time is right?" Edana paced away from the bed before turning back. "I knew he was hiding something, but how could he hide something like this? How could *you*?"

"I didn't want to make him a target, and he wanted to make his own mark. You know how that is," Fal said, his eyes direct on hers. "Before your father died, he named Phelan as his successor."

"Did he know Phelan was your grandson? Wait," his words caught her attention. "How did my father know Phelan?"

"Phelan's father was your father's spymaster."

Edana's face registered her surprise. "Aral has a son?" She studied Phelan's face again. How had she missed that? The resemblance was there. The mouth. The eyes.

"Phelan began working for your father at a very young age. Cian

provided his training and for the last two years Phelan has served as King's Champion."

Edana struggled to take it all in. There were so many secrets. Her father's. Aral's. Phelan's. Was the truth so dangerous? "Why didn't he tell me?" she muttered to herself. The King's Champion was known as the right hand of the king, dispensing justice where and when needed. Only the most trustworthy would be considered for the job. Her father's champion was one of the most well-known in recent years. Not his appearance, obviously, but his name. Her father's champion had been known only as the Wolf. That her father would name the Wolf as his successor wasn't a surprise. That he hadn't told her *was*.

Fal answered her question. "I told your father not to tell you."

Edana's mouth dropped open as her eyes kindled.

Fal laughed warmly. "There are so many destinies at play here, child. The two of you weren't meant to meet until now."

"But why? He's been part of my life in a roundabout way for years, apparently, and I never even knew. Why couldn't we know? If we had, I wouldn't have chained him and locked him in the dungeon."

Fal's eyes grew distant. He seemed to be looking through her. "If it had been known that Phelan would succeed your father, if the two of you had met under less--shall we say--stressful circumstances,

you would have fallen in love and married. If you had married, you would both be dead by now.”

Edana dropped her head into her hands. Ask a simple question, she thought. None of this made sense to her. Phelan would be king, and since he was the grandson of Fal, chances were good that the Stone would acknowledge his right to rule. Even though he wasn't king yet, the result was inevitable.

Her world had just changed again. Why argue with it? What good would that do?

“What would you have me do?” she asked quietly.

Fal leaned across the bed and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. Her skin hummed where he touched. “Have faith. Trust each other. Be strong. Keep pushing him. You make him stronger.”

Edana didn't see how. He'd just said that if things had been different, they would have loved and died. That told her that love made you weak. But who was she to argue with a god? Instead, she nodded.

When Fal turned to go, Edana stopped him by laying a hand on his arm. The shock of it ran up her arm and spread throughout her whole body. Fal smiled and his dark eyes danced. Edana smiled back dumbly. Her brain was filled with the deep hum she associated with the Stone. She'd been on the verge of asking something, but as soon

as she'd touched him, she couldn't remember what.

"Your family," he said, prying the thought from her mind. "For the moment they are well. Your mother is angry, but she knows you are coming for her. Though you may be surprised what you discover when you find her. Your sister is worried as well, but her emotions fluctuate. She is trying to conceal them, but I sense anger, disbelief, and even happiness mixed in."

Edana shook her head to try to clear it. She would remember not to touch a god again. "Thank you."

"Remember, be strong." He looked once more at Phelan before meeting her eyes. "Keep each other safe. I will see you again soon." With that, he leaned across the bed and laid a gentle kiss on her forehead. The humming intensified briefly. The sensation made her dizzy. Edana closed her eyes against it. When the feeling dissipated and she could open her eyes, Fal was gone. As was most of her energy. It seemed she would need a little more rest.

She started to turn but swayed on her feet as she did. She would never make it back to her own room. Instead, she decided to trust Fal--and Phelan by extension.

Edana lay down in the bed next to her future king. She hoped he would forgive the impropriety since it was his grandfather's doing.

For now, Edana would sleep. Half-truths, lies, danger, gods, and

prophecies would have to wait a few more hours.

## CHAPTER 24--PHELAN

Phelan woke slowly. He was relieved that he didn't feel too horribly, but he didn't exactly feel great either. His head throbbed from too much sleep, a sensation he hadn't felt since childhood. Aside from a few aches and bruises, though, his body was intact. His wound, in fact his entire right side, was gloriously warm.

He slowly opened his eyes, knowing that the light would be too much for his eyes to adjust to quickly. Blinking to clear his vision, he saw Edana curled up next to him in sleep. Her hair had come loose from its braid and was in a disheveled cloud around her head as it lay on his shoulder. One arm draped across his chest. Her breathing was slow and even. For a moment Phelan marveled at how fragile she looked.

Despite her small stature, she'd always brought to mind one of the Amazon warriors from the stories. He wished she hadn't fallen asleep with him. Wished he hadn't caught her trying to help those villagers. Then he wouldn't know how delicate or how kind she could be. Then he wouldn't feel this need to take care of her.

Groaning at his own foolishness, Phelan tried to rise and immediately realized his mistake.

Apparently, Edana didn't like to be woken abruptly. She jerked upright and planted her tiny fist in his face.

Phelan cursed loudly.

Realizing her mistake, Edana froze. "I'm so sorry," she said quickly. "You startled me."

Phelan wiggled his jaw to make sure it wasn't broken. Had he just thought she was fragile? Delicate? Clearly he'd been mistaken. "The next time you hit me, I might forget I learned anything about chivalry and hit you back."

Edana's mouth twitched as she tried to suppress a smile.

She failed.

Phelan's eyes narrowed as a peal of laughter erupted from her. "I'm glad my pain amuses you," he said darkly.

When Edana's laughter wound down, the look in her eyes became angry, then quickly wary. "I apologize for hitting you...Sire." Her tone was bland.

Phelan regarded her closely for a moment, but it appeared she had schooled her features to a neutral expression. "It appears I've slept through a great deal."

"Yes. You missed your grandfather's visit."

He nodded. The old man had said he would leave it to Phelan to tell Edana the truth. Apparently Phelan didn't work on the same time frame as his grandfather. He should be angry, but he could admit to feeling relieved. For some reason, the hurt he read in Edana's eyes



made him feel guilty.

“I wasn’t sure how to tell you.”

“Tell me what? That you knew my father? Pretty well, it appears. That your grandfather is a god? That you lied to me about the Stone?”

“Wait just a minute,” he began. I didn’t lie about the Stone. I said I was a guardian, which is true, by the way. And yes, I knew Cian. He was a friend and mentor to me.” Phelan rose and walked to a small chair placed in the corner. His next words would likely be hard for her to take, and Phelan didn’t want to be within striking distance.

“He was poisoned over a year ago. I was in Britannia at the time. He called me home to help find the culprit, but we couldn’t determine who was behind it. It had to have been someone close to him, but we couldn’t prove who, though we suspected Morfram. He would have needed help too. If it had been only him, it would have been a simple matter. Before I learned anything more, Cian sent me to Wales to meet with their court physician, but nothing helped.

“When the poison finally killed him, I was told to find you and make sure Morfram didn’t try to kill you as well, but I didn’t know if you had been the one helping Morfram.” Her outraged expression made him smile. “It didn’t take long to figure out that you couldn’t have been behind it. I knew after Cian died, I would finally get the

chance to come out into the open. He understood the need to keep you in the dark about the succession and the need to keep us separated.”

“Why wouldn’t he tell me about the succession?”

“You were raised to rule, to lead men. He once told me that before he spoke to Fal, he had every intention of naming you his successor. You would have been ten or so at the time. I think he was relieved when he found out about me. He didn’t know what kind of trouble you would face if you were chosen.”

Phelan shrugged his shoulders. “He didn’t know how you would react to me, especially since Fal warned him to keep the two of us apart, and now, with everything that’s going on, you don’t have a lot of time to think about it. He knew I would need you. Despite the fact that you’re a woman, the soldiers know you. They may have heard of me, but I don’t think they’d be willing to follow my orders until after I’m crowned. Since we can’t exactly have a coronation in the middle of a war, I’ll need your help.”

Edana shook her head in denial. “You’re the King’s Champion. They have to follow you.”

“Edana, I’ve been away for the last three years. Before that, I served the crown in a more...dubious position.” Phelan didn’t think Edana needed to hear about his years working under his father as a

spy and assassin. "These men don't know anything about me other than my nickname."

"The Wolf," she said.

Phelan nodded and rose, moving back to sit on the edge of bed. "Given the fact that we'll be fighting against Cian's chief advisor, I don't think my name will be enough to convince them to trust me." He turned his body to face hers and took her hands in his. "You were meant to lead our people against Morfram. I've had some time to think about this." He swallowed his pride and said the one thing he hated most. "I'm sorry for suspecting you and treating you the way I did, but we're in this together. I know it. *You* know it. Help me. We *will* do this together. Afterwards, you can go back to hating me."

Edana stared down at their joined hands for a long moment before lifting her eyes to meet the brilliant gold of his. "It tingles," she murmured.

"What?" His brow winged up in question.

"When you touch me, my skin tingles."

Phelan gave her a wolfish smile.

"Not like that," she laughed. "It's like when Fal touched me. I feel a jolt. Then my skin tingles. I can hear a low hum in my head. It's like being a little drunk."

Phelan's smile widened. "You've been drunk, Princess?"

Edana blushed. "Kyl and I wanted to try ale. We just tried a bit too much. Anyway, when you touch me, it's similar. It's...powerful, I guess. Wait, do you have powers? Is that why?"

Phelan winced. "I prefer the term *abilities*. Nothing too exciting, though. I heal faster than most people," he gestured to his body, "as you can see, and if I focus hard enough, I can catch glimpses of things that haven't happened yet. It's not pleasant. I either see things I don't want to, or I don't see anything and get a bad headache and a bloody nose. The old man always says there will be more someday. Something about the powers being locked away, and just waiting for the right key to turn the lock." He shrugged. "Whatever that means."

Edana studied him for a moment. "We need to make a deal."

Phelan was immediately wary. "What kind of deal?"

"You were right. We need to work together. We *will* work together. You help me find my mother, and I'll lead the army until you're crowned, but I don't want any interference from you."

"I don't think I like that," he interrupted.

"If you disagree with an order, we can discuss it in private," she continued over his interruption. "An army can only have one general."

"And what will I be doing while you're playing general? You don't have enough experience to lead an army on your own." He stressed the last part.

"You'll be a king. You'll fight for Eire, and you'll get to know the men serving you. Let them see you. You've got an advantage going in. Everyone's heard of the Wolf. Your fighting skills are already legendary. The name doesn't hurt either." She paused as if considering her next statement. "Why do they call you the Wolf?"

In response, Phelan turned his arm over to expose the inside of his wrist. A dark shape of a wolf's head marked the skin. "It's a birthmark. The first time Cian saw it, he said it went with my eyes." He smiled at the memory.

Edana only nodded before continuing. He figured she would have more questions later. "It's one thing for them to respect your abilities and another for them to respect *you*. Show them you're not just a soldier, but a king, too. Eventually, you won't need me to lead them."

"I'm not a soldier Edana. I'm a warrior. There's a big difference between the two."

Edana nodded in understanding. "I've seen you fight. Being a warrior is about knowing your individual strengths. Being a soldier is about incorporating those strengths with the strengths of others. When you fight with others by your side, it becomes instinctual."

"Cian said something similar to me once."

"He was a smart man and a good king. A good father." Tears

glistened in her blue eyes before she could hide them.

Phelan once again thought of her fragility and how much he hated that she made him want to comfort her. This was likely the reason they were kept separated for so long. If he was overly worried about her, he would weaken himself. A king needed to be strong. Remote, he told himself.

He looked down at their hands, still entwined. He couldn't afford to get too close to her. To anyone, for that matter. Cian had left him a kingdom on the verge of war. He couldn't let anything come before the land itself.

But he couldn't bring himself to let go of her hands. It was nice to be close to someone without worrying about secrets that needed to be kept. So he held her hand. Just one moment more, he told himself. As he'd said, they needed each other.

"Is there anything else?" he asked as he finally forced himself to release her.

"No more lies. For the moment, you and I are partners. If we're going to succeed, then we need to know we can trust each other."

Phelan nodded. "I agree, but what happens when this is over?"

"When we're no longer partners?"

He nodded again.

"We can try for friends." Edana smiled. "The urge to kill you

faded days ago.”

Phelan returned her smile, but he knew there was one thing he couldn't tell her. A last promise to a dying man that would likely lead to more animosity between them. He would keep that to himself a little longer, at least until he was sure she wouldn't kill him in revenge.

Edana held out her hand to shake on it. “Friends?” she smiled.

Phelan gripped her small hand in his large one. “Friends. Now, we need a plan.”

## CHAPTER 25--KYL

Kyl and Ianna rode as far as they could before stopping. They ate, slept, then woke after a few hours to do it all over again. It took nearly nine days to reach the village of Lahinch. Nine days of green hills and dark forests. They tried to avoid towns as much as possible until Kyl couldn't stand the look of exhaustion on Ianna's face any longer.

Lahinch was only about two leagues southeast of Hags Head, the southernmost point of the Cliffs of Moher where Edana was heading. With any luck, they would be able to find Edana and fill her in on what was happening back in Tara.

By this point, Kyl and Ianna were tired and hungry. Kyl was desperately in need of a fire and a soak in a tub after so long on horseback. Ianna was likely feeling the same way, if the strain on her face was any indication. At least he was used to it. All things considered, she'd managed to move a lot faster than he'd expected, considering she'd rarely spent time on a horse in the past.

When they road into the village, Kyl offered up thanks to the gods that the place boasted an inn. They would be able to get a full night's rest before they had to set out a dawn.

They located the inn on the northwest edge of the small town. It was a moderately sized timber and wood structure. The wood was



faded and the stone worn down by the cool winds that came off the ocean. There was a small stable located near the inn. Overall, the buildings weren't in the best condition, but anything would be better than sleeping on the ground for one more night, and the horses would probably enjoy being out of the wind this close to the coastline.

Kyl looked over to where Ianna was dismounting. A young boy came running out of the stable, waiting to take their reins. With a smile and a thanks, Kyl handed off his horse to the boy. Kyl and Ianna had put up the hoods on their cloaks when they neared the town, hoping to avoid any unwanted attention if someone recognized her. Just now, her shoulders were slumped and her eyes dull with fatigue. He knew she was a strong young woman. He would gladly admit that he'd underestimated her. She was more like Edana than he'd realized.

Kyl walked over to her and took her hand, interlacing their fingers. "Are you alright?"

Ianna yawned and nodded. "I've never been more tired in my life. I need sleep."

Kyl led her forward and knocked on the inn's door. He heard footsteps and muffled voices before the door was opened by a small, white-haired man in an ill-fitting tunic and breeches. "Yes?" His voice creaked.

"We'd like a room for the night," Kyl told him.

The old man hesitated. He glanced over his shoulder at something Kyl couldn't see. "Alright. Just the one, then?" He cast a quick look in Ianna's direction.

Her hood still covered her face. Though she was tall, it was obvious she was a woman. Kyl considered this briefly. His desire to keep her safe outweighed his concern for propriety. "Just the one."

The man ushered them in but made no move to escort them to a room. The man's eyes strayed once more. Kyl felt a flash of unease. Something was wrong here.

He cursed himself silently as he drew his sword. If he hadn't been so concerned about keeping Ianna comfortable, he wouldn't have risked the inn at all. Love made men stupid, he decided.

The old man's eyes widened at the sight of Kyl's sword and took a step back. Kyl lifted his sword to a guard position but never got the chance to use it.

"Drop it," a rough voice growled.

Kyl considered fighting his way out before he noticed the arm around Ianna's waist and the small knife at her throat.

He turned slowly so he could see their captor. His breath left him in a rush. Kyl threw back his hood. "Gods, Phelan. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Phelan's eyes widened in shock. "Me? You're supposed to be in Tara. Edana--" He stopped himself and pulled Ianna's hood off. "Apologies, Princess." He sheathed the dagger in his belt.

Kyl noticed Ianna's eyes were alert now. Alert and angry. "Where's Edana?" he asked. "Is she...Did Donal...?"

Phelan smiled. "She's fine. She's sleeping still. She had a long day. And Donal's dead. By Edana's hand, I might add. She managed that before I could even unchain myself."

"Take me to her," Ianna demanded.

Kyl brushed a hand across his lips to cover the smile. It was obvious she didn't trust Phelan, son of Aral or not.

Phelan grinned at her. It must be obvious to him as well. "Right this way, Highness." He gave brief instructions for food to be brought to his room before he led them down a narrow corridor.

When they entered, Kyl and Ianna hesitated briefly before charging toward the sleeping figure in the bed. Kyl took a brief moment to wonder why Edana was sleeping in Phelan's room.

Kyl stood over her legs, while Ianna stood over her upper body. With a nod to each other, they both pounced.

Edana jerked awake with a curse and tried to struggle. Her arms and legs were completely immobile. The more she tried to wriggle her way free, the harder they laughed. It must have been the

laughter that finally got through her sleep-clouded mind.

Kyl and Ianna continued to laugh as Edana's smile exploded into life.

"Gods! Get off me so I can hug you idiots."

They stood up as Edana struggled to her knees on the center of the bed. They both enveloped her in a hug.

"This is all so touching," Phelan drawled, "but why don't you tell us what the two of you are doing here."

"Don't be an ass, Phelan. Relax." Edana's tone held none of the animosity Kyl had noticed before he left them.

"It might be easier for me to relax if you weren't all in my bed."

"Why are we in his bed?" Ianna asked. "Why were you *sleeping* in his bed?"

Kyl raised a brow, first at Edana, then at Phelan. Phelan only grinned, while Edana blushed furiously.

"It's a long story," she said. "We were talking and I fell asleep."

"What she's not saying is that it was the second time she fell asleep in my bed."

Edana glared at Phelan. Kyl looked back and forth between the two. Despite Phelan's tone and the occasional heated look from Edana, they had obviously come to some sort of understanding. Kyl hated to be the one to disturb the peace, but Edana needed to know

who Phelan was.

“Edana, we need to talk to you.” Kyl aimed an apologetic glance at Phelan. “Privately.”

Before Phelan could leave the room, Edana stopped him. “We’re all in this together. You can say what you need to in front of him.”

Kyl sighed. Edana never did things the easy way. “Alright. First of all, Phelan is Aral’s son.” He said this quickly, expecting some sort of reaction. When he got none, he waited another moment to let the news sink in. He was braced for the heat of Edana’s temper when she threw her head back and laughed.

“I already know. That’s probably the least significant thing about Phelan.”

“So he told you?” Kyl asked, confused. The way Aral had spoken, he hadn’t expected Phelan to disclose anything.

“How’s he doing?” the man in question asked.

“Well,” Kyl began. “Are you aware that he’s serving as Morfram’s spymaster?”

“He has been for years now,” Phelan admitted. “Cian ordered him to take the position.”

Again, Kyl and Ianna looked to Edana. She wasn’t surprised by this news either.

“Did you know *he’s* a spy as well?” Ianna gestured angrily at

Phelan. "He lies for a living."

"Ianna." Edana's tone was a warning.

"No, it's fine," Phelan said as he moved to sit on the bed next to Edana.

It struck Kyl as a gesture of familiarity. They were obviously easy with each other now. Something must have happened.

A knock on the door interrupted them. The man who'd opened the door and his wife, a robust woman wearing a food-splattered apron, entered without waiting for a response. Each carried a large tray. One held cups and a flagon of wine. The other held four bowls of a thick, aromatic stew. Kyl's stomach growled noisily.

The room immediately filled with laughter.

After thanks were offered to the old man and his wife, the two left them to their business. Kyl and Ianna didn't hesitate and they scrambled to their food and began to eat. Edana and Phelan remained seated on the bed with their bowls in their laps. Kyl and Ianna neglected the wooden chairs at a small table and sat down on the floor.

When they finished their meal and the innkeeper came to take their bowls away, Phelan nodded to Edana. This was apparently her sign to begin their tale. She spoke of their run-in with Donal, fighting with a group of mercenaries hired by Morfram to capture Edana,

Phelan's injury, and Phelan's heritage. She told them of the shared dream that started it all and Phelan's years as Cian's Champion when he became known as the Wolf. When she finished, they remained silent for a long moment.

Kyl looked to Phelan, his future king, and noticed the veil had dropped again. Gone was the playful sneer. In its place was a new determination. He could respect that.

"I'm not bowing or saluting until you're crowned. Sire," Kyl added as an afterthought.

Phelan laughed. "I don't think bowing or saluting will be necessary even when I'm crowned. But," he sighed heavily and ran a hand through his hair dramatically, "if you really want to. I suppose I'll have to get used to it."

Kyl smiled. "I'll try to restrain myself."

"I'm glad you two are suddenly the best of friends," Ianna commented dryly. "But I think we need to focus on getting our mother back and getting this sword before Morfram does. The quicker we do that, the quicker we can get back to Tara." She looked at Edana. "Morfram's been buying soldiers over to his side. From what I could see and hear, most of those who remain loyal took their families and fled north. Some stayed, though. With us gone, Morfram's next in the chain-of-command. I guess they didn't see anything wrong with

what he was ordering.”

“He’s bringing in mercenaries to supplement his numbers,” Kyl added. “Whether he gets the sword or not, I think he’s planning on a war. You just happen to be his primary target.”

“Why me?” Edana asked.

“Probably for the same reason *I* need you,” Phelan said.

Edana batted her lashes playfully. “For my charming personality?”

Phelan surprised them all--even himself, it appeared--when he reached out to tug on her earlobe. “Because until a new ruler is crowned, you’re the only one who can lead the army against him.”

“No pressure. Right, Edana?” Kyl teased.

“Your sense of humor is warped.”

Kyl smiled. “So what’s the plan, Majesty? Or do I need to direct my question to the commander?” He nodded to Edana who was chewing her lower lip as she stared down at her hands.

“We were in the process of coming up with a plan,” Phelan said. “We just couldn’t decide the best way to get into Nuada’s Cave to get the sword. The *commander* here thinks she can go in and rescue her mother and the sword without my help.”

“That’s not exactly what I said,” she argued. “If you’re going to be King, you can’t just walk headfirst into danger, you idiot.”



"That's *King* Idiot to you. Besides, I'm not about to let *you* walk in there when *I* was the one assigned to protect you. *Fal* told me to look after you. *Your father* told me to look after you. *My grandmother* told me to look after you." He looked around at Kyl and Ianna. "Am I the only one who sees the pattern here?"

"You can't protect me by putting yourself in danger," Edana quickly pointed out. "If you die, Morfram might very well be crowned. In this case, your safety's more important than mine. Likely I'm the one with the best chance of drawing Morfram out."

"My safety? Woman, are you crazy? I'm the King's Champion. The Wolf. That means I'm the one most likely to walk in and out of there alive."

"Who was the one laid up with a sword wound to the stomach?" Edana snapped.

"Who's the grandson of a god and heals quickly?" was Phelan's retort.

Kyl couldn't hold back his laughter any longer. They paid him no attention, though, as they continued to glare at each other. "I can see why you two are having trouble deciding on a plan." They were acting like his Aunt Elya and Uncle Cedd, who hated each other but had been married for almost forty years.

Phelan sighed. "She's impossible. Talk to her," he pleaded.

"Personally, I think it would be simpler to reason with a rock. Or beat her over the head with it," he muttered darkly.

"You'd likely break the rock into tiny little pieces," Kyl laughed.

"Can we focus please?" Edana asked. Her tone told Kyl that she was about to lose her temper. "We need a plan."

"Actually," Ianna said. "I have an idea, but we'll need some help."

Kyl looked around at the others. "We don't know what soldiers we can trust. Any ideas?"

Phelan pursed his lips. "How far are we from Carrowgar?"

Kyl considered. "Only a league or so."

"Good. I've got some friends there."

"But how do we know we can trust them?" Ianna asked.

"They've been with me for the past two years. When we came home, I went to Tara and my second, Alain, went to his mother's home in Carrowgar."

Ianna smiled at their group. "This could work then. We just need to make sure we don't underestimate Morfram."

Kyl grunted his agreement. So far, Morfram had proven to be way ahead of them in terms of preparation.

## CHAPTER 26--BIDELIA

Nuada's Cave was cool and damp. The torches provided enough light for Bidelia to see clearly, but offered little in the way of warmth. The sheer size of the cave ensured that the heat from the torches disappeared before reaching her skin.

The mouth of the cave opened toward the sea. Queen Bidelia knew from memory that the Aran Islands could be seen in the distance to the northwest. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks below muted the voices raised inside the cave.

"They should have been here by now. Morfram said he would have the girl here yesterday!," the voice whined.

"Enough," Bidelia snapped. "Morfram will get here soon enough. Edana will get the sword, and we can get out of here."

"Yes, my lady." Her servant, Dorn, bowed. His gray hair was tied back neatly in a queue. His breeches and tunic were immaculate.

Bidelia looked down at her own clothing. Her emerald green dress and matching cloak were chosen to match her eyes, as were the jewels she chose to wear. She knew how out of place she looked in this damp cavern.

Edana was in for quite a surprise when she finally arrived, Bidelia thought with a smile. Morfram promised he would keep the secret of where the queen's loyalties lay. She hoped he kept his word on that.

She was looking forward to seeing the look on her oldest daughter's face.

Everyone thought Bidelia was weak, that she had to be shielded. They thought she would be content to play with her flowers and stay out of the day-to-day business of running a country. Even her own daughters considered her weak. Especially Edana. Always trying to shelter her, coddle her as Cian had done. How could her own daughter think so little of her?

Bidelia smiled coldly and imagined the precious Edana's surprise when she learned her weak, gentle mother was responsible for Cian's death.

She hoped Morfram had left Ianna in Tara. Her beautiful girl. Ianna was sweet and kind and loved Bidelia the way a daughter should. She would be given a choice soon enough. Her mother or her sister. Regrettably, the sisters were close, but Ianna would need her mother, especially since Morfram didn't plan for Edana to live any longer than necessary.

Bidelia paused a moment. She knew she should feel guilt or grief over the imminent loss of her older child and the part she was playing in it. Instead, she felt nothing. All these years of putting on a false smile had numbed her. Cian had been to blame, always more concerned with ruling his people. Bidelia had been relegated to the

background, last on his list of priorities, and she made he paid the consequences for his negligence. Why couldn't she have helped him? If, even once, Cian had included her in his numerous meetings, she might have been able to forgive him, but she had grown tired of being treated as an empty-headed female for him to pick up and discard as the whim struck him.

When Morfram entered with Aral by his side, Bidelia rose from her seat, a short, blunted stalagmite. When no one entered with them, she began to worry. "Where is she?"

Morfram took her hands in his before leaning down and kissing her angry lips. "Edana and the prisoner managed to kill Donal and his men. They weren't seen in Tara. I expect they're on their way here to rescue you."

"How would they find us? Do you think Donal told her everything?"

Morfram shook his head. "Aral's spies report them visiting some old woman's house in the woods. Nobody seems to know who she is or exactly where she lives, but I believe she must know something about the caves. Edana and the prisoner--Phelan, I think was his name--were seen heading in this direction."

"Then why haven't you had her captured?"

Morfram's eyes flashed dangerously. Bidelia found herself taking

a cautious step back. "I've tried," he bit out. "They fought their way clear of a group of mercenaries about ten leagues east of here. Your idiot of a husband was the one who had her trained to fight."

"Obviously he wasn't an idiot," Aral added dryly.

Bidelia and Morfram whipped their heads around to stare at him.

Aral shrugged, as if their combined anger meant nothing to him.

"He trained her to defend herself. She defended herself when she needed to. However inconvenient it is to your plans, Cian was never an idiot."

"You would defend him?" Bidelia turned to Morfram. "Apparently your spy isn't as loyal as you would believe."

"It isn't a matter of loyalty, my lady--"

"Queen," she corrected. "Or Majesty. I'm still your queen. You'll address me as such."

Aral nodded at her. "Quite right, my Queen. As I was saying, it isn't a matter of loyalty. I'm paid for a service. If you want me to protect your feelings, you'll have to pay me more."

"What do you know of my feelings?" she bit out.

"Concerning your dead husband? Most people who commit murder feel guilt, sadness, fear, regret--take your pick. I suspect you feel nothing, which is something I find troubling."

"You dare?" she growled. This arrogant fool would learn soon

enough not to cross her, Bidelia thought. "I'll only warn you once, Aral. Be careful how you speak to me."

"Enough. Both of you," Morfram ordered. "We don't have time for your petty quarrels. We need to be ready when Edana arrives. I've set up watches around the area. Aral, come with me. My love," he said to Bidelia. "I must warn you. Ianna managed to escape. She'll have gone after Edana by now."

"How could you let this happen? You said you'd keep her safe," she hissed.

"I'll try to, but if she chooses to stand with Edana then I'll have no choice."

"Once you have the sword, Edana will have to surrender."

"If you truly believe that, then you don't know your daughter very well," Aral interrupted.

"Explain." Morfram's tone was commanding.

"Edana won't give up. It won't matter if you have the sword and are named king. If she believes you're responsible for Cian's death, she'll come for you, and I suspect the people of Eire will be behind her."

Bidelia waved this away. "She's only a girl. If it comes to war, she can't lead an army by herself."

"You're probably right," Aral conceded. "But I've learned that

the man known as Phelan was also Cian's Champion. I'm sure you've both heard of the Wolf. He would be capable of assisting Edana."

"Why wasn't I aware of this?" Bidelia asked. "Morfram, you didn't tell me. The Wolf! I should've been told."

Morfram was eyeing Aral with a speculative look. "I was also unaware. Which begs the question, why would Cian have kept the identity of the Wolf from the people? From me? I was his chief advisor."

"I can't say, my lord. Cian always thought a few moves ahead. If it was kept from you, he definitely had a good reason for it."

Morfram nodded. "To be safe, neither Edana nor this Phelan will leave this place alive."

"And Ianna?"

"If she chooses to stay with her mother and me, then she will be safe." Morfram glanced at Bidelia. "Otherwise, she will die too."

Bidelia gasped. "How can you say that? She's your daughter!"



## CHAPTER 27--EDANA

"There's not much cover near the cliffs," Kyl explained. "If Morfram has guards--and I'm betting he does--then there's no way we can just walk in there without anyone knowing."

"Then Ianna's plan is the best way to go," Edana reasoned.

The group had left the inn the previous night, deciding they were less likely to be discovered if they camped out away from the main road. Of course, she and Phelan had to argue over the best spot to do that. Their brief peace at the inn had evaporated the minute they'd decided to leave there.

He was back to being his usual arrogant self, only slightly more annoying now that she knew he would soon be king. Assuming they lived long enough to see him crowned.

Edana suspected that if and when Phelan was crowned, he would be impossible to deal with. When that happened, she would have to consider finding a quiet place in the woods. Maybe even something like Moira's secluded home. She liked the thought of that. She'd never been on her own before. Solitude had its appeal, especially when she considered the work left to do.

Edana would rescue her mother who was probably terrified by now. She would retrieve the sword, deliver it to Phelan since she was pretty sure that's what Fal wanted, then she would do everything in

her power to kill Morfram and protect her people. Her father would expect nothing less of her.

“Is everything ready?” she asked Kyl.

“Ianna and Phelan are in place. I still don’t know why she has to be involved,” he added. “And I’m worried about these men Phelan brought in.”

Edana shrugged. “Phelan needs to be there in case something goes wrong and we can’t just leave her out here by herself. She’s safe with him.” she assured him. “Fal told me to trust him. Even if I wanted to, it probably wouldn’t be wise to argue with a god--especially one who controls fate.” She smiled at the thought. She was pretty sure she was finished being worried about Phelan and his grandfather. “Even with all his character flaws, Phelan seems brutally honest. If he says these men will help, then they will.”

“But where did they come from?”

Edana sighed inwardly. Kyl still wasn’t sure who to trust. Given everything else that had happened, she couldn’t really blame him. Maybe if he’d spoken to Fal as she had, he would be more open to outside assistance. Especially when they needed it. “You heard him. He said they were assigned to him when he was sent to Wales.”

“I get that. What about since then? How long has he been back in Eire?”

"A few months, I think. These men have been working for Aral since then. Apparently they've known about Morfram's plan for some time. All the most likely targets were given protection."

"Do you think they could have prevented your father's death? Aral mentioned something about poisoning. Maybe if they'd killed Morfram when they found out he was planning treason, Cian would still be alive."

Edana shook her head. She hadn't had time to mourn his death before all this started. Talking about it, wondering what if, would only distract her.

"I have no way of knowing exactly what happened. Phelan, my father, and apparently even Aral, couldn't prove Morfram killed him. If we survive, I'll deal with it then. Right now, I'm more worried about my mother."

"She'll be okay. She and Ianna are so similar. They may look fragile, but there's steel in there."

Edana didn't know how to voice that that was one of her worries. Her mother always seemed like the perfect lady--sweet, unassuming, and gracious to all but the servants. Nothing like Edana herself. But on a few occasions, she'd spotted something calculating, a cold anger, lurking in her mother's eyes. Usually, those eyes were aimed at Edana or her father when she noticed it.

Edana pushed the thought aside. Her doubts would have to wait. "Let's go."

Edana and Kyl strolled into the open. Kyl's sword was drawn, while Edana had her bow in hand, an arrow already nocked.

This was the part that worried her most. If they assumed that her mother couldn't or wouldn't lift the sword, then Morfram would need a child of Cian to do it. Since there were two daughters of Cian on the loose, Morfram might very well decide to kill Edana at the first opportunity and take his chances finding Ianna to do it.

The flat terrain of the cliffs, the stark grays and browns of the rocks extending out to the choppy ocean waves beyond, were almost overwhelming in their beauty--one of the benefits to those who lived in the Munster region. The green of the grass gave way to the gray of the stone and, eventually, to the blue of the sea.

Focus, Edana chided herself. She couldn't afford to be distracted by the scenery. With her bow in hand, she kept her eyes open for any sign of an ambush.

There was nothing but the roar of the ocean.

"I don't like this," Kyl whispered. "It's too easy."

Edana felt the same way. This was a trap. They knew that going in. Morfram was waiting for them, reinforcing their suspicions that Bidelia couldn't lift the sword. He needed either Ianna or her to

do it for him.

They reached the mouth of the cave, hidden away from the overlook, accessible only from a narrow, rocky path leading down to it. Its mouth was wide and dark. The unknown lurked in its belly. Without hesitation, Edana and Kyl walked into the cave's gaping jaws.

Expecting to be swallowed by darkness, Edana was surprised and troubled when a steady light could be seen shining ahead of them.

Voices could be heard, but she couldn't make out their words. As they moved closer, Edana recognized her mother's voice, her tone pleading.

"But you promised she'd be safe," Bidelia said.

"If she's at all concerned with self-preservation and does what she's told, then she will be," Morfram's voice replied.

Something about the tone sent a shiver racing up her spine.

"You can't trust anything he says, Mother," Edana said as she stepped into the light. Her bow was raised and the sharp, steel point of her arrow aimed at Morfram's heart.

Bidelia gasped as she spun to face her. Tears streamed down her pale face. Those yet to be shed glistened in the emerald depths of her eyes.

Morfram jerked Bidelia's body in front of him. He drew a gold-handled dagger and placed the tip to her throat. His smile was as

sharp and cruel as the blade he held.

“How nice of you to join us, Edana. We’ve been expecting you.” He glanced at Kyl. “I should have known you’d be with her. Always following after her like a trained dog. Where’s the other one?”

“His training wasn’t as advanced,” Edana explained, “so he got left behind.”

Morfram’s laugh struck her as slightly mad. The sound left her cold.

“All the same, I think you and your pet had better put your weapons down unless you want your mother’s blood staining the floor.”

Edana set her bow aside and gestured for Kyl to drop his sword. “The weapons are down. Let her go.”

“With pleasure.” Morfram sheathed his knife and released his hold on Bidelia’s waist. She didn’t move away from him. Her body remained pressed against his and a smile slowly bloomed across her face.

“Mother?” Edana asked, confused by her mother’s actions. “Come away from him.”

“I think not,” Bidelia murmured sweetly.

Edana’s expression must have been comical because Morfram’s and Bidelia’s laughter rang out, echoing throughout the cavern.

"This is even better than I imagined!" Morfram exclaimed.

"Mother," Edana began slowly, keeping her eyes locked on those of the other woman. "Morfram's responsible for Father's death. He wants to use the sword to take the throne for himself."

"Oh no, dear," Bidelia purred. "*I'm* the one responsible for Cian's death." Edana's shocked gasp went unnoticed. "Killing him was the easiest thing I've ever done. He drank the same type of wine every night after dinner. He even kept a bottle in our chambers. It was a simple matter to put the poison in."

"No," Edana breathed. "I don't believe you."

"I can tell by your eyes that you do."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because I was little more than a pretty decoration to him," Bidelia spat out, her eyes glowing with her anger. "He was always too busy training with his men or in meetings with his advisors or checking on you and your training. I deserve to have some say in how this country is run."

"And that's reason enough to kill your husband and the father of your children?"

"I'm the Queen! I deserve to be treated like one, not some empty headed child. He always told me to focus on my garden. He actually thought I would be content with so little. It seemed fitting

that those same flowers he insisted I tend were the cause of his death." Bidelia's smile was striking. It was the smile of the self-satisfied. "And he was only the father of one of my children."

"You're lying," Edana said coldly.

"Now why would I do that? Haven't you ever noticed how alike Ianna and *her* father look?" Bidelia cast a loving glance over her shoulder at Morfram.

Edana felt sick to her stomach. She didn't want to believe it, but as she ran a searching look over Morfram's features, she was struck by the similarities. The high cheekbones, the shape of the mouth, and especially the eyes. Not the color so much, but the shape and intensity of the gaze.

She could feel the bile rising in her throat and had to fight to keep it down. The smug look on Morfram's face wasn't helping.

Edana nodded to herself. She needed to keep it together. It didn't help that she knew Ianna was nearby, listening in. "I take it you don't really need rescuing then. So why are you here?"

"The sword, of course," Morfram said. "Your mother isn't of royal blood. Neither is your sister. That leaves you. I'd hoped after Donal and his friends were done with you, you'd be a little more compliant." His gaze raked over her. "I take it they didn't succeed."

Edana smirked but her fists clenched in anger. "I hope you



weren't too fond of them. They're all dead now."

"And how did a little thing like you manage that all by yourself? My guess, you sat back and let your little puppies do all the dirty work."

"Well this little puppy was busy walking right past your men to steal Ianna out from under your nose," Kyl put in good-naturedly. Only the hatred burning in his eyes belied his casual tone.

"And I doubt the other would appreciate you calling him a puppy," Edana added.

"Quite right. After all, I hear he's more of a...wolf."

The emphasis he placed on the last word told Edana what she needed to know. "So you know you handed the King's Champion right into my hands."

Morfram sighed, sounding more resigned than irritated. "I'll admit, I had hoped to sway him to my cause even before I found out who he was. He managed to sneak into the citadel when the guards were on high alert after your mother's *abduction*. Very impressive."

"I take it you didn't have to resort to any *extreme* measures to get him to help you. The tension when the two of you were in the same room together was palpable." He once again raked his eyes over her body. This time there was a predatory glint in his dark eyes.

Edana's lip curled in disgust. She suspected if her mother had

seen the hunger lurking she wouldn't be so quick to help the man  
commit treason. "I only had to be my charming self."

## CHAPTER 28--PHELAN

Phelan and Ianna worked their way up the sheer face of the precipice.

Ianna had said the caves were formed by flowing water underground and that there would be two openings. At first, he'd been skeptical. Now, he was just irritated.

Apparently this particular cave had the one large entrance, accessible from the narrow path, and another, smaller entrance, barely large enough for them to crawl through located high up on the rock face. It was impossible for them to get to it by climbing down without being seen, so they'd been forced to find a path to the rocks below just so they could turn around and climb the face back up.

The positioning of Nuada's Cave reinforced Phelan's belief that gods were impossible and unbearable to deal with. They always had to make everything difficult.

The stone was slick and damp. Terrifying, even. Ianna claimed that since it was her idea, she would be the one doing the climbing. Phelan had been drafted to accompany her as it turned out Kyl was afraid of heights.

When the plan had been set, Kyl took Phelan aside and threatened bodily harm should Ianna be hurt. Edana's sentiments had been the same, but reinforced with a firm jab to his chest.

Phelan found himself smiling. Something must be wrong with him, he thought, that he was starting to enjoy and look forward to her attitude. Which, if he was being honest with himself, was why he'd told Kyl to protect Edana or *he* would be the one hurting.

Phelan's foot slipped on the slick stone, bringing his mind back to the task at hand. He quickly scrambled for purchase before he could fall to his death on the rocks below.

"Are you okay?" Ianna whispered.

"Fine," he muttered darkly.

It was all his grandfather's fault. Putting Edana and him together. She was a distraction. Thinking about her was going to get him killed. The way she kept creeping into his thoughts when he needed to concentrate on keeping them all alive.

No, he corrected himself. It wasn't *all* Fal's fault. Edana could share the blame.

When they finally managed to squeeze through the tiny mouth, Phelan and Ianna belly-crawled their way into a larger passage. From there they followed the faint sound of voices and came close enough to hear the conversation--right when Bidelia was declaring Ianna's true parentage.

Ianna quickly covered her mouth to muffle the sound of dismay that escaped her. Her face remained pale as they continued to listen.

Phelan clenched his fists at what Morfram implied about his and Edana's relationship. Then again, when Edana claimed she won him over by her charm, he had to bite back a snort of laughter.

She didn't have a charming bone in her body.

He thought again how wrong it must be that he was fascinated by her sense of humor in a situation that could get them all killed. Self-preservation didn't seem to be a high priority for her.

She definitely wasn't the pampered princess he'd accused her of being when they first met. This past week had proved it. She rode for days without complaint. Slept on the ground without complaint. Lived on dried meat for days without complaint. Fought off enemy soldiers and mercenaries with flair. She did whatever necessary to protect her people. She'd even handled the truth about his ancestry pretty well.

As much as it irritated him, Phelan suspected Edana was quickly becoming the best part of his life. He couldn't lose her now, not to someone like Morfram.

And, he promised himself he wouldn't lose her when this was over. No matter what Cian had said to the contrary. He'd fought at the bidding of others all his life--first for his father, then for Cian. For Edana, he would fight for himself.

"What do you want?" Edana asked.

"I want you to get the sword for me," Morfram pointed to a small

enclave near the rear of the cavern.

“If you wanted me to get the sword for you, you should probably have waited to tell me what a conniving, murderous bitch my mother is.”

“If not for your mother, then what about for your lover’s father?”

Phelan jerked to attention. He could see Edana’s profile from where he crouched. Her face remained stoic.

“You do know that your Phelan is Aral’s son, don’t you?” Morfram smirked.

“Where is he?” Edana asked casually.

Phelan wasn’t feeling so casual. How could Morfram have known?

“He’s safe...for now. Whether he stays that way is up to you.”

Edana hesitated for several seconds while Phelan tried to will her to get the sword.

“Fine. I’ll get it. *After* Kyl, Phelan, and Ianna are safely away from here.”

“They’ll be safe. I only want the sword.” Even Phelan could hear the slyness in his voice.

“Don’t take me for a fool!” Edana’s voice cracked like a whip and echoed off the walls.

Morfram’s eyes narrowed and the traitor Queen flinched visibly.

"You'll swear on the gods that no harm will come to them. If not, you'll have a long wait in hell before you lay hands on that sword. You've already said I'm the only one who can get it for you."

"You don't ask for your own safety."

"I already told you. I'm not a fool. As soon as I give you the sword, you'll try to kill me."

Phelan felt Ianna flinch next to him. He looked over quickly. Her eyes were wide. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "She knows what she's doing," he mouthed.

"Clever girl." Morfram's tone was anything but complimentary. "I'm going to enjoy this more than I can say."

Edana tilted her head as she watched the man carefully. "Why?"

"For the same reason your own mother hates you. You think you're more capable, more worthy than everyone else. Your conceit is sickening. And you're not better than I am. You're nothing!"

Phelan heard it in the man's voice--madness. His hatred for Edana was unfounded. If he killed her, another would take her place. And another. He needed a target. Edana might not even be the first he'd set his sights on. This type of sickness needed to destroy any kind of light it could find, and Edana was the brightest light in all of Eire.

Her passion and flair attracted Morfram so much that his only

solution was to eliminate her. She was like a fire, barely contained, with the capability to draw people in and destroy them if she needed to. Morfram had been drawn in. In this case, Phelan hoped Morfram would realize the danger he was in too late to stop it.

“Kyl. Leave us. Take my mother,” Edana directed.

“No!” Bidelia cried, turning and clutching at Morfram’s clothes.

“Tell her!”

Edana shrugged. “What’s more important to you, Morfram? The sword? Or my mother?”

Clever, Phelan thought. Even if Morfram succeeded, she was driving a wedge between them. The queen would see how little she meant to the man.

Morfram stared down at Bidelia’s tear-drenched face and smiled fondly. He laid a gentle kiss on her lips then shoved her toward Kyl. “Take her.”

“You bastard!” She screamed, fighting Kyl’s grip. “We’ve been together for seventeen years! You can’t do this! I’ll kill you!”

Morfram’s face was cold and composed again. “Take her and go.”

Edana nodded and Kyl took a firmer hold on Bidelia’s arm as he dragged her from the cave.

The Queen would probably try to throw herself off the cliffs,



Phelan thought. They might all be better off if she did.

“Phelan,” Ianna whispered, dragging his attention away from her screaming mother. She gestured a hand toward the surface questioningly. She began crawling back the way they’d come when he nodded.

Phelan turned to follow her. He cast a look back at Edana. She leaned negligently against one of the cave’s gray walls of stone. Her small stature was deceiving. She would be fine on her own, he told himself. Besides, he’d made a promise to protect Ianna. He would keep his word.

But he would be back for Edana.

When they made their way up to the surface, Kyl was restraining a shrieking Bidelia. Her words no longer made sense, though she began to quiet when she spotted Ianna.

Ianna marched forward until she stood toe-to-toe with her mother. She slapped her across the face with all the force she could muster. “You killed my father.” Her normally cheerful voice had turned cold. “I don’t care what you said back there. *Cian* was my father. And if my sister dies, I’ll kill you myself after you’re charged with treason and publicly humiliated.”

Bidelia’s mouth gaped in shock while her tears continued to fall. The left side of her face was red from Ianna’s handprint.

Phelan cleared his throat. "We need to hurry. Where's my father being kept?" he asked Bidelia. She only sniffed. "Where?" he roared.

"There's an--an inn, just off the main road, northeast of here."

Phelan put his fingers to his lips and whistled sharply. After a few minutes, Alain, a tall, muscular man in his late twenties, with blonde hair and hard green eyes rode into the clearing.

"We've captured the guards. There were only about twenty." Alain grinned. "Mercenaries are overly concerned with self-preservation. Each gave us the location of the next when we threatened them. Not exactly a loyal bunch."

"And my father?"

"Ah." He gave Phelan a concerned look. "Well, they held him at an inn not far from here for a bit, but when we got there, the place was covered in blood and everyone was gone. The innkeeper, a little old lady, was trying to wash blood off the walls. It was a mess."

Phelan inhaled sharply. "Send men out to keep looking for him."

"Aye." Alain saluted and galloped away from the cliffs.

"Kyl. Ianna. You're coming with me. There's a barracks north of here in Ballyvorda. We need to gather more men and spread the word in case Morfram escapes. Let everyone know there may be more mercenaries in the area. We need to avoid all-out war if we can."

Bidelia chuckled softly, gaining his attention. The chuckle grew to delighted peals of laughter. "You stupid boy. The war's already started."

Arrows began to rain down around them. Kyl protected Ianna's body with his own as they ran toward an outcropping of trees. Phelan supposed he was more of a gentleman than he realized since he did the same with the mad Queen.

When they reached the cover of the trees, Phelan was able to locate the source of the arrows. They were coming up over the cliff's edge from the sea. "How many?" he demanded.

Bidelia didn't bother pretending she mistook him. "Twenty ships all along the coastline. Roughly a hundred men in each. You won't last the hour, and I suspect Morfram already has the sword by now. Edana's dead and my love will come for me." Her voice was wistful, ignoring the fact that Morfram had handed her over to his enemies only a short time before.

"You're wrong," Phelan told her. "You've known Edana her whole life but you've never seen what she is."

"She's nothing!" Bidelia spat.

Phelan shook his head. "She's everything."

With that, he focused on Edana inside the cave. Pictured her leaning against the cold stone while heat glittered in her blue eyes.

Then he pushed every bit of strength and power he could muster toward her with a power he knew he possessed but had never had cause to use.

He would strengthen her by temporarily weakening himself, and he would pray to the gods that it would be enough.

## CHAPTER 29--EDANA

Edana stood before the dark stalagmite and stared down at the iron crosspiece and hilt erupting from its top. Warmth hummed under her skin. The sensation was familiar, like Phelan had wrapped an arm around her shoulders. As she felt it she was comforted.

She remembered the strange writing that covered the sword's hilt. Even knowing it was the language of the gods didn't stop her from trying to decipher it.

Perhaps if she could, she would find a way to survive this. She knew as soon as she pulled the sword free, Morfram would stab her in the back and take it from her dead hands.

But she had no choice. Even if Phelan managed to find Aral, it could be too late. She needed to at least try.

Morfram stood a few paces behind her. Giving her room to work, or so he'd said.

Edana scoffed. Giving himself time and room to use the amount of force to deliver a killing blow when the time came. Phelan told her to buy them some time. They would need as much time as possible to deal with whatever reinforcements Morfram had brought along.

Ianna's plan was working. Somewhat. How could they have known their mother was a traitor? Did they ignore the signs? *Were* there signs?

"You must have been planning this for a long time," Edana said into the silence.

Morfram grunted. "It's taken nearly eighteen years for all the pieces to fall into place."

"Seems like a long time to wait for a throne."

"Not just a throne. An entire kingdom. For as long as I want it."

Edana raised a brow questioningly. He sounded completely serious.

"The four treasures of the gods." He spoke to her in the tone he had used when she was a child in need of a lesson. He sighed. "When I heard about the treasures, I knew that I had to have them. Whoever possesses all four will gain indescribable power. It's taken me this long to find them."

"This is only one of the four," Edana pointed out. "And everyone already knows the location of the stone."

Morfram's smile troubled her. "I wouldn't have made my move if I weren't completely prepared."

"So you had to kill my father, your best friend, to do it?"

"It wasn't about him. It was about power." Morfram looked down at the sword as if to emphasize his point. "I'll never go back to being powerless again."

Edana watched his eyes cloud. Before she could ask him what

he meant, his eyes focused and he gestured to the sword. "No more stalling. Let's get this over with."

He was right, she couldn't wait any longer. She reached out and touched the hilt of the sword, gently brushing her fingertips down the metal. Despite being trapped in the cave for gods only knew how long, the sword's hilt was warm. Almost too warm to the touch.

Taking a steadying breath, Edana got a firm grip on the hilt and pulled. It moved slowly at first--barely an inch. Then, as Edana's will firmed, the shining blade with the same mysterious marks down its length slid free.

Morfram was forgotten as Edana stood immobilized by the sword's beauty. Her heart raced and her body felt somehow lighter--almost as if her soul was reaching out to it. The humming along her skin intensified and she came back to herself.

The inside of her wrist was burning. She looked and saw a mark, a word, branded there. *Teine*. Fire.

"What are you doing?" Morfram growled behind her.

Edana turned to see him with his dagger drawn, hacking away at a barrier of light that separated them. Edana smiled. She knew in that moment that the gods had taken additional steps to ensure their treasures wouldn't be left in the wrong hands. "This is interesting. Isn't it?"

“Give it to me! Give me the sword!” He continued to strike against the barrier.

“I don’t think so. Morfram, you’re guilty of conspiracy to commit regicide and treason against the royal family of Eire. You’ll return with us to Tara where you’ll face judgment for your crimes. Put the dagger down.”

Madness burned in his eyes. His smile was horrifying and twisted. He used the dagger to slice open his palm then placed his bloody hand on the barrier. His scream echoed throughout the space.

The light barrier began to fade. Even faded, it still held him away.

With a bellow of rage, Morfram hurled his dagger at it. It crossed through and Edana lifted the sword to prevent the blade from striking her face. She barely succeeded and the hurled knife opened a shallow cut along her cheekbone.

“This isn’t over!” Morfram pounded once more on the barrier, his eyes burning with hatred and madness, before he turned and ran from the cave.

Edana stood for a few seconds before following. She exited the cave in time to see him hurl himself off the ledge to the sea below. By some miracle, he managed to miss the jagged rocks. When his head broke the surface, he began screaming for one of the ships to come to



him.

Only then did Edana notice the strange fleet spread out in the waters below. She'd been so focused on Morfram that they hadn't even registered in her mind. Even now, archers fired arrows over the cliffs' rise. Edana could hear Phelan bellowing orders to his men above. She ran up the narrow path to find her friends already engaged in battle.

Dozens of men fought on the surface. Ianna stood near their mother along the sparse tree line and shot anyone who came near with Edana's bow. She hadn't even known her sister could shoot, and she hadn't noticed Kyl pick it up when he left the cave.

Kyl, Phelan, and a large blonde man who could only be Alain were trying to fight their way to Ianna. Arrows continued to fall, taking down men indiscriminately--allies and enemies alike.

Edana flowed forward and engaged in the fight. It made little difference. Even with the ease in which she handled Nuada's sword, she couldn't do anything about the archers' deadly assault. She tried her best to ignore them and the cries and groans of the dying.

They fought on. Hacking and stabbing. Slicing and swinging at any enemy soldiers still standing. It seemed like hours instead of mere minutes before the arrows stopped.

Kyl was struggling with the last of the enemy. When the man

fell to his knees with Kyl's sword buried in his chest, Edana began to look around. Bodies littered the ground.

Phelan was removing an arrow from Ianna's upper arm while Bidelia looked on. Edana made her way toward them.

"Are you alright?" She laid a gentle hand on her sister's uninjured arm. Ianna was shaking.

"I'm okay." Her voice was more controlled than her body. "Phelan says it's just a flesh wound."

Edana smiled gratefully at Phelan. "He would know. Why don't you go sit down and rest. Get some water," she told Ianna. She gestured Kyl over. He would take care of her. The love gleaming in his eyes every time he looked at Ianna guaranteed that.

When they had gone some distance away, Edana's gaze roamed over the men. Phelan's men, along with many of Aral's most trusted, were scattered, cleaning weapons, and checking the fallen for survivors. "Morfram got away."

"I see that." Phelan wiped the blood from her cheekbone, causing her to wince. "It isn't too deep." He glanced down at her hand. "You managed to keep the sword."

Edana glanced down at the blade she hadn't bothered to sheath. "It protected me, but it doesn't work the way I thought it would."

"How do you mean?"

"After all of Fal's talk and all this," she gestured around them. "I assumed it would give me some...I don't know, godlike fighting ability. But it's not like that. It didn't improve my abilities or give me greater strength. It formed a shield around me that Morfram couldn't get through. And he certainly tried." She gestured to her face. "He managed to do this much by smearing his blood on the barrier. I could actually see it weakening."

"Well, it's good that it protects you."

"That's not the point, Phelan. It doesn't help *us* defeat Morfram. It's for an individual fighter. It'll protect you." She tried handing him the sword.

He held his hands up defensively. "What do you mean, it'll protect me?"

"It's yours."

"No." He shook his head and reached down to grip her sword arm. He ran his thumb over the fresh wound branded into her wrist. "You lifted it. It's yours."

"Phelan, you're more important to Eire than I am. We need to keep you safe. Especially since Morfram's still out there."

He gripped her shoulders as he looked down at her. "You're more important to me."

Edana's mouth dropped open. Phelan grinned before laying his

forehead to hers. "Please keep it. I'll be fine. I've got enough demigod blood to protect myself."

Edana jerked her head back. "Which reminds me." She hit him lightly on the chest. "What did you do? I *felt* you in the cave."

Phelan looked away sheepishly. Suddenly, his eyes opened in shock, and he spun her around. It took Edana only half a second to realize what he'd done.

He'd used himself as a shield.

The point of a sword erupted from his chest. His body jerked and blood poured from the wound. Bidelia's smile was pleased.

"He gave his strength to you," she said before she turned and ran.

Time slowed for Edana as she lowered Phelan to the ground. Her pulse jumped and she could feel her heart shattering at the sight of Phelan's wound. Without realizing what she did, she held her arm and the now vibrating sword out. With a cry, a line of fire shot out of its tip and struck her mother's retreating back.

With a cry of pain, Bidelia fell to the ground and was still. Edana dropped the sword in horror. She turned back to Phelan and dropped down by his side. His face was a study in agony.

"Get a healer!" she screamed. She looked up to see Alain, Kyl, and Ianna.

Alain crouched down to examine the wound. "It won't do any good at this point."

"He'll heal." She had to believe he would. "He heals quickly." Tears were flowing down her cheeks. She sat on the ground and laid his head in her lap. "Please don't die."

Phelan's smile was more of a grimace. "Only a week ago, you wanted to kill me yourself. She just beat you to it."

"Don't joke." She stroked his face. "Fal said this would happen. That we'd weaken each other. We should have listened to him!"

"Fal always told me you'd weaken me and make me stronger than I've ever known."

"I hate you. If you die now, I really will hate you. We've got too much left to do. Morfram's still out there."

"You'll have to kill the bastard without me. On the bright side," he paused to cough. Blood stained his lips. "It turns out the sword is a little more powerful than you thought."

Helpless, Edana sat as Phelan's lids drooped over the luminous gold of his eyes.

"You two have made quite a mess of things."

Edana jolted back to find Fal standing over them. "Help him," she demanded.

Fal quirked a brow at her.

“Please.”

Fal smiled warmly. “It is necessary.”

“It’s necessary for him to die?” She brushed a dark lock of hair away from his face.

“It is not death. His powers are being unlocked.”

“So he’ll be alright?”

“It will require a great deal of pain. He was already weakened before he was stabbed,” Fal told her.

“What can I do?”

He regarded her for a moment. “Fire is fitting,” he said. Edana didn’t have the slightest clue what he was talking about. “Take his hand,” he directed. “When his heart stops beating, will him your strength. He will need it for a few moments to bring his body back.”

“Do you hear that, Phelan? You’re coming back. You’re stuck with me for a little longer.”

He didn’t open his eyes, but his lips quirked up at one corner. He coughed again and blood trickled from his mouth. Seconds later, his heart went still.

For a moment Edana panicked. Focus, she chided herself. Looking down at her greatest irritant and the man whose strength and determination, whose courage and humor had quickly become one of the bright lights in her life during this dark time, Edana focused and

willed him everything she could--her strength, her desire for him to survive, and the fiery passion of her anger at Morfram.

Phelan's body bowed and Edana grew lightheaded as she felt her strength leave her.

The mark on her wrist burned, and she fought to remain conscious by focusing on the pain there. It was a losing battle. As her head fell forward on his blood-covered chest, the last thing Edana was aware of before the dark took her was the steady thump-thump of Phelan's heart, beating once again.

## CHAPTER 30--PHELAN

He was freezing. Phelan felt as if every single inch of his body was coated with ice and that if he tried to move he would shatter. His mind was too full of pain to wonder *why* he was this way.

Then he felt it.

Just a small trickle of warmth at first, then strength--the heat of Edana's strength flooded into his mind before flowing out and settling over the rest of him. The pain slowly died away. After what seemed like days, Phelan opened his eyes. Sunlight burned brightly. He squinted his eyes and flinched away from the light.

"Ah. You're awake," Fal said merrily. "I'm pleased you survived. I'm told it can be a painful experience."

Phelan opened his eyes slowly this time before turning his head to look up at his grandfather. "What are you talking about?"

"I told you one day you'd achieve your full powers. Today is that day."

Phelan groaned as he sat up. Someone had moved him away from the death that lingered on the cliffs. He could still see them. He could still smell the metallic stench of blood.

Kyl sat a few feet away while Ianna bandaged a cut on his arm. Her own arm was bandaged, making her movements stiff. Tears mottled her cheeks.



It took Phelan a moment to remember her mother was the one who tried to kill her sister. If Phelan hadn't stepped in the way, she would have succeeded. Then Edana had shot fire out of Nuada's sword and struck her mother.

Fire. From a sword.

It was one thing hearing legends of the Sword of Victory and another to see the legends were true. And now, Edana controlled it.

Edana. His head whipped around. He didn't see her. Frantic, Phelan surged to his feet. He swayed before regaining his balance. He felt strong. Too strong. His body was thrumming with sensation.

Everything was somehow stronger--amplified. The brightness of the sun. The wind as it breathed through the blades of grass and leaves on the trees. Insects and animals moving about, their hearts beating as they did. Everything that surrounded him pulsed with life. And he was connected to it. He could hear and feel it all.

On the periphery of his new awareness, one heart beat louder than the others. Edana, even in sleep, was strong.

"Why is she in the cave?" he asked no one in particular.

Ianna and Kyl looked as if they wanted to question how he knew this, but Fal answered first. "The sword is strongest in the cave. Nauda first conjured it there. Because she's now connected to the sword, she can draw strength from the cave as well.

"But she's alright? She wasn't hurt?"

Ianna stood up and crossed to him. Her green eyes were sad and glistened with unshed tears. "You saved her. Our mother--" her voice broke. "Our mother tried to kill her, and you saved her." Ianna gave him a one armed hug, awkward because of her bandaged arm.

Phelan hadn't dealt with a lot of affection and gratitude during his life, but he could sense, whether by intuition or with his newfound abilities, that she needed to give it. He hugged her back gently. "I'm sorry about your mother. Is she alright?"

"She's alive. But she killed you. Only for a short time, but she still killed you."

"No matter what she did, she's still your mother."

Ianna released her hold on him and stepped back, wiping tears away as she did. "Thank you," she said again.

When Kyl stepped forward, Phelan raised his hands, palm out, to ward him off. "If you're thinking about hugging me too, please reconsider."

Kyl grinned. He had a dark bruise forming along his jaw line. "I'll try to restrain myself."

Phelan's lips quirked up and he shook Kyl's outstretched hand.

"This is all very touching, children," Fal interrupted, "but there's still work to do. Loyal soldiers are gathered in the north, awaiting

command from the royal family, namely Edana. I believe Alain can show you where and fill you in on what to expect when you get there. After that, the real battle begins. Morfram is sailing for Tara as we speak. In three sennights' time, you'll be fighting for the fate of Eire."

Phelan processed this quickly. They had twenty-one days to get their army to Tara. "Where's Alain? And my father? Has he been found?"

"Alain is burning your dead. Your father was taken back to Tara."

Phelan could tell by Fal's tone that something wasn't quite right. "Is he hurt?"

Fal shook his head. "He's unharmed."

"So he'll meet us in the north?"

"He'll be there soon enough."

Phelan nodded his thanks. "Gather what horses and supplies you can," he told Kyl. Find Alain and let him know we'll be leaving within the hour. Walk with me," he told his grandfather. The two set out toward the cliffs and Edana.

"What didn't you wish to say in front of them?" Fal asked.

"How's she doing? Really? I can tell something's not right."

"Nuada's sword is a powerful weapon. She's the first to yield it since Nuada himself. He imbued it with his own essence. He wanted

the sword to be able to respond to him of its own volition.”

“What does that mean?” Phelan didn’t think he was going to like this.

“The sword feeds on emotion. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the sword reacts to that emotion. When you were stabbed, Edana struck out with her own strength and emotion. And because you lent her your own strength, when she was in the cave, she lashed out with your emotions as well.”

His grandfather might as well be speaking another language, Phelan thought. “I still don’t understand.”

“When you give your strength--physical strength--to another, you create a link, like a pathway between you. It remains separate from her own--much like a backup reservoir that she can tap into when necessary. That pathway is very difficult to close under normal circumstances. More difficult when you consider that the two of you are already connected.”

“So what does that *mean*? Our strength is linked?”

Fal shook his head. “Look at your wrist.”

Phelan pulled up his right sleeve to see the inside of his wrist. He’d been born with the mark of a wolf on his skin. Now, over it, very faintly, he could see the word *Teine* etched. The same marking that was burned into Edana’s skin.

“When she used the sword, her emotions were unusually strong. She shattered the barrier separating your strength from hers. Your mind and your thoughts are still your own, but when you were dying and her own strength began to wane, she felt everything you did.” He paused to let this sink in. “From now on, if you are hurt, she will feel its echo in her own body. The same is true if she is hurt.”

Phelan thought of the coldness of his powers settling over him and the pain as his flesh knit back together over his wound. “There’s got to be a way to break the link.”

Fal indicated his wrist again, as if the marking said all Phelan needed to know. “There’s none. Though there is one good thing to consider,” he said cheerfully. “Because you heal quickly, so will she now.”

“Yea, that’s just great,” Phelan bit out sarcastically. They were about to fight a war, and now he had to worry that if he were hurt in the fighting, she would feel the sting of the blow. The same if she were hurt. This would be considered awful under normal circumstances. But now? If they were distracted at the wrong moment, they could be killed. “Did you know about this?”

Fal smiled. “I knew you would be linked. The means of linking was unknown to me. Though if I’d known it would be this drastic,” he admitted ruefully, “I might have intervened. I knew you’d weaken

yourself for her and she for you, and that your powers would be unlocked. Not that Bidelia would try to kill Edana when she did and not how Edana would react. With the way the two of you argue like children, she very well could have thanked her mother for saving her from having to do it herself."

Phelan would ignore that. "You knew Bidelia would try to kill Edana at some point? Will she try again?"

"Look and see. You know how it works."

Phelan sighed. One of the abilities he'd inherited from his grandfather--and likely his grandmother as well--was that of foretelling. If he focused hard enough on one particular person, he could catch glimpses into their lives. Often he would see their death, which was why he avoided using this gift unless absolutely necessary. There were times though when the visions came upon him unwanted.

One of the benefits of serving as King's Champion was the traveling. He was never around any one person for very long--save Alain. Also, this was one of the reasons his father and grandmother couldn't be demonstrative in their affections for him. Though in his father's case, Phelan suspected it had more to do with the knowledge that he had known beforehand of his mother's death, yet hadn't been able to stop it.

Phelan closed his eyes and thought of Edana. Her raven hair.

Her bold blue eyes. Her strength. Even their new connection.

When nothing came, he focused harder, though how he could when his mind was so full of her, he didn't know.

Nothing. He began to panic.

His eyes popped open. "It's blank. She's not dead. I can feel her. What's going on?"

Fal regarded him for a moment before throwing his head back and losing a musical burst of laughter. "Just one more thing I hadn't anticipated. This proves that even gods aren't infallible. You'd think it would annoy me," he mused. "I don't think I've ever been surprised before. Most likely the link is responsible for this. You can't see her future, just as you can't see your own," he said as his laughter died down.

Phelan frowned. There were positives and negatives to this. On one hand, he wouldn't have to worry about seeing her future when he didn't want to. On the other though, he *couldn't* see her future if he needed to.

"You don't look happy," Fal commented.

Phelan met his eyes. "I'm not sure if I am. You just keep piling more and more on."

"I wouldn't give you anything you couldn't handle," Fal said, his expression sincere. "As for Edana, look at it as a gift. You can have a

real friend for once. She knows all your secrets. About your father. About me. She knows her father chose you over her, and despite what she said when you first met, she hasn't tried to kill you yet."

Phelan snorted. The man had a point. He'd never been allowed to get too close to anyone because of his family's secrets. Not to mention his powers. Edana knew though. So did Kyl and Ianna, for that matter. But Edana was part of it now, somehow *inside* his powers. "I haven't told her of her betrothal," he murmured. That was the biggest secret left to tell, and one Edana would likely hate him for.

"Yes. That will be a bit of a problem," Fal mused. "I have some ideas though. How do you plan to tell her?"

How was he going to tell her? 'Hey, Edana, your father wanted you to marry Prince Arwin of Wales, and I'm the one who arranged it.' Not likely.

They were at war with the next best thing she had to an uncle. Her mother had just tried to kill her. To top it all off, she was linked to a demigod. He didn't want to have to tell her about the betrothal unless he found a way around the agreement he'd been forced to make on her father's behalf that she would have to marry a stranger and leave her home when it was all over.

There *was* no good time to say something like that. Especially since he had feelings for her himself. If he'd known that he would, or



that he could, he would have asked Cian for her hand for himself. But his grandfather had always warned him that any relationship between the two of them would be unwise.

“This is your fault,” Phelan accused.

Fal nodded, as if reading his thoughts. “The timing wasn’t right before.” He laid a hand on Phelan’s shoulder. He squeezed reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I’ll fix it.”

With that, he was gone.

Phelan shook his head. His life was already complicated enough.

When he entered the cave, he saw that a torch had been lit to keep the darkness at bay. Edana sat with her back to the stalagmite that had once encased the sword. The sword in question lay across her lap.

Her head was tilted back and her eyes closed. Dark smudges beneath her eyes bespoke of her exhaustion.

When Phelan sat down next to her so that they were hip to hip, Edana’s eyes blinked open. “How do you feel?” he asked her.

“My mother tried to kill me. She admitted to killing my father. I have a fun new sword that shoots fire that I don’t even know how to control, and my body feels like it’s on fire. Congratulations on your new powers by the way.”

“I think you meant to say thank you.”

Edana snorted and closed her eyes again. "That was my way of saying it. I'd be a little more grateful if I didn't feel like death."

"It's got to be better than actually being dead."

Edana's lips twitched. "You've got a point there." She turned her head to look up at him. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty good actually. Did Fal tell you the deal?"

"If one of us gets hurt, the other feels it. Not exactly a good thing with everything else that's going on. And my initiation into it was pretty damn awful."

"Yea, but you got a fun new sword that shoots fire," Phelan said, tongue in cheek. "Focus on that."

Edana's laugh bubbled out. "True. Did you see it?"

"I may have been dying, but I couldn't really miss that."

"Is she dead?" Edana asked quietly. "I didn't even check. Didn't even think to ask. I didn't even think at all. I just saw red," she admitted. "It just--" she lifted her hands to demonstrate. "Just rose up and flew out of me. I don't think I could have stopped it."

"She's alive." Phelan closed his eyes and tried to search for her with his mind. "She's singed a bit. Very angry."

"Got any other fun *abilities* up your sleeve? We might be needing them pretty soon."

"I haven't had time to test anything out. Fal said we have a

three sennights before we meet up with Morfram again. That gives me a little time to test things out. Flex my new muscles. And speaking of sleeves." He lifted her arm and turned it so he could see the inside of her wrist. There was a faint impression of a wolf's head over her brand.

"I didn't notice that before."

"Just another reminder that we're stuck with each other." He smiled at her.

She returned it. "We'll have to meet with the troops in Ulaid as soon as possible. You can flex those muscles on the way."

"And you can test out your new weapon. Why Ulaid though?"

"Fal said the soldiers went north. Ulaid's the only logical choice for them to gather. It's close enough to Tara to reach in a few days."

"Makes sense. Kyl and Alain are gathering supplies. We'll leave whenever you're ready."

Edana held out her other hand. "Help me up. I want to talk to my mother first."

Phelan stood and dragged her up with him. She was battered, her clothes were torn and bloody, but she stood strong. Even though things hadn't gone as they'd hoped, for the first time, Phelan thought they could win this. No matter what Morfram threw at them, they would stand strong.

## CHAPTER 31--MORFRAM

They failed him. Everyone--Bidelia, Aral, Ianna, these men.

They all failed him.

Everything had gone wrong from the start.

Morfram paced the rolling deck of the ship, *Goke*. It was a triple-masted vessel complete with black sails and dark planking, ideal for night raids. One of the benefits of the *Goke* was its maneuverability. It relied on sails and oars unlike standard galley-style ships that relied on sails alone. One of the reasons Morfram had been able to survive the crashing waves at Moher was that the *Goke's* captain was able to get to him quickly. If not for the oars, he would likely be dead by now.

Morfram once considered himself lucky to find these men, Ottomans, known as Barbary pirates. All they had to do was follow his orders. His instructions weren't that difficult. If they wanted to receive their payment, they'd better do *exactly* as he said from now on. Although, he admitted to himself, since their payment had been stolen out of his office, he would need to get into the treasury at Tara before the captain and his men questioned him.

The captain of this vessel, Camali, was one of the more blood-thirsty he'd come into contact with. His large frame and dark-skin paired with eyes that appeared as dark as the sails of his ship added

another element of menace.

The rest of his men, just as dark and physically imposing as Camali, went about their duties confidently. A few stopped to glare at Morfram as he passed.

He wasn't impressed.

If these men had been more competent, Edana and her little friends would be dead. He would have the sword, and even now be proclaiming himself King. It was their fault that things had gone wrong.

Morfram never considered that he'd been the one responsible. His plan had been flawless. Everything had been in place for months. Then Edana had ruined everything. Would she never die? Eighteen years of planning had been destroyed in an instant.

The sword had protected her in the cave. Morfram didn't understand why. It belonged to him. If anyone deserved to wield the Sword of Victory, the greatest weapon of the gods, he should be the one. From the first moment he heard of Nuada's sword, he'd known it was meant for him. The problem had been that he'd needed Edana to get it for him. He'd never expected her to be able to use it against him.

Morfram's eyes kindled at the thought. She ruined everything. The bitch needed to die. She *would* die, he vowed. As soon as he

could get back to Tara and get his worthless mercenaries gathered, he would march his army down her throat.

“Sir,” a rumbling voice said.

Morfram turned to see Camali approaching.

“We’ll reach the port of Duiblinn in three days. I’ve deployed skiffs carrying the message to the nearest ships. We’ll debark there.”

Morfram regarded the man. His dark, steely eyes were unblinking. “Good. When we get to Tara, I have a special job for you.”

He remained silent, waiting for his task.

“You’ve heard of the Wolf of Eire?”

Camali smiled, revealing one gold-plated tooth.

“I want him dead.”

“It will be done,” he rumbled.

When he walked away, Morfram turned back to look at the sea. Perhaps this one time, things would progress according to plan.

Ianna would die first. His own blood had refused to stand with him. Loyalty was important to him. He conveniently ignored the fact that he had turned on his King and then abandoned Bidelia to his enemy. No, she’d refused to stand with him so she would have to pay for her mistake.

Edana would be driven mad at the sight of her dear sister’s

body. Then, he would kill Phelan. The Wolf.

Morfram scoffed. Cian had managed to keep one secret from him. Good for him, but it changed nothing. No matter how skilled rumor claimed the Wolf to be, Morfram wouldn't let him win. He wouldn't need the sword for this. Camali would serve as his assassin in this case.

Only then would he kill Edana. She would lose everything she cared about. Her family, her friends, her home, and eventually her life.

Morfram would do anything to make it happen.

## CHAPTER 32--EDANA

Standing side-by-side with her sister, hands laced, Edana stared at her mother. The sun was shining down on them. The wind blew gently off the water. It should have been a beautiful day, but their mother's actions had cast a pall over everything.

Alain had taken the precaution of having the queen's hands and feet bound.

Edana was grateful. She knew she could never hurt anyone so helpless, and right now, those restraints were the only thing saving the woman.

"Let's try this again," Edana said. "Did you kill our father?"

Queen Bidelia, once considered the most beautiful woman in all of Eire, blew the scorched ends of hair out of her face, and looked at them. "I killed *your* father," she said with a small smile.

Edana desperately wanted to slap the smile off her face. She restrained herself. Barely.

"Ianna's father," Bidelia continued, "is very much alive."

Ianna released Edana's hand and stepped forward. Her arm swung out and connected with Bidelia's face for the second time before anyone could react.

Bidelia's cry of pain was met without sympathy.

"*Cian* is my father. I don't care what you say," she hissed.



Bidelia's face was stricken. She turned to Edana. "You did this," she spat.

Edana threw her hands up. "You and Morfram seem to blame me for everything. But I'll bite. How is *this* my fault?"

"You offended Morfram too many times to count. You think you can use your pretty face and people will do whatever you want them to. Take this one here," she pointed her bound hands at Phelan. "We thought he was trying to kill you. That you offended someone else more than Morfram. Now he's watching you like a puppy."

"That's the second time someone's said that," Phelan mused. "I don't think I like it."

Edana rolled her eyes. "How exactly did I insult Morfram?" she asked Bidelia.

"You give orders like you have the right, like you outrank him. Then you expect him, and everybody else, to follow them."

"I *do* outrank him," she said slowly.

"You've done nothing to be worthy of your position. You were born into it, yet you have no loyalty for me or for Morfram. What about the other nobles? No! You care more about those commoners in the Navan. They don't deserve our help," she barked. "You'll see. When Morfram's king, they'll be back in their proper places--starving in a gutter somewhere."

"Do you hear yourself?" Edana asked, shocked. "Those are our people. Most of them work hard to take care of their families. Then they're taxed until they can barely afford to take care of themselves."

Bidelia sniffed. "If they can't take care of themselves, then why should we bother to take care of *them*?"

"Because it's our duty!"

"Not for much longer. Things will change when our next ruler is crowned," Bidelia asserted.

"You think this will all be done by the king?"

Bidelia lifted her chin. "Morfram will see it done."

"Did you ever consider that Morfram won't be King?" Edana asked. "Ever consider that Father already chose his successor?"

Bidelia laughed. "If you think you'll be Eire's next ruler, you're even more arrogant than I thought."

"First of all, Morfram's the one who told me I would rule in the first place. I hadn't really considered it. Secondly, Father named *Phelan* to succeed him. In case you missed it before, Phelan is Fal's grandson. It's a pretty good bet the gods will accept his suit."

Bidelia's face went white. "You're lying."

"Why would she lie?" Phelan asked. "Didn't you just stab me? Am I not standing here unharmed?" He turned to Edana. "Crazy must run in your family."

Kyl chuckled from his place beside Ianna, earning an elbow to his side. "What? You've got to admit, he has a point."

"Oh really?" Ianna's brow winged up.

"Well actually--" Kyl began. He was interrupted by Bidelia's pleas to her younger daughter.

"You have to help me, Ianna," she begged. "They want to hurt me. Please don't let them hurt me. I'm your mother!"

Ianna looked down at their mother with ice in her eyes. "I'd say they'd be justified. You tried to kill Edana, also your daughter, and ended up attacking our new king. You'd do better to ask him to spare your life. I have no mercy to spare right now."

Tears flowed down Bidelia's pale face. The woman might not have loved her, Edana thought, but she'd always loved Ianna.

She turned to Phelan to see him staring down at Bidelia. His golden gaze was hard, uncompromising. His long hair when paired with the look in his eyes gave him the air of a very dangerous man. He surveyed the queen for a moment before crouching down so that their eyes were on the same level. "You'll tell us what we need to know. If you do, I'll make sure you aren't executed for treason. Understand?"

Bidelia nodded slowly as she looked at her hands.

"You admitted in the cave that you killed Cian. Is that true? Did

you murder the king?"

"No," she answered quickly.

Phelan looked to Edana. "Found another new power. I can tell when someone's lying." He turned back to Bidelia. "Let's try this again. A little honesty would be appreciated. Did you murder King Cian?"

She swallowed visibly. "Yes."

"How?"

"I started poisoning him over a year ago. Small amounts at first, but more and more as time went on and he didn't die."

"What was the poison?"

"It's called Trailing Bittersweet. It's a plant that looks almost like a vine. It grows around flowers and other plants. A small amount will only make a person sick. With prolonged exposure, the body's ability to fight off the poison wears down."

"Where did you get it?"

Bidelia looked at Ianna. There was regret in her eyes. "I grew it."

Edana and Ianna had gripped each other's hands tightly. Their mother just confessed to killing their father. From the look in her eyes, Edana thought her mother might see the mistake she'd made.

"Why?" Phelan continued. He stood and laid a comforting hand

on Edana's shoulder.

"Morfram wanted to be king." She shrugged her elegant shoulders.

"Then why come after the sword?"

"He'd heard rumors about its existence years ago. He was obsessed. When he heard the King's Champion had returned home, he decided the sword was his answer to defeating him--or you, I suppose. With you out of the way, he would go to the stone. Eventually, he would get the spear and the cauldron. He wanted to assure that if he got the throne he would be able to keep it."

"And he wants to kill Edana over some imaginary slight?" Phelan prompted.

Bidelia's eyes drifted to meet Edana's. Edana could see them frosting over. So much for hoping her mother would see the error of her ways. "She thinks everyone's weaker than she is. That she has to protect everyone.

"Morfram shut down Cian's program to feed the poor and stopped sending food into the city. He said we didn't need to pay for them. If they couldn't take care of themselves, then they didn't deserve our help. They're weak," she bit out. "Then Edana started sneaking out of the citadel at night. Suddenly the commoners have money and food. It wasn't hard to figure out who was behind it. She

directly opposed Morfram's wishes. Then she had the nerve to steal from *Morfram*. Money went missing out of his office. It wasn't hard to figure out who was behind it, though I wasn't in Tara when it happened," she admitted.

"Sorry I called you a spoiled brat," Phelan said to Edana.

She found her lips twitching. Leave it to Phelan to take time out from an interrogation to do the unexpected. "Father was sick, and Morfram didn't want to deal with the expense." She shrugged. "Kyl and Ianna were helping too."

"Ianna wouldn't do that," Bidelia snapped. "She knows what's expected of her."

"And what's that?" Ianna asked. "Letting innocent people starve to death?"

"Obedience."

Ianna laughed. There wasn't much humor in the sound. "You don't really know me at all. For your information, *I* was the one who stole from Morfram. It was easy. I walked right into his office while Edana and Kyl stood watch."

Bidelia's eyes were angry. "Just get on with it," she told Phelan, turning her gaze away from her daughters.

"Where did the ships come from?"

Now the queen's smile was sly. "You've heard of Barbary

pirates, haven't you? They make excellent allies."

Until they stabbed you in the back, Edana thought. But why would Morfram use them? They typically raided coastal towns or other ships. Their ships wouldn't do them any good in this type of war. Then it hit her.

"He wants to use them to drive the people from the coastal towns inland."

"Ah, clever girl."

Edana glared at her mother's purred interruption.

"Why would he do that?" Kyl asked.

"Think about it." Edana didn't like this. "If the people are driven out of their homes, they'll want to report it to the king, the royal family, or the royal guard. Morfram's obviously made some deal with the pirates. I assume it has something to do with all the plunder they can get from the towns. Probably an additional fee. He makes a show out of driving them out of Eire and gains the support of anyone who opposes him as ruler."

"But he'd still have you and Phelan to deal with," Ianna pointed out.

Edana shook her head. "Donal was supposed to deliver me to Morfram. I would get the sword, he would kill me, and *then* he would use the sword on Phelan, even if he didn't know who

Phelan was. If he did, he didn't want to let him out of the dungeons alive. She just said they thought he was an assassin sent in to kill me."

"I thought about it," Phelan smirked.

Edana made a face in his direction. "Nothing's going the way he planned. If we're lucky, that means the Ottomans haven't had a chance to start raiding yet."

"Until you and I are put down, he can't afford to set them loose," Phelan pointed out. "So we'll go to Ulaid, meet up with Alain's uncle. He's the current northern commander," he said to Kyl and Ianna. "Then we march south to Tara."

"We can't attack the city."

"We won't have to," Ianna put in. "If we can get Phelan to the stone while all those troops are gathered, any Eirans fighting for Morfram will have to lay down their weapons or risk treason. Plus, we'll be stealing his thunder right out from under him. After that, dealing with his mercenaries should be fairly simple."

"The soldiers haven't already committed treason?" Kyl asked. "When the Queen went missing, Edana was in charge. When she left, you were."

"Morfram could have convinced them that I wasn't. Normally, the king would name his successor publicly before his death. Father



didn't do that. Lacking any public declaration, the Code of Kings states that the royal family has thirty days to name a successor to go to the stone. In the meantime, the oldest *male* of the family reigns in the interim.

"Father's the first king in centuries that didn't have any male children. There's nothing in the Code about who's in charge if there aren't any boys. Morfram would be familiar with the Code and the ways he could manipulate it."

Edana stared at her sister in surprise.

Ianna blushed. "What? I like to read."

Phelan laughed. "You're handy to have around." He rubbed his hands together. "It's a plan."

"Ulaid, soldiers, Tara, and the stone. In that order." Edana nodded. "Did I miss anything?"

"What do you want to do with her?" Phelan motioned to her mother.

Bidelia still had a cruel smile plastered on her face. Edana didn't know this woman. Not really. This woman was a murderer. Had she really been so blind not to notice the hatred that burned in those bright green eyes?

Ianna wrung her hands in obvious distress.

"We'll take her with us to Ulaid for holding," Edana told them.

"After Morfram's defeated and Phelan is king, she can be moved to Tara and tried for treason."

"Ianna just said opposing you isn't treason." Bidelia's smile was wide and triumphant.

"No," Edana conceded. "But regicide is." Her mother's smile melted away. "Let's go. We've got work to do."

## CHAPTER 33--KYL

The ten-day ride to Ulaid was pretty uneventful. Except for the weather and that Edana and Phelan's bickering had resumed. For eight of the last ten days, the rain had poured down, muddying the roads they were on and slowing their progress as they moved northeast away from the cliffs of Moher. The only bright side Kyl saw was that the rain on the leaves made the trees along the road glisten when a stray beam of light snuck through the clouds. As for the bickering, it seemed mostly friendly, but there'd been a few times when the two had to be pulled apart.

Kyl could laugh about it now. Edana had a quick temper, while Phelan seemed slower to anger, more controlled. Even so, when he got going, the two seemed pretty evenly matched. But gods! They argued about everything--when to stop for the day, the best place to make camp, the quickest route between Ulaid and Tara, whether they would tell the northern commander and his soldiers that Phelan would be their next king...the list went on.

Kyl, Ianna, and Alain just stood back and enjoyed the show, while some of the other soldiers placed bets regarding when the two might come to blows. Even there they seemed evenly matched. Phelan definitely had the physical advantage, but Edana was crafty and had a sword that could shoot fire.

The blasted sword scared Kyl to death. Edana's supernatural sword wasn't all they had to deal with though. Phelan learned several of his new abilities--often by accident. His strength grew, his senses were heightened to an unbelievable level, and he could occasionally read minds.

Kyl had to admit he'd been a bit stunned when Phelan had been arguing back and forth with Edana, who didn't even manage to say a single word out loud. It seemed to disconcert Phelan as well, and he promised he would try to get a better handle on that one. He said he didn't want to go traipsing around in people's minds, learning all of their dirty secrets. Edana had laughed then.

Her laughter lasted right up until their next argument.

At dusk, their group agreed to camp outside Ulaid's city walls and go into the town in the morning. Kyl fully agreed. Guards tended to get twitchy at night, especially when a couple dozen people, all but two of them soldiers, came riding in after nightfall.

Despite their arguing, Phelan and Edana spent as much time together as possible. Surprisingly--at least it was surprising to him--they discussed more than the upcoming battle. Once, Kyl heard them talking about Phelan's mother. He didn't want to eavesdrop on another conversation about the man's family. The first time, with Moira, had been necessary. Now it would just be rude, so he'd left

them alone.

Friendship between Edana and Phelan could only benefit them all. Especially him, Kyl thought. This gave him more time alone with Ianna when Alain and his small group of men went out to scout the area, as they were doing now.

One of the men had dragged a fallen log near the fire so Ianna wouldn't have to sit on the ground. They seemed less concerned with Edana's sensibilities. She'd been dubbed one of the men, though most were occasionally seen casting admiring looks in her direction.

Apparently, they found her combination of hot temper and dainty beauty appealing. More fool they, he thought.

Kyl approached the fire and sat next to Ianna. She continued to stare into it. Her hair was loose and the light from the fire turned her copper locks to flame. At least they'd been lucky enough to get new breeches and tunics before they'd left the western coast. They weren't exactly clean after so long on the road, but at least they weren't torn and covered in blood.

Kyl nudged Ianna's shoulder. Her face was pale and her eyes were glazed with exhaustion. "You okay?"

Ianna offered a tired smile. "I've never ridden so much in my life. Between the horses, my mother's complaining, and watching Edana and Phelan argue, I'm exhausted."

Kyl laughed. "I was just thinking the same thing about those two." He rubbed his palms on his thighs, hoping to rub the knots out of his muscles. "Where do they get the energy? I'm hoping when we go into the city tomorrow, they'll relax a bit. At least in front of the men."

"They will. Edana said they made a deal. I think they're trying to work out the kinks before what little privacy they have is lost. It's kind of nice though."

"What is? Their fighting?"

Ianna chuckled. "Edana's never had any close friends outside of you and me. She never had time. Then Phelan comes along when our world is turned upside down. The two of them are well-matched." The sound of raised voices could be heard now. Ianna smiled. "Sometimes, anyway."

"What about you? You don't have a lot of close friends either."

She shrugged. "I've never really needed any. I had you and Edana, my books, my mother, and Aral." She was quiet for a moment. "How did I miss it, Kyl? My mother's a murderer. And Morfram's my father? How could I not know?"

Kyl draped an arm over her shoulder in a friendly gesture he'd used all his life. Ianna leaned into him. "We all missed it. Your mother has never been the kindest person. Think back to how she

treated some of the people in the citadel. I think people generally ignored it because she has a pretty face. People underestimate the pretty ones. That's why you and Edana are always treated like you might break if you're bumped wrong."

Ianna snorted out a laugh. "I'm sure that was a compliment."

Kyl grinned. "It was. If people just want to see you as a pretty face, it's got to be satisfying to knock them back a step for it. I'm not trying to justify what she did. She made her choices. You could have made the same one." He squeezed her shoulder gently. "You didn't."

She sighed wearily. "You're not wrong."

"Haven't we been over this before? I'm never wrong." He sighed dramatically. "It's a curse."

Ianna laughed and swatted his arm playfully. "You always know how to cheer me up."

"It's a gift," he added sagely, causing Ianna to laugh again.

"Do you think we can do this? Beat Morfram, I mean?"

"I think we're meant to." At her quizzical look, he continued. "Fal came to Edana. He told her what was happening and what she had to do."

"Some gods are tricksters."

"Believe it or not, I thought of that. If this is a game, why involve Phelan? I don't think Fal would risk him if it were all for

laughs. Besides, did you see his face on the cliffs? After Phelan was stabbed and after Edana passed out?"

"No. I was more worried about my sister and my crazy murderous mother."

Kyl smiled at her description. "I swear he was pleased. Not that they were hurt but that they were together."

"But why? You don't think he's planning to bind them together or anything? Edana wouldn't be happy about that."

"Think about it though," Kyl insisted. "They're already acting like an old married couple with the way they're fighting."

Ianna chuckled, then raised a hand to her lips. Some of the returning soldiers were beginning to look in their direction.

"If she makes the decision, fine. But if she finds out she's being maneuvered--that the decision's already been made for her--she won't be much fun to be around."

Kyl snorted. "That's an understatement."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes. The crackling of the fire, the laughter of Tynans men, and the muted voices of Edana and Phelan filled the air. For a few moments though, Kyl could concentrate on the feel of Ianna next to him, her head leaning on his shoulder. It was a moment, a good moment, that he knew he would stay with him.



“Kyl?”

“Hmm?” he turned his head to look down at her.

“What am I supposed to do when the fighting starts? I don’t think I can just sit back and do nothing.”

“You can’t fight, Ianna.” Just the thought of her in the middle of a battle turned his blood to ice.

She shook her head. “I know. I’d be dead in seconds, but I have to do something.”

“We can talk to Edana about it tomorrow. She probably has something for you already.” He rubbed a hand up and down her arm when he felt her shivering. “Are you cold?”

Ianna offered a small smile when she met his eyes. “Scared, cold, and actually kind of happy you’re here with me.”

Kyl was silent for a moment. Ianna never ceased to surprise him. Looking into her beautiful green eyes, he saw what he’d wanted to see for years.

His gaze flicked down to her lips, then back to her eyes. He saw his own desire reflected there. When he leaned in and touched his lips to hers, she turned her body so she could wrap her arms around his neck.

Kyl couldn’t say who deepened the kiss only that it did. This, too, was a moment.

Sadly, the moment was interrupted by whistles and applause. When Kyl pulled away he saw Ianna's eyes were glazed with passion and excitement.

They smiled at each other like idiots until someone cleared his throat to get their attention.

Kyl turned his head to see Edana looking at them. Her brow was lifted and her arms were crossed over her chest. Her hair was in its customary braid that hung over her right shoulder. Her eyes were searching their faces. She looked dangerous.

Phelan stood behind her with a huge grin plastered across his face. "Nice," was all he said, earning an elbow jab from Edana.

Kyl turned back to Ianna and noticed a blush creeping over her cheeks. It only made him want to kiss her more, which wasn't in his best interest at the moment. "Edana," he began, stopping when she held her hand up.

What she did next horrified him more than he could say. Kyl thought she might be going mad--maybe Bidelia's ailment was hereditary.

Edana let out a squeal and clapped her hands before bounding over to hug her sister. "Gods! It's about time!"

Kyl was speechless.

Phelan laughed.

And for some reason, Ianna started crying.

The sound of Ianna crying snapped Kyl out of it. "What's wrong?"

Ianna only cried harder.

"Men are idiots," Edana scoffed.

"What? Why?" Kyl wasn't prepared to deal with tears.

"She thought I would be mad at her," Edana explained.

"I can see why *you* might be mad at *me*, but why would you be mad at her?"

Edana laughed. "She thought we were together."

Kyl still wasn't getting it.

"You know, *together*," Edana said again. Then she grinned.

Kyl threw his head back and laughed until tears ran down his face. He sat down heavily on the log and held his side. "Why would you think that?" he asked Ianna. "I thought we explained it before."

She glared at him. "You were always together, trying to get away alone. And I saw you kiss her," she accused.

Kyl smiled at her. She was jealous. Because of him. This was turning out to be a good day. He grabbed her hand and pulled her back down beside him. "You know Edana's my best friend. When your father sent me away for my training, I missed her so much. It was like a part of me was missing. Even though we were only a few days'

ride apart, I didn't have time to visit and Cian didn't want her coming to see me." Kyl turned his head to smile at Edana. "He must have thought she wanted me too."

Edana snorted.

Kyl winked at her before meeting Ianna's eyes again.

"When I came home, we decided to kiss. See if Cian was right. He wasn't. We laughed ourselves silly. The next day, I saw you and felt like I'd been punched in the gut. You were so beautiful."

"He's getting sloppy now," Phelan interrupted, earning another elbow. He rolled his eyes. "If anyone else starts crying, I'm gone."

Kyl's eyes never left Ianna. "It was hard being around you when I knew your father wouldn't approve."

"He loved you like a son."

"But I'm not. I'm the son of a soldier--"

"His general. One of his most trusted generals."

"A general is still a soldier. I thought if I kept my distance it would go away. Obviously, that didn't work."

Kyl shrugged. "I'm done trying to stay away from you."

Ianna smiled and laid her lips on his again.

"Gods, you people are too emotional for me," Phelan complained. "Come on." He grabbed Edana's hand and pulled her away. "We've got more to discuss."

“I was tempted to start playing matchmaker if they didn’t hurry things along. They’ve been moon-eyed in love with each other for years,” Kyl heard Edana say.

Kyl just went right back to kissing Ianna. He had a few years’ worth of kisses to make up for.

Everything else could wait until morning.

## CHAPTER 34--EDANA

The group rode into Ulaid the next morning to the sound of cheers. Alain had gone in ahead of them to find out what kind of welcome they should expect.

Alain reported that Ulaid was full to bursting. All of the barracks were full and refugees from Tara, who had known something was amiss in the citadel, were sleeping in tents on the streets. The people of Ulaid were demoralized, thinking the royal family had been killed. Men fleeing from Tara had carried the stories of Morfram's coup.

The sight of Edana and Ianna riding into their city with Phelan, who had his shield out and openly displayed for the first time, must be a welcome sight. Even if people didn't know his face, they all knew what the wolf's head on the shield meant. The King's Champion had arrived.

They were directed to a central command building in the heart of Ulaid and were met by Alain and what looked to be an older version of the giant blonde man. His light hair was going grey, as was his beard, but his body seemed strong and more than capable of fighting.

"Highness," Alain's deep voice began. "This is my uncle Conn. He serves as a commander here."

"Just the man I want to talk to then." Edana dismounted and handed her reins over to a waiting groom. Phelan did the same.

“Alain, find the logistics officer and have him report here in half an hour,” Edana continued.

He saluted and left.

“Kyl,” Phelan addressed. “Find a dungeon and lock the queen in there. Take Ianna with you in case anyone has any questions.”

Kyl and Ianna dismounted and led their mounts away.

“Conn,” Edana said. “What do you say we get some food and get started. We’ve got a lot of work to do and only a few days to do it.”

“Right this way.” Conn led them into the gray, stone building and into a room with a map of Eire on its center table. There were three men already gathered there. They looked up as they entered.

“Princess Edana and the Wolf,” Conn introduced.

Phelan sighed, “You can just call me Phelan.”

Conn nodded. “We’ll resume this later,” he dismissed his officers. When they left, he took a seat at one of the tables and motioned for them to join him. “I apologize for my rudeness, your highness. My knees aren’t what they used to be.”

Edana smiled at the man. “Call me Edana. We don’t really have time for the niceties of rank right now. I assume Alain told you what we’ve been dealing with.”

Conn nodded. “He did, but I find some of it a little hard to

believe.” He eyed Phelan skeptically. “Alain tells me you’re the Wolf. I thought you would be older.” He rubbed a hand over his bearded cheek. “How old *are* you, by the way?”

Phelan’s answering grin was sharp. “Old enough to know when old men should keep their mouths shut or risk a beating.”

Conn’s deep laugh rumbled out. “Alain said you don’t like being questioned about your age. The boy’s enjoyed traveling with you these past years.”

“The boy’s bigger than the two of you combined,” Edana said dryly.

“But he’s slow,” Phelan said earning another laugh from Conn.

“Can we get down to business please? We’ve got a war to win.”

“She gets cranky when she’s hungry.”

Conn nodded. “Give me a moment. I’ll send for food.” He walked out to track down a servant.

“What do you know about him?” Edana asked.

“Only what Alain’s told me. He’s had command of the Northern troops for the last ten years. He’s conservative in the field which won’t be very effective against the type of men Morfram has. He’s fought skirmishes, but never anything on this scale.”

“That’s going to be a problem. Things have been relatively peaceful here for the last thirty or forty years. We don’t have a lot of



experience with something like this. You said so yourself," she pointed out. "Training is different than an actual battle."

"Between the three of us and Kyl, I think we'll be fine. Conn's got the battle experience. I've enough fighting experience to handle a loose group of warriors. You've studied enough with your father. He trained you to be ready in case Eire ever needed you. You can handle strategy. Ianna can help with that."

"And what is Kyl doing?"

"Protecting you."

"Like hell he is. I can protect myself."

Phelan ran his hands through his hair, the only outward sign of his agitation. "It's his *job*. Once we get a solid strategy lined out, you and Ianna can sit back and stay safe."

"In case you're forgetting, Morfram is coming after *me*. I have the sword." When he took a step toward her, Edana shoved him back. "We talked about this. *I'm* in command here. You agreed. Until you're crowned, you follow my orders."

"I agreed you would control the army, *not* that I would follow your orders, and *not* that I would let you fight. Besides, we talked about that before we found out Morfram was insane and targeting you. Even with your new toy there," he pointed to Nuada's sword on her hip, "you're outmatched."

"You think so?" she hissed.

"Why take chances? You said Morfram wants you and the sword. If you go out there, you might as well hand it over to him and slice your own throat."

Edana gritted her teeth. "I told you I can take care of myself."

"I don't care. If I have to lock you up with your mother, then I will. You won't be fighting. That's final," he yelled.

"Okay. No fighting," Edana murmured reasonably.

Her fist flashed out and connected with his face. She followed it with a kick to his upper abdomen, knocking him back.

Phelan lifted a hand to his mouth. His fingers came away smeared with blood.

Edana held her own stomach. Fal had been right again. She could feel when Phelan was hurt. Her lip throbbed and she lifted a hand to make sure there wasn't any blood on her own.

Before she could see the movement, Phelan grabbed the front of her tunic and pulled her forward so that their faces were only inches apart.

His eyes were blazing and his chest was heaving. She'd never seen him look so angry, but she refused to back down. If he wanted to lock her up, he would have to knock her unconscious to do it.

"I heard that," he growled before his lips crushed down on hers.

His mouth was hard and demanding. Edana swore she could taste his anger.

It didn't stop her from returning the kiss. She gripped her fingers in his hair as he grabbed her braid and tipped her head back to get a better angle.

"Ah. Phelan the Wolf," a voice interrupted.

Edana and Phelan broke apart.

Standing in the doorway, looking at them in shock, were Kyl, Ianna, Alain, Conn, and a man she'd never seen before.

His golden hair and pale blue eyes highlighted his dark skin and strong features. His clothing was of a simple style, but the material was of good quality. His only adornment was a pendant hanging from his neck with a raven in flight depicted on it.

Edana had a moment to think he was a very good looking man, but the directness of his gaze unnerved her. His next words had her moving between unnerved to baffled.

"Care to tell me why you're kissing my betrothed?" his deep, melodic voice asked.

Edana's brows drew together in confusion. Betrothed? The man must be mistaken. "And you are?"

"Prince Arwin of Wales." He bowed. "Your future husband."

"You must have me confused with someone else."

"Not at all. You're the Princess Edana. You're much more beautiful than I'd anticipated."

Edana frowned, ignoring his compliment. "I'm not betrothed. I think I would know."

Arwin gestured at Phelan. "Your father had Sir Phelan arrange the marriage six months ago. I was on my way to collect you when we got word of your father's death. We would have been here sooner but we were set upon by pirates.

"We'd only just managed to repair our ship near Tauplin when we received word that Tara was overrun with mercenaries while there was an army gathering here. We were fortunate to meet a man named Aral. He led us here. Now, I want to know what's going on."

Edana nodded along through his explanation, but her ears rang with one thing--Phelan had arranged it. She looked at him and saw the truth in his eyes. She refused to acknowledge the apology she saw there.

Her arm swung out once more, but he stepped out of the way.

"Don't," he said shortly. "You'll just hurt yourself."

She considered striking out again, but he was right. She would just be hurting herself as well. She'd been hurt enough.

Edana suddenly felt drained. Her father and Phelan had gone behind her back and taken away her freedom. More importantly,

neither had bothered to tell her the truth.

"You said no more lies," she accused.

"Edana. I--"

She held up a hand to forestall him. "No. Don't bother." Edana looked away. "I don't have time for this. Conn, assemble the officers. We need to discuss what comes next."

"Edana, listen to me," Phelan said.

"You've had weeks to tell me the truth. You chose not to. I'm choosing not to listen. We have a war to fight. When it's over, we'll talk. Until then, stay out of my way."

She turned to Arwin. "As you can see, I don't have time for pleasantries. If you want to go back to Wales, I'll meet you there when I can."

She kept her head up and her back straight as she walked from the room. No one would know that this was one betrayal too many. First Morfram, then her mother. Now, her father who swore he would never force her to marry. Worse, she wasn't able to tell him how mad she really was.

Then there was Phelan. She'd trusted him. At first because Fal told her to, but then because she'd been able to be herself with him. She didn't worry that he wanted something from her. He didn't need anything. He'd been her first true friend aside from Ianna and Kyl.

They were connected by some strange bond Fal had forced on them, and there was no escaping it. When this was all over, she could always sail across the channel and forget she'd been stupid enough to trust him in the first place.

When tears began to cloud her eyes, Edana swore she'd cut her own eyes out before she let a single one fall.

## CHAPTER 35--PHELAN

Phelan watched her as she walked away. He should have known how she'd react. He *did* know. If he was being honest with himself, he knew. He just hadn't wanted to tell her.

Over the short time he'd known her, she'd gone from a potential obstacle and pain in the ass to his friend and ally--his partner even.

She felt the same about him. He didn't have a firm grip on his new abilities, but he sensed she felt the same. Now by being too afraid to tell her the truth, he'd shattered her trust when it had already taken a beating.

Phelan didn't know if this was something he could fix. He just knew he had to try.

When he moved to go after her, Arwin stepped in his path.

"What's going on here?"

"I don't have time for this." He looked around. Alain and his father had melted away to give them their privacy, but Kyl and Ianna stood in the doorway glaring at him. They couldn't be any more angry with him than he was with himself. "You two. Fill him in. If you want to stay and help, fine. If not, try not to get in anybody's way."

"He didn't seem this rude when I first met him," Arwin said to the room as Phelan was leaving.

"Believe it or not, he was worse than that when we did," Ianna

admitted.

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Phelan found Edana huddled together with the three officers he'd seen with Conn earlier.

"Just get it done," she said. "We need to get to Tara as soon as possible. I want scouts ahead of the column sweeping a two-league radius. Send them out in teams of two. Report to me twice a day." When the men saluted her, she saluted back. "Let's get to work."

"You sound like you know what you're doing," Phelan said as he approached her.

She didn't turn around. "I know what needs to be done. These officers know their men. An army relies on communication. Without it, it doesn't function."

"Is that your subtle way of telling me I should have communicated with you?"

She turned to face him then. Her expression was a mask. She hid her emotions well, and he couldn't get any sense of them with his new powers.

"I didn't think it was that subtle."

"Edana." Phelan sighed and rubbed a hand over his face wearily. "I'm not waiting until the war is over to talk about this. There's too much at stake. Maybe I should have told you--"



"Maybe?" Her voice was sharp, her mask beginning to slip.

"Alright. I should have. I get that. This isn't easy for me either. I've never had to worry about what secrets I've kept in the past. I've been on my own for a long time...I'm not doing this right."

"Why don't you start by telling me why my father decided to betroth me to someone in another country after he promised me he wouldn't."

"It's complicated."

"I'll try to keep up," she said dryly.

Phelan sighed again and gathered his thoughts. "When Cian first found out about the poisoning, he wanted to keep it quiet. If word got out, Eire would have become a target. He sent me to King Brann, Arwin's father. Apparently the two are, or were, on friendly terms.

"I was supposed to approach Brann and his healers to see if I could find a cure for the poison. Hard to do when we didn't even know what *kind* of poison was used. One man, Brann's chief healer, came forward and said that he would help, but Brann wanted some kind of compensation. He requested the betrothal. Edana, you know how bad things were in his last few months." When she only nodded, he continued. "He authorized me to do whatever was necessary before I left for Wales."

"He'd get a cure and Arwin would get me." Edana mused.

Phelan shook his head. "It wasn't as easy as that. Brann's healer didn't recognize the poison used either. All his attempts to cure it only made your father worse. When he was lucid enough to remember what I'd arranged on his behalf, he made sure there was no timeframe on the betrothal."

"Oh good. I have to marry Arwin but the when is up to me."

Phelan winced at her sarcasm. No matter how he justified it, Edana was being moved around like a game piece. He didn't like that she was so angry with him, but he didn't want her to hate her father. "He wanted you to be a queen. That's what you were raised for. You have to know that he wouldn't have done it if he hadn't been dying."

"But he did die. Only a few weeks ago, in fact. To top off everything else that's going on here, even if we manage to save my home, I'll eventually have to leave it. Oh gods!" Horror registered on her face. "He didn't betroth Ianna, did he?"

Phelan shook his head. She would be worried about her sister. "Just you."

She huffed out a breath. "That's something then. Any other details I should know about?"

"That's not enough? I'll show you the marriage agreement when we get back to Tara if you want, but you don't have to worry about it."

That statement had her temper flaring again. "I'm being forced

to marry a complete stranger and I don't have to worry about it?"

"That deal was made before our adventure on the cliffs. I have a feeling that your leaving Eire would be bad for your health."

"Oh, I suppose I'll just go tell Prince Arwin that we can't get married because our ass of a future king has a *feeling*. I can just imagine how well that will go over."

"Gods, woman! You're irritating!" he huffed. "I'm trying to tell you I'll find a way to get you out of this. I can't see how at the moment, but I will. You belong in Eire."

You belong with me, he thought. She probably wouldn't want to hear that right now.

"Okay. Now why don't you tell me why you couldn't tell me the truth. We had a deal. We said we were in this together. Have you gotten so used to lying that you're incapable of telling the truth?"

Phelan winced. She wasn't too far off the mark. "If you're going to get snotty again, I won't bother trying to explain at all."

"By all means," she said regally. "I'm all ears."

"You know," Phelan pointed out, "when you use that tone, I get the urge to strangle you."

"Quit stalling."

Might as well put it all out there, he thought. "I told you before that I get glimpses of the future if I try hard enough. Before I

arranged the marriage, I tried to see yours. I couldn't. That usually only happens with strangers who aren't meant to have any impact on my life. Or myself, I suppose. I can't see my own future. When I couldn't see yours, I assumed it was because you didn't matter."

"Gee thanks. That's so sweet."

"Shut up. I think maybe Fal kept me from seeing it. For all I know, our link could have been what stopped me from seeing."

"There *was* no link."

He pulled his sleeve back to show his wrist. "But there is now. I think we were meant to have one. He said before that we were kept apart in the past because the timing wasn't right. That means that eventually there *would* be a right time." Phelan turned and paced away from her before turning to face her again. "I've been thinking about this over the last few days. Everything that's going on with Morfram, I think it's bigger than we thought. Fal's never been this involved before, and now he won't tell me anything. And I can't see it. I've tried."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you and I need to stay together. Fal put us together for a reason, and I don't think this war is it--at least, it's not all of it."

"Something *bigger* than war? That's a cheerful thought."

Phelan finally allowed himself a small smile. "Friends again?"

She regarded him carefully. "What about that kiss?"

Phelan assumed she would bring it up, but just now he wasn't quite sure what to say. "What about it?"

"It took me by surprise."

"I didn't hear you complaining."

She smiled up at him. "You didn't really give me a chance."

"I don't know what you want me to say. You irritate me and frustrate me. You make me crazy most of the time." Her eyes were still smiling into his so he decided to finish it. "I wanted to kiss you. I've wanted to since you walked into the dungeon at Tara."

"You hated me then."

"Hate's a strong word. Dislike is better. But even when I didn't like you, I wanted to kiss you."

"And now?"

"Now we take this army south so we can beat Morfram. And when I want to kiss you, I will." Phelan couldn't say why he was getting angry. He didn't want to give her the chance to say no. Knowing her, she would say no just so they could argue.

Edana snorted. "If you don't get me out of this betrothal first, I'll have to go back to thinking up creative ways to kill you. Maybe then I could set Arwin up on the throne and stay in Eire."

It was his turn to laugh. "You can't talk to your king like that."

It's treason."

"You're not king yet," she pointed out.

"Maybe you should start practicing."

"And have your head get so big you can't fit through the doorway? I don't think so. I'm keeping you humble. You can thank me after we beat Morfram. When we get to whatever's worse, I'll try being more subservient."

"Yep. It definitely makes me want to strangle you." His tone was bland.

"Maybe later. First, we need to work out the best way to get to the stone."

## CHAPTER 36--IANNA

They stood around the map of Eire studying the layout of the hills and valleys that surrounded Tara. The map stood in the center of the largest tent, erected to serve as a command post. For the past five days, the army had been marching south during the daylight hours and making camp at sundown. At first everyone, Conn in particular, had been skeptical about this plan, but with Phelan's ability to sense enemy scouts with his budding abilities, it had proven to be a good arrangement. This way, the men were able to conserve energy for what was to come.

Voices were raised--Phelan's and Edana's, of course--in an argument that had gone on for two days. Occasionally, Kyl or Alain would try to get through to one of them, but so far nothing was working.

Prince Arwin had elected to stay on with his band of archers to help. Ianna had heard tales of the accuracy of Welsh archers. Stories claimed that a hundred years ago, the best of these men had taken on the injustice their king had inflicted on the people of Wales and deposed him. People claimed the man had stolen the king's gold and given it to the people.

If these archers were anything like the legends, Ianna was grateful for their presence. She wasn't so sure about their prince

though. He watched everyone carefully. He had intelligent eyes to go with his pretty face.

Ianna hadn't had the chance to speak to her sister about the betrothal yet, but at the moment, Edana seemed determined to ignore it. From the way Arwin was looking at her, appreciation and consideration in his eyes, Ianna didn't think Edana would be able to ignore it--the betrothal or the man--for much longer.

She knew it was nosy of her, but she wanted to know what Phelan had said to Edana. The two of them were acting as if nothing had happened. As if they hadn't been caught in a steamy, passionate embrace by Edana's future husband. The way they were arguing over who would be going to the stone, it appeared things were back to normal. Only their normal wasn't really all that normal, Ianna mused.

Not like Kyl and herself. She smiled inwardly. After years of loving him in secret, she was finally able to be open about her feelings. They'd even taken to sharing the same tent at night. Just thinking about it caused Ianna to blush. While she hated the situation they were all in, she was grateful for this one thing. Because she needed a few more happy moments, Ianna decided to put a momentary end to the arguing.

"Edana. Phelan." She kept her voice firm in a tone her nurse had used on her and Edana as children.



When the argument stopped and they turned to glare at her, she suggested they take a break and resume this after supper.

Reluctantly, they let the matter drop. When their gazes clashed, Ianna knew it was only a matter of time before it resumed.

After Edana and Phelan left the command tent with Alain and Conn, Kyl took Ianna in his arms and kissed her lips firmly. "The end of their arguments always leave me with time alone with you. It might be strange, but it has me looking forward to them." Kyl's grin was contagious. "I get the entertainment of watching them with the added benefit of you as a reward for enduring."

Ianna laughed and pressed her lips to his. "I feel the same way, but I worry when they really get going that Edana's going to lose her temper and hit him. I'd worry less if she wasn't hurting herself in the process."

She'd come to respect and like Phelan. He was good with the soldiers and camp followers. He was a clever fighter and an able leader. Ianna thought he would make a good king. Her father--she refused to think of Cian as anything else--had chosen well. But she wasn't sure if she could fully trust him. Especially not with her sister.

"No," Kyl said after a moment. "Their personalities are just too similar. Besides, I think it's how they both show they care."

"But they were awful to each other before. When you first left

Tara.”

“I think that was their way of fighting their attraction for each other. Did you see that kiss? I had the urge to cover your eyes.” He grinned. “I restrained myself because I knew you had to see it for yourself.”

“They fight because they care? Not because they’re still fighting their attraction?” Ianna wasn’t sure about that.

“Kind of. They fight now because they care enough about each other to fight their attraction with everything else we have going on.”

“And when this war’s over?”

Kyl frowned and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.” His hands rested lightly at her waist. “*They* probably don’t even know. Phelan’s going to have to deal with the fallout from Morfram, and Edana could very well be marrying the Welsh prince.”

“That’s assuming we beat Morfram.”

“You’re too young to be so negative.”

That gave Ianna pause. Maybe it was an inherited trait. Her mother and birth father were both as negative as they came.

Kyl seemed to sense her thoughts as he pulled her in closer and laid his cheek on top of her head. Ianna hugged him tightly.

“I don’t know if I can watch her be executed,” she whispered.

Kyl sighed. “I don’t think Edana can either. But she has to be

punished for what she's done. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes." Her throat burned as she felt tears threatening. She'd cried more in the last few weeks than she had in her entire life. "I just don't know how I could have missed seeing what she is."

"She's your mother. She managed to hide what she was from everyone. Morfram did too. I don't want to worry you more, but it makes me wonder if they had any other help."

"Aral helped. He told you he did. Father told him to."

"Cian told him to serve as Morfram's spy, not hide an affair between the queen and his chief advisor. And how could Aral not have known that Morfram had your mother poison your father? He was always with the man. No way would he have missed that."

Ianna considered this. He made a good point. If Cian had known, Bidelia and Morfram would have been exiled or executed. Their deceit couldn't have been left unpunished. "That doesn't necessarily mean Aral was the one keeping their secrets though. Like you said, they fooled everyone, and I thought you said you trusted Aral."

Kyl shook his head. Ianna knew he didn't like thinking it of Aral, but things just weren't adding up. "It's his job to know what goes on in Tara, especially in the citadel. It just doesn't feel right. And honestly, I'm not sure who I trust anymore."

“Do you think that’s why Phelan hasn’t included Aral in any of our command meetings?”

Kyl considered this for long, silent seconds before laughing. “We’re forgetting about Phelan’s new power. It’s probably handy to be able to detect lies--especially when we’re at war and interrogating enemy scouts every day.”

Ianna was comforted by this. “Gods, you’re right. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at anyone the same after all this. I see lies and conspiracies everywhere I look now.”

Kyl chuckled. “I know the feeling.” When his stomach growled, he pulled away from her but gave her arm a gentle tug. “Let’s get some food.”

Ianna smiled.

“Why don’t we talk first?” Arwin said from the doorway.

Ianna turned to see quiet blue eyes regarding her carefully. Kyl gave her hand a quick squeeze. “How long have you been standing there?”

His smile was charming. “Probably longer than you would like.”

Ianna found herself blushing. Kyl shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

Arwin laughed. “I’m sorry. There hasn’t been much to laugh about in the past few days.”

Ianna nodded, but it was Kyl who spoke. "Not that we're not grateful for the extra help, but why are you still here? You don't have any interest in this that I can see."

"The Princess Edana isn't reason enough?"

"You haven't approached her since the day you arrived," Ianna pointed out. "You're always around us--her--in our meetings, yet you don't speak. You just watch her carefully."

He smiled ruefully. "I'll admit after seeing her temperament, I'm hesitant to approach her. She seems unusually... spirited is the polite way to say it. Though I would say violent seems more accurate."

Ianna and Kyl found themselves laughing. Spirited. That was an understatement.

"Does that mean you'll be breaking your betrothal?"

Arwin shook his head sadly. "I can't. I need her."

"Why's that?" Phelan asked and he entered the tent. "I never thought to ask why you wanted Edana specifically. I'm asking now."

Arwin turned to regard Phelan. He looked past him and after a few seconds spoke. "Is she not with you?"

"Believe it or not, we don't spend every waking minute together." Phelan's voice was dry. "You should probably wait until she gets here though. I'm sure you can understand that with everything else we have going on here, she's a bit upset."

"I don't understand why you never told her."

Phelan shrugged as if they were talking about nothing of consequence. "I have my reasons. Edana knows them."

"What do I know?" Edana asked. She smiled at Ianna and Kyl before turning to Phelan.

Ianna thought with the mail shirt Phelan insisted she wear, Edana looked like one of the warrior queens of old she'd seen in paintings back in Tara. Her black hair was braided and twisted around her head, forming a crown. Her blue eyes were cool. Ianna thought that was one of the changes in her sister this struggle had brought on.

Phelan didn't bother answering. Instead, he gestured for Arwin to.

"Princess--"

"You can call me Edana."

"Edana." He offered a small smile. "We were discussing our betrothal."

Edana nodded. "From now on, if you have questions about our betrothal, you can bring it up with me. I don't want you going behind my back and talking to my sister or Kyl."

"Very well. The question I had was actually about your relationship with Phelan. If you're lovers, I'd like to know."

Ianna sucked in a breath. Experience told her Edana was about

to lose her temper again.

Instead, her sister laughed.

"If you'd asked me that a few weeks ago, I would have thought you were crazy and punched you in the face."

"Don't worry about my feelings," Phelan drawled.

Edana smiled at him. "Now, I'm oddly flattered you think I could be a king's mistress."

"Notice I'm only the king when it suits her," he muttered.

"I wasn't trying to insult or flatter you. Either one of you," he added to Phelan. He looked around. "Is it safe to talk here?"

"Phelan would know if anyone were close." Ianna told him. She moved to take a seat at the small table that held the map of Eire. No way would she leave and miss this.

They moved to join her. She saw Arwin's eyes flash when Phelan took the seat next to Edana's and draped an arm over the back of her chair.

Ianna bit back a laugh. Phelan grinned and winked conspiratorially. He was doing it on purpose.

"We've gotten word that the Ottomans have been sending ships out to raid along our coastlines. We've dealt with several incidents in the last year. One of the men we captured admitted the emperor is trying to steal enough to support his war in the east.

"We thought a marriage would ensure cooperation between your country and mine if these pirates--they call themselves privateers--continue to attack along our shores."

"This is the first time we've heard about this," Ianna answered. "The Ottoman ships we saw at Moher came as quite a surprise."

"Why didn't you just ask my father for a military treaty?" Edana asked. "If the Ottomans are a threat, he would have listened."

"Military treaties are broken every day. A marriage is a more permanent arrangement. My father wants us to be prepared in case the raids increase."

Ianna thought he had a good point, but it was hard to accept when he would be taking her sister away.

She watched Phelan lean over to whisper in Edana's ear. She jerked back with a frown on her face. They eyed each other before Phelan finally broke the silence.

"There may be a problem with the betrothal."

To Arwin's credit, his expression remained composed. He looked up at the tent's ceiling. "I'm sure I'm going to regret this." He looked at them again. "What exactly is the problem?"

Phelan and Edana laid their right arms on the table and pulled back their sleeves. Each had a strange mark on the inside of their wrist.



Phelan's was a dark wolf's head with a white outline of the word *teine* running through it. Edana's was a black raised *teine*--as if it had been branded there--with a pale wolf's head outlined over it.

Ianna, Kyl, and Arwin leaned forward to get a better look.

"May I?" Arwin asked Edana.

When she nodded, he reached out to run a finger over the mark. He jerked his hand back with a curse as he shook his hand. "It burned me."

Edana's eyes went wide before she looked at Phelan. He reached over and brushed his thumb over the mark carefully. "It feels warm. You try," he instructed Kyl and Ianna.

They were burned as Arwin was.

"It's never done this before, but then again, Phelan's the only one who's seen it." Edana said. "Try Phelan's."

They repeated the process with Phelan's mark. The results were the same.

"Huh." Phelan's voice was mystified. "This proves my point a little too well."

"Where did they come from?" Arwin asked.

Ianna was wondering the same thing. Edana never mentioned anything about being marked.

"I was born with the mark of the wolf. Edana was branded when

she lifted Nuada's sword. When my powers were unlocked, we were bound and given each other's mark."

"What does that even mean?" Ianna wondered aloud.

"We don't know." Edana shrugged. "Fal's been uncommunicative since we left the cliffs. We have more questions than answers at this point."

"We don't know what will happen if she leaves Eire or if the two of us are separated." His eyes were direct on Arwin's.

Arwin rubbed weary hands over his face. "My father isn't going to like this."

"We've got bigger problems than your father right now. When this is over, I promise we'll sort things out. Come to a new agreement."

"Actually, I have a better idea," Ianna put in.

All eyes turned to her.

"What if you adopt him into your family?" she asked Phelan. When he only looked at her as if she'd gone mad, she continued. "There's a precedent for it in the Code of Kings. Nearly four hundred years ago when the Norsemen were raiding."

"Don't get her started on history," Kyl commented with a roll of his eyes.

"I'm trying to help here. Will you shut up?"

Kyl only smiled at her.

“As I was saying,” she flicked her hair over her shoulder in an irritated gesture. “Because you choose your heir, there’s no need to worry about him succeeding you to the throne. He becomes part of your family. You become part of his.”

Phelan and Arwin considered each other. Their glances were wary.

“If either country goes to war,” she continued, “the other will be required to give assistance as it will be considered an attack on the royal houses. And most importantly, to me anyway, Edana stays in Eire.”

“Well I like it,” Kyl put in. “Don’t mind me though. I’m just a lowly soldier. I wouldn’t dream of involving myself in courtly matters.” His formal tone lightened the mood as Ianna suspected he intended.

Phelan’s lips twitched. “You weren’t this annoying when we were in Tara.”

“I was working then.” He shrugged and smiled.

“If we agree to this, what needs to be done?” Phelan asked.

“You just need a piece of parchment and a quill. You’ll each sign the agreement. Arwin will need to be present at your coronation for a more formal announcement, but this will serve as a binding agreement between both parties.” She smiled at Arwin. “This is probably a

better deal for you. I doubt Edana would make a very good wife."

"Hey!"

Ianna laughed at her sister's outrage. "You know I'm right."

Phelan ignored them. "What do you say, little brother?"

Arwin's eyes scanned Phelan's face. "I think I'm older."

"But I'm bigger."

Edana rolled her eyes. "Boys. Great idea, Ianna."

Ianna laughed. "That's one less thing for us to worry about. Now--and try not to argue," she directed at Phelan and Edana. "The stone. No. Don't argue, Phelan. You know Edana has to be there too."

"She doesn't *have* to be there. She *wants* to be there just to drive me crazy."

"No. I want to be there so you don't get yourself killed. There's going to be an ambush," she told the others.

## CHAPTER 37--EDANA

"How do you know that?" Ianna demanded.

Edana looked at Phelan. "Do you want to tell them?" Her voice softened.

He sighed. "One of the scouts we captured claimed my father was still working for Morfram. He said Morfram already knew we would be making a play for the stone. He would be waiting for us." His eyes swept the room. "The scout was telling the truth."

"What did Aral say?" Kyl asked.

"We can't find him." Edana's voice was grave. She didn't like having to tell the others that Aral had betrayed them as Morfram and her mother had done. It seemed like those few people she'd trusted her whole life were the only ones she couldn't trust now.

"After I questioned the scout last night, I went to find him. He was gone." Phelan's tone betrayed his unease.

"Which is one of the reasons I *will* be at the stone with you."

"Don't trust me to do what needs to be done?"

"You know that's not it," Edana told him. "If your father *is* still with Morfram, then they'll both be there."

"You don't think they'll change their plans since their scout hasn't returned?" Arwin asked. "They have to assume he's been captured."

"They won't." Edana's voice was confident. "We have to go to the stone. If we don't, more people, more Eirans, will die. We have to give them a reason to abandon Morfram's cause."

Kyl scratched his head. "As much as I hate to admit it, I think Edana needs to be there. She has the sword for a reason. The two of you are connected for the same reason. Besides, do you want her to lead the main force against Morfram's army?"

Phelan's eyes glared in Kyl's direction. "I want her to stay back. She's a tactician, not a warrior."

"Phelan," Ianna's voice was gentle. "She's both. You know she's both. You might lead Eire after you go to the stone, but Edana leads *now*."

"You're taking her side because she's your sister," he pouted.

Ianna shook her head at him. "I'm taking her side because she's right."

"I know I'm new here," Arwin tried to mollify, "but I'm confused about why you don't want her there. From everything I've heard -- from you, Ianna, Kyl, Alain--Edana's the one person Morfram wants most. She's the one most likely to draw him out."

"She could get hurt."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here." Edana gripped Phelan's hands in hers as she faced him. "You and I are in this

together. We made a deal. We can keep having this argument over and over again, but it's not going to change anything." She squeezed his hands. "So stop arguing and help me come up with a plan to keep us alive."

Phelan leaned over and laid his forehead on hers. "If you get hurt, I'm locking you in the dungeon when we get back to Tara."

"If *you* get hurt, I'll lock you in a cell with my mother."

"You're a brat." He laughed and covered her face with his palm playfully. "Okay," he said to the others. "If it's true and my father's involved, we'll need something unexpected."

"I can help with that."

Edana turned to Arwin. She appreciated his willingness to help. All things considered, he was handling all of this very well. "You don't have to do this."

"As your ex-betrothed and 'little brother' to your king, I think I do. But if I'm ever in trouble, I'll expect you all to be there."

"I've never been to Wales," Kyl teased.

Edana smiled warmly. Even if she didn't want to marry the man, Prince Arwin would probably make a good friend. She seemed to be stockpiling them in a short time.

"Deal."

"Deal," Phelan agreed. "If Edana, Arwin, and I are going to face

Morfram, Ianna you'll have to stay back with the camp followers."

"But--"

"No." Edana's voice was firm. "*You* don't argue. You weren't trained for this. Kyl, you'll be serving as Conn's lieutenant with the main body. I've already discussed it with him. He requested you. You know the area around Tara better than anyone."

"Is there any point in *me* arguing?"

"None."

Kyl sighed. "If anyone gets hurt while I'm not there to look after you, I'll be pretty upset. I'll be the one who has to lock the lot of you up. I doubt the queen wants that much company."

Edana was thankful that her closest friend could always be counted on to do what needed to be done. She was lucky to have him.

As she looked around the room and saw the mix of humor and determination on the faces surrounding her, she thought how lucky they all were to have each other.

Morfram didn't understand who he was dealing with, Edana thought. These people were unlike anything he'd faced before. When they met on the field of battle in a few days' time, Edana planned to show him how severely he'd underestimated them.



## CHAPTER 38--KYL

Kyl raised his sword just in time as arrows rained down around them. Men screamed as they were hit. Healers ran in to drag the wounded and dead away from the frontline so that the army could continue fighting.

"Get your shields up!" Conn bellowed to those behind the shield wall.

Their training proved effective as men snapped their shields into place. Following orders gave them little time to feel fear. Fear before battle was a good thing--or so Kyl's father had always said. If you let fear control you *during* a battle, you were as good as dead.

Morfram's mercenaries were relentless. Kyl was gratified that many of the Eiran soldiers Morfram still employed weren't engaging. Scores of them, likely confused by the coordinating of the attacking force, stood back and watched from a nearby hill.

He appreciated their restraint.

He would have appreciated it more if they had denied Morfram in the first place.

When the flight of arrows stopped, Kyl lowered his shield. Four arrowheads were buried in its surface. He lifted his sword arm to break them off.

"Kyl!" Conn called.

He stepped out of formation to go to his commander. The man was out of breath and his face was red from the exertion. "We can't take another hit like that." He pointed to the enemy's right flank. "The archers are gathered there. They can't have more than fifty. You're an archer too, right?"

Kyl nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"I need you to form a team. Take as many men as you need, but it's got to be done quickly."

Kyl scanned his gaze over the plain. The mercenaries were assembled to the south, shutting Conn's troops off from Tara. Morfram's Eirans were situated more to the southwest. They would be in a good position to play hammer to Conn's anvil if and when Phelan ever got to the stone. The mercenaries between them wouldn't stand a chance.

Back to the east, the small but deadly group of archers of Morfram's forces were situated in a small U-shaped outcropping. It was a good position if the attack was coming from the north, as theirs was. But if Kyl could get a group of archers *behind* them, it would be a simple matter to eliminate them.

"Alright. I need as many archers as you can spare--at least twenty though--and as many infantry with full shields."

Conn nodded. "You," he caught a nearby archer's attention.

“Take Kyl and report to your unit commander. He’ll need a few men. He has my approval.” He turned back to Kyl. “Take your unit with you. Good luck and get moving.”

Kyl saluted and walked away. When he reached his infantry unit, he spared enough time to fill them in on their mission. “We don’t have much time. We need to stop them before they get another volley off.”

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It took nearly an hour, too much time in Kyl’s mind, to sneak forty-two men around the east side of the plain without being seen. Conn, understanding that he would need to draw attention to himself, sounded an advance. They were holding their own until whoever was commanding Morfram’s forces signaled the archers to resume their attack.

This helped Phelan and his team as the sound of fifty bows being drawn and the thrum of strings as they released filled the air around them. It didn’t do so much for Conn’s men who were taking the brunt of the assault.

When Kyl had his men in position on the rise overlooking the enemy archers, he signaled for each infantryman to angle his shield down and for each archer to take up position behind the shield. If the enemy managed to get any arrows off in their direction, every man

would be protected by the shield. The archers would only have a small window--when they drew and shot--when they would be unprotected.

Not wanting to alert them until it was too late, Kyl kept his signal to his men simple.

He stepped away from his own shield bearer, aimed at the archers' commander and fired.

Times like these, he was thankful Cian had insisted that he and Edana learn to shoot a bow. The king had claimed bows were the most versatile weapon to have in your arsenal.

Cian had probably been right.

His arrow struck the enemy commander high in the chest to the right side. The man uttered an "oomph" and a groan as he dropped to the ground. Kyl reached back into his quiver to retrieve another arrow as the rest of his men fired into the group below.

The smell of blood stung the air.

A few managed to get off their own shots when Kyl's archers were exposed. He lost three men in order to defeat the enemy archers. Three was three too many.

The whole skirmish took only a few minutes, but to Kyl and his aching shoulders and pounding heart, it felt like hours.

Eventually someone would notice that the archers were no longer active and come to investigate. It would be best to get his men

out of there quickly, Kyl thought. With another silent signal, they melted away to return to the main body.

Kyl felt a pang of regret for the dead and dying.

He'd done what needed to be done, but Morfram had orchestrated this. The deaths of hundreds of men, mercenary and Eiran alike.

He hoped Edana and Phelan were making the bastard pay for it.

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Kyl and his men returned to the main body to discover mercenaries were breaking through on their right flank.

The blood in Kyl's veins froze.

Ianna had been helping the healers when he left. Bandaging cuts and helping the healers set breaks. The healing tent was set up just behind their forces to the west.

He had to get to her.

"With me." His voice rang with command. Later, it would surprise him that his voice hadn't cracked with his fear. At the moment, fear was all he felt.

His men followed.

Kyl reached the gap in their defenses to find mercenaries baring down on the healers' tent. Ianna stood with a group of soldiers in front of the tent.

Even from the distance, Kyl could see the determination etched on her face. Someone had given her a bow. As far as he knew, she'd only shot one once, when they were at Moher. She'd been surprisingly effective at a distance when she'd had time to aim before firing.

She didn't have that luxury now as the enemy charged.

Kyl didn't bother ordering the charge. He ran forward. One mercenary made the mistake of stepping into his path. Kyl intercepted the cut that arced toward his head. With swords locked, he used his free hand to deliver a short jab to the man's face. With a grunt of pain, his opponent stumbled back and their swords disentangled.

Kyl swung out again as the man danced back. His attack was parried, but Kyl was relentless. As his opponent began to panic, he faltered and left an opening.

Kyl didn't hesitate to strike. When the man fell, Kyl moved on to the next.

When he finally reached Ianna's side, she was releasing an arrow at an oncoming soldier. It flew wide, but she didn't falter. She kept a cool head and sidestepped. The men around her stepped in front of her to block the oncoming attacker.

"Are you alright?" Kyl asked as he scanned her face.

She had dirt and blood spattered on her skin. Her eyes were

glazed but her expression was hard. "I'm fine. When they broke through, they went straight for the healer's tent. Who does that?" she snapped. "What honor is there in killing a wounded man?"

"They're not here for honor. They're here to serve as assassins for a mad man."

"So what do we do?"

"We keep fighting."

## CHAPTER 39--EDANA

Edana stood on the Hill of Tara next to the Stone of Destiny with a cloaked Arwin at her side. Setting themselves up as bait was necessary.

A little frightening, but necessary.

The air around them was filled with the sounds of battle raging on the plains below. She knew Kyl was in the middle of all that and felt a trickle of fear work its way up her spine.

She did the only thing she could in the situation. She pushed the fear aside. The only way she could help Kyl now was to beat Morfram.

Edana just needed the slimy bastard to show his face.

She didn't have to wait long.

When Morfram crested the hill and came into view, he had a large, dark-skinned pirate at his side. Nearly two dozen others followed behind them and fanned out. He stopped when he stood between her and the stone.

He made no move to touch it. Not yet. But Edana could sense his need.

"I'm glad you could make it, Edana." His cold voice made Edana want to shiver.

"Isn't that what you said last time," she goaded. "You know?"



When I got Nuada's sword and you had to run away?"

His hatred glinted in his eyes. "I'll make you regret that shortly. I see you brought your new puppy. Tell me, Phelan. How's your father doing?"

When 'Phelan' didn't respond, Morfram's smile went sharp. "Sore point for you, boy? Care to know how I knew of your plan?" He turned his attention back to Edana. "You don't look surprised, Princess."

"Liars and traitors aren't worth my consideration at all. I see you've made some new friends though. Is this why you were upset I was taking money from the treasury? From you? You needed the money to pay off pirates?" She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I wonder what's going to happen to you when you can't deliver the rest of the money you promised them. My mother was very forthcoming when we questioned her."

"Don't worry yourself, Princess." His voice was a sneer. "You won't have to worry about it for much longer."

Edana drew Nuada's sword and smiled at Morfram. "You're right about that. You won't live long enough to pay them."

"Camali," he addressed the giant by his side. "Take care of the puppy."

The behemoth's smile flashed. He drew his own sword. The

eastern-style blade was curved and its point was sharp and looked deadly, especially in the hands of this Camali fellow. He stepped toward them.

He didn't make it very far when Arwin lifted his head and pulled his hood back.

"Who are you?" Morfram snapped.

"Does it really matter at this point?"

"Where's the boy? Where's Phelan?" Morfram's voice rose in anger.

Just then one of the pirates fell, an arrow piercing his chest. Kyl's knowledge of the area when coupled with Edana's and Ianna's had proven beneficial. Between the three of them, they knew every inch of land surrounding the city. There were ways to reach the stone that weren't on any map.

Morfram had never explored as they had. He'd relied on others to do his work for him. Knowing this, they'd been able to exploit it.

"He's behind you."

Morfram spun to see Phelan behind him, sword drawn. "Attack!"

All hell broke loose. Swords clanged and arrows flew. Arwin had suggested his archers be present. Edana agreed as their expertise was invaluable as they downed any and all of Morfram's men who had yet to engage. It was too dangerous to fire into a crowd when one of

your men could be hit. No matter how good the Welsh archers were, they couldn't hope to hit their target every time.

The man Morfram had called Camali changed direction and prowled toward Phelan. His gait was fluid despite his enormous size. He moved with the grace of a predator.

In contrast, Phelan stood his ground. But in his stillness was a confidence Edana had never seen the likes of before. He would be fine, she told herself, as his sword met Camali's.

"You're ruining everything!"

Morfram's hissed words snapped Edana's attention away from Phelan. She could see Arwin out of the corner of her eye, locked in battle beside Alain, as they took on a small group of pirates.

It looked like it had finally come down to her and Morfram. She wouldn't hesitate this time to do what needed to be done. She'd promised her father a long time ago that she would fight for those who couldn't fight for themselves.

Today she would fight for all of Eire. The strong and the weak. The rich and the poor.

Morfram threatened them all. She couldn't let him get away with it.

Edana held her sword in a high guard while Morfram raised his to do the same. It was hard to tell what was colder--his eyes or the steel

of his blade.

"I didn't get the chance to kill your father myself. Your death will have to serve," he snarled.

Flames ignited down the length of her blade as her emotions flared. "I'm not the same person I was in Tara." Her eyes were fierce.

"You'll never be more than the spoiled brat of a weak king."

If she'd learned anything from Phelan in the short time she'd known him, it was that it was important to control your emotions when your life was in the balance. If an enemy could manipulate your emotions, you were already dead.

"Stop talking and fight."

When sword met sword, sparks exploded off the blades. They broke apart and charged again. Her blade danced as Morfram thrust and cut. She deflected every attack. With every move, Morfram's eyes shone brighter. The madness there had risen to the surface and was starting to spill over.

When he lunged, he growled his hatred. It was then Edana realized that she could manipulate *him*. Force *him* to make a mistake. His weakness was his pride. She could exploit it.

"Did you know," she said conversationally, "that my father considered you little more than a servant? Was it any wonder Ianna and I thought the same?"

He stabbed out again, but Edana dodged the blow.

“Does it bother you knowing that they put you on the same level as a chambermaid?”

“And where are they now?”

“Well, my father’s probably resting on the Isle of Man, and Ianna’s probably laughing that you and my mother would stoop so low as to concoct this story about *you* being her father.” She laughed and dodged another strike.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I wonder if that relationship was real at all. My guess? You probably had to bribe her to get her to say it. Like my mother would have an affair with a servant. She made it clear that servants should learn their place.”

“I’m not a servant!” he screamed, his sword hacking down at her.

She deflected his blade and stepped back again. “Oh really? What do you call it? You were paid to perform a certain task, weren’t you?”

“I’m not a servant!”

This time when he charged, Edana was ready. His cut was clumsy and easily deflected. As she pushed his blade to the side, exposing his chest, she struck out with a quick thrust. Her fiery blade

plunged into his chest, cauterizing the wound.

When he fell, Edana took a moment to offer a prayer to the gods--Nuada especially--for giving her such a formidable weapon. She looked down at his still form and the blackened, gaping edges of the wound in the center of his chest. Edana turned her back to the sight, though her ears were assaulted by the gasping sounds as he struggled to breathe. Finally, he was still, but Edana couldn't bring herself to check if he still lived.

As she refocused her attention on her surroundings, she saw Alain and Arwin were standing over a small group of pirates on their knees. Seeing they were outmatched, they had surrendered their weapons rather than die for a cause that wasn't their won.

Phelan was still fighting Camali, but with a sharp strike with the hilt of his sword, the man was rendered unconscious. When his foe lay unmoving except for the rise and fall of his chest that indicated he still lived, Phelan's head turned and his eyes met Edana's. From what she could see, he was completely unharmed.

With a smile and a wink, he stepped toward the stone.

Throughout the battle on the hill, the stone had remained silent, but as Phelan moved toward it, it began to hum.

When Phelan laid his hand on its surface, the humming grew louder and a low rumble shook the hill. Everyone stood transfixed.

In that moment, the battle raging on the plain below halted as all eyes turned toward the Stone of Destiny and the new King of Eire.

Edana smiled and moved to approach him, not realizing that she'd sheathed the sword in her excitement.

Phelan returned her smile briefly before his eyes went wide. "No!" he yelled.

She was only a few feet away from him, but the distance was too great. Edana spun to find Morfram's dagger plunging toward her. She lifted an arm to deflect it, but his madness made him strong.

The blade tore through skin and tissue, high on her chest. She cried out as she pulled her sword and swung out blindly. She must have made contact, but she didn't see where as her vision was already going black around the edges.

She stumbled forward as voices rose around her. When she started to fall, she felt strong arms catching her. Her fingertips brushed over the stone as her arms went limp.

The stone exploded with light and sound. Just like in her dream. Edana had enough time to think how beautiful the sound of the stone's song was before the darkness completely filled her vision.

## CHAPTER 40--PHELAN

She came awake in stages.

First, her eyelids fluttered. Then her head moved on the plump pillows on the bed. After a few moments of stillness, it began all over again.

Phelan stood watching from the doorway as Ianna sat by her sister's bedside reading, her hair bright against the pale green of her dress. Edana had been sleeping for the last two days and it was starting to wear on his nerves. "Wake her up already," he demanded. He was getting sick of the different shades of blue her room was decorated in. Against the dark blue of her bedding, Edana *looked* sick. Her pale skin stood out against the dark color, irritating Phelan even more.

Ianna sighed and closed her book with a bandaged hand. She'd been lucky to come away from the battle with something as minor as a broken hand. Others--many others with more fighting experience--hadn't been so lucky.

"We've been over this before. The healer said she'll wake up when she's ready to. If you're so annoyed, go find something else to do for a while." She waved a hand at him. "Don't you have some kingly duties to attend to?"

"I'm starting to think your attitude is worse than your sister's.



And you're both irritating the hell out of me," he said, voice rising.

"Why are you yelling?" Edana croaked as her lids fluttered open. Her eyes were alert, if a little too bright.

Ianna squealed and leaned over to hug her.

Phelan moved forward and sat on the bed by her side. "How do you feel?"

"Thirsty."

Ianna smiled. "I'll get it." As Ianna poured a cup of water from the pitcher on the bedside table, Phelan helped Edana who was struggling to sit up. When she finished the water, Ianna left to have food sent in.

"Really," Phelan said. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Did I miss anything good?"

He smiled. "You missed two days' worth of bad, actually."

Edana frowned. "Oh. Well, you can tell me anyway."

"Where do I start?"

"Start with why the sword didn't protect me like last time. That's the second time it hasn't stopped an attack."

"I don't know."

"I'm sorry to say, *leanbh*," Fal said as he appeared in front of them, "but I was just as surprised as you were."

"That's comforting," Edana muttered sarcastically. "Well what

happened after I passed out? The last thing I remember was hearing the stone singing again. It was just like in my dream.”

“Ha. I’ll get to that,” Phelan told her. “The mercenaries surrendered when the Eirans who’d been working for Morfram surrounded them. You were right about that.”

“Naturally.”

Phelan rolled his eyes and continued as Fal hovered over them. “After he stabbed you, Morfram and Camali, got away in the confusion. I sent Alain and his men to pursue those who fled. They haven’t returned yet.

“I sent for a healer for you, but by the time he arrived, the wound was already healing, most likely due to our link. The healer said to let you get some rest.”

“How did I get here?”

“I carried you. When we passed the Temple of Eiru, the priest was ringing the bell and yelling ‘Hail to the King and Queen’. I didn’t think anything strange about it at the time.” His expression was pained. “Gods, I didn’t think at all. I thought you were dead. And by the way, I’d appreciate it if you would avoid getting stabbed again. It’s painful.”

“You think?”

Phelan smiled. “Anyway, while I was watching over you--”

"You were watching over me? Phelan, that's actually sweet."

"I was waiting for you to wake up so I could lock you in the dungeon--or wring your neck. You said you wouldn't get hurt."

"How was I supposed to know that a burning, gaping hole in the man's chest wouldn't kill him?"

"Anyway," he ignored her sarcasm. "That's when Fal showed up." He pointed to his grandfather. "You can tell her the rest. She'll probably complain and argue if I do."

Fal smiled at him. "I told him this was always part of the plan. As my grandson, Phelan was chosen to serve as your protector. You were always meant to rule Eire, Edana. Basically I'm just here to keep you from getting killed," Phelan commented.

Edana blinked. "I'm confused. You're the one who wanted us kept apart our whole lives. You manipulated my father to keep us from meeting."

"It's all about timing," Fal said. "You weren't meant to know each other before. You were different people. It was important that you both wait until the right moment for all of this to be set into motion." He looked at Phelan. "You always had your father and me to fall back on. That won't always be the case." He turned to Edana and smiled kindly. "You needed to believe you were capable of stepping into a role of leadership." Fal smiled warmly. "You both needed to

learn to rely on yourselves before you could rely on each other. Now you know what you must do and you have each other for support.”

“That’s not all,” Phelan said before Fal could leave. He looked down at Edana. “We were right about there being more to everything than Morfram wanting to rule. Fal admitted that he and his brothers are at war with a god named Miledh and his sons. To win, they need us to find the other Lug’s Spear and Dagda’s Cauldron and unite them and the sword with the stone.”

“And where are we supposed to find them?” she asked Fal.

Fal shook his head. “I cannot say. I’ve done all I can do. Now, it’s up to you. You’ve both been blessed in so many ways. My brothers and I are grateful for your help.” He leaned down and kissed them each on the forehead. “Keep in mind that *you* are our greatest weapons. We need you more than we can say.”

With that, he disappeared.

Edana blew out a breath. “So we saved Tara from Morfram--”

“For now,” Phelan interrupted. “He’s still out there somewhere. Until we know for sure he’s dead, it’s best to be cautious.”

“For now,” Edana agreed. “What do we do? Where do we start?”

“We need to have the coronation as soon as possible. I don’t want to give Morfram time to come back and make another play. But

at least next time, he'll have to go through both of us."

"You said Eiru's priest called us King and Queen."

"We are. You were meant to rule and I was meant to rule by your side--or so Fal implied."

"We're not married are we?"

"Not yet."

Edana let out a breath. Phelan thought she sounded almost relieved. "Wait. What do you mean 'not yet'?"

"Oh we're getting married," he told her.

"Like hell we are!" She was only eighteen! "I'm too young to get married."

"And I'm not? Doesn't seem to make much difference. We *are* getting married."

"I don't recall your asking."

"Because I didn't. If I did ask, you'd just argue with me. I'm not giving you the chance."

"Phelan, you're being ridiculous."

"We'll see. Why don't you get up and get dressed. We can argue about anything you want later, but for now we need to go read the names of the fallen for the funeral ceremonies."

"Oh." Her brow was still creased.

Phelan knew as soon as they saw to duty they would start the

argument all over again. That was fine with him. They would have time to settle the matter later. And he wasn't going anywhere unless she was with him. This protector thing was something he took seriously.

He leaned down and laid a quick kiss on her lips. When she didn't protest, he deepened it. He would have all the time in the world for this. The thought had him grinning against her lips. He pulled away and smiled down at her. "Get dressed and let's go."

As he was leaving her room, he found Kyl waiting for him. "Any news?"

Kyl shook his head. "No one reported seeing Aral anywhere near the battle, but I just received word from Ulaid. The men assigned to guard Bidelia's cell were all found dead, and she was gone."

"Gods," Phelan breathed. "With most of the city following the army, there weren't many people around to witness anything."

"So far, no one's come forward," Kyl confirmed. "I've spoken with Conn already. He'll return to Ulaid tomorrow and will let us know if he hears anything."

Phelan nodded. "Send word to the other regions. I want everyone on the lookout for both of them. And send a letter to your father. I need to know what he can tell me about these Ottomans. He probably has more experience with them than anyone else."

Kyl saluted, but his voice was teasing. "Yes, oh wise King."

"You're an ass," Phelan laughed. "Get out of here. We'll meet you on the plains. The funeral pyres are ready to be lit."

"And after?"

"We rebuild. We have to. This isn't over yet."

## EPILOGUE

Morfram lay on his bunk in the near complete darkness of the storage hold of the *Goke* as the ship rocked in the waves. His wounds were severe, but there wasn't much that could be done for him. That bitch had cauterized his wound, keeping him from bleeding to death, and preventing him from being healed further. He was just lucky that Camali had been so concerned with getting his payment that he'd taken a wounded Morfram with him when he fled.

As he lay in the dark, he let his anger rise. Hatred for Phelan and Edana for ruining his plans again and hatred for the gods who'd cursed him with his fate thundered through him. All his plans had gone to waste. Years of work gone. Luckily, Camali had survived to sail them away from the coasts of Eire.

Morfram was too weak to ask where they were going, but he hoped it wouldn't be too far. He needed just enough time to rethink his strategy to try again before he died. If he could kill Edana, he would welcome death gladly.

The throne of Eire was *his*, yet she'd taken it from him. If he had to kill the entire population--men, women, and children--to make her death happen, he would. In fact, the idea appealed to him.

"Is that really what you want?" a voice whispered in his ear.

Morfram turned his head sharply but the room was empty.



"Who's there?"

"You don't know me," was the hissed reply, "but I can help you."

"Why would you do that?"

"My help isn't free. If I help you, you help me."

Morfram considered this. "And how can I help you if I don't know who you are?"

The voice chuckled and the sound echoed around the tiny room. "You can call me Miledh. I need you to retrieve a few...items for me. Items I believe you've been searching for."

"And how will you help me?"

"I'll give you Eire. The death of your enemies. Everything you've ever dreamed of will be yours. Edana's blood will coat your hands before we are done."

Morfram's heart raced with excitement. "I'll do it." The thought of Edana's death set his blood on fire. He would do anything to make it happen.

"Very good. Your hatred pleases to me. You deserve a reward."

Before these words were uttered, Morfram's wounds began to heal. He felt his strength growing as his purpose did. When his body was whole once more, Morfram smiled into the darkness.

The war had only just begun.