

Oath of the Brotherhood

THE SONG OF SEARE
BOOK ONE

CARLA LAUREANO





CHAPTER ONE

The mist hung from the branches of the ancient trees like threads from a tattered banner, though the last vestiges of sunlight still glimmered on the horizon. Conor Mac Nir shivered atop his horse and tugged his cloak securely around him, then regretted the show of nerves. He had already seen the disdain in the eyes of the king's men sent to escort him. There was no need to give them reason to doubt his courage as well.

A weathered, scarred man on a dun stallion made his way from the back of the column and fell in beside him: Labhrás Ó Maonagh, Conor's foster father.

"It's too quiet," Labhrás said, his gaze flicking to the dark recesses of the forest. "The animals have gone to ground—they sense the unnatural. Keep your eyes open."

The twenty warriors quickened their pace, battle-hardened hands straying to their weapons for reassurance. Conor gripped his reins tighter. Now he understood the comfort a sword brought. Not that it would be of any use to him. He would be no help against dangers of the human kind, let alone whatever lurked in the mist.

He felt no relief when the road broke away from the trees, revealing the first glimpse of Glenmallaig's earthen ramparts and the stone dome of the keep within. The mist had already found a foothold, wreathing the top of the walls and giving the impression they stretched unendingly skyward. The moat's stale waters lapped at the base of the walls. Glenmallaig made no pretensions about being anything but a fortress, solid and impregnable.

"Steady now," Labhrás murmured.

Conor drew a deep breath. Few knew how much he dreaded this homecoming, but Labhrás was one. Other men might have taken the honor and considerable financial rewards of fostering King Galbraith's son without a thought to the responsibility it entailed, but Lord Labhrás had raised him as he would have brought up his own child. By contrast, the king had not shown a shred of interest in Conor for his entire seventeen years.

He swallowed hard and tried to disappear into the folds of his cloak as the drawbridge descended toward the bank. The leader of their escort gave a terse signal, and the procession lurched forward amidst a thunder of hooves on timber. Conor shuddered as he passed into Glenmallaig's courtyard, a wash of cold blanketing his skin—too cold, considering the fast-approaching spring. The carts carrying Labhrás's tribute to the king clattered across behind them, and the bridge once again crept upward.

Inside the courtyard, wood smoke and burning pitch drifted on the air, stinging his nose. It should have been a welcoming vignette, but the orange firelight only cast the mist-filled courtyard in a sickly yellow glow. Conor cast a glance over his shoulder just as the drawbridge thudded shut, sealing off the life he'd left behind him.

Foolish thoughts. Conor shook them off as he dismounted and winced at the twinge in his muscles as they adjusted to solid ground. A hand on his elbow steadied him, the iron grip incongruous with its owner's graying hair and finely lined face.

"Home at last," Dolan said under his breath, a tinge of irony in his voice. More than merely a devoted retainer, the manservant had become a friend and confidant over the nine years of Conor's fosterage at Balurnan. Dolan knew better than anyone the fears Conor's return stirred within him.

A pale, skeletal man descended the steps of the double-door entry, headed for the captain. After a moment of quiet conversation, he strode in their direction with a cautious smile. Conor squinted, then drew a sharp breath. The last time he had seen Marcan, the steward of Glenmallaig had been in the bloom of good health, commanding the household with a mere word. Now his clothing hung from a gaunt frame, and shadows marked the pale skin beneath his eyes. Surely the mere passage of time couldn't have effected such a transformation.

"Welcome, my lord Conor," Marcan said with a bow, his voice as

calm and capable as ever. “Your old chamber has been prepared for you. Come.”

Dolan gave him a nudge, and, reluctantly, Conor followed Marcan up the front steps into the great hall. Torches threw flickering light on the cavernous room, from its rush-covered floor to the curve of the ceiling, though they could not quite dispel the shadows at its apex. Conor’s gaze settled on four unfamiliar men standing before the dais that held the king’s throne. From their elaborately embroidered clothing, he guessed three of them to be lords of the realm. The fourth’s clean-shaven head and plain robes marked him as a cleric.

The priest turned, revealing the black tattoos that etched his neck and curled up behind his ear. Conor halted as he met the piercing blue gaze, unable to summon the will to move. The sensation of a thousand insects scrambled over his skin.

Lord Labhrás’s solid form cut off his view, breaking his trance. “Take Conor to his chamber,” Labhrás told Dolan. “I’ll be up directly.” Only when the servant took Conor by the shoulders and turned him down the adjacent corridor did he realize he was trembling.

Who was the man? And what had just happened? Conor struggled for breath as they ascended a long flight of stairs, a pang of foreboding striking deep in his gut. He gave his head a sharp shake to clear away the sluggishness. Only once he was halfway up the stairs did he regain enough clarity to survey his surroundings.

They looked completely unfamiliar.

He glanced behind him to the hall to reassure himself they hadn’t detoured while he was in a daze, but no . . . this was the main staircase to the upper floor. He must have traveled this very path thousands of times, both in his early years at fosterage and in his visits back home.

Why couldn’t he remember it?

Marcan stopped near the top of the stairs and pushed a door open. “Here we are, just as you left it. Your trunks are being brought up now, and I’ll send the boys in to fill the tub.”

Conor stepped inside, expecting a rush of recognition, but this room felt just as foreign as the stairway. Faded tapestries dampened both the chill and the echo from the stone walls. Fine woolen blankets and a wolf’s pelt covered the shelf bed on one end, and a single chair with a

threadbare cushion stood beside the carved oak armoire. Opposite it, a wooden bathing tub waited, already half-filled with water.

The door banged open to admit four of the keep's servants, each pair carrying a heavy wooden trunk between them. They plunked them unceremoniously near the door, then escaped into the corridor without a bow or even a nod.

Dolan scowled at their backs, then turned to the trunks and loosened the leather straps on the nearest one. He immediately began to unpack Conor's garments with practiced efficiency, shaking out the wrinkles before he hung them in the wardrobe.

Conor watched Dolan work for several minutes. "Who were the men in the hall?"

"Three of them were minor lords."

"And the fourth?"

Only the slightest pause in the servant's movements betrayed his discomfort with the question. "Unless I miss my guess, there is a druid once more at Glenmallaig."

Conor sank onto the edge of the bed, his breath catching in his throat. *A druid.* They were not uncommon in the kingdom of Tigh. Most were quiet, contemplative men, content to remain isolated in the nemetons until they were called upon to perform the rites of Tigh's gods and goddesses at the quarter year or to tender folk cures for ailments. Conor had come across their kind outside Balurnan, and while the Balianes denounced their pagan ways, few could perform any magic beyond benign hearth charms.

Yet this druid's suffocating presence said he was no harmless earth wizard. Conor had grown up hearing stories of the Red Druids, blood mages of immense power that counseled kings and led men in battle. Could this man be one of them? Did the Red Druids even still exist, outside of history and bards' tales?

Before he could voice his thoughts, a light knock at the door announced the arrival of two boys with steaming buckets of water in each hand.

"Bathe," Dolan said, while the boys emptied the water into the tub. "I'll go fetch your supper. Lord Labhrás should be up soon."

Conor smiled his thanks, though food was the last thing on his mind. It was bad enough he was about to face his father and explain why he had not yet laid hands on a sword. Now he might have to contend with a Red

Druid, whose kind were notorious and ruthless inquisitors, a man who looked at him as if he already knew Conor's most dangerous secret.

He forced down his unease and stripped off his travel-stained garments. His skin prickled, but a quick glance over his shoulder assured him the door remained closed. He slid quickly into the bath's meager concealment. *Breathe. They couldn't know.* Labhrás had been careful. No books of Scripture or religious symbols had come with them, and Dolan's discretion was unquestionable.

If the king found out, it would take only a whisper to destroy Labhrás's status in the kingdom. Galbraith may have relaxed the restrictions on Balianism during his reign, but not so long ago, adherence to the forbidden faith would have landed their severed heads beside the keep's gate. Even now, Balian converts did not retain possession of their lands and titles for long.

Lord Balus, protect us, Conor prayed silently, not daring to give voice to the words. May You be the shield between us and our enemies. May You be the Light that guides our path. May everything we do further the work of Your kingdom.

He let out a long, shuddering sigh and sank further into the warm water, concentrating on moving his breath in and out of his lungs. Inch by inch, he forced his mind away from his worries. He could not afford to seem afraid here. To show any discomfort would only make them wonder what he was hiding.

Conor.

He sat bolt upright in the bath, sloshing water over the sides. He whipped his head around, looking for the source of the whispered voice.

I know what you conceal, Conor. Soon, they all will. I can protect you.

Gooseflesh prickled his skin, and the warm water turned cold. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

Join me, Conor. You'll be safe . . .

He jerked awake with a yelp and slid underwater before he even realized he had fallen asleep. He surfaced, spluttering, to find Labhrás watching him from the doorway.

The older man's lips twitched. "Taking a swim?"

Conor blinked. Steam still rose from the surface of the water, and the floor beside the tub was dry. A dream. Just a dream.

He shook his head with a self-conscious laugh. "Not intentionally."

He wrung water from his tangled hair and reached for the cloth beside the tub. Only once he had dried himself off and tugged a clean linen shirt over his head did he dare voice his question. “Is it true? Is there a druid at Glenmallaig?”

Labhrás nodded and sat down on the bed. “His name’s Diarmuid. He’s been present at court for at least a year, though I’d be surprised if he hasn’t had an influence for longer than that. I don’t need to tell you—”

“—the less he knows of us, the better? No. That one I figured out for myself.”

Labhrás sighed. “There are things we must discuss, Conor, but they are not topics for tonight. Eat, try to get some sleep. We’ll speak tomorrow.”

“Aye, my lord.” Conor knew better than to press him, even though there was little chance he could put any of this out of his mind tonight. He watched his foster father move to the door and then called out, “Lord Labhrás?”

“Aye, Conor?”

“I don’t remember this place. Any of it. My chamber, the hall. . . . It’s only been three years. I should remember something, shouldn’t I?”

He expected Labhrás to reassure him, to tell him he had been grieving his mother when they last visited Glenmallaig, too young to remember anything before that. Instead, Labhrás met his eyes seriously. “Aye, you should remember something. Good night, lad.”

Conor exhaled heavily and scrubbed his hands over his face. Nothing about this trip felt right. Not the escort, not the mist, not the druid’s presence. He was not foolish enough to assume any of it was connected—not yet—but he knew with certainty he was far out of his depth.



CHAPTER TWO

“Conor, wake up!”

Conor jolted to alertness, his hands flying up to shield himself before he realized it was only Dolan. Bright sunlight already streamed through the bubbled glass windows of his chamber. He let out a long breath and scrubbed the sleep from his eyes while he found his voice. “What time is it?”

“Late. I let you sleep through breakfast, but now you’re wanted in the hall.”

“The king?”

“Indeed. Get dressed. He is not a patient man, your father.”

Conor slid from bed and dressed reflexively in the clothes Dolan handed him. The moment he dreaded was almost upon him. Would his father berate him in front of everyone? Or was it to be a private audience, with no one to witness how Galbraith expressed his displeasure?

He was still struggling into his coat when Dolan shoved him unceremoniously into the chair and yanked a comb through his tangled hair. “A good thing we have no need for warrior’s braids.”

“Don’t remind me.”

When Dolan was finished, he offered a brass hand mirror, but Conor ignored it. He knew what he would see. Dolan had left his dark blond hair long and loose, as was the fashion for boys. Only men who had taken the field of battle were permitted to wear the many thin braids as a symbol of their valor. His fine wool jacket, worn over a linen shirt and pleated knee-length tunic, only served to highlight a rawboned frame that had yet to grow

into a man's physique. In a court that prized appearances, this was just one more area in which he was bound to disappoint.

"Let's have this done with," Conor said, rising. With any luck, his father would only give him a quick once-over before he returned to more important matters. After all, the return of a son from fosterage was hardly a state occasion, even if it did coincide with a meeting of the king's council. Conor squared his shoulders and strode into the corridor, steeling himself for the audience below.

His steps faltered when he and Dolan entered the great hall. Men and women filled the room, pressed shoulder to shoulder and dressed in finery the likes of which Conor had never seen.

Voices rumbled at the front of the hall. Then, one boomed out, clear and deep among the rest. "Marcan, where is my son?"

Marcan appeared beside Conor and Dolan. "Right here, my lord."

Heads swiveled toward them. As Marcan led him forward, the crowd parted, and whispers rustled through the room. Conor kept his eyes fixed firmly ahead. The cloying scents of perfumed oils, straw, wool, and silk closed around him, and the press of so many bodies after the isolation of Balurnan roused his instinct to flee. By the time the throne came into view, he could barely breathe.

King Galbraith had always loomed large in Conor's memory, but he had chalked it up to a child's outsized perceptions. Now, he realized his memories were accurate. Clad in a wolf's-fur cloak with the steel crown of kingship upon his brow, the king nearly filled the throne. His waist-length hair, brown-blond like Conor's, fell in warrior's braids over his shoulder, and several plaits decorated his long beard. Beside him stood Lord Riocárd, Galbraith's champion and captain of the guard, bearing the sword of kingship. The captain was a formidable man in his own right, fierce-eyed and broad-shouldered, but even he was dwarfed in his lord's presence.

Conor looked away before his eyes could betray his anxiety—into the face of the only man he feared as much as his father. Lord Fergus, the king's tanist, was an older, paunchier version of Galbraith, and he made the king seem downright warm by comparison. He took Conor in, a slow, predatory smile spreading across his face.

Beside Fergus, a second man scrutinized him as one would observe an insect through glass, emotionless. The druid himself. Conor suppressed

another shudder at the symbols of dark power tattooed on his neck and hands.

“Come here, boy,” Galbraith said. “Let me see you.”

Conor tore his eyes away from the observers and moved forward to kneel on the lowest step. He pressed his trembling hands together in front of him.

“Look at me!”

Conor jerked his head up and stared forward while the king’s gaze roamed over him.

One corner of Galbraith’s mouth twisted in displeasure. “Tell me, have you started your training yet?”

“What training would that be, sir?”

“Don’t be clever with me. You know to what I refer. Sword, bow, spear.”

“No, my lord.” Conor’s voice came out strangled, forced from his constricted throat.

“Then what exactly have you been doing for the last nine years?”

“Studying, my lord.”

“Studying?” Galbraith’s tone changed, a note of curiosity in it.

Conor’s heart lifted slightly. “Aye, my lord. History, mathematics, literature, astronomy, law, languages—”

“What languages?”

“I can read and write the common tongue, as well as Ciraeon, Levantine, and Norin. My Melandran is passable, and I know a bit of the Odlum runes.”

Galbraith stared at him for a long moment. The hall fell silent but for the crackle of torches and the occasional rustle of a lady’s gown, every eye riveted on the spectacle before them. Then, in one swift movement, Galbraith reached over and ripped the sword from the scabbard in Riocárd’s hands. The ring of metal echoed in the hall as the blade stopped a fraction of an inch before Conor’s eyes.

“The only language our enemies understand is the language of the sword.” Galbraith’s eyes locked unflinchingly on his son’s.

Then the weapon was gone, tossed back to Riocárd. Galbraith stood, his expression thunderous as he scanned the assemblage. “Labhrás, where are you?”

“Here, my lord.”

All heads turned toward Lord Labhrás where he stood at the edge

of the gathering. He wore unadorned garments of fine wool, though he was easily the equal in wealth to any of the onlookers, and he remained unruffled beneath the king's furious stare. Conor would have given anything to possess even half that calm and dignity.

"I sent you a son, and you bring me back a daughter! Explain yourself."

"I did as I was asked, my lord." Labhrás's voice was soft, unchallenging. "You wished your son to be educated."

"As a warrior, not a scholar! What good is a man who cannot lift a sword to defend himself and his people? You have brought shame to Tigh."

Labhrás took a step forward, his expression hardening. "It is no shame to know of the world outside one's palace, my lord. Conor is a diligent student, and he excels in all he puts his hand to. I would think any man would be proud to call him his son."

Gasps rippled through the crowd at Labhrás's audacity, and Galbraith's face turned an unhealthy shade of purple.

"You dare—"

"I did what was agreed upon, my lord. Shall I remind you of the terms of that agreement?"

Galbraith's mouth compressed into a thin, hard line. Conor looked between the two men in amazement as the king swallowed a sharp response.

"Then you may take responsibility for what he has become. He is no son of mine." He strode down the dais and passed Conor without another glance.

Someone sniggered in the silence, but Conor barely noticed as the room wavered around him. He had been dismissed, possibly disowned, the favor that fell on an only son withdrawn as quickly and easily as Galbraith's tossed sword.

"Come, Conor." Labhrás lifted him to his feet, his hand clamped around Conor's biceps. He steered him away from the gathering toward an intersecting corridor.

The druid stepped into their path with a pleasant smile. "Allow me to introduce myself, young man. I'm Diarmuid."

Conor blinked back a wave of dizziness. "You're the druid."

"Aye. Considering your education, I suspect you understand what that means better than most."

Labhrás inserted himself between Conor and the druid, his expression hard. “It’s best I return the boy to his chamber now.”

Diarmuid merely smiled. “When you want answers, Conor, all you need do is ask.”

Before Conor could puzzle through the cryptic offer, Labhrás ushered him past the man toward the stairs. “That could have gone worse.”

“How?”

Labhrás arched an eyebrow, and Conor remembered what they strove to keep from the king and his druid. The question of religion, and the fact his education could not have been accomplished without the services of a Balian priest, had never arisen.

Conor felt stronger and clearer with every step away from the hall, and his dizziness faded. He thought back to the exchange between Labhrás and Galbraith. Was the king actually afraid of what Labhrás might say? Never would he display that kind of weakness before the lords of the realm unless what Labhrás could reveal would be far more damaging.

When they reached Conor’s chamber, they found Dolan waiting. “So?”

“About what we expected,” Labhrás said.

Conor looked between the men, open-mouthed. “You knew this would happen? You knew my father would disown me?”

“That was for show,” Labhrás said. “Clan law doesn’t allow him to disown blood. But aye, I expected his anger. As did you.”

“I suppose I did.” Conor focused on his foster father again. “What was that all about? What agreement?”

Labhrás and Dolan exchanged a glance, and then the servant slipped out the door. Labhrás gestured for Conor to take a seat on the bed and pulled up a chair beside him.

“Perhaps I owe you an apology. Most of that had nothing to do with you. You recall, of course, that your uncle, Riordan, sat the throne before your father.”

“He abdicated in order to join the Fíréin.” Conor understood the pull of the legendary brotherhood. Nearly every young boy in Seare fantasized about being one of those preternaturally gifted warriors, but only the Balian clans followed the tradition of sending the firstborn son to the Fíréin. That a king of Tigh would abandon his throne in favor of a Balian warrior-brotherhood was unfathomable.

“Galbraith was not the council’s first choice as Riordan’s successor,”

Labhrás said. “Several of us, myself included, looked to the minor royal branch, though a Mac Laighid has not sat the throne for generations. Riordan, however, pushed hard for Galbraith’s election. He swung enough votes to win him the tanistry, and when he abdicated a few months later, he handed him the throne.”

“Why not just take himself out of the succession?”

“If he did that, he couldn’t influence the council’s selection. Of all the candidates, Galbraith was most likely to be sympathetic toward the Balian, considering your mother was one. The king—and the rest of the council—are well aware he owes his throne to a Fíréin brother. That’s why he didn’t argue when Riordan returned from Ard Dhaimhin and insisted you be fostered with me.”

Conor’s mind whirred. “I never even met Riordan. Why would he take such an interest in me?”

“Even I don’t know that,” Labhrás said. “We were practically brothers, raised together in fosterage, but he always kept his own council. He was very specific, though. You were to be raised in our faith, and you were to be given an extensive education.” Labhrás placed his hand on Conor’s shoulder. “You see now why Galbraith would not want such a thing revealed. Should the Balian’s involvement in his choices become common knowledge, the council might dethrone him.”

No wonder his father was furious. Conor’s scholarly pursuits and lack of fighting skill drew far too much attention to a fosterage that should never have been arranged. Yet he still couldn’t fathom why Riordan would have gone to so much trouble for him.

Labhrás stood. “I’ve given you enough to think about for one day. But first . . .” He dipped a hand into the neck of his tunic and drew out a pendant on a long silver chain, then draped it carefully over Conor’s head. “This has been with me for long enough. It’s yours now.”

Conor lifted the heavy pendant in his palm, his blood whooshing too fast through his veins. It was a wheel charm, a ring of ivory with three carved spokes representing the tripartite nature of Comdiu, a clear symbol of the Balian faith.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“It’s a relic of the Great Kingdom, one of the few remaining objects of power. Keep it close, and keep it hidden. It will help.”

“Help what?”

“No more questions. Some things are better left unspoken.” Labhrás placed a light hand atop Conor’s head and then left the room.

Conor turned the charm over and studied the runes inscribed there, but his knowledge of Odlum was too rudimentary to be of any help in deciphering their meaning. He briefly considered stowing it in one of his trunks. But Labhrás did nothing idly. If he’d given Conor the charm, he’d thought he needed the protection. Conor dropped it beneath his tunic before he could examine too closely the dangers from which he was being protected.

Dolan entered and shut the door firmly behind him. “Let’s see it then.”

It took Conor several moments to work up the courage to draw out the charm again. “Lord Labhrás said it was an object of power.”

Dolan peered at it, but he made no move to touch it. “Labhrás has worn it for years. I’ve always suspected Riordan meant it for you when the time was right.”

“What do you know about all this?”

“I’ve served Labhrás since we were both children,” Dolan said. “He’s told me what I need to know to keep you safe, nothing else.”

“And this?” Conor held up the charm. “This really has . . . magic?”

Dolan just smiled.

Conor rubbed his eyes wearily. Too much had happened in the last day to process. His dishonor before the court, the story of the kingship, the druid’s presence . . . and now he wore an object, which by all accounts was imbued by some long-forgotten Balian magic. The beginnings of a headache pulsed in his temples.

“I have to think,” he muttered, rising. “I’ll be back in time for supper.”

Dolan’s brows knit together, but he didn’t try to dissuade him. Conor concealed the charm and headed straight out his door. Since he barely remembered the layout of the keep, he picked a route at random and began to walk.

Iron-bound doors dotted the stone hallway, but Conor didn’t try any of the handles. When he reached an intersection, he turned left down another corridor, this one decorated with moth-eaten, smoke-stained tapestries. This was part of the structure guests would never see. He trailed his fingers along the rough-hewn stone as he walked. The torch beside him guttered in an unseen breeze, yet the interior hallway had no

doors or windows. He stopped as a shard of memory surfaced. Perhaps his direction had not been random after all.

Slowly, Conor pushed aside one of the tapestries to reveal a narrow wooden door. His hand trembled on the latch. *Coward*. He drew a long breath and pushed the door inward on well-oiled hinges. Hidden, perhaps, but not forgotten.

Conor stepped into blackness, the tapestry swinging back to block the torchlight. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could make out the dim shapes of a chair and some sort of cabinet. He stretched out his arms, and his fingers brushed stone on either side.

How could he have known this was here, but not remember the room itself?

A memory jolted him abruptly: his younger self, crouched in the corner while Galbraith shouted and a woman sobbed in the distance. His mother. He could almost hear the shouting now . . .

But no, that wasn't part of the memory. He really could hear voices. He held his breath, straining his ears for the source of the sound until he could distinguish individual words.

"—the coast of Gwydden. Some say they're making a permanent settlement."

"Sofarende don't settle. They pillage and burn and go back to their islands."

"Not this time. If they establish a permanent base—"

"Enough." Though Conor had not recognized the other voices, there was no mistaking the king's authoritative baritone. "The Sofarende are a real threat, whether they settle or not. Eventually, they'll look for richer targets, and Tigh is the first in sight."

Conor realized he was hearing a private meeting of the king's council, filtered up from the chamber below. He should leave immediately—he couldn't be the only one who knew of this room—but he couldn't pull himself away from the conversation.

"We can handle an invasion," Fergus said scornfully. "Why run to Faolán for help?"

"Because they will share the casualties. And whether you admit it or not, they command more skilled warriors in the northern territories than we have in all of Tigh. It's time to make our peace with the Mac Cuillinn."

Silence fell. Conor barely breathed.

“You know I must object to this plan, my lord,” Labhrás said after a long pause. “Sending Conor to Faolán—”

“You have only yourself to blame,” Galbraith said scornfully. “If you’d raised the boy in a manner befitting his station, I would never have considered such a thing. At least now Conor can be of some use to Tigh.”

Blood drummed in Conor’s ears. He didn’t want to hear any more. He stumbled over the chair in his haste to get to the door and pushed into the corridor without considering who might be on the other side of the tapestry.

The hallway was still deserted, though, so he took a moment to catch his breath. He should never have stayed once he realized the room’s purpose. How had he found it the first time? And who else knew of its existence?

Conor steadied himself with a hand against the wall while his other one reached automatically for the charm beneath his shirt. The ivory emanated a subtle but unmistakable warmth through the linen.

Only then did he realize that for the first time since returning to Glenmallaig, his mind felt completely clear.

It couldn’t be a coincidence his buried memories had led him here right after he put on the charm. Was that what Labhrás meant when he said it would help? Did that mean his memory loss was due to another, darker sort of magic? If Diarmuid truly was a Red Druid, such a spell wouldn’t be beyond his ability. But if that were true, what was he trying to make him forget?

Conor had to work out the details before anyone learned of his suspicions. At least it sounded as if he wouldn’t have to conceal them for long.

The king was sending him to Faolán.

As a hostage.



CHAPTER THREE

Conor paced the confines of his chamber for the next two days while he waited to hear his fate firsthand. The books he brought from Balurnan held his attention for only so long, and he was too distracted to put up much of a defense in his games of King and Conqueror with Dolan. When the servant put Conor's king into check for the second time, he simply tipped the marble game piece in surrender and pushed away from the game board.

"The silence is maddening," Conor said. "I'm going for a walk."

Pacing the dim, smoky hallway did nothing to relieve the smothering sense of stillness. Labhrás's country manor was smaller and more humble than this colossal keep, but it had been alive with warmth and laughter. Right now, smells of the evening's supper would be drifting across the courtyard from the kitchen, signaling the coming night. The household warriors would eat with them in the hall before a cheery fire, while Labhrás's three daughters took turns telling tales culled from educations no less thorough than Conor's.

His chest ached at the recollection. His family was in Balurnan, regardless of the clan name he bore. He couldn't imagine King Galbraith calling for him in the evenings as Labhrás had, to mull over the day's events to the sound of the harp. The instrument had been in the Maonagh clan for generations, but they called it Conor's harp since he was the only one who could coax a melody from its aged rosewood frame. He would give anything to be back there now, his hands on the strings, instead of sitting in this oppressive keep, waiting for someone else to decide his fate.

"The harp!" Conor's feet carried him halfway down the corridor before he fully registered his intentions. He passed the secret chamber behind the

tapestry, turned a corner, and stopped before a door that looked like every other entryway in the palace.

The latch gave easily, and the door opened into a large, dark room. Conor removed one of the thick candles from the iron stand inside and lit it from the torch in the hallway, then touched the flame to the other wax columns. They flared to life, bathing the room in a warm yellow glow.

Layers of dust and cobwebs covered the tapestries and darkened the colorful rug on the stone floor. Conor swept aside one of the cloths that covered the furniture and found a high-backed chair beneath it. When he lifted the flower-embellished cushion, he was rewarded with a memory of his mother, young and auburn-haired, painstakingly embroidering it by firelight.

“My mother’s sitting room.” How long had it been since he had set foot in this chamber? He’d last visited Glenmallaig three years ago, the same trip during which she’d had her accident, but those memories were as inaccessible as the others.

He wandered past the covered chairs and tables and stopped short before an object in the corner. Beneath the covering lay a beautiful Seareann lap harp, far finer than his instrument at Balurnan, its maple soundboard elaborately carved with mythological creatures. He touched a string, and it sprang back with a metallic hum, bringing with it a shard of memory.

He sat at his mother’s feet as she held the harp in her lap. Her fingers moved nimbly up and down the strings, demonstrating the major scales and chords, which she named as she plucked them. Conor reached out to touch the instrument.

“Would you like to try?” she asked, smiling down at him.

Conor sucked in a ragged breath. His mother had played the harp? How could he have forgotten that? He tried to hold on to the image, but he could have sooner captured smoke in his hands. Tears threatened to pool in his eyes.

Instead, he settled into the chair with the instrument. He plucked each string and made minute adjustments to the pins until every note rang true. When he played an arpeggio, a shiver of anticipation rippled across his skin.

Conor began with Labhrás’s favorite song, a ballad about a man who returned from war to find his family had moved on without him.

That turned into a cheerier tune Labhrás's wife favored. One by one, he played through each of his foster family's most requested songs: a mournful ballad for Morrigan, the eldest daughter; a lively reel for Etaoin, the middle child; and finally a silly jig that had something to do with a dog disguised as a bard. He smiled as he imagined eight-year-old Liadan singing along in her off-key soprano.

Then the song shifted into a melody Conor couldn't remember hearing, let alone playing. Music poured from the instrument, filling the room and reverberating through his bones while he lost himself within the notes of the song.

The door burst open with a bang. Conor's fingers slid from the strings with a discordant twang as Labhrás shut the door behind him and snuffed out the candle flames with his fingertips. "Not a sound."

Gooseflesh prickled Conor's arms, and his heart thudded in his ears. He lost track of how long he sat there in the dark, gripping the harp. Perspiration beaded on his forehead and slid down his face.

Just when Conor had reached the limits of his patience, Labhrás broke the silence. "You mustn't play here. You reveal too much. Come, quickly now; the king's summoned you."

Conor carefully set down the harp and rose, his gut twisting at the urgency in his foster father's voice. He followed Labhrás out the door and down the stairs to Galbraith's private chamber, the same chamber above which he'd eavesdropped just two days ago.

Inside the study, the king sat behind a large table, flanked by Fergus and Diarmuid. He gestured for Conor to approach.

"I'm sending you to Faolán. You're to leave with Lord Riocárd in five days."

Conor's knees almost gave way, even though he had been expecting this very announcement. "Faolán. For how long?"

"Until you're of age, at least. We've signed a treaty with King Calhoun. You're to be his hostage to ensure our good faith."

"I see. Is that all, my lord?"

Galbraith raised a hand in dismissal. Conor turned on his heel, and Labhrás opened the door for him.

"One more thing." The king's voice hardened. "Was that you earlier? The music?"

Conor's heart rose into his throat, but he composed his expression

before turning back to the king. “I’ve been studying in my chamber most of the afternoon.”

Galbraith gazed at him, his brow furrowed while he gauged his truthfulness. Then he waved him off.

As Conor turned back to the door, Diarmuid reached out and gripped the back of the king’s chair. Only then did Conor notice the fine sheen of sweat on the druid’s forehead.



“That was very unwise of you.”

Conor frowned at Dolan. He had expected the servant to reassure him about his upcoming journey to Faolán, not berate him for something he hadn’t realized was prohibited. “I still don’t understand why I can’t play.”

“After your mother died, the king decreed there was to be no music in the palace. Perhaps he couldn’t bear to be reminded of her.”

Conor remembered little—a fact of which Dolan was trying to take advantage—but even he knew his parents’ marriage had been a political alliance, not a love match. He had seen how unwell the druid appeared. No, he was willing to bet the druid had forbidden music, not the king.

He could voice none of those thoughts, however, so he put on a humble expression. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

Dolan looked unconvinced, but he nodded. “We’re going to Faolán then. I think you’ll find some differences in the hall of a Balian king.”

“Was this part of Riordan’s plan?”

“I don’t see how it could be. That decision was made years ago, and this was only decided in the last few days.”

Conor nodded, but things were falling into line far too neatly to be coincidence.

They are not coincidence. Not everything is decided by the plans of men.

Conor shivered. He rarely heard Comdiu speak so plainly. Even though he had been raised in the Balian faith, even though he knew Balus was Comdiu incarnate, he still had a difficult time believing his God intervened so directly in the lives of believers.

“In any case,” Dolan continued, “Lisdara will be a cheerier place to live than Glenmallaig, hostage or not.”

Hostage. That word brought him back to reality. He was not merely a guest, nor was this a long-term alliance through marriage. Galbraith had

need of Faolán's warriors, and his son's life was simply surety. Conor had been disowned and dishonored, removed from any hope of leadership. He was a sacrificial pawn. When he was no longer of any use to Tigh, his life would depend solely on his value to Calhoun Mac Cuillinn, a fierce warrior of great repute.

Suddenly, Conor's future—and his safety—looked far less certain.

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CHAPTER FOUR

A tailor accompanied Dolan to Conor's chamber the next morning. Despite Galbraith's contempt for his son, it seemed he would not let him leave for Lisdara unprovisioned. It would reflect poorly on the king should Conor arrive with only one chest of plain clothing better suited to a minor landholder than a king's son.

The tailor took his measurements with his fleshy lips pursed in dissatisfaction. Conor endured the perusal in silence. His scrawny frame would not do justice to the fine clothing, so he left the selection of fabrics and trims to Dolan's judgment. He wouldn't pretend to be something he wasn't merely to avoid his father's displeasure.

You've pretended to be something you're not for years. It's the clothing that bothers you?

Conor shifted uneasily, earning a glare from the tailor. The piercing comments came more frequently now, and Conor couldn't say he was entirely comfortable with them. He voiced his disquiet to Labhrás, expecting his foster father to discount the episodes as imagination.

But Labhrás only nodded. "Until now, you've looked to me for direction, but you are practically a grown man. It's time you let Comdiu guide your decisions."

"So you don't think I'm imagining things?"

"Not at all." Labhrás placed both hands on Conor's shoulders. "Just remember, it's your choice what to believe and how much to reveal."

"Aye, my lord." Conor's throat tightened around the words. Until now, he hadn't understood all Labhrás had done for him. Though they shared no blood, Labhrás *was* his father.

“I’m proud of you, son. You will bring honor to Tigh.” The older man squeezed Conor’s shoulders. Then he changed his mind and pressed him into a strong embrace. “Look to Comdiu, and you won’t go wrong.”

Labhrás released him and moved to the door. Then he turned back, his expression sober. “If you ever need anything, and I’m not . . . available . . . remember I’m not the only one looking out for you. You’ll always have a place with kin if you want it.” He sent him a sad smile, then slipped out the door.

Conor sank down on the bed, the warmth he’d felt moments before squeezed out by a cold, hard knot in his middle. Surely his foster father hadn’t meant the words as they sounded. Did Labhrás believe he was in danger? Was Conor in danger too?

That alone would have been unsettling, but the kin to whom his foster father referred could only be his uncle, Riordan.

If something happened to Labhrás, Conor was to join the Fíréin brotherhood.



Once more, Conor traveled among armed, mounted men, and once more, their presence did not comfort him. A party of this size traveled slowly, with its complement of foot soldiers and mounted warriors. An endless stream of carts clattered along behind them, carrying their tents, food, and personal belongings, as well as a display of Tigh’s bounty for King Calhoun. At this pace, they would spend five days on the road, most of it only a stone’s throw from the ancient forest, Róscomain, and the dangers that lurked within. Even the brigandine jacket Conor wore, with its heavy metal plates sewn to boiled leather, failed to reassure him. It only reminded him how ineffective their weapons and armor would be against the threat in the mist.

But Róscomain’s dark, threatening edge became tedious after a few hours, and by midday Conor began to succumb to the monotony. He marked the regular movements of the outriders as they scouted ahead for threats. He listened to the conversations of men around him and tried to guess the regions of their birth from the subtle differences in their accents. He even composed harp melodies in his head to entertain himself.

When at last the light began to fade and the first tendrils of mist twined the trees, Lord Riocárd called a stop. The servants transformed an open

meadow into a canvas village with astonishing speed, setting out lavishly furnished tents for both Riocárd and Conor. Dolan brought him a bowl of stew and a chicken leg with a flask of well-watered mead, but the food could not distract him from the tree line. Boredom may have dampened his anxiety over their proximity to the forest, but the falling darkness reminded him that he had legitimate reasons for fear.

Despite his nervousness, as Conor listened to the low sounds of men and horses among the creaks of armor and the crackle of campfires, his heavy eyelids drifted down. He retreated to his tent, where he wrestled off his brigandine and stretched out fully clothed atop a plush feather bed. As soon as he tugged the blanket over himself, he fell asleep.

Until a woman's voice, low and sultry, beckoned him. *Conor.*

The sound entwined him, wrapping him in shivery fingers of pleasure. Half-sedated, Conor sat up slowly in his bed and stared toward the forest.

Lay the charm aside. You don't need it. Come to me.

Conor's hand closed around the charm, and it sent a jolt of alarm through his body. He startled awake, covered in gooseflesh despite the warmth of his blanket.

"They're out there." Dolan crouched beside Conor's cot, the low flame from the single lantern glinting in the servant's dark eyes.

"What are they?"

"Old magic from the beginning of time. The pagans call them the Folk, an ancient, half-human race that lives between our world and the next. But Balians believe they are the Fallen, the celestial beings who turned against Comdiu before time began. He gave them leave to wreak their will upon the earth. For a time, they were bound, but as Balus's gifts wane, so does the protection against them. We call them the sidhe."

In the dark, Conor trembled. Dolan had never spoken openly of the threat in the mist, and knowing the truth only heightened his fear. Until this moment, he hadn't realized exactly how sheltered he'd been at Balurnan. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"So you won't be drawn by their call. The sidhe can't harm us directly. They can only deceive us, and our faith makes us less susceptible to their lies." Dolan patted his shoulder. "Rest now. I'll keep watch."

Conor stretched out on the cot and closed his hand around the ivory wheel. Despite his efforts to sleep, disturbing questions swirled through his mind. The sidhe had beckoned him before. This time, though, the call

had been harder to ignore. Would they just keep trying until he could no longer resist?

The camp stirred long before daylight without Conor finding sleep. Smells of smoke and cooking food wafted on the breeze with hushed voices and the sounds of weapons being checked and horses prepared. Then a string of curses drifted through camp.

Dolan left his side in a flash, disappearing from the tent before Conor could poke his head out the flap. When the older man returned, he wore a grim expression. “We lost three men last night. Left their horses and armor behind.”

Conor’s eyes went to the trees, where the mist had already begun to recede. “What did Riocárd say?”

“He’s calling them deserters. They’ll double the watches tonight, but it won’t help.”

“You sound as if this is not the first time.”

Dolan glanced back at the milling camp, the tightness of his mouth betraying his concern. “Not all casualties of past campaigns have been from battle, lad. Róscomain takes its due, even if the enemy takes more.”

Conor shuddered. He might have escaped the sidhe’s grasp last night, but he knew how close he’d been to succumbing to the voice. Had he not been wearing the charm, he might be among the missing.

They rode well into twilight the second day, resting the horses and foot soldiers only as long as necessary and eating cold meals to avoid the time it took to light fires. The warriors eyed the tree line warily, grasping swords and spears at the slightest noise.

As Dolan predicted, Riocárd doubled the watch.

Despite his fears, Conor slept soundly, troubled only by the usual dreams of the unknown. In the morning, though, another warrior was missing, and the two dozen men on watch couldn’t account for his disappearance. He had simply vanished.

“Or the others were spelled,” Conor muttered as Dolan helped him into his armor.

Days melded into nights in a dreamlike fashion as they continued their progress toward Faolán. By the fifth day, when they at last broke free of the shadow of Róscomain in favor of open country, even the heartiest warriors looked drawn and anxious.

In four nights, they had lost eleven men.

They entered the meadowlands that indicated the border between Tigh and Faolán, the dark demarcation of Róscomain barely visible in the distance. The warriors drew their first easy breaths since leaving Glenmallaig. Here in the open country, the sidhe held little sway. Everyone knew the creatures of the mist clung to their dark forest, content to prey upon those who traveled the king's road.

That night, the mist blanketed the open country as thickly as it had the forest's edge. In the morning, three more men were gone.



CHAPTER FIVE

A contingent of Faolanaigh warriors met them in the meadows as the sun edged midway from its apex to the western horizon. The eight guardsmen rode powerful Gwynn stallions, each man dressed plainly in leather and plate with hammered helms. The Mac Cuillinn's green standard flapped above them in the brisk afternoon breeze.

Riocárd called a halt and waited as a single man in the center rode forward. The Faolanaigh warrior removed his helm, displaying a shock of copper hair that curled wildly out of warrior braids, and tucked it under his arm. "Lord Riocárd, on behalf of Faolán, I bid you welcome and offer you the hospitality of Lisdara."

Riocárd dipped his head in acceptance. "Mac Cuillinn, I gladly accept your offer."

Mac Cuillinn? Conor gaped at the disheveled man while Riocárd took his place alongside the Faolanaigh king and the guards shuffled themselves into order around them. Conor hung back with the other Timhaigh where he could observe their host unnoticed.

Although it was hard to judge on horseback, Calhoun Mac Cuillinn seemed to be of middling height and powerfully built, evidence of long years wielding a sword. A close-clipped red beard covered the lower half of his handsome face. His eyes, hazel-green and attentive, scanned their party and the surroundings with military discipline. Conor instantly liked him.

He was so absorbed in his study of the king he didn't notice the keep until it loomed before them. Mortared walls of gray stone rimmed a flat-topped hill, and ancient oaks, already leafing out with spring foliage, lined the interior walls. Beyond, barely visible through the greenery,

rose the domed slate roof of the palace itself. Unlike Glenmallaig, with its stark lines and mist-wreathed battlements, Lisdara exuded warmth and welcome.

The road to the keep wound up a series of steep switchbacks, narrowing at times to a width barely sufficient for a cart. Conor kept his mount carefully to the inside wall and fixed his gaze straight ahead, not daring to look anywhere but the road until they leveled off before an open pair of massive timber gates.

Up close, Lisdara was even more impressive. Gray stone slabs paved the courtyard, and brilliantly colored glass windows marked the upper floor of the cylindrical keep, displaying scenes from the Balian Scriptures, as well as saints, kings, and martyrs. Conor had heard about such magnificent artistry from his tutor, but he'd never thought he would see it in person.

As the procession rattled into the courtyard, the arch-topped doors of the palace opened and spilled out a host of servants. A middle-aged man, tall and thin with bright copper hair and beard, stepped forward. He bowed first to the Mac Cuillinn, then Riocárd.

“Lord Riocárd, welcome to Lisdara. I am the Mac Cuillinn’s steward, Leannan. We’ve prepared the guest house for you, and there is ample space in the meadow below for your men.”

“I’m sure the accommodations will be adequate, Leannan,” Riocárd said calmly. He dismounted and handed his reins to a stable boy, then looked to Calhoun. “I imagine you will not begrudge us a bit of rest before we come to the hall?”

Calhoun, still atop his own mount, dipped his head graciously. “Of course. My servants will see to any needs you may have.”

Riocárd nodded stiffly, reminding Conor the two nations had not so long ago been enemies.

“My lord, may I take your mount?”

Conor snapped his gaze away from the men. A young boy looked up at Conor expectantly. Conor dismounted and put the horse in the boy’s charge, then watched Leannan direct the chaos in the courtyard with practiced calm. Servants unloaded trunks and took horses to the stable, while the guardsmen retreated back down the hill to the meadow below. He scanned the space for Dolan and his possessions, but found neither. He’d have to find his quarters on his own, then.

Conor made it only a few steps toward the guest house—a large, thatch-covered structure on the western edge of the enclosure—before a man blocked his path. He stumbled to a halt.

The king of Faolán stood before him, surveying him with a thoughtful smile. “You must be Conor.”

“Aye, my lord.” Too late, Conor realized he should bow and managed only a graceless bob of his head. A flush crept up his neck. Hardly the impression he’d hoped to make on the man who controlled his future.

To his credit, Calhoun only clapped a large hand on his shoulder and turned him toward the palace. “Leannan!” The slender steward emerged from the throng immediately. “Will you show our new guest to his chamber?”

Calhoun turned back to Conor, smiling warmly. “We’ll have time to get acquainted later. Right now, let Leannan take you to your quarters. If you need anything, just ask him.”

Conor watched Calhoun stride back into the crowd, speechless, until Leannan caught his attention.

“This way, my lord. I’ve already had your things sent up.”

Conor followed the steward up the front steps of the keep, still stunned by the friendly and utterly informal welcome. They passed through Lisdara’s elegant hall, and the steward glanced back to make sure Conor was still following before leading him down an adjoining corridor. “I took the liberty of putting you on the family’s side of the keep. The guest quarters are grander, but these are more comfortable.”

Conor followed Leannan up the long flight of stairs, mentally marking their path. The palace was bigger than it looked from the outside, far bigger than Glenmallaig, which had always seemed like the largest structure in Seare. The steward turned right down an intersecting corridor at the top of the stairs, then left at another short one. Conor sensed movement out of the corner of his eye and whipped his head around in time to see the swish of skirts into one of the chambers.

He stared at the empty corridor, wondering who the girl was, until he realized Leannan was standing before an open door.

“This is your room.”

Conor entered hesitantly. Sunlight streamed through another stained-glass window, casting fanciful patterns across the spacious stone chamber. Embroidered draperies enclosed a shelf bed topped with a

luxurious-looking feather mattress, and a large chair sat by the window. On the other side of the room, his trunks awaited unpacking beside the tub.

“You’ll want a bath before supper,” Leannan said. “I’ll send someone up with hot water. Would you like refreshment in the meantime?”

“Aye, thank you. Leannan . . .”

The man turned in the doorway. “Aye?”

“I’ve lived rather simply my whole life. You don’t need to go to any trouble for me. We both know I’m a hostage.”

“It’s no trouble. Besides, the Mac Cuillinn gave orders you were to be treated like family. If there’s a mistake, you’d best take it up with him.” A smile twitched at the corners of the steward’s mouth.

Conor fought his own smile. “In that case, perhaps we shouldn’t bother him.”

“Very well. Let me know if you need anything.”

Conor stared at the closed door long after Leannan left. He’d been at Lisdara for a handful of minutes, and already he’d experienced more kindness than he’d received in his own father’s keep. Was that what Dolan had meant by the difference in the hall of a Balian king?

Moments later, a procession of boys arrived to fill his tub. Dolan hadn’t yet reappeared, so Conor stripped off his clothing and eased into the bath with a sigh. After five days on horseback, he’d forgotten how luxurious a tub of warm water could be.

The door creaked open, and Dolan poked his head in with a smile. “I see you wasted no time.”

“I couldn’t stand the road dust any longer.”

Dolan entered, balancing a platter, and then nudged the door shut with his foot. “Leannan sent this up for you.”

Conor’s stomach rumbled at the sight of soda bread spread with butter and honey. He took the wooden mug in a dripping hand and sipped cautiously. Sweetened, heavily watered mead traced a warm line down his throat. Dolan unpacked his finest garments from his trunk and laid them on the bed.

“Where exactly am I supposed to wear those?”

“The feast tonight, of course. An alliance between Tigh and Faolán is unprecedented. All the lords of the realm have come to witness the event.”

The once-comforting mead sloshed in Conor’s stomach, considering a

quick exit. He felt awkward enough at his own father's court, and now he was to be put on display at Lisdara?

"How many exactly?"

"Conor, relax. No one expects you to do anything but smile and nod and pretend to enjoy yourself. The attention will be on Riocárd and Calhoun anyway."

"I hope you're right." For the first time, Conor was glad for his new wardrobe. He may not be the warrior his father expected, but at least he wouldn't shame his homeland.

Minutes later, wrapped in a clean linen cloth and trying to force down the soda bread, he considered the clothing Dolan held up before him. "I'll leave it to you. I can't believe we're to feast after so long on the road. Sleep would be a far kinder welcome."

"Calhoun will treat Lord Riocárd as he would your father, and that means lavish feasts. The Mac Cuillinn may lack vanity, but he understands how this game is played."

Conor flopped back on the bed cushions with a sigh and pressed his fingers to his eyes. A game. His father had surely devised this alliance as just part of a larger plot that would benefit neither him nor Faolán. But Calhoun wouldn't consider such an agreement unless he too had a plan in which a royal hostage could be of use.

Conor stifled a yawn. As his heartbeat slowed, the tension knotting his shoulders melted away. It couldn't hurt to close his eyes for a moment, could it?

Conor woke to gentle shaking. He jerked upright and nearly collided with Dolan, who bent over him. The stained-glass windows were dark, and several thick candles now lit the room.

"The guests are already in the hall," Dolan said.

Conor's heart lurched. He looked down at his shaking hands and knew he'd be lucky to put on his own boots.

Fortunately, Dolan had no intention of letting Conor do anything on his own. The servant sat him down firmly in the single chair and began the tedious task of combing the tangles from his damp hair. Conor gritted his teeth while Dolan fashioned locks into tiny plaits. Apparently, no one was supposed to know about Conor's failures, even if the warrior braids were a blatant lie.

Dolan then dressed him in layers of fine linen, wool, and silk, all in

royal Timhaigh blue. When the servant held up the mirror for him, Conor hardly recognized himself. Glenmallaig's tailor had done an admirable job in using pleats and tucks to camouflage his lack of muscle. The effect wasn't half bad.

"I look . . ."

"Like a prince." Dolan smiled and set the mirror down. "Now, enough admiring yourself. It's time to go to the hall."

On cue, a servant appeared at the door. Conor shot one last, helpless look at Dolan before following the boy down the corridor to the staircase, where he was handed off to a richly dressed page. At the entrance of the great hall, Conor halted. He had expected a few dozen lords and ladies, not this gathering of hundreds. Strains of a lute drifted over the deafening roar of voices.

To Conor's everlasting gratitude, the page did not announce him, though he hardly needed to. As soon as he stepped into the hall, all heads swiveled toward him, and their curious eyes took him in from top to bottom. He fixed his gaze on the dais and reminded himself to breathe, only to have the air whoosh from his lungs again.

Beside a man who strongly resembled Calhoun—presumably the king's younger brother and taniist, Gainor—sat the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Pale red-gold hair fell in ringlets over her shoulders, and even from this distance, Conor could tell her eyes were the luminous gray of quicksilver. His heart took up residence in his throat. It could be none other than Lady Niamh, Calhoun's twenty-year-old sister, "the jewel in Lisdara's crown." For once, the lavish descriptions had not been exaggerated.

A moment later, the page handed him off to yet another servant, who led him to his chair. His pulse quickened when he realized he was to be seated beside her, but she did not even acknowledge his presence. Fortunately, Calhoun and Riocárd chose that moment to make their entrance. The assembled guests rose to their feet in one motion, the women applauding and the men pounding their fists on the tables. Calhoun grinned broadly as he passed through the cacophony, pausing every few steps to converse with his lords. Riocárd held himself confidently, but he knew his part, and he hung back in deference to the king.

Calhoun took his place on the dais and held up his hands. The noise ceased, and the guests took their seats amidst a rustle of silk and linen, anticipation written in their expressions.

“My lords and ladies of Faolán, it has been a generation since we have had the pleasure of hosting our Timhaigh brethren. I consider it the greatest honor to present Lord Riocárd of Tirnall, champion to the king of Tigh.”

The room erupted into applause, and fists pounded on wooden tables again, as if Calhoun had announced the king himself. Riocárd stood and gave a slight bow. When the noise died down, Calhoun continued, “I also would like to welcome King Galbraith’s son, Conor, whom I will have the pleasure of hosting here at Lisdara for the next several years.”

The response was only slightly less enthusiastic for this announcement. Conor flushed and threw a grateful look toward Calhoun for his generous welcome, not daring to look at Niamh for her reaction.

Servants appeared at every entrance to the hallway, bearing spectacular platters of fried fish, roast pheasant, and candied vegetables. A goblet appeared at Conor’s elbow. He took it and sipped the heavily spiced wine while other servants began to dish out choice morsels.

The man to Niamh’s right leaned back with a friendly smile and held out his hand. “I’m Gainor, Calhoun’s brother. Welcome to Lisdara.”

Conor smiled in return and clasped Gainor’s forearm. “Thank you, Lord Gainor. I’m certain I’ll like Lisdara, if this welcome is any indication.”

“Calhoun knows how to throw a feast. As you’ve no doubt guessed, this charming creature beside you is our sister, Niamh.”

Conor bowed his head, afraid to look her in the face. “Descriptions have not done you justice, my lady.”

“Nor you, my lord.” The press of Niamh’s lips into a thin line belied her practiced tone. Her eyes slid over him before she turned her attention back to her own wine goblet.

Gainor pushed himself away from the table and settled into the empty seat on Conor’s other side. “Don’t mind her. We mere mortals are beneath her notice. Now, you don’t need to learn everyone’s name right away, but I’ll at least tell you who to hide from.”

Gainor waited for the last servant to move away, then attacked the sumptuous-looking food loading his plate. Conor picked at the food while Calhoun’s brother pointed out various guests.

“That right there”—Gainor indicated a handsome young man with night-black hair—“is Keondric Mac Eirhinin, lord of Rathmór, Faolán’s largest holding besides the king’s. His clan has always supported Mac

Cuillinn even though Clan Eirhinin has royal blood. He's the wealthiest man in Faolán besides Calhoun."

"So should I avoid him or grovel before him?"

"Don't worry. He's far too rich and important to be bothered with the likes of you."

Conor grinned. He picked out a hard-looking older man with graying hair and sharp features. He reminded Conor of Galbraith's lords. "What about him?"

"Good eye. Avoid him. He hates everyone except Niamh. He's had designs on her for years."

"But he's old enough to be her father!"

"His son's old enough to be her father. All the same, don't get cornered by him. Lord Duggan has a terrible temper."

"Duly noted."

Conor's plate looked more appetizing as his stomach unclenched, the unexpected empathy lifting his spirits.

He scanned the room again, and his eyes fell on a girl he was sure had not been there moments before. She was unremarkable but for a mane of shiny hair that fell in a sheet around her shoulders. Her pale green silk gown clearly hadn't been made for her—it hung off her small frame and clashed with the honey color of her hair. She glanced in his direction, and their eyes locked. Her gaze pinned Conor in his seat. A chill, not altogether unpleasant, rippled over his skin.

"Who's that?" he choked out, finally daring to break the connection.

Gainor followed Conor's gaze. "Aine, our half sister. I hadn't thought she would attend."

"I didn't know you had another sister."

"Our mother married an Aronan chieftain after our father, the king, died. We hardly knew Aine, but since both her parents have passed, Calhoun invited her to live at Lisdara. I'll introduce you tomorrow. You're of an age, I think."

Conor nodded mutely, his mind returning to the odd sensation that stretched between them. Was he so naive about women he could be struck speechless by two of them in the same evening? No, he had been taken by Niamh's beauty, but this was something completely different. He felt as if he knew Aine, even though he was sure he had never seen her

before tonight. He dared another glance in her direction, but her place was now vacant.

For the rest of the meal, Gainor entertained him with witty stories about other feasts and carefully unnamed guests, though the chill emanating from Niamh was almost palpable. She'd probably expected far more from the son of a Timhaigh king. He could hardly blame her for being disappointed. He fell short of his own expectations most of the time.

The noise in the hall died abruptly as a man dragged a chair to the foot of the dais. He was unassuming, dressed in well-made but drab clothing, his dark hair touched with gray. Only when he produced a stunning walnut harp did Conor realize he was not a servant. Anticipation fell heavily in the hall, the silence unbroken even by the rustle of clothing.

"The bard, Meallachán of Killary," Gainor whispered.

Conor barely heard him. He had never dreamed he would be sitting a handful of feet away from the most celebrated bard in Seare.

Meallachán took his time tuning the harp, then began a plaintive melody that felt both familiar and wondrously new, his fingers flying over the strings. When he began to sing in a mellifluous tenor that enriched and deepened the ethereal sound of the harp, Conor at last understood the reason for the bard's renown. Calling both Conor and Meallachán musicians was like classifying both a raindrop and an ocean as water.

The melody washed over him as his eyes drifted closed. His heart ached at the sheer beauty of the music, and his fingers itched to take up a harp and join its voice to the harmony. He settled for committing each note to memory with the hope of later reproducing even a fraction of that wondrous sound. When the last notes died away, he opened his eyes in time to see Gainor wipe tears from his cheeks.

Conor met the gaze with his own blurred eyes, and the king's brother smiled sheepishly. Even Niamh looked moved. As the bard launched into a folk tune meant to break the melody's spell, Conor glanced down the table and saw Calhoun watching him thoughtfully.

The king gave him a slight nod, then turned his attention back to the bard, leaving Conor to wonder exactly how much of his soul he had bared on his face when he thought no one was looking.



CHAPTER SIX

“The Mac Cuillinn has invited you to breakfast in his chambers.”

Conor rolled over and rubbed his eyes. He had slept deeply and dreamlessly for the first time since leaving Balurnan, but he still felt tired. Sunlight already cast kaleidoscopic patterns through the stained-glass window.

“I’m to dine with Calhoun? Why?”

Dolan fixed Conor with a hard stare. “He’s the king. He needn’t explain himself.”

Conor threw back the blankets. “Something understated then. Best to show a full measure of humility.”

Twenty minutes later, dressed in a simple tunic belted over a saffron-dyed linen shirt, he followed a servant through the maze of hallways to the opposite side of the keep. When they came to a closed door at the end of the corridor, the servant knocked lightly and pushed the door open. Conor took a halting step inside.

The king and his three siblings sat at a small, rectangular table near the windows. Calhoun glanced up and waved casually at an empty seat. “Conor, come. The tea’s getting cold.”

Conor wordlessly slipped into the vacant seat beside Niamh, directly across from Aine. Calhoun nudged the earthenware pot in his direction before he resumed his conversation with Gainor about the honey production in Lisdara’s hives, but neither girl gave any sign of awareness of his presence.

His ears burned as he poured tepid liquid into an empty cup. He clearly didn’t belong here. Why had Calhoun invited him if no one was

going to even acknowledge him? To his relief, several servants chose that moment to arrive with their breakfast: warm oatcakes with honey and butter, poached fish, and fried quail eggs. At least if he was eating, he wouldn't be expected to make polite conversation.

Calhoun looked up from his conversation as if seeing him for the first time. "Conor. Have you met my other sister, Aine?"

Aine's gaze flicked to Conor's face. Her eyes were the same quicksilver gray as Niamh's, dark-lashed and intelligent. For a moment, he forgot to breathe. She was not nearly as plain as he had first thought. Then he remembered Calhoun's question and stammered out, "Uh, no, I haven't had the pleasure. My lady."

Aine dipped her head and offered a reserved smile before returning to her meal. Calhoun looked between the two of them with a thoughtful expression. The Mac Cuillinn was far too perceptive.

"I like to breakfast with my family when I'm at Lisdara," Calhoun said. "You are not obligated to join us, but know you're welcome at my table."

Conor swallowed. "Thank you, my lord. You're very generous."

"Not at all. Now, there's a matter we must discuss."

Conor's heart beat harder at the ominous statement, but he kept his expression blank.

"We value education in my household. Brothers Treasach and Iuchbar have generously come from the monastery at Loch Laraigh for that purpose, and I think you will find them as knowledgeable as your tutors back home.

"On the matter of your sword training, Gainor and I have agreed it can wait until you settle in. After that, Gainor will work with you himself until you feel comfortable joining the men in the yard."

Conor supposed he should be embarrassed by how keen Calhoun's measure of him had been, but he couldn't summon anything but relief.

"In the meantime," the king continued, "you'll have your afternoons free to pursue your own interests. I thought perhaps you might spend some time with Meallachán."

This time, Conor could not keep his shock from his face. "Meallachán?"

Calhoun arched a brow. "Did I get that wrong? I guessed you were a musician."

"No. I am. At least, I try. But Meallachán?"

“It’s your choice. None of my siblings have the talent or the inclination, and it seems a shame not to take advantage of his willingness to teach.”

“It would be a great honor,” Conor managed at last. “Thank you, truly.”

Calhoun waved off Conor’s thanks. “Good, that’s settled. Now, I believe Treasach is expecting you three in the library.”

Niamh rose immediately, but Aine didn’t move. Instead, she addressed her brother in a surprisingly deep, Aronan-accented voice. “By your leave, Calhoun, Mistress Berrach asked me to go to Fionncill this morning.”

“As long as Ruarc accompanies you,” Calhoun said.

“Thank you.” Aine’s brilliant smile lit her entire face and once more shattered Conor’s train of thought. “I’m looking forward to putting my studies into practice.”

Calhoun gestured to the older sister. “Niamh, you can show Conor to the library then.”

Niamh shot Conor a pointed look, and he leapt to his feet, his chair’s legs shrieking against the stone floor. He gave Calhoun a hasty bow. “Thank you, my lord.”

The king waved him away once more, and Conor followed Niamh back into the hallway. His awe faded with each step. Niamh might be beautiful, but she was also sullen and rude. Aine, on the other hand, merely seemed reserved.

That smile, though, had been anything but shy. Who was Mistress Berrach to elicit that sort of reaction? And what sort of business did she have outside Lisdara?

He certainly couldn’t ask Niamh. Even if she did deign to speak with him, she seemed no friendlier with her half sister than she was with him. Instead, he fumbled to fill the silence. “What exactly do Treasach and Iuchbar teach?”

“Treasach’s specialty is languages, history, and geography. Iuchbar teaches mathematics and law.”

“Which do you prefer?”

“Languages.” A chilly half smile formed on her lips. “I wouldn’t worry if you don’t take to it. From what I hear, a Mac Nir needs only wield a sword.”

Heat rushed to Conor’s cheeks. She had obviously guessed what the delay in Conor’s training meant. A surge of defensiveness propelled his next words—in Norin. “Normally, you would be right. But my education has been somewhat unconventional.”

Niamh stared at him, uncomprehending.

He switched to Levantine. “The language of the Kebarans perhaps?”

Another blank stare. Finally, he said in the common tongue, “I wouldn’t worry about it. From what I hear, a Faolanaigh princess need only be sweet and biddable to catch a husband.”

Niamh’s expression hardened. He hadn’t thought it possible for her to look any colder. Inwardly, he cursed his impulsiveness when she picked up her pace, forcing him to nearly run after her.

When they arrived at the library door, Niamh looked at him pointedly, and it took a moment to understand what she wanted. He jerked the door open, and she brushed past him without a glance.

Lisdara’s library was twice the size of Balurnan’s, high-ceilinged and packed with books. Small square tables, each with two chairs, had been placed strategically around the room. Niamh sat at one of them, her glare warning Conor away from the empty seat beside her. He chose another spot and turned his attention to his new teacher.

One thing seemed certain about Treasach: priesthood was a recent avocation. In contrast to the soft, contemplative look of the priests he’d encountered, Treasach was built like a fighter, broad-shouldered and heavily muscled, with large, scarred hands. The scholar’s queue at the nape of his neck struck Conor as a ridiculous disguise, like putting a collar on a warhorse and calling it a hunting dog.

His smile of welcome was genuine, though, and he approached Conor with an outstretched hand. “You must be Conor. Welcome. I’m Brother Treasach.”

“Thank you.” Conor gave him something halfway between a nod and a bow. “I’m looking forward to returning to my studies.”

“Good! Let’s begin then. I take it Lady Aine’s not coming?”

“She had other business. The Mac Cuillinn approved.”

Treasach nodded and retrieved a large tome from the table. To Conor’s relief, the topic was not language, but history, specifically Ciraeen social and political structure. Within minutes, Treasach had drawn Conor into a lively debate about the merits of republican and monarchical rule.

“Seareanns have combined the best of both methods,” Conor said. “The Senate never could have accomplished what the emperor did because they spent too much time debating theoretical topics. Likewise,

Cira had too many tyrannical rulers for the people to ever fully embrace such a method of government.”

Treasach smiled wryly. “You do realize the Seareann kingdoms are monarchies?”

“Of course. But even in Daimhin’s time, the clans were free to rule themselves and elect their own kings, while having the advantage of a higher authority to settle disputes, make peace, and organize an army.”

“So you’re a proponent of reinstating the High Kingship?”

Conor hesitated. “I think there are some tactical advantages to centralized rule, especially in times of war. But it would take a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions to bring it about now.”

“Well put, Conor.” Treasach gave a satisfied nod. “Have you aspirations of politics then?”

“Certainly not, sir.”

Treasach smiled and closed the book. “I think that’s enough for today. I’ll see you, and hopefully Aine, tomorrow.”

Conor rose from his seat and moved toward Niamh. Rude or not, she deserved an apology for his harsh words. But she rushed from the room before he could reach her.

“Give her time,” Treasach said softly at Conor’s shoulder. “She’ll come around.”

Conor wasn’t so sure. If he hadn’t let his anger get the better of him, he wouldn’t have to work twice as hard to win her over. As he left the library, though, he remembered her dismay at being seated with him at the feast. Somehow, he doubted anything he did would make her view him with less than contempt.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Aine Nic Tamhais left Calhoun's study with a distinct uneasiness in her stomach. Truthfully, the sensation had not been far from her since coming to Lisdara four months before.

Her father, Alsandair Mac Tamhais, had always spoken of Seare as a wild place, barely one step removed from its pagan roots, enmeshed in magic both dark and mysterious. Aronans thought themselves highly civilized and pragmatic, an affectation that made them closed-minded about anything that hinted at the supernatural. Lord Balus's coming had ended the need for magic, they said, and anyone who practiced it must serve a darker power.

Aine's pace quickened as she returned to the chamber she shared with Niamh. Magic hung heavy over Seare. She had felt it as soon as she set foot on the dock: the pulse of a pure, brilliant power, and beneath it, a sinuous strand of something older and much darker. That same darkness lingered in the forest beyond Lisdara, and sometimes she felt it seeking, testing the protections woven into the keep's walls. No one else seemed to notice the invisible battle that waged beyond, though, and admitting her sensitivity would only bring unwanted scrutiny. Even the ancient healer, Mistress Berrach, did not know Aine's secrets, but the longer she studied with her, the more difficult they were to conceal.

Oonagh, the lady's maid she shared with Niamh, was folding clothes into a large oak chest when Aine entered her chamber. "My lady! I thought you were at your lessons!"

"I'm riding with Mistress Berrach this morning. Will you send for Ruarc? I can find my riding clothes."

Oonagh curtsied in acknowledgement and hurried from the room.

Aine took her time selecting a brown wool dress and a lightweight cloak from the wardrobe. She had just pulled on the clothing when a familiar rap sounded at the door. She slid a sheathed knife onto her belt and buckled it quickly, then swept the cloak around her shoulders. When she opened the door, Ruarc lounged against the opposite wall.

Aine had known her Seareann bodyguard for so long it was hard to see him as others did, but objectively, his mere presence was enough to discourage untoward thoughts. Middle-aged, but as lean and strong as he had been in his early years, Ruarc projected restrained menace, like a viper poised to strike.

He was the gentlest soul she had ever met. He could also kill remorselessly with the proper provocation. The latter was likely why Lady Ailís, with her last breath, had passed his duty to Aine. Ruarc never questioned the matter. He had merely appeared at her side, and he had not left it since.

“You look troubled,” he said, falling into step beside her. “What is it?”

“The same as always.”

Ruarc fingered the dagger at his belt, a sure sign he was troubled. “Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to come here. You’ve been unsettled since we arrived in Faolán.”

“And what was there left in Aron? Mother’s dead.” Aine swallowed the lump in her throat. Six months was not long enough to dim her sense of loss. She steadied her voice and continued, “Aunt Macha has no use for me. She tolerated me for Father’s sake. If she found out . . .”

“I know, but—”

“I’ll be fine. It’s just harder to ignore certain aspects of my talents here than it was in Aron.”

They emerged into the bright morning sunlight and started across the courtyard to the beehive-shaped clochan, a stone remnant of a more primitive age that now served as Mistress Berrach’s residence.

“It’s more than that, isn’t it?” Ruarc said, his brow furrowing as he studied her. “Something else is bothering you.”

“It’s nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing. The Mac Nir boy disturbed her. She couldn’t look at him without feeling the subtle hum of energy, a stronger, brighter version of the threads underpinning Faolán. Worse yet, she had dreamed of him in Aron the night before Calhoun’s invitation arrived. She had

been poised to decline until she was struck with the certainty that that boy waited for her in Lisdara. Instead, the words had spilled out, "Tell my brother I'll come."

Ruarc's frown deepened. "My duty is to protect you, Aine. If you hold things back, it makes my job much harder."

Aine forced a smile and put a light hand on his arm. "I have full confidence in you." A pity his particular skills would be of no help in this situation.

Just as they arrived at the clochan, the door sprang open. An elderly, white-haired woman scowled at them from the threshold. "What took you so long?"

"Forgive us," Aine said, aware that Ruarc was struggling against a smile. He found Mistress Berrach's ill temper more amusing than she did. Then again, he didn't bear the brunt of it. Still, the old healer knew more medicine and herb lore than a dozen of the clan's physicians, and Aine had already learned more from her in four months than in two years with her aunt's knowledgeable, but skeptical, practitioners.

Mistress Berrach thrust a bulging leather sack at Ruarc. "There, young man, carry this for me and go get our horses. Go on, I'm not getting any younger, you know. At this rate, I'll be dead before you return."

Ruarc hid a grin and jogged back across the courtyard to where a boy waited with three blanketed horses.

"Thank you for allowing me to accompany you today," Aine said.

Mistress Berrach harrumphed. "Just don't kill anyone. That's one mistake I can't fix."

Ruarc returned with their horses then, saving Aine from answering. He helped the healer mount first and then gave Aine a leg up onto her own mare. The horse danced nervously beneath her, obviously sensing she was a barely competent rider. Mistress Berrach, by contrast, seemed as comfortable atop her mount as on her own feet, despite the fact horses were not common in Seare outside the palaces of kings.

The horses' hooves thudded on packed earth as they made their way down the steep switchbacks with Mistress Berrach in the lead. At the bottom, the old woman turned due south onto a trail that was little more than a few hoof prints in the grass. Aine would have missed it had she not been following the healer so closely. After a few minutes of open

meadow, the trees began to grow more thickly, forming the young forest that bordered Seanrós. Aine shivered at the touch of magic on her skin.

Mistress Berrach cast a glance over her shoulder. “You feel it, do you? Good. You’re not a total disappointment.”

Aine’s eyebrows lifted. Perhaps Mistress Berrach saw more than she let on.

They traveled slowly through the border woods, breathing in the heavy scent of damp earth and vegetation. After nearly an hour, the small trail joined a larger road, and the trees again thinned into rolling countryside.

Aine drew a deep breath, and her earlier tension began to melt away in the quiet. Peat smoke drifted faintly on the breeze, wafting from the hearths of the whitewashed cottages in the distance. Ivory-fleeced sheep with black faces grazed freely, unhindered by enclosures. A cow lifted its head and lowed softly as they passed.

Up ahead, the road widened into a large area of hard-packed dirt. A square building with a shingled, peaked roof loomed before them, the lime-washed wickerwork and great three-spoked wheel identifying it as a church.

“This is Fionncill,” Mistress Berrach said.

“Only this?” Compared to Aine’s birthplace, Forrais, this smattering of cottages and pastureland hardly qualified as a village.

A throng closed around them as they rode into the square. There were women in rough-spun skirts and wool shawls, tending dozens of children among them. Frail elders, propped up by daughters and grandsons. Men wrapped in bandages or wracked with coughing. Aine threw a panicked glance at Ruarc. So many patients, so many expectations. How could they possibly tend them all?

Ruarc dismounted first and helped her down from her horse. As soon as Aine’s feet touched the ground, several children began tugging at her clothes.

“Are you really the king’s sister?” A tow-headed girl, perhaps six years old, looked up at Aine with wide blue eyes.

“I am. My name is Aine. What’s yours?”

“Mara, m’lady.” The girl bobbed a curtsy and smiled shyly.

A little boy, who had been hiding behind Mara’s skirts, popped to Aine’s side. “Are you going to fix my mama?”

“I’m certainly going to try. Where is your mama?”

The boy grabbed her hand and dragged her across the yard to where a pale, red-haired woman cradled a tiny infant on the front steps of the church. “Mama! This is Aine! She’s going to make you better.”

Color bloomed in the woman’s ashen cheeks. “Hush now, Donall. I’m sorry, my lady. He hasn’t yet learned to hold his tongue.”

“No need to apologize.” Aine smiled and sat down on the steps beside her. “What’s your name?”

“Caitlín Ó Laoghaire, my lady. My husband’s Donall the Elder. One of the Mac Cuillín’s tenants.”

Aine nodded and turned her attention to the infant. “May I?”

Caitlín gave the baby over to Aine without protest. Automatically, Aine extended her awareness into the boy, seeking signs of illness, but she found only a drowsy sense of well-being and the faint stirring of hunger. Whatever troubled the mother, she had not let it affect the care of her newborn.

“How old is this little one?” Aine asked.

“Born a fortnight ago, my lady.”

“A difficult birth, was it?”

“Aye. The midwife barely stopped the bleeding with an application of casewort and yarrow.”

“I see.” Aine handed the child back to his mother. “May I examine you?”

When the woman nodded, Aine made a show of her cursory examination, though she hardly needed to. She immediately sensed the sluggishness Caitlín hadn’t been able to shake off since the child’s birth. The woman had been far closer to death than she knew.

“I’ll mix a tonic of yellow dock, stinging nettle, and dandelion to strengthen your blood,” Aine said. “It may still be a month or two before you regain your energy, though. Try not to exhaust yourself.”

Caitlín bowed her head in relief. “Thank you, Lady Aine. You are very kind.”

“Not at all.” Aine smiled at Mara and Donall. “Take care of your mama, all right?”

The children beamed.

Ruarc handed her a wax tablet and stylus before she could ask. She jotted down the woman’s name, her diagnosis, and the remedy and then moved on to the next patient.

None of the patients taxed Aine’s skills, considering a single touch

revealed what ailed their bodies. She made her examinations and assured them she could mix a remedy back at Lisdara. Soon, her wax tablet was full of names and notes, and the crowd dwindled to only a handful of petitioners.

When the last patients had been seen, Mistress Berrach strode to Aine's side and took the tablet without asking. She scanned the notations, clucking her tongue. "Too fast. You don't spend enough time with the patients."

Aine's cheeks heated. "Do you think I got the diagnoses wrong?"

Mistress Berrach's scowl returned, but her black eyes twinkled. "I have no doubt they are correct. But it won't do to make it look so easy. People begin to ask questions."

Aine swallowed hard. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Don't you? When you touch them, you know what's wrong with them, just as you felt the wards."

Aine tried to deny it, but her dry mouth wouldn't form the words.

For the first time, the old healer looked at her kindly. "I know how difficult it is to keep such a thing secret. There shouldn't be a need. But even here, different can be dangerous."

Then, as if the conversation had never taken place, Mistress Berrach said, "Don't dawdle now, you two. You'd think I was asking you to carry the horse, not the other way around. We still have work to do."

Aine mounted with her guard's help and spurred her mare after the healer, concealing her smile. Apparently she was not the only one hiding her true nature.

A quick glance at Ruarc, however, showed no such amusement. In fact, he looked as troubled as she had ever seen him.



CHAPTER EIGHT

More feasting followed in honor of the Timhaigh guests, and the night after his arrival Conor dressed for a celebration again, this time in slightly plainer garments. As he made his way down to the hall, he was surprised to find only the slightest twinge of apprehension...

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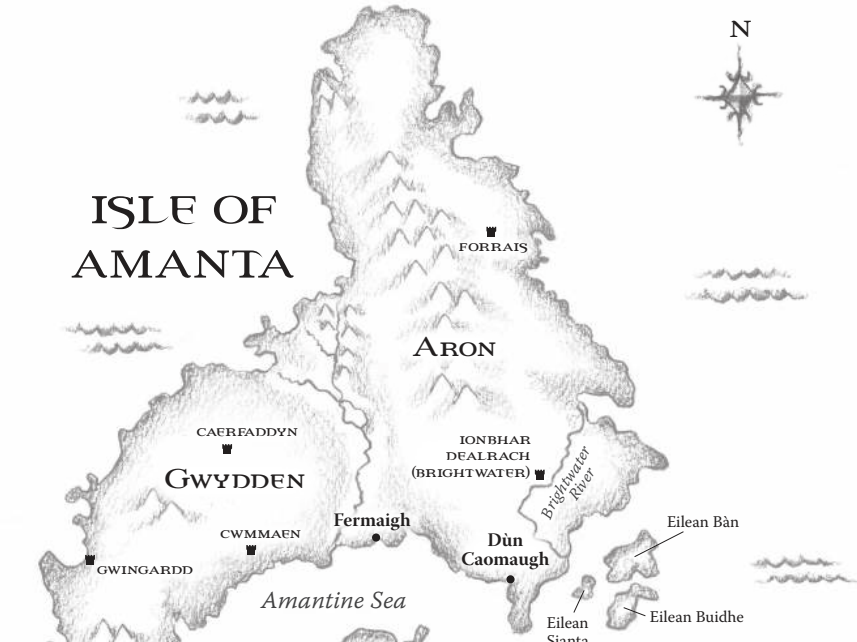
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Carla Laureano is the two-time RITA® award-winning author of over a dozen books, spanning the genres of contemporary romance and Celtic fantasy. A graduate of Pepperdine University, she worked in sales and marketing for more than a decade before leaving corporate life behind to write full-time. She currently lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband, two sons, and an opinionated tortoiseshell cat named Willow.

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Oath of the Brotherhood

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