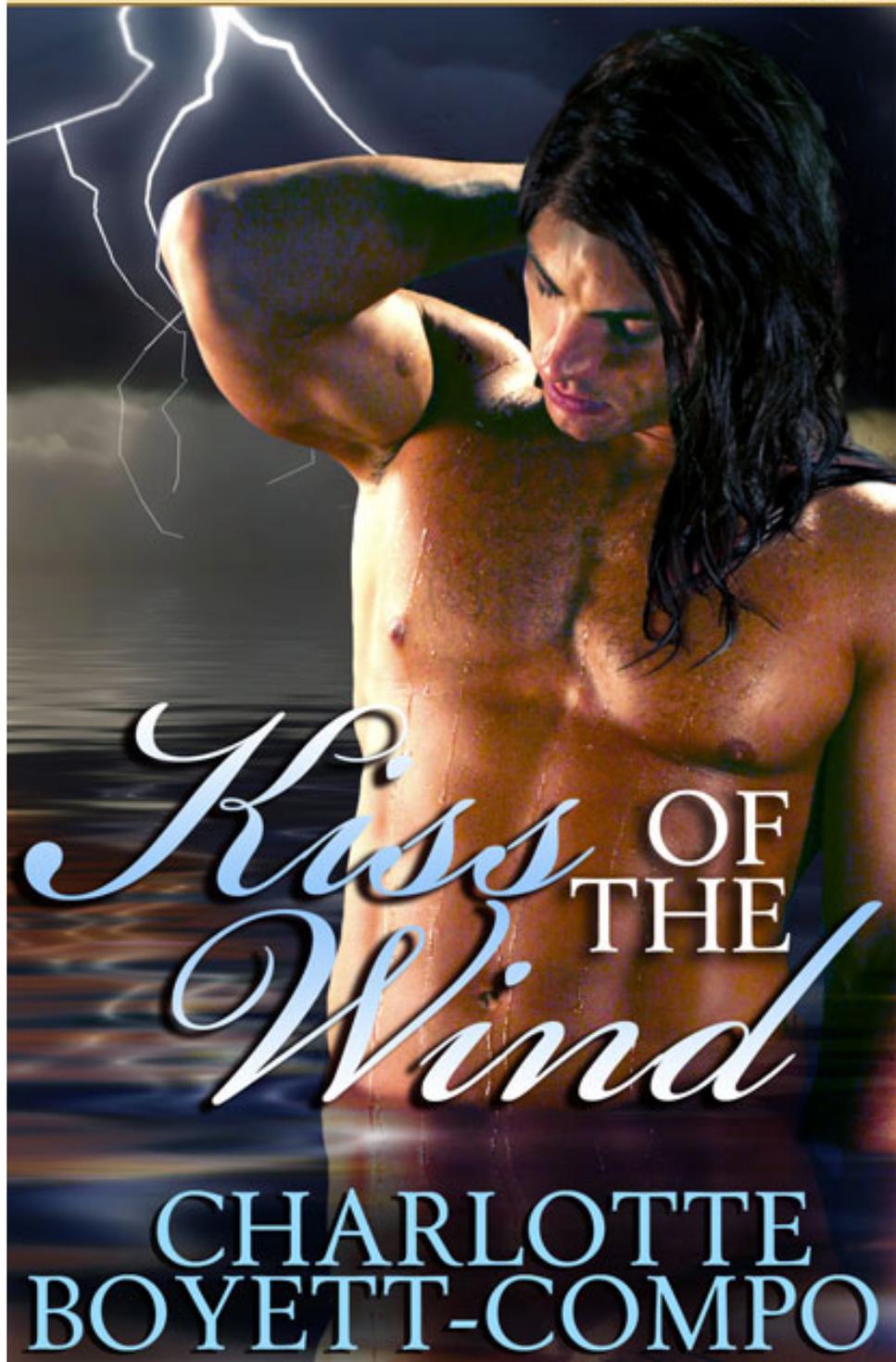


ELLORA'S CAVE XANADU



Kiss OF
THE
Wind

CHARLOTTE
BOYETT-COMPO

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Kiss of the Wind

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KISS OF THE WIND

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Acknowledgement

To Helen C. Chapman, a very astute lady. My Reapers love you as much as you love them!

Glossary

ardan faagail: the funeral platform

Ard-Choyrle: the High Council

arn: the house of prayer

Arreyder: a Lord-Guardian

Ayr 'sy leigh: father-in-law

ben heshee: my wife

ben-Jee: goddess

ben Vraavey: sister-in-law

Braar 'sy Leigh: brother-in-law

briw beg: the magistrate or lawyer gods

Briw Binsch: the Tribunal Judges

bwoirrinagh: lass

caillagh: witch

Carrick Ard: Home of the Wind regent

chaglym: the social hall of the gods

Charvaal: The Abyss

Clagh Folley: the Blood Stone (signifies the Teiyt)

Clagh Ghlass: a Blue Stone

cron tayrn: the lottery for a bride

Currym: the village below Mount Roijit

dooinney: husband

fer caggee: my warrior

fer coadee: warrior guard

Gaey: the Four Winds

Gaey Hwoaie: the North Wind

Gillid: white as snow
halley chymsee: sacred assembly hall
jee: god
Jeeoil: Planet of the Gods
Jee yn Ayr: the Father God
keeill: church
lhiannan: sweetheart
Lommanyn: the RawWinds (ashes are cast)
Mayragh: mother
Mo Regina: My Queen
Mount Riojit: Mountain above Carrick Ard
Mount S'Yrjey: Mountain upon which Jeeoil was built
My ghraih: my heart
myr shen dy row eh: so be it
Plaasagh Mooar: the Grand Palace of the Gods
Prinse lhiass ree: the Prince Regent
Quaiyl: the Court of Law
Quaiyl Vriwny: the Court of Justice
realm of the baanrys: the land of insanity
Shamyr Reayrtey: the Viewing Chamber
shamyr vee: the dining hall of the gods
Sheidaghan: the Windy Place (heaven)
Sheidey: Winged Goddesses of the Four Winds
Shenn Voir: Grandmother (title of great respect for an older woman)
slaneyder: the healer
tarrishagh: beloved
Teiyt: the Chosen One
toshiagh: the village chieftain
Yn Rhuillick: God's Acre (the world)

Prologue

Pain and heartache were two things the Storm Lord knew all too well. Hope was something he had long since abandoned. His life had become one long unbearable night blending into another lonely day filled with despondency then fading into one more miserable night – without surcease and without expectation of anything changing.

It had been years since he had gone to the *Shamyr Reayrtey*, the Viewing Chamber from which he could keep tabs on the villagers. At last check, all had been well there. Lives were progressing as they should. Death was meted out by the Fates in stops and starts, and births came to celebrate the continuance of their species. Those who lived at the base of his mountain were his responsibility, his obligation, and in his careless way he had paternal feelings for each and every one. They feared him, but that was to be expected for he was not like them.

They were human.

He was a god.

Weary and with a heavy heart and lagging footsteps, he climbed the stairs, not understanding why he was being drawn to visit the *Shamyr Reayrtey*. Spying on the villagers always drove his loneliness deeper for the sight of loving families gathered together – laughing and loving and living peacefully – always cut him to the core, drawing fresh heartache. After a visit to the Viewing Chamber his depression always worsened.

Entering the *Shamyr Reayrtey*, he felt the cold intensely. It was nearly as bitter inside the small room as were the chambers of his heart, and just as dark. Only the sky glow coming through the six-foot-square pane of blue-tinted glass relieved the oppressive gloom.

He took his place at the scrying transom and laid a palm to the opaque surface. At once the opacity began to dissolve in a slow circle spreading out from the warmth of his hand until the window before him was clear.

He sighed heavily, and as the north wind howled and spat ice crystals at the window of the *Shamyr Reayrtey*, the Storm Lord laid his fevered brow on the cold glass and stared down at the twinkling lights of Currym, the village that had been his to rule since time began.

For a long time the Storm Lord was content just to watch the wisps of pearl-gray smoke curling lazily up from the various chimneys. As his warm breath fogged the window with each despairing sigh that came from his forlorn breast, he traced aimless patterns on the glass. There was a winter storm passing over the village and no one was out and about on such a dreadful night. Everyone was safely secured behind their doors, snoozing in their chairs or cozy in their beds.

Through the darkness of the late Sauin night, low clouds slipped past the tall steeple of the *keeill* to cast a curious shadow over the holy place. It was this strange glooming, the sudden appearance of something that should not have been there, that caught his attention. His stare sharpened. The breath stilled in his lungs.

He frowned and straightened from his slumped position at the window. His hawklike gaze shifted uneasily over his village – seeking that which had disturbed him, the unknown, mysterious vibration that had chimed resonance in his withered soul. One by one he passed his scrutiny over each and every dwelling in Currym, settling only long enough to slip unseen, unfelt through the hearty stone walls to observe his villagers at their deserved rest.

Most were sleeping soundly, curled warm beneath the covers. Some were tossing restlessly upon their beds, covers kicked aside. A few were kneeling in prayer and he did not intrude on their private words to the gods. Two were arguing with their spouses. One little tyke was being rocked to sleep by his mother who crooned a soft tune. A young boy was snug beneath the covers doing what boys of his age always did after becoming acquainted with that which dangled between their legs.

A hesitant smile appeared on the Storm Lord's craggy face. Deliberately he caused the window of the boy's room to rattle, almost chuckling to himself as the brat snatched his hands out from under the covers.

He would have bypassed one of the more prominent dwellings for it was a fancy hut carved from expensive stone and bore the sigil of the *toshiagh*, the village chieftain, upon its door. Yet there came to him from within a mysterious tugging, and that tugging caught him like a web, pulling him inside.

For a moment he stood incorporeal before the wide cobblestone hearth, watching the red and gold embers striking up through the flue with a soft crack and pop. The hut was otherwise still with only a single lamp left burning low in the common room. He felt comfortable, at ease in this warm place. It had the feel of peace about it. It was a house of love – of that he was sure – and he envied those who made this their home. He inhaled deep and the pleasant odors of a hearty meal that had been served up for supper and the clean scent of candle wax soothed him. Beneath the scent was another that drew him like a moth to a flame. He sniffed again, caught the scent and followed it.

Trailing the palm of his hand over the well-polished curve of a chair back, his gaze fell on rows of books lined upon a shelf and he knew this house was a place not only of love and peace but of learning. This was a sharing place, an encouraging place, a place to rest and be hopeful. A family made this their home and not just a place to lay their heads and fill their bellies. Arguments would be few and far between in such a place.

He sighed deeply, longingly, and the pain of his loneliness ate at his soul. What he would not give to live in such a wondrous place where one was wanted and needed, where each member mattered and was loved. Where hope was more than just a word.

Turning away lest his agony grow too much for him to bear, he would have left this sweet place had not he heard the soft, little moan. His head turned toward that sound

and he stopped—his attention pulled like a magnet to a door a few feet away. He moved to the door, feeling a keen sense of hurt deep within him. He hesitated for a moment longer then drew in a long breath and passed through the wooden panel.

It was a young woman's room into which he'd blundered, and it was to her he felt the tugging. Her scent permeated the room. It was a glorious scent like rose petals and honeysuckle and mountain laurel in the spring. It was a refreshing scent that made him think of brighter days and more loving times. On unsteady legs he ventured farther into the room until he came to stand beside her bed. He looked down and the breath caught in his throat.

Beauty such as he had never known lay there before him. Long, pale hair the color of summer moonlight hung in a thick braid over one slender shoulder. Loving tendrils that had escaped the plait clung gently to a sweet oval face. Thick, golden lashes fanned ivory cheeks kissed with the taste of the winter sun. Lips like ripe red cherries beckoned him to taste, to savor, to sweep the tip of his tongue across their softness. Beneath the frilly edge of the sheet, he saw a lush bosom rising and falling lightly, slowly, the milky globes beckoning his fingers to touch, to caress, to stroke.

She moaned again and a single crystal tear seeped from beneath her long lashes and fell with infinitely gentle slowness down her still cheek.

He stood transfixed—watching the crystalline bead make its way down her soft flesh. His entire body ached with the need to wipe away that tear, to make right whatever had brought on this young one's sadness. He felt a fierce protectiveness that became physical agony welling inside him. He longed for this woman in ways he had never yearned for another and it stung him to the core of his being to know some other man would have the grace of her body, the heat of her love, the beauty of her smile bestowed upon him. Another man would seed her body with his children, care for her, love her and give her all of him. Another man would sleep beside her into old age and hold her in his arms when she left this hateful world.

"If only you could love *me*," he whispered. "What I would not give to have you love *me*."

He closed his eyes and thought of the myriad ways he would love to worship her beauty. His palms itched to travel over every sublime inch of her. His fingers ached to slip inside her wet heat, to experience her slickness, to taste her sweetness. His cock throbbed and burned him unmercifully as he thought about sinking into her tight channel.

Blessed—or cursed depending on the way he looked at it—with a very fertile imagination, he envisioned himself peeling back the covers and lifting her into his arms, cradling her slight weight against him as he carried her back to his castle up the frozen mountain. He could picture her long hair flowing free, cascading down over his arm, stirring gently in the wind as they moved through the night. Her nightgown would waft around her long, supple legs, one slender arm trailing while the other lay pressed between their bodies. Her little toes would intrigue him as they peeked from beneath the hem.

He would carry her to his chamber, the door to which opened of its own accord as he neared. Flames from a hundred candles would burst into life as he took her over the threshold, and the chamber would fill with the sweet scent of jasmine. Upon a thick coverlet of plush white fur he would lay her down, the nightgown slowly dissolving from her shapely body so he could view her as she had been created by the gods to admire. He could almost hear his own intake of breath as her beauty was revealed to him in its entirety.

She would be lovely from forehead to toe with silky-smooth skin and breasts that would fill his palms to overflowing. Her waist would be small, her belly flat, and the curls at the apex of her thighs soft and springy as he threaded his fingers through. Her long legs would part to reveal the glistening pink flesh into which he longed to delve.

He drew in a long breath and scented the special fluid that lay within the walls of her womanhood. It was a spicy, intoxicating scent that made his cock ache as it never had before.

The Storm Lord shook himself mentally for it had been many long years since he had sunk his body into a woman's, had lain beside one. His longing hardened into a burning pain centered in his shaft.

What he would not give to divest himself of his clothing and stretch out beside this vision of loveliness. He could almost feel her juices coating his fingers as he gently thrust them inside her, could almost feel the tightness of her gripping them. The pad of his thumb tingled where he would brush it across the untouched bud that held her passion lying in wait to be freed. The scent of her womanhood rose up to tickle his nose and he inhaled deep, once more drawing her special odor into his lungs and holding it there as he would love to hold her body close to his own.

The sensation of her breasts molding to his hands, the speculated weight of them as he palmed them, the feel of her nipple tightening against his fingertips caused a chill to ripple down his tall frame.

He could picture himself covering her with his own body and nudging aside her thighs to rest the tip of his cock against her opening. As his hands plied her silken flesh, his lips would caress hers, his tongue would slip inside to taste her. He would trail kisses down her chin and neck and draw each tight little bud into his mouth, dragging his tongue over to harden it even more. He would lap at the sweet flesh, lick it, suckle it until she groaned and writhed beneath him, offering her hips to him in need.

And he would sink into that virgin flesh. His cock would break through the fragile barrier that would take her from girlhood to womanhood and he would descend deep into those velvety folds and hold himself there, kissing away the minute pain he had caused in breaching her maidenhead.

Then slowly he would begin to move inside her—stretching her, readying her, showing her how much he wanted and needed what she had to offer. He would take his time making love to her, worshipping her, bringing her into the world of passion

slowly and with care. He could imagine her legs parting even farther then lifting to wrap around his hips as his stroke deepened, quickened.

His palms began to sweat as he thought of shifting them beneath her sweet little ass so he could lift her for a longer penetration. He shivered just thinking of how tight she would be around him, how wet and warm as she clutched at his cock. His heartbeat accelerated just thinking of how satisfying a climax would be with a woman such as this beneath him. His temples pounded from the rushing blood. His cock throbbed unmercifully. Red lights danced at the periphery of his vision.

She moaned in her sleep and turned over to her side, her lush breasts squeezing together to form a deep cleft that drew his gaze directly to it. He ached to press his face to that cleavage, to draw in the sweet scent of her, to run his tongue down the fleshy valley.

“Gods,” he swore, and heard his voice break.

He had to turn away, had to put distance between this vision of loveliness and the desperate need he had to possess her. She was not for him. She would never be his.

No woman would be ever again.

Fleeing the hut, he would have flown straight back to his Viewing Chamber and stayed there to lick his wounds, but once again his attention was caught and held by something untoward in his village. It was floating over this place like a stagnant sheet of decay and it troubled him deeply.

He swept his gaze over the night-darkened lanes and shadowed streets, the moonlit courtyards and empty town square, and when he came to one small hut—a lowly structure though cleanly kept—he felt the overpowering anguish that had settled within those cobbled walls and stopped his inquiry.

This was what had called him.

Death lay heavy upon the structure, and when he passed his incorporeal form into the common room, he saw a body upon its *ardan faagail*, the funeral platform, and around it a family had gathered to grieve.

It was a woman in the middle years of her life who lay upon the soft wool blanket covering the platform. Her face was work-worn but serene—a faint smile curling at her lips. Her rough, reddened hands were clasped lightly at her waist, but they had once held the hands of the young who knelt now beside her and had shorn the hair of a husband whose face was mottled with unbearable pain. A woman who bore the same look as the dead woman—a sister without doubt—rocked slowly in her sorrow.

Tears gathered in the eyes of the Storm Lord and he slipped away only to have his attention snagged by still another low murmur of grief. He turned his eyes toward a larger hut and found there a similar scene though this time the deceased was a young man whose pregnant wife wept bitterly for the loss of her protector, the love of her life.

It was the smell of a fresh death lingering in that particular house that made it all too clear to the spectral visitor to Currym what ill had befallen his village. He inhaled the vicious scent, filled his lungs with that putrid morass, and fury lanced through him

like summer lightning. With a brutal roar, he pulled back into the *Shamyr Reayrtey* and stood there quaking in his rage.

“Not again!” he howled to the Fates. “I begged you, please not again!”

“Your responsibility,” a voice whispered to him. “Your responsibility.”

Fleeing the Viewing Chamber, he raced down the stone corridors of his fortress, but he could not outrun the liability, the accountability that was his and his alone. He was at fault here, and because he had not been vigilant, and once more had not seen to the safety and well-being of his people, innocents had paid the price. He had let them down. He was to blame.

Again.

“Please,” he whimpered as he threw himself upon his cold, lonely bed and beat his fists uselessly against the fur spread. “Please!”

But the Fates ignored him – as they always did. There would be a hefty price to pay for his lack of watchfulness and the pain would be his alone to bear.

Chapter One

Gathered around the ceremonial fire in the *halley chymsee*—the sacred assembly hall—were the remaining nine village elders though one of them—Eamon Lysaght—lay in his simple, unadorned pinewood coffin as the people of the village filed by in silent respect for the oldest of their leaders.

Outside the *halley chymsee*, the line stretched all the way to the *arn*, the house of prayer from which each villager would come before entering the hall to bid Eamon a last farewell. “*Shee yee da’n annym echey*,” each of them whispered as they placed their fingertips on the great man’s forehead. It was the final words said to every great leader—May he rest in peace.

Jarlath Bennett, the chieftain of the village, stood with his wife, daughter and three sons at the far end of the hall. His family had been among the first to show their reverence to the fallen elder and were growing tired from the long day of mourning. His wife was not well and he was terrified she would soon be joining her cousin Eamon in *Sheidaghan*, the Windy Place, where the dead spent eternity. He frowned as Iollan Kearin started toward him. He had no love for the healer, who had been a rival for the affections of Jarlath’s wife Caoilainn when they were younger. Since he could barely tolerate the pompous ass, he could not force a smile of greeting onto his face as he had for the others. It was all he could do to tolerate the only man he had ever hated.

Iollan bowed respectfully to the chieftain though it was obvious to any who observed the act that the *slaneyder*, the healer, bore no such good will toward Jarlath. Etiquette out of the way, Iollan then turned a gentle smile to the woman the entire village knew he still coveted. “How are you feeling tonight, ‘Lainn?” he inquired.

“Better, Iollan,” Caoilainn replied. She risked a quick look at her husband’s unsmiling face. “Thank you for asking.”

The healer inclined his head then turned his attention to Jarlath. “I have been asked by Elder Dalaigh to make myself available for an emergency session of the village leaders after tonight’s ceremony. He bid me tell you your presence will also be required.

Jarlath’s frown deepened. “Did he say why a session is being called?”

Iollan gave his long-time rival a sarcastic look. “You know full well why they wish to meet, Bennett.”

Jarlath flinched. “The *cron tayrn*,” he said in a pained voice. “The lottery for a bride for the Storm Lord.”

“But a lottery has not been held for three hundred years,” Caoilainn protested, her face pinched and pale. “Why now?”

"Because now it is needed," Jarlath answered gently. "We have lost almost all of our elders. Only a handful of us remain. There is only one thing to do to stop the deaths."

Caoilainn cast a frightened look to her only daughter. Aideyn was standing with her head down, her hands twisting at her waist. "One more year," the girl's mother said. "One more year is all I ask."

"In that span of time, we might lose the entire village to this loathsome plague," Iollan reminded her. "Will you take that chance, 'Lainn?"

"Besides," Jarlath said, taking his wife's trembling hand in his, "Aideyn is not the only unattached young woman of the village. There are dozens of others of or around her age. The chance of our child picking the *Clagh Folley* is low." He brought Caoilainn's hand to his lips. "Have faith, my wife. Come the solstice next year, our daughter will be joined to Niall."

"If Niall returns from the wars," Caoilainn said miserably.

"He will," Jarlath stated firmly. "There is talk of peace."

"There is always talk of peace," Iollan quipped, and turned away from the sight of Jarlath comforting his lady. His fists were clenched, his fingernails digging into his palms. A muscle jumped in his jaw. Those who glanced his way could see the effort it took for him not to smash his adversary in the face. There had long been bad blood between the two men even when they were toddlers, and instead of the animosity cooling over the years, it only seemed to have increased.

Caoilainn leaned her head against her husband's strong chest—her eyes meeting Iollan's for just a moment before she closed them. Giving herself up to the soothing caress of her husband of thirty years, she stood shivering in his arms.

"I am sorry to have brought news to you that clearly has upset you, 'Lainn," Iollan apologized.

"My wife is a strong woman," Jarlath snapped. "She knows her duty to the village."

Before Iollan could comment on that snide remark, Emmet Monck, one of Jarlath's deputies and eldest brother to Niall, Aideyn's betrothed, came hurrying toward them. His florid face was showing the strain under which all the law officers of the village had been operating for several months. The young man glanced at Aideyn then leaned in to whisper in his chieftain's ear.

Jarlath stiffened and pushed his wife gently away from him. He settled his dark blue stare on Iollan. "Another person has died."

Iollan flinched. "Who was it this time?"

"Catreona, the older," Jarlath replied.

The healer ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "It is nearly always one who has passed their fiftieth summer," he stated. "When they should be enjoying their retirements and grandchildren, they are taking their rest instead in their coffins." He looked to Eamon Lysaght's coffin and shook his head. "He was barely sixty, and with

his passing, the next oldest villager is my brother Seamus, and he was struck down with this vile sickness two days ago. He may not survive the week."

"The condolence line is almost ended," Jarlath observed, not wanting to hear such news. For as much loathing as he bore Iollan, he had that much affection for the older Kearin brother, and to learn Seamus might be on his death bed greatly disturbed the chieftain. "Emmet," he said to one of his sons, "take my ladies back to our house and stay with them until I send for Aideyn then accompany her back to the *halley chymsee* when it is time."

Aideyn jumped at her father's words but said nothing. Tears were glistening in the young woman's eyes as Emmet reached out to gently take her arm.

"Everything will be all right," Emmet told her. "You will see."

"I have a bad feeling about this, Emmet," Aideyn whispered. "A very bad feeling. I will be the Chosen One and I am so afraid."

"Deynnie, please," her brother insisted. "Don't start with your soothsayer nonsense. This is not the time." He waited respectfully for his mother to join them.

"What if she *is* chosen, Jarlath?" Caoilainn fretted as she stared into her daughter's troubled eyes.

"Then she is chosen and that is her destiny," her husband stated. "Go along now, 'Lainn. Your daughter will need your counsel."

Giving her husband one last uneasy look, Caoilainn held her chin high and exited the *halley chymsee* as befitted a woman of her rank though her legs threatened to give way beneath her with each step she took.

The chieftain watched his family winding its way through those gathered, speaking graciously to the elders, nodding to the young ones, and let out a long sigh. He feared for his wife's health, and though she walked straight with her shoulders back, he knew the effort it took for her to do so. Three days older than he, in two weeks she would celebrate her fiftieth birthday. He hoped and prayed they both would live to see many more birthdays.

"We will hold the *cron tayrn*," he heard the healer telling one of the elders. "The dying will end once the *Teiyt* reaches the High Fortress. That is the Covenant."

"Aye," the elder agreed with a sage nod. "The dying will end."

Despite the fear his daughter would be the Chosen One, Jarlath Bennett knew the lottery was necessary. He also knew it was going to be the longest night of his life.

* * * * *

With the wind howling like a banshee and pushing against the travelers with icy fingers, it was a miserable trek over the dangerously twisting causeway. So coated with black ice no animal save a fleet-footed goat could move easily along the path, the thick coating made the going doubly hard. The wobbly boards skidded beneath their boots, threatening to send them careening into the turbulent sea at any moment.

“How much farther is it, Cearul?” Aideyn Bennett had to shout to be heard over the skirl of the fierce wind.

Cearul stopped to wait for his sister to come closer to him for his throat was aching from the cold and he already knew he would have a raging cold by the same time the next day. He adjusted the heavy wool scarf covering the lower part of his face as she came to stand behind him.

There was a hint of snow in the blustery air that made the clothing on their backs feel heavy and uncomfortable. Somewhere up among the jagged cliffs of the mountain island toward which they traveled, a lone wolf added his ominous wail to the moaning wind as the feeble light cast from the winter sun lowered behind the tallest peak.

“What did you say?” he yelled as she neared him.

“How much farther?” Aideyn asked.

“Once we are on the island, we are to look for an opening between the cliffs,” he shouted back at her. “When we find that, we will be there. Since I have never been on this trail before today, how can I know how much farther that will be, Deynnie?”

Because she knew her eldest brother was nervous and his heart breaking for her, Aideyn did not snap at his question as she normally would have. Her own nerves were raw, her soul withering within her, she understood Cearul’s edginess.

Pulling her heavy winter great coat closer around her, striving to ignore the blisters her new boots had caused, she pushed her chin lower into the protection of the thick wool muffler wrapped around her head and blinked away the few flakes of snow that had settled on her eyelashes.

Once more the wolf howled—his presence closer this time—and brother and sister stilled, looking around them quickly for the source of the danger. The snow had begun to fall and was quickly obscuring the causeway and its treacherous icy coating. Blackness edged the cliffs of Mount Riojit, making it virtually impossible to see anything that might be hidden in the deep ebon shadows far below the causeway.

“He’ll not let anything attack us,” Cearul said. “We are being protected.”

“I pray you’re right,” Aideyn said.

“You know I am,” Cearul stated. “You are the *Teiyt*, the Chosen One. He will guard you, Deynnie.”

“I have to be the unluckiest person in the world for I won the lottery,” she lamented.

Sick to her stomach with fear, Aideyn struggled just to put one foot ahead of the other as her brother started up the serpentine trail again. In her pocket was the *Clagh Folley*, the Blood Stone, she had picked during the *cron tayrn* and she could almost feel the loathsome thing burning a hole through the cloth to sear her flesh. Why—she beseeched the gods—could she not have chosen a *Clagh Ghlass*, a Blue Stone, instead of the one that had snatched her away from her family, her village, all she knew?

Her thoughts went to the young women ranging from sixteen to twenty who had reported to the *halley chymsee* for the drawing. Each had reached into the big copper bowl passed around their circle ringing the ceremonial fire and taken a smooth stone. Like each of the friends she had grown up with, she had ached to open her palm immediately to see the color of the stone she'd chosen, but it was forbidden until the last stone was picked. When the bowl was empty, each girl had extended her hand toward the fire—fists clenched, palms down—and when the high priest had bidden them, they turned their hands over. One by one—beginning with the youngest girl—the high priest had ordered each of them to slowly open their tightly clutched fingers to reveal the stone that lay in the center of their palms. As sigh after sigh of relief came from the girls, Aideyn's belly had clenched all the harder. She knew before it became her turn to display the stone she'd picked that she held the *Clagh Folley*. In her heart of hearts, she'd known from the moment the call for lottery had been issued. It was all she could do not to faint when the red stone was revealed.

"Oh Deynnie, *no!*" Aideyn's best friend Teagan cried out. "You are betrothed! How can it be you?"

"The gods have spoken!" the high priest pronounced, and with a clap of his hands, the other girls had scattered quickly like chaff before a harsh wind, hurrying home to inform their families of their good fortune and Aideyn's fate. Not even Teagan remained behind to console her.

Remembering all too well the numbness that had spread over her as the high priest escorted her to *keeill* to pray, Aideyn had knelt before the winged statue of the *Sheidey*—the Winged Goddesses of the Four Winds—to ask Their blessings on the family she would never see again. Only one male of her family would be allowed to accompany her up the mountain and she had not been surprised that it had been Cearul, her oldest brother.

"Mother has taken to her bed," her middle brother Pdraig had informed her. "Father fears she will not rise from it again. His fears are such that he sent Edward for the healer."

Though Cearul's face had been stony and his gaze unwavering, Aideyn could sense the shock and regret her brother tried so hard to conceal. He was trying to be brave for her. She knew he had to be quaking in his boots with every step up Mount Riojit, for their destination was one to which each of the villagers hoped they'd never be asked to travel.

Cearul stopped so suddenly Aideyn plowed into his back. "What is it?" she asked.

"Wolf," Cearul said, pointing to the large black shape that sat perched on one craggy shelf.

Aideyn's heart skipped a beat for the beast was so close to them she could reach out to pat its head. It was staring intently at her, its golden eyes glowing in the light from the torch sputtering in Cearul's shaky hand.

"Do you think it is one of his?" Aideyn asked.

"Everything on this mountain and in the valley below belongs to him," Cearul reminded her. "He is the *Prinse Ihiass ree*, the Prince Regent, one of the Four Elemental Princes. Aye, surely the beast is one of his."

Chastened by her brother's words, Aideyn looked away from the wolf and inched forward slowly with her brother. She could feel the weight of the beast's amber gaze upon her. It pressed against her shoulder blades. Praying it would not spring upon them to rake its wicked claws down their backs, she pressed as tight to Cearul as she dared.

"It won't attack, Deynnie," Cearul said, shifting his shoulders so she would move back.

Aideyn turned to look back and was surprised to find the shelf empty, the beast gone. The silence and stealth of its disappearance frightened her more than knowing where it was.

"There!" Cearul said, lifting an arm to point upward. "There is the High Fortress!"

Through a jagged break in the cliffs, Aideyn could see the soft glow of lights. A bridge led up to the vast black expanse of stone known as *Carrick Ard*.

Aideyn felt a shiver run down her spine at the sight of the massive structure where she would spend the remainder of her days—however long that might be. Tall, sinister-looking spires rose up from the structure almost to the summit of Mount Riojit and in the faint sky glow surrounding the massive building lent an eerie incandescence to the conical bronze roofs capping the black fieldstone spires.

Cearul had moved up the steep steps but his sister remained standing where she was, gazing up at the fortress with terror. There was nothing reassuring about the impressive façade upon which she looked. Unrelieved black stone blocks blended almost perfectly into the craggy expanse of the mountainside. It looked as though the stronghold had been carved from the mountain that surrounded it on three sides. Impossibly sheer inclines straight down from the top of the mount made it impregnable to invaders. Huge bronze doors were set firmly across the entrance to a cave higher up the slope. Gnarled trees—their branches twisted, bent sideways and wind-stripped of leaves—lurked like sentinels at the base of the structure. The sea ran beneath the causeway and shimmered darkly, reflecting the iron stanchions and wood planking of the drawbridge that crossed over it.

It was a foreboding sight, an ominous landmark that made the hair at the back of her neck and arms stand on end. There was deep menace emanating around *Carrick Ard*.

"Deynnie?" Cearul called out. He had turned to help her over a jagged step and was surprised she was not close behind him.

Swallowing the lump of fear that threatened to choke her, Aideyn lifted the hem of her heavy great coat and began the steep climb to where her brother awaited her.

"Be careful of the brambles," Cearul warned. "Don't snag your coat."

Glancing down at the banks to either side of the steps, Aideyn saw a thick growth of leafless shrubs, their stems overgrown with long, sharp, thorny spines that reached skyward. There would be no way to traverse the field of brambles carpeting both banks without doing serious harm to limbs. Their place in the scheme of *Carrick Ard's* defenses had been well designed to keep enemies from scaling the banks en masse.

The blowing wind seemed to have increased in strength and now the snow was falling in thicker waves as brother and sister made their way cautiously across the drawbridge. Though their way was lit by torches that had been stuck into wall brackets, no guard waited either at the raised portcullis or watched them from the barbican as they entered. No one lurked about to usher them over the fixed bridge and into the lower bailey of the fortress. No bowmen stood atop the curtain wall or looked down upon them from the conical spires. It seemed as though *Carrick Ard* was bereft of inhabitants, but Aideyn knew there was at least one occupant in the inhospitable abode.

Snow was piling in the lower bailey and coating the high steps that led to a set of massive black doors at the entrance to the main building. Two large torches lit the portals and cast a feeble glow on the gruesome iron doorknockers fashioned in the form of grinning human skulls.

"Not a welcoming place, is it?" Cearul asked.

"Visitors are not wanted here," Aideyn reminded him.

"And not likely allowed in, I'd wager," he said. Taking a deep breath, he reached for the death's head doorknocker in front of him. The deep, booming sound coming from within the fortress at his knock made him jump back from the door.

Almost immediately the large door on the right opened with a shrill shriek that set nerves on end. A cadaverous-looking man—tall and as straight as an arrow—inclined his head but said nothing.

"I am Cearul Bennett," Aideyn's brother said. "I have brought the *Teiyt*."

Cringing at the word, Aideyn could not meet the servant's hawklike stare as he swept it over her. She looked down at his shoes instead.

"Welcome to *Carrick Ard*, milady. His grace is awaiting you," the servant said, and stepped back, but when Cearul would have entered the fortress, the rail-thin man put out a staying hand. "Only the female is allowed entry."

Cearul's eyes widened and he looked back at Aideyn. "Deynnie, I..."

"Thank you for escorting me here, my brother," she interrupted him, and stepped forward. With lightness she did not feel, she stood on tiptoe to kiss Cearul's cheek. "Journey home safely."

"But..."

She did not give her brother a chance to say anything else. Sweeping past him lest she lose her nerve, she went into the fortress and never looked back.

"Your sister will be well cared for, young sir. She will never lack for anything for as long as she lives," the servant said then shut the door in Cearul's woebegone face.

The entry in which she found herself was darkly lit and smelled faintly of patchouli. Though it was hard to see the dimensions of the room in the dim light, she had an impression of expansiveness with ornate furniture hugging the soaring walls.

“May I take your coat?”

For a reason she could not explain, Aideyn was uneasy turning her back on the servant, but the heavy coat was weighing her down and felt clammy in the soft heat wafting through the entry hall. She nodded, drew off her thick fur gloves and handed them to him. Tucking her bottom lip between her teeth, she turned so the man could help her off with the coat, steeling herself not to flinch when his bony fingers grazed her collarbone as he peeled the coat from her shoulders.

From out of nowhere another man appeared to take the coat and was gone with it before Aideyn had gotten a look at him. She thought he might have been younger but she couldn't be sure.

“This way, milady,” the servant said, indicating a wide archway off to the left.

Aideyn followed in the servant's wake, wanting to ask his name but unable to find her voice as she felt her booted feet sinking into plush carpet that very effectively deadened the sound of their footsteps. Her eyes were growing accustomed to the gloom through which she walked.

The room he led her to was lined floor to ceiling with thousands of books in ornate shelves that stretched from one wall to another, their expanse broken only by the doorway and an enormous fireplace in which flames danced and a huge log popped. Candelabras stood on a few of the tables and should have given the room a cheery glow, but the atmosphere was so oppressive, so cumbersome it was hard to find comfort in the plush surroundings. An intricately carved mahogany desk sat off to one side, the top covered with various stacks of papers. Deep shadows lurked in the corners where the candlelight did not reach to give the room an intimidating feel. Before a wide bank of windows, two large chairs sat facing the view – dark now with the blackness of night – with a small bronze-topped table placed between the chairs.

“His grace will join you shortly,” the servant said. “Would you like a cup of tea to chase away the chill?”

“No, thank you,” Aideyn said. As nervous as she felt her stomach to be, she was afraid putting anything in it would lead to disaster.

“Please, sit where you would like then. If you need anything, the bell pull is there beside the hearth. I will come at once.” He turned to go.

“May I ask your name?” she called out to him.

The servant turned and bowed elegantly to her. “I am Conreeaght, milady.”

She forced a smile to her lips. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Conreeaght.”

As though unaccustomed to being told such a thing, the servant blinked, his eyebrows shooting up into the sparse black hair that barely covered his head. His lips

twitched and he inclined his head. "The honor is entirely mine, milady, I assure you," he said. "Entirely mine."

With that said, he melded silently into the shadows of the hallway beyond. After standing where he'd left her for several moments, Aideyn finally surveyed the room and chose a comfortable-looking chair near the fireplace. She was cold and longed to stand in front of the roaring fire with her back to the heat, her skirts hiked up to warm her backside, but such a thing was unseemly. Instead, she sat in the chair—nearly groaning with the lushness that reached up to envelop her—and crossed her legs at the ankle, her hands placed demurely in her lap, her shoulders back and head high.

She would never know how long she sat there waiting for her host to arrive, but when the uneasy feeling came to her that she was not alone, she surreptitiously turned her head to survey the room, searching for the source of the nervousness that had suddenly gripped her. On the first pass, her gaze found nothing out of the ordinary, but as she swung her attention back the other way, she caught sight of a deeper shadow in one corner and realized someone was sitting there, unmoving, partially hidden in the darkness. She stopped breathing and stared, instinctively knowing who was observing her and wondering how long he had been doing so.

"You had an uneventful journey, *bwoirrinagh*?" a soft, sensuous voice inquired.

Aideyn's heart thudded hard against her rib cage. The word he had used was antiquated. She knew well what it meant—lass—for she had seen it written in the histories of her village. She cleared her throat. "Aye, your grace. I did."

"It is such a brutal night on which to make a journey to *Carrick Ard*. I would have had it been a calmer night for your trip to my home."

She did not know what to say to that. Any night would be a bad night to come to this remote place, but she knew she dared not tell him so. Clenching her fingers tight in her lap, she waited for him to either rise or come to her, or for him to bid her join him.

He did none of those things.

"How many have died in your village since the plague first struck?" he asked.

"Fifteen, your grace," she replied, and heard a heavy sigh come from her host.

"I am saddened to hear the number of deaths was so high, but there will be no more," he told her. "I will tell you that your mother is feeling much better and is taking sustenance even as we speak. She will experience a full recovery. I would not suffer her to pine away for fear of your safety so I have sent her calming thoughts to let her know you are in good hands. I will visit her dreams this night and reassure her even more."

Aideyn breathed a sigh of relief and slowly closed her eyes to the news. His thoughtfulness eased her mind on many levels.

"Thank you, your grace. I am very appreciative of your efforts."

There was a heaviness to his voice that touched her when he spoke again.

"I did not realize the plague had returned. Had I known, I would have acted sooner."

"We are grateful for your protection, your grace," she said, remembering what the elders had bid her say to him. "We owe our lives to you."

"You owe your troubles to me as well," he said. "I am the reason for them."

She could not dispute the matter for everyone knew the Storm Lord had been cursed centuries before and such losses were his atonement for whatever sin he had committed in the long ago. From time to time his people were made to pay the price for that transgression. It wasn't fair, but then again, the Fates had never been fair to the villagers.

"It was never my intention a lottery ever be held again," he said, and rose to his feet. Still hidden in the deeper shadows, he turned to leave. "I ask your pardon that you were forced to come to this barren keep, Aideyn Bennett."

"Then may I return to the village, your grace?" she questioned.

He stopped but did not turn to face her. There was no hesitation in his words as he replied, "No, *bwoirrinagh*. You are here now and here you will stay for as long as you live."

Aideyn's shoulders sagged and any hope she might have been harboring that he would allow her to leave was dashed completely. "I understand, your grace."

"Your young man will return to the village in good health," he said.

"Niall?" she said, tears filling her eyes. Their marriage had been arranged at their births by their parents, and though she did not love her betrothed as a woman does a man, she had feelings for him as a brother. To learn he would come home safe from the war was a great relief.

"He will join with your friend Teagan and they will have many robust children." He cleared his throat. "One they will name after you."

She knew the Prince Regent of the Winds could see into the future and the future he was predicting made her heart glad. "They have always loved one another," she said. "I am happy to know they will wed." She wiped at a tear that ran carelessly down her cheek. "I was worried..."

"There is no need for you to ever worry again, *bwoirrinagh*," he interrupted her. "You are safe here. No harm will ever befall you within these walls."

She took another step toward him, but when he stiffened at her approach, she stilled. "Is there anything you would like to ask me, your grace?"

"I know all there is to know of you, Aideyn," he said softly. "I could not have asked for a woman more suited to be the *Teiyt*."

"That is very generous of you to say, your grace," she said, lowering her head beneath a dark blush.

"It is the truth. Now it grows late and I know your journey here was tiring. Conreeght will show you to your room. May your rest be without dreams."

When she looked up, he was gone.

Chapter Two

The room to which Conreeaght led her was breathtakingly beautiful and so brightly lit she had to squint as she entered since her sight had adapted to the lower level downstairs.

"I believe these are your favorite colors?" Conreeaght queried.

Indeed they were, Aideyn thought as she took in the mauve silk of the wallpaper, the deep green of the velvet on the duvet cover and draperies hanging at the windows. Two overstuffed settees upholstered in a lively floral print of celadon, burgundy and light gray stood to either side of a pale pink marble fireplace. On the floor was a richly colored plush rug in dark green and burgundy swirls. An elegant brass four-poster bed with an ornately scrolled headboard sat along one wall with identical armoires flanking a delicate-looking desk gracing the opposite wall. Dual nightstands with beautiful blown-glass lamps in a pale green color sat to either side of the bed. On the bed lay a silk nightgown in a soft pink color.

"Beautiful," Aideyn said in a hushed voice as she fingered the silk. "It is all so beautiful."

"I am happy you approve, milady. The master wanted to please you."

"He has," Aideyn agreed. "Truly he has."

"The bathing chamber is through that door," Conreeaght said, pointing. "I have taken the liberty of preparing a hot bath for you. You might wish to wait a bit for the water was scalding when it was poured. I scented it with oil of gardenia."

"Gardenia?" she inquired.

"A tropical flower of which his grace is quite fond," the servant explained. "You will find the solarium filled with plants from all over the globe. Many are simply astounding in their beauty."

Unable to believe the richness of her surroundings, Aideyn glanced down at her own gown and felt very out of place.

"His grace has provided you with a new wardrobe, milady," Conreeaght said as though he'd read her thoughts. "You will find all you will need in the armoires."

Aideyn's eyebrows drew together. "How did he know my size?"

Conreeaght's lips twitched in what she was beginning to realize passed for a smile. "His grace knows many things, milady. There is not much that escapes him." He met her gaze directly. "Hardly ever."

A slight tremor passed down Aideyn's spine at the reminder that there would be no secrets kept from the Storm Lord nor any leaving him. She had been warned to keep her thoughts to herself and mind what she said lest she offend him.

“He is a fair man,” Conreeaght said. “A good man. Give him the respect he is due and he will do the same for you.”

“I understand,” she said, ducking her head beneath the warning.

“Then I bid you a pleasant night, milady. I pray you sleep well in your new home,” the servant said, and backed out of the room, closing the door gently behind his departure.

After Conreeaght had left her, Aideyn moved about the sumptuous room inspecting the wardrobes filled to overflowing with gorgeous gowns—and all of them apparently in her size. There were boots, underwear, shawls, bonnets and just about anything a well-dressed young woman of her age would require to be a fashion plate. Not that she would be going anywhere or entertaining anyone for those beautiful clothes to be admired.

She stroked one soft midnight blue gown cut from a luxurious length of crushed velvet. Never had she owned such beautiful things, and the feminine part of her longed to try on each and every garment. Reluctantly, she turned away from the wardrobe and inspected the furnishings—the desk with its myriad drawers filled with writing paper and ink, seals and all manner of things that would make correspondence with her family so easy. Trying out the comfortable desk chair, she then moved to the settee, the overstuffed chair, and then went over to run her fingertips along the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that contained hundreds of volumes. There would be hour after hour of peaceful reading within those tomes and the mere thought of sitting curled up before the wide sweep of windows with book in hand almost made her giddy.

She lifted her arms and turned around and around, feeling free for the first time since the lottery. Staggering with a touch of dizziness, she wrapped her arms around herself and drew in a long, deep, cleansing breath.

“Make his home your home, child,” her mother had advised her. “Perhaps then you will find a measure of happiness.”

“*There is no need for you to ever worry again.*” The Storm Lord’s words curled around her heart and Aideyn sat down on the thick, plush mattress, deep in thought.

Her sacrifice as the *Teiyt* had ensured the end of the plague. Her mother was on the road to recovery. Her best friends Niall and Teagan would be together as they had always wanted. *Carrick Ard* was not the hellish place hinted at around the campfire. It was a gloriously beautiful home with a personable servant and a master who showed fairness in his dealings with her. Surely life here would not be such a chore.

“For all you have done for me and mine, I will make you as good a wife as I know how to be, your grace,” she said as she scooted off the bed. “This I vow.”

She made her way into the bathing chamber and stared longingly at the big copper bathtub with its fragrant steaming water and soft fleecy bubbles floating on top. She smiled and began removing her clothing. It had been a long time since she had had a chance to take a leisurely bath, and not once without climbing into bathwater already soiled by someone else’s body.

Bending over, she trailed her hand through the water. The warmth was just right and the scent of the bubble bath—something she'd never encountered before—made her sigh with contentment as she lifted a leg and climbed into the tub, sinking down into the foam with a groan of utter delight. Leaning on the tall back, she put her arms on the rim of the tub and closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of the warmth, the tickle of the bubbles and the gentle lap of water over her.

She stayed in the tub—luxuriating in the decadent delight it offered—until the water became cool and clammy. Heaving a heartfelt sigh of regret, she stood and reached for a towel that lay draped over a table that sat close to a small auxiliary fireplace keeping the room warm. Plush and soft, the towel felt wonderful against her skin, and when she wrapped it around herself before going back into the bedroom, she reveled in the comfort it provided her.

Dropping the towel, she put on the pale pink gown she'd found on the bed. It was made of satin and lace and fit her perfectly, molding to her body as though it were a second skin. Likewise the wrapper that had been concealed beneath the gown floated about her on a wisp of lace that smelled faintly of flowers.

Aideyn was about to climb into bed when a light knock sounded at her door and she hastily donned the wrapper, feeling heat rush to her face that anyone might see her dressed in her nightwear.

"Aye?" she asked, moving close to the door.

"Milady," she heard Conreeaght say, "I beg your forgiveness. I was remiss in my duties. His grace has sent a light repast for you."

Her stomach rumbling automatically at the words, she eased the door open and peeked around it. She moved back to allow the servant to enter with a tray upon which sat several silver-covered dishes.

"My humblest apologies, milady," the servant said. "Please forgive me."

"There has been no harm done," Aideyn was quick to tell him.

"Even so, I should have thought of your comfort. It was careless of me. There is nothing too heavy here," Conreeaght said. "I brought a light broth, half a ham sandwich, some fruit and cheese, and a frosty pitcher of milk." He set the tray on the desk between the two large armoires. "Is there anything else you would like?"

"No, this will be fine," she said. "I didn't realize how hungry I was until I smelled that cheese!"

Conreeaght almost smiled. "His grace knew you'd had no evening meal." He pulled the chair at the desk out for her. "He will ever see to your comfort."

"Where is his grace?" she asked as she sat down.

"He is in the *Shamyr Reayrtey*, the Viewing Chamber," Conreeaght replied. "I imagine he will be spending a great deal of time there for a few more days until all danger of the plague has passed."

Not understanding what a Viewing Chamber was, Aideyn wanted to ask but thought better of it. She didn't want to appear nosy.

The servant headed for the door. "Please do not hesitate to ring for me if you need anything." He indicated an ornate bell pull beside her bed.

"Thank you, Conreeaght. I hope you sleep well and your dreams pleasant if they come."

The servant stilled. He cocked his head to one side and held her gaze for a long moment. "I greatly appreciate your concern for my well-being. Thank you," he said, respectfully bowing his head.

"I hope we will become friends, Coni," she said then tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. "May I call you Coni?"

Bright light infused the man's swarthy face and he squared his shoulders. "Indeed you may, and I would be most pleased if you would." He sniffed as though he were trying to hold back tears. "Good night, milady, and have a restful evening," Conreeaght bid her before quietly closing the door behind his departure.

The food was as delicious as the room was tantalizing, and by the time Aideyn had finished off the cool glass of milk that washed down her meal, she was feeling sleepy. After going into the bathing chamber to relieve herself and wash her face and hands, she padded barefoot back to the bed and climbed up, groaning with pleasure as she sank down into a mattress that felt as though it were a fleecy white cloud. Scrunching down beneath the soft covers, she buried the side of her face against the thick pillow and closed her eyes.

So much had happened within the last two days that she found it difficult to give in to sleep, although she had not slept at all the night before. Worry over the lottery, her being the unlucky one to choose the *Clagh Folley* and all the obligations that entailed, she had been a bundle of nerves since Elder Eamon Lysaght's wake. Her mind would not shut down and kept going over the moment when she had opened her palm and saw the Blood Stone.

"Oh no, Aideyn!" Teagan had taken a step back, as had the girl to Aideyn's right.

"The gods have spoken!"

Aideyn had stood where she was as the other girls scattered at the clapping of the high priest's hands. Mutely staring at the *Clagh Folley*, she thought she felt heat flowing from the stone. When the high priest stepped forward, she had looked up into his rheumy eyes and flinched, seeing the pity registering there.

"You are the *Teiyt*, the Chosen One, Aideyn Bennett," the old man said. "You have been selected by the gods to be the consort of the Storm Lord."

Unable to speak, Aideyn had nodded, all hope evaporating like dew in the morning sun.

"You must leave immediately lest another of our fold succumb to the plague. Keep the Blood Stone in your pocket lest he should ask to see it."

Feeling as though she were wading through thick mud, Aideyn had paced the confines of the *halley chymsee* as she waited nervously for whichever of the men in her family would come to take her up the dangerous mountain pass to *Carrick Ard*. With her palms sweating, her heart beating rapidly, her very soul shriveling in her breast, she had known true fear for the first time in her young life.

"Make the best of the situation," her mother had told her tearfully. "Be good to him and perhaps he will be good to you."

"Do as he says," had been her father's advice. His voice was strained, his eyes watering with tears he refused to shed. "Do not argue with him and do not anger him."

"Stay out of his way as much as possible. Be like a servant and blend into the woodwork," Padraig, one of her middle brothers, had added.

Lying there in the softness of her new bed, Aideyn opened her eyes and stared at the wall. Every creak, every pop, every snowflake that plinked against the windows caught her attention, but she realized she felt no strain, no unease, no dread. Though everything was new to her, strange and exciting, she had no fear of her new surroundings nor was she experiencing any trepidation about the man to whom she was now betrothed. His had been a calm, gentle voice, and though first impressions could be misleading, she felt he was indeed the good man Coni said he was.

Sinking down beneath the luxurious comforter, she found she was eager for the new day to come for her future was dawning as well.

* * * * *

Alone in his bedchamber Aeral Chiarn Dorrin paced as he had done many a night in his immortal life. Upon his return from the Viewing Chamber, he knew rest would not come to visit him that evening. Though no more villagers had died from the vile plague sent by his enemy, many were too ill to even lift their heads, and for that he was deeply sorry. His lack of diligence where the valley people were concerned had caused pain and suffering where none need ever have been.

"You are a selfish man, Aeral," he cursed, and flung himself down in a chair. "Why the gods still tolerate you to draw breath I will never know. They should have destroyed you long ago."

As soon as he had become aware of the disturbances in the valley, he had thrown a net of protection around the villagers, pushing aside the evil of his enemy who had sent the vile plague once more. There would be no more deaths, no more suffering, and the village would return to normal in a few days. He would make sure of it. He would atone for his inattention. Unfortunately another would atone alongside him.

His thoughts went to the lovely sacrifice that had been sent to him and his heart ached anew. It had been centuries since he had been given a mate, centuries while his loneliness had been eating away at his soul hour by hour. Had he been paying attention and not steeping himself in self-pity, he would have put a stop to the lottery before it

could be held. No woman should ever again be condemned to decide whether or not to spend her life with him.

Running a hand over his tired face, Aeral laid his head on the tall back of the chair and closed his eyes. Even in the darkness behind his eyelids, Aideyn Bennett's beauty shone like a beacon, calling out to him with a siren song he wished with all his being he could ignore. Already his blood was singing through his veins with a happiness his heart did not feel. His body was hardening with anticipation and his palms itching to stroke the soft flesh of her body.

He could feel the fire beginning to build in his loins. It was an insidious punishment he had endured many times over the eons, but this time it seemed more pronounced, all-encompassing, and it made his hands tremble with the fierceness of his growing lust.

It had been Aideyn's lovely face and body he had seen in the chieftain's hut. He had been drawn to her—just as he knew the gods had intended.

"Look, Aeral," he could hear them whispering in the vault of the heavens. "Look what we have sent to test your mettle this time, Storm Lord! Is she not a rare beauty?"

Aye, that she was. Everything about her was lovely and his body yearned to know hers. He wanted so badly to slip between her silken thighs and bury himself deep within her, to lose himself in her, to bury his pain. He longed to bring her pleasure and to know again pleasure of his own.

She would be a gentle lover, he thought—shy and naïve. No man had ever laid a hand upon Aideyn Bennett, and though he ached to be the first, he doubted she would give herself over into his keeping, and he would never force her to do so nor coerce her for that matter.

But what would it be like to claim that virginal flesh for his if she but allowed it?

Though it was torture to even consider it, he thought perhaps it would be unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. Her body would fit his like a velvet glove and mold to him as though they had been carved from the same cord of wood. Her soft arms and legs would wrap around him as she opened her body for his claiming.

With his hands and mouth and shaft he would worship her as his goddess. He would move heaven and earth to give her such pleasure she would never want to leave his side. He would pour all his stored-up love and emotions into making love to her. She would not leave his bed wanting—of that he could be sure.

If only she would allow it.

Sighing deep, Aeral opened his eyes and stared blindly into the darkness of his room. Not for the first time did he feel the injustice of his plight. Judged for a crime in which he'd had complicity and held accountable for something he had never foreseen happening, condemned for a sin another had wrought, he had been damned by the gods at the insistence of his enemy—the Sea Lord.

"Mayhap now you will know the agony I experienced when I lost my love at your hands," his enemy had raged at him when the judgment had been handed down. "He

took my woman from me. Let the vagaries of the Fates take his from him! I curse you, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin. I curse you for all time!"

The curse had not ended when Aeral's first wife Deirdre took her last breath upon the island ten thousand years before. Unlike her husband, Deirdre was mortal and when she died from a mysterious illness borne of the sea – the same plague from which the villagers now suffered – her ashes had been cast to the *Lommanyn*, the Raw Winds, her five brothers and five sisters mourning her passing. Until the day they died, her relatives, just as his enemy before them, had cursed Aeral, blaming him for something beyond his ability to control.

"It is not enough!" his enemy had shouted when Deirdre died. "He has yet to atone for his sin! Make him pay until he is broken!"

"What would you have us do?" Morrighunia, the Great Goddess, had asked. "I will never agree for the Storm Lord to be given physical pain of any kind!"

"Let the villagers send him another mate and let her too perish! Make him suffer as I have suffered! I want him to feel as I felt when my beloved was lost unto me! Make him pay over and over again until he goes mad with his grief!"

"In what manner would this woman be sent?" the gods asked.

"Order the humans to hold a lottery and have the Chosen One sent to *Carrick Ard*," the Sea Lord stated.

"The villagers will not willingly do such," Morrighunia stated.

"Then I will bring a plague down upon them by sending putrefaction into the water they consume," the Sea Lord suggested. "Death will come to them until they choose a bride for him. Is that not incentive enough?"

It was agreed that would induce the villagers to supply a bride to the hated Regent of the Winds. The gods had voted the punishment upon him as the Sea Lord had asked.

So century after century, the village across the causeway had chosen wives for Aeral Chiarn Dorrin, the Prince Regent of the Winds. The lottery was held, a woman sent, and the sentence began all over again. No woman ever wanted to remain on Mount Riojit with the reclusive lord of the floating island. None since had lived to take the vows to be his lawful wife.

It was, he thought with an aching heart, all part of the brutal curse that had been laid upon him. No woman sent to him had ever found him attractive. They shrank from him, ran from him, repulsed by what they saw, fearful of his powers and distrusting of the gentle hand he extended toward them. When they were forced to be in his presence, they trembled when he drew near, shuddered if he forgot and touched them, fainted if he raised his voice out of the sheer desperation to know a fleeting moment's companionship. No woman had ever spoken to him without prompting, smiled at him, embraced him or put her hand to him in either kindness or anger. They cried day and night and kept themselves hidden until they could find a way to take their lives to be rid of him.

Over and over again, Aeral had watched woman after woman die rather than stay with him, each one cursing him with her last breath for being the cause of her misery. At times the guilt was almost more than he could bear and had he the means to do so, he would have journeyed the dark waters of death along with them long ago.

But that was not to be.

The exacting state of his loneliness, his isolation had become nearly unbearable. With each passing day locked within his solitude, he feared his sentence was set for as long as time existed. There would be no surcease for him, no end. The pain would go on as the loneliness continued to build. His heart would ache, and with each new lady sent to remind him of what would never be, a little more of his soul would shrivel until there would be nothing left but an empty husk.

“Milord?”

Aeral turned his head toward the only servant left at *Carrick Ard* and though he was not entirely human—nor completely rational—Conreeaght kept Aeral from going insane in his isolation. The servant was also the closest thing to a true friend the Storm Lord had ever known.

“She is settled in?” Aeral asked.

“Aye,” Conreeaght answered. “Do you wish anything before I go hunting?”

Frowning, Aeral shook his head. “Must you?” he inquired.

Conreeaght shrugged. “It is my nature, milord, and I was interrupted earlier when the lady and her brother arrived.”

“Not her brother,” Aeral said in a stern voice, his frosty blue eyes boring into the servant. “Leave him be.”

“No, milord,” Conreeaght agreed. “I go after only animals this night.”

Aeral nodded and waved a hand in dismissal. He was too tired, too heartsick and feeling too discouraged to argue with the man. Hanging his head, he listened as the servant turned to go and knew the moment Conreeaght paused. “Aye, what is it?” he asked in a weary voice.

“She is a lovely young woman, milord,” Conreeaght replied. “And very polite. She wished me a good evening and she did so in a way I knew she meant it.”

The Lord of the Winds raised his head, though he did not look at Conreeaght. “She did this?” he questioned.

“Very politely and with care. Not like those who came before her,” Conreeaght said. “I may be proven wrong, milord, but I do believe she may be the true Chosen.” He bowed then left.

A glimmer of hope flared fleetingly to life inside Aeral’s withered heart. He felt his hands trembling from the force of that slight flicker of optimism. Looking down at the tremor, he was quick to tamp down such feelings, douse that brief ember of wishful thinking, for time and the Fates had taught him a cruel lesson he had learned only too

well. Companionship that brought happiness, contentment and pleasure were for others, not for him.

Never for him.

“There will never be a woman who will willingly take you to her breast ever again, murdering fiend that you are! This I promise you!” his enemy had prophesied. “The only way you will have a woman is if you take her by force!”

Had he been a lesser man, he might well have shed copious tears long, long ago, Aeral thought as he slumped in his chair, his long legs thrust out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. He might well have given in to the despondency and misery that was his daily existence. Instead, he suffered in silence, rarely showing emotion even to himself. Anger took too much out of him these days and wallowing in self-pity had caused the villagers to suffer because of his lack of diligence. It was time he roused what energy he could dredge up to make sure Aideyn lived for as long as possible. That she would choose him over death was too much to ask. No woman since Deirdre had, and he had no reason to believe this lovely would behave any different.

Bracing his elbows on the chair arms, tenting his fingers, he lowered his forehead to his hands. As he did, he heard the wolf howling about the cliffs. A tic started in his lean jaw for he knew the beast was closing in on its prey. Death was stalking the cliffs of Riojit this night. It was the mountain’s constant companion.

“Go easily, beast,” he whispered. “Embrace death without a struggle and without pain.”

A gust of wind pushed at the windows beside Aeral. He swiveled his head to look and for a moment he saw the scowling face of *Geay Hwoaie*, the North Wind, pressed against the pane. It was a cold and brittle face, the beard rimmed with frost and icicles, the gray eyes narrowed, the lips drawn back in a snarl, its breath frosting the glass.

Aeral held up a hand in command and *Geay Hwoaie* shrieked, whirling away from the window. The Storm Lord relaxed. One of those he kept in the mountain caves had returned finally and was winding his way angrily up the sheer cliff. Aeral had set him loose and wished now he hadn’t. Obviously *Geay Hwoaie* had done as much damage as he could, and having been called back by the Storm Lord had come home to sulk.

Covering his face with his hands, Aeral rubbed at the tiredness enveloping his eyes then ran his fingers up through his hair to tug brutally at the thick waves. Any ache other than that which dwelt in his heart and soul gave him some semblance of normalcy and he welcomed the pain.

A log popped as the fire crackled in the hearth across the bedchamber, drawing his attention. In the leaping flames he could see *her* face—eyes sad, but filled with reproach and hatred.

“Please go away,” he whispered to the wavering image. “Not tonight.”

Yet the image remained as a ghostly reminder of the cruelties of the Fates and the vagaries of Branwen, goddess of love and the stormy north seas.

As he watched, a slender arm extended from the flames to point an accusing finger at him.

"Why can't you leave me in peace, *cailleach*?" he asked, tears—which he refused to shed—filling his wounded eyes. "I had no hand in your fate. You know that."

Still the finger pointed, and accompanying it was a pitiful moan that wafted over him like a blast of frigid air from the highest peak atop Mount Riojit.

Feeling the guilt—though it was not his own—he rose from the chair and fled the room. Once she came to besiege him, the reflection of her would remain all night. Her moans would grow louder and the finger move closer to him until he could feel the prickling ice of it against his heart, her spectral hand closing round that shrunken organ to squeeze until he could stand it no longer. Fleeing the chamber was the only thing he could do when she appeared.

Moving down the stairs like an aged man, he thought again of changing rooms. Perhaps if he laid his head upon a pillow in another room, she would not find him, would not intrude upon what little serenity—and sanity—he had left, would allow him to sleep tranquilly.

Knowing his home like the back of his hand, he needed no candle to guide his feet to the study where the bottles of Chrystallusian brandy awaited him. He moved effortlessly through the dark, reveling in the coldness of the marble flooring on his bare soles as he walked. Unerringly he went to the sideboard, picked up the decanter that held the fiery brew and—disdaining a snifter—carried it to one of two chairs flanking the windows and sat down. He tilted the decanter to his lips and took a healthy swig.

The potent brandy burned a fierce pathway down his throat and into his empty belly. He took another sip then another, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth as he rested the base of the decanter on his thigh. Morosely, he stared out the window at the night-darkened vista. He had not had the energy to eat an evening meal and the intoxicating liquor hit him hard, traveling quickly to his head.

Instead of numbing him though, the liquor only intensified the raging lust that had invaded his lower body. His cock was as hard as stone and throbbed like an infected tooth. It had been centuries since he had felt even a flicker of desire. To experience it now was a torment he could barely endure.

"Haven't I suffered enough, *Mo Regina*?" he asked the goddess who had once been his friend. "Can I not have an end to this punishment?"

As if in answer, the tightness in his groin intensified and he groaned, reaching down his free hand to rub at the burning ache that was causing his discomfort. The touch of his fingers upon his straining flesh only added to the torment and he snatched his hand away, lifting it in front of his face to watch it tremble.

How he ached to mold his fingers around Aideyn's lovely breast. He could almost feel the smoothness, the firmness of that virginal flesh. He well remembered what a woman's lushness had felt like in his hand—a taut, sweet nipple pressing into his palm. Closing his eyes, he imagined the warmth of the young woman's curves beneath his

questing fingers. Rubbing his fingers together, he thought of the slick wetness that would ooze from between her silken thighs. If he concentrated hard enough, it was nearly possible to get a whiff of that delicate, musty scent as it pulsed from her untested sheath. He could feel it coating his middle finger as he slid it deep into her hot, tight channel. He could feel her body pulsing around him and his cock leapt in anticipation.

“Stop it, Dorrin!” he snarled, and lifted the canister to gulp a large mouthful of the brandy. Though it stung his mouth and dribbled down his chin, he did not care. He opened his eyes and glared into the night, daring his enemy to show himself.

“I am here, Storm Lord,” his enemy sneered, and beneath the foundations of *Carrick Ard*, the sea swirled viciously, the angry waves lapping over the shore like greedy fingers that—if they could—would grab Aeral’s home and snatch it far beneath the surface.

“Leave my people alone, you miserable bastard,” Aeral shouted.

“For now,” came the rumble of his enemy. “Enjoy the fresh pain I have sent you in the form of that sweet, tender morsel you will soon destroy as you have every woman you ever laid your evil hands to!”

With the raw ache, the burning only growing worse in his lower body, Aeral did the only thing he could to relieve the agony. He tilted the canister and drank.

Inebriation was the only way he could make it through the long, lonely night.

Chapter Three

Aideyn woke to bright sunlight streaming in through the windows. She stretched her arms over her head and purred like a contented cat, writhing on the satin sheets as she chased sleep away. She let out a long, contented sigh then sat up, the sudden realization of where she was intruding like a splash of cold water.

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Make the most of it," she said aloud as she always did upon awaking each new morn. It was her prayer and her most fervent belief.

Her gaze fell on the rosewood clock on the desk and her eyes flew wide.

"Oh no! I overslept!"

Flinging the covers aside with a hiss, she scrambled from the bed, ashamed she had slept almost until the eighth hour. Never in her life had she done such a thing—usually being up with her mother at the first light of dawn. How had she managed to lose track of time?

Dressing in her serviceable gray serge gown as quickly as she could, she rushed to the vanity and fumbled with the brush, dragging it through her waist-length blonde hair, wincing as the tangles came free. Gathering the heavy mass into a twist, she pinned it atop her head with tortoiseshell pins. Then groaning with frustration, she searched for her boots but spied a pair of satin slippers instead and quickly thrust her feet into them.

"Thank you, milord, for your thoughtfulness," she said as the comfort of the slippers encased her cold feet.

Just as she pulled her bedchamber door open, she let out a squeak and jumped back, surprised by Conreeaght standing there, his hand uplifted to knock. She stood there gasping for breath, her own hand pressed to her chest. "You just t-took ten years off my life, Coni," she stammered.

"Milady, forgive me!" the servant said, his face filled with alarm. "I did not mean to frighten you."

"Of course you didn't," she agreed, and reached out to put a reassuring hand on his arm, her shoulders slumping as she drew in steadying breaths. "It's just I wasn't expecting you. That's all."

"I would do nothing to hasten the end of your life, milady. Nothing!" Conreeaght stated, and his lips trembled. His gaze was apologetic as he quivered beneath her touch.

She smiled. "Rest easy! It was just a figure of speech, Coni. Don't take it literally."

"I would no more cause you harm than I would cut off my own leg!" Conreeaght vowed. "Milady, I..."

"Hush now! Say no more about it." She blushed. "I'm afraid I overslept." She glanced down. "What have we here?"

The servant held a tray in his free hand and the wonderful smell of hot coffee and sweet rolls permeated the air. "I b-brought you something with which to break your fast," he stammered.

"Is his grace not breaking his?" she asked.

"He will notify me when he is ready to eat, milady," Conreeaght informed her.

Dragging a calming breath deep into her lungs, she forced a smile to her lips. "Then why don't I come down to the kitchen and have my repast with you and the cook?" she asked, striving to put the man at ease.

"Cook?" Conreeaght repeated. "Milady, we have no cook at *Carrick Ard*. There are only the three of us in residence here."

Aideyn's eyebrows shot up. "Truly?" She thought of the mystery man who had taken her coat the evening before and realized it must have been the Storm Lord himself.

"Truly, milady," Conreeaght answered her. "It is I who prepares all the food at *Carrick Ard*, though I must admit I am not all that good at it."

She laughed. "Have you eaten?" At his slow nod, she shrugged. "Then let's go to the kitchen and you can at least drink a cup of coffee with me while I eat."

"You are inviting me to spend time with you?" the man asked. His surprise was evident in the way he looked at her.

"Why ever not?" she countered. "We can sit and talk while I break my fast and then we can plan the noon meal." She bit her lip. "That is unless you've already started preparations for it."

Conreeaght shook his head. "Not yet. It is a chore I detest each day. I put it off as long as I dare."

"Well, lucky for us that is a chore I thoroughly enjoy. So lead on," she said with a laugh.

He stepped back to allow her to exit the chamber.

She hooked her arm through his, ignoring the slight gasp and stiffening of the man's body. "Let's go see what mischief we can make in yon kitchen, Coni," she said with a grin.

Conreeaght looked down at her with something akin to awe. "You seem of good spirits today, milady. You slept well?"

"As well as could be expected of someone sleeping in a new environment," she replied. "I made a decision not to rail against my fate but rather to embrace it. Today is the first day of the rest of my life, Coni. I will make the best of it."

A strange expression flitted over Conreeaght's face and a ghost of a smile hovered at his thin lips. "That is the best news I have had in a long, long time, milady," he said.

She glanced down at the tray in his hands. "But I'll tell you, if I don't get that coffee into my system soon," she said, squeezing his arm, "I might well change my mind!"

"It is an innerving drink, is it not?" he asked.

"And an absolute necessity." She gave him an arched brow. "I suppose the cleaning will be up to you and me as well."

Conreeaght blinked. "Milady, no! I will do the cleaning! Such things are not for the hands of the Storm Lord's wife!"

"Who says?" she countered, and when he would have protested, she squeezed his arm. "Coni, I will not lounge around and let you do all the work. I was taught a fine work ethic by my parents. I am not above making my husband's home as pleasant a place for him as I can. I'm not overly fond of cleaning but certainly I am not above it."

Conreeaght's lips parted then he snapped them shut when she winked at him. He led her down the stairs – answering her questions and giving her some idea of what his master liked in way of food.

"I brought in a wild boar last eve," Conreeaght said as he escorted her to the vast kitchen. "I will see to its processing."

"How well stocked is the larder?" she asked as she stood in awe of the room, looking around her at the dusty copper pots hanging from the ceiling, the array of dishes in the china cabinets.

"I am sure his grace will provide whatever it is you need," Conreeaght replied. "Think it and it will be. Such is his power."

A tremor wriggled down Aideyn's spine to remind her she was in the abode of the Storm Lord. Magic was as commonplace here as snow was on the higher elevations of Mount Riojit. It would take some getting used to, but she had made up her mind to make the most of her life on the island, and accepting the paranormal aspects of it was a start. As she had said to Conreeaght, railing against the Fates for having chosen her as the *Teiyt* was useless and it served no good purpose. She was here and here she would remain until she took her last breath. She could either make the most of it or wallow in self-pity. Considering she had been brought up to be of stalwart character, wallowing was not in her mindset.

"All right then," she said, sitting down at the little table where Conreeaght had placed her tray. "We'll have creamed potatoes and green beans cooked with a hock from the boar. I'll make corn muffins, I think. Perhaps baked apples with cinnamon and honey?"

Conreeaght sighed deeply. "His grace will be most pleased," he told her. "He has quite the sweet tooth."

"While I'm cooking you will be freed up to do something other than worry about menus," she said with a giggle, taking a sip of the coffee and trying not to wince at the bitter, over-boiled liquid.

The servant had not missed her reaction to his coffee. "I never have learned to brew a decent pot," he said.

"I'll show you," she said. "My mother always added eggshells to the pot to cut the acrid taste."

"Eggshells," Conreeaght said, the word spoken as though it had captured his interest.

Long into the morning she and Conreeaght worked side by side in the kitchen. He didn't seem to mind her endless chatter as she prepared a noon meal of vegetable soup she whipped up from scratch. She showed him how to make grilled cheese sandwiches on the wood stove then had him help her turn apple juice into mulled cider with cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and ginger.

"Should we prepare a tray for his grace?" she finally remembered to ask.

"He spent the night in his study and would not wish for me to disturb him. When he is hungry, he will ring for me." Conreeaght shrugged. "I worry about him for he ate nothing last eve and very little at noontime."

"Is that usual for him?"

Conreeaght nodded. "I fear so, milady. He gives in too readily to his melancholy, but I've yet to find a way to keep him from doing so." He lowered his voice. "And he's grown far too fond of the brew," he said, laying a finger alongside his nose.

Aideyn glanced up at the big clock hanging on the kitchen wall. It was almost noon. She put her hands behind her to untie the apron she had donned while making the soup. Hanging the apron on a peg, she started out of the kitchen.

"What is it you do, milady?" Conreeaght asked quickly.

"I am going to speak with his grace," she said.

Conreeaght winced. "I am not sure that is such a wise idea, milady. Perhaps you should let him come to you."

She stopped and turned to look back at him. "Am I not to be his bride?" she asked.

Slowly the servant nodded.

"And as such, should I not look to his welfare as I would my own?"

The servant tilted his head to one side, giving her a look that made her think of an adoring dog. "Aye, milady. You should."

"Then I shall." She smiled then tucked her lower lip between her teeth. "He doesn't bite, does he?"

For the first time in centuries, Conreeaght Annym laughed. "His bark is much worse, milady, but I doubt you will ever hear it." He tugged his right eyelid down with a blunt fingernail. "His howl? Now that is a different matter."

"He howls, does he?" she asked, her brows elevated.

"Like a banshee," Conreeaght replied, but his smile was genuine.

"Not too loudly I hope."

“Only when ’tis a full moon.”

She twisted her lips to one side. “Please tell me the man does not have fleas,” she said. “I will not tolerate fleas in my home.”

Conreeaght’s shoulders shook with mirth. “Nay, milady. He’s not the one with the fleas,” he told her.

“So it’s you then!” she accused then raised a finger to point at him. “Well, we’ll have none of that. I’ve a remedy for such things, so it’s a long, healthy soak for you when all’s done.”

Grinning at his astounded expression, Aideyn left the room. She had no idea where the study was but thought perhaps it might be the room to which she’d been taken the night before. Walking past every room with an open door between the kitchen and the front entrance, it was the next to the last door she found closed and stopped there, taking a deep, fortifying breath before knocking lightly.

“Go away,” came the gruff command from behind the portal.

“Oh, I think not, milord,” she said under her breath, and opened the door. She stopped just inside the room, looking at a brace of chairs that faced the window.

He was sitting with his back to her. All she could see was one long leg arched over the arm of the chair and his dark head just barely visible above the back. On the opposite side of the chair, his arm hung off, his fingers wrapped around whatever it was he held.

“Lunch is ready, milord,” she said, clasping her hands in front of her and staying where she was, although she was keenly curious to get a look at the face of the man across the room.

Her husband-to-be did not reply for a long moment, and when he did, his words were slurred. “I’m not hungry.”

All too well Aideyn understood men and their propensity to drown their troubles in the bottom of a liquor bottle. Her father and brothers were such men. She suspected her husband-to-be was of the same ilk and realized what he held in his hand was no doubt liquor.

She folded her arms over her chest. “There is no nourishment to be had in whiskey, milord,” she said. “Will you join us in the small dining room for the meal, or would you prefer we bring it to you?”

“Us?” he echoed. “We? Who is we, *bwoirrinagh*?”

“Coni and I,” she answered.

“Who the hell is Coni?”

“Conreeaght,” she replied.

She thought she heard him grunt, and when he spoke, she could hear a bit of pique in his tone.

“You plan on eating with a servant, milady?” he asked, his arm disappearing as he lifted it toward him.

"Have you objections? There are only the three of us here. It seems silly that we should each eat alone. Where is the sense in that?"

He had yet to move from the chair and her inquisitiveness was growing. He sounded young, yet she knew he was ancient. Tales of him were all she had to go by, and if any of the folklore was true, he was a ghastly monster with a penchant for savagery. She wanted to get a look at him so she could prepare herself for the years to come. She took a step closer.

"I'll be along," he said, halting her in mid-step. "And I have no objections to him eating with us."

Aideyn nodded. "Good. Then we'll await your appearance," she said, wincing at the implication that word had in her fertile mind. She left quickly, her face flaming and her palms sweating with nervousness now that she had bearded the Storm Lord in his lair.

Her heart pounding as she made her way back to the kitchen, Aideyn realized she was trembling, her hands shaking. She had no idea what to expect from the man who was to become her lifemate. When that Joining would take place, she did not know and the thought of it – and all it signified – sent cold chills down her spine.

"He is a beast!" Teagan had cried. "A monster of the night! Oh Deynnie, I am so sorry it is you who will be his bride! The thought of you at his mercy..."

Conreeaght looked up from the task he was performing, and upon seeing the paleness of his mistress's face, came toward her, hand outstretched. "Milady, what did he do?" he asked.

Aideyn shook her head. "Nothing," she said, swallowing past the dryness in her mouth. "He will be along shortly." She hurried to the stove to stir the soup.

"You did not see him?" the servant asked.

Flinching, she shook her head again. "His back was to me."

"Ah," Conreeaght said, lowering his hand. "I see. All will be well, milady. Have no fear."

She nodded at his words and began ladling soup into the tureen. Hot liquid splashed her hand but she paid no heed to it. The blood was pounding in her ears and she was suddenly feeling sick to her stomach. The smell of the soup only managed to heighten her discomfort.

Half an hour passed but the Storm Lord did not appear. The food was growing cold and Aideyn's nerves were stretched to the breaking point. Angry that her husband-to-be was careless of his charges, she waved a hand at a chair.

"Well, that's enough time to wait. We might as well sit down, Conreeaght," she said. "I will hold lunch no longer. If he wishes to be rude, so be it."

Hesitantly the servant took his seat, glancing nervously now and again at the doorway as he took the proffered plate of sandwiches from his mistress. He was obviously uneasy about sitting with her, but when she lowered her head to give

blessing over the food, he closed his own eyes and did the same, clasping his hands tight in front of him.

"Bless this food of which we are about to partake and bless the hands that have provided it for our use," Aideyn said. "May we..."

Gentle but firm hands pressed down upon her shoulders and she stilled, opening her eyes and looking across the table at Conreeaght, who shot to his feet as though propelled from a cannon.

"Milord!" the servant said, bowing his head.

"Sit, Conreeaght. Sit," the Storm Lord ordered. His hands flexed on Aideyn's shoulders. "Or would you prefer I call you Coni as well?"

Conreeaght looked as though he would choke as he fumbled himself back into his seat. "Whatever is your p-pleasure, your grace," he stammered.

She could feel the Storm Lord looking down at her as he stood behind her. The heat of his flesh seemed to go right through the material of her gown and the scent of his cologne was heady, doing strange things to the pit of her belly. "Finish your blessing, *bwoirrinagh*," he ordered in a gentle voice.

Aideyn had to swallow before she could bring moisture to her dry mouth. "May we be nourished by this food and gain strength from it."

There was a moment of silence then the man behind her spoke.

"*Myr shen dy row eh*," he responded in the old language, the words meaning so be it.

"We were beginning to think you would not join us," she said.

"My pardon, milady," he said softly. "I needed to clean up a bit before I presented myself to your table."

"Our table," she corrected, and felt him give her shoulders another light squeeze.

"Our table," he repeated after a short pause.

Bracing herself, she craned her neck around to look at him, but he had moved to the opposite side away from her and she had to turn her head to follow him to the chair at the end of the table.

At first her gaze went to the belt buckle of his britches and she saw he wore black leather pants topped by an immaculate white shirt left unbuttoned halfway down a broad chest revealing a thick mat of dark hair. Slowly her eyes moved up past broad shoulders, a strong neck and determined cleft chin until she was looking directly into his face.

She blinked and blinked again for he was looking at her with one black eyebrow crooked upward.

"Expecting an ogre, were you?" he asked as he took his seat.

Unable to speak for the lump in her throat and the roar of blood rushing through her ears, she just stared at him with her mouth ajar.

"You've stricken her mute, milord," Conreeaght mumbled, and then sucked in a breath at his audacity.

"I believe I have," the Storm Lord said, putting his elbows on the table and lacing his fingers together as he stared back at her. "Am I that ugly, milady?"

Aideyn snapped her mouth shut, swallowing before she could speak. "Nay, milord, you know full well you are not in the least ugly. You managed to surprise me, is all."

"I suppose surprise is a sight better than shock," he commented. "I know well what the villagers say is my countenance. I've often thought I should send a reflection of that hideous image to visit them in the dead of night."

"You would not," Conreeaght said reproachfully.

"No, I would not, but it amuses me to contemplate it," the Storm Lord replied. "Surely it would curdle their milk."

"Or straighten their hair," Conreeaght chuckled.

She could not take her eyes from him. From the thick mane of ebony hair he wore longer than was fashionable and curled slightly at his shoulders, from the brilliant sapphire eyes and tawny complexion to those very broad shoulders and lean waist, he was every maiden's dream – an extraordinarily handsome man with a sensuality about him that made her womb leap. When he pursed his full lips, twin dimples bracketed his cheeks and deepened the cleft in his chin.

"You believed the tales told of me?" he asked as he unlaced his fingers and reached out to take up the napkin by his plate. "That I had fur from the top of me to the bottom, sharp claws, fangs and blood-red eyes?"

"I knew not what to believe," she was quick to answer. "No one who has seen you in the flesh has ever returned to the village to give a description of you."

"Yet that does not stop them from speculating on how I look," he said, his lips twitching. "The crooked nose, the hellish hooded eyes, the furred face with thick jowls and jagged fangs dripping potent venom, talons curved toward my hairy palms, stooped back, lumbering limbs and dragging feet."

"You forgot the stench, your grace," Conreeaght joined in.

"Ah yes. The infamous stink of the bog warping my deformed body and diseased mind." He sighed melodramatically. "How could I forget my very best feature?"

Aideyn giggled, and when his eyes met hers, she felt her heart accelerate.

"You find my famed deformities amusing, do you, *bwoirrinagh*?"

"Oh indeed I do, milord," she said with a grin.

He took a sip of his water, lowering his gaze to the tureen. "What smells so good, milady?"

"Forgive me, milord!" Conreeaght stood so he could serve the soup to his master.

Aideyn blushed. "It is merely vegetable soup," she said. "My grandmother's recipe."

"It smells heavenly," the Storm Lord replied. "What is in it?"

"All manner of root vegetables," she replied. "Beets, turnips, rutabagas, potatoes, onions, parsnips and carrots cooked in a light broth. I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will," he said, thanking Conreeaght for serving him. He took the platter of sandwiches. "And what are these?"

"Grilled cheese," Aideyn answered. "A childhood favorite of mine on cold wintry days."

"And it is cold," the Storm Lord agreed. "We'll have more snow this afternoon. *Geay Hwoaie* is straining at the bit to be let loose again."

At the mention of the winds the Storm Lord kept imprisoned in the mountain, Aideyn shivered.

For a while the three of them ate in silence, Aideyn's husband-to-be giving her a thoughtful nod as he tasted the soup. She watched his strong hand as he dipped the spoon into his soup bowl, scooping the liquid up from the rim nearest to him to the back of the bowl as etiquette demanded. He wore an intricately knotted gold ring upon the thumb of his right hand and for some reason that fascinated her. Strange feelings were trilling through her as she looked at the dark hairs on the backs of his hands and the long, tapered fingers tipped with short, well-manicured nails.

"Will this evening be all right for the Joining, milady?" she heard him inquire.

Aideyn jumped, dragging her attention from his strong-looking hands. "I beg your pardon?" she said, finding herself staring into those fascinating eyes framed by long, thick, dark lashes.

"I asked if you would be agreeable to our Joining taking place tonight," he repeated.

"So soon?" she asked, feeling her heart skip a beat.

The Storm Lord looked down as though he'd been struck. "If you would prefer to wait..."

"No," she said, sensing she had inadvertently hurt him in some way. "Tonight would be fine. I've no objections to it being tonight."

A muscle ground in his lean jaw. "The better to get it over with," he grumbled.

Aideyn took up her napkin and blotted her lips. "I did not say that, milord."

"You didn't have to," he retorted, taking another long drink of water. When he lowered the goblet to the table, he glanced at her before biting a large chunk out of his sandwich, speaking around the obstruction. "I have no illusions of how distasteful women find this arrangement." He looked pointedly away from her.

Conreeaght met Aideyn's eye and gave a minute shake of his head as though to warn her not to comment on his grace's statement.

Realizing she had somehow dampened the mood of the meal, Aideyn folded her hands in her lap. "May I ask who will perform the Joining, milord?"

He said nothing as he chewed the large chunk of food in his mouth. His eyes had taken on a stormy look that made them appear cold and forbidding. Conreeaght answered for him, drawing her attention.

"There is an emissary who comes from the Ancient Ones to say the words over you, milady," the servant told her.

She looked away from Conreeaght to the silent man sitting at the head of the table. "I saw the gown you provided for me," she said quietly. "It is truly lovely."

"It is a new gown in case you were wondering," the Storm Lord snapped. "I would never expect you to chain yourself to me in another woman's used frock."

Feeling his anger and not understanding what she had done to provoke it, she pushed back from table. "Forgive me, milord, but I fear I have inadvertently caused you grief and that was certainly not my intention."

"It makes no difference," the Storm Lord mumbled.

"It does to me," she said. "I would not have you think me ungrateful for your generosity nor have you believe me dismissive of the effort you took in providing a lovely gown for our Joining."

"So long as you know no other woman has worn it, that's all that matters."

"I fear that is not all that matters. Far from it," she said, and rose to her feet. "I will leave you gentlemen to your meal."

"Milady, please do not go!" Conreeaght said, also coming to his feet.

"It is best I do, Conreeaght, before I say something I should not," Aideyn said, and smiled fleetingly at his protest before leaving the table, her eyes showing her hurt.

Aeral heaved a long breath and sat back in his chair. "That didn't go well, did it?"

"She was not insulting you, milord," the other man asserted. "Nor was she trying to stall for time concerning the Joining."

"You think not?"

"I know not," Conreeaght said. "That is not her way."

Running a hand over his face, Aeral turned to give his servant a wary look. "So you think this is a situation into which she was eager to be thrust?"

"Perhaps not, but I believe she is trying to make the best of the lot handed to her," Conreeaght said then winced as he undoubtedly realized how that had sounded. "Forgive me. That didn't come out..."

"I've no desire to be hurt again, Conreeaght," Aeral snapped.

"Why are you in such a hurry to Join with her then? Why not court her? Get to know her? Perhaps win her over?"

"Only to have her spurn me in the end anyway?" He shook his head. "No, I think not. As I said, it is best to get the whole thing out of the way and her free of me if that is what she truly wants," Aeral said. He lowered his head. "Before these feelings I am beginning to have get out of hand."

"I believe you may well be borrowing trouble where there is none."

"How long do you think she will be with us before she follows all those who have come before?" the Storm Lord asked through clenched teeth. "A year? Two? Do you believe she will last that long?"

"How long will it take you to break her spirit and make her miserable here so she will *want* to leave us?" Conreeaght countered. "Will you even allow her to last to when the Question is asked before you push her away?"

Aeral's eyes widened. "Is that what you think I will do?"

"I believe you do not realize when a gift has been handed you, milord," Conreeaght replied.

"I have been cursed by the gods, Conreeaght," he snarled. "Just as you were cursed. Do you see an end to your sentence?"

"No, milord, but..."

"Neither do I, and the last thing they would give me is a gift unless it were poisoned," Aeral growled, and heaved himself up from the table. "'Tis best to take the brew early and let it do its evil rather than suffer another night of the misery that haunts me at the sight of such beauty." Stalking off with his shoulders hunched and his hands thrust into the pockets of his britches, the Storm Lord disappeared into the darkness of his fortress, his boot heels ringing hollowly on the stone flooring.

* * * * *

Aideyn paced the confines of her bedchamber, trying to figure out what had turned her husband-to-be sullen. Thinking back on the conversation, she realized it had all begun when she questioned the haste of their Joining. She went back over the conversation with a heavy heart.

"He thought I was trying to postpone the ceremony," she said at last, sitting on the edge of her bed. Letting her shoulders sag, she hung her head. "I hurt his feelings."

All the old tales of his savagery, his beastliness came to mind. From childhood she had heard all the stories of the Storm Lord and, like the rest of the girl children, had shivered with fright.

"Pray the lottery is never called in your lifetime!" The old litany rang out in her mind.

"Pray you are never the *Teiyt!*"

What, she wondered, would the women of her village say if they were to actually see the Regent of the Winds? Would they be as frightened of him as they were of the ogre of the folk legend?

He was gloriously handsome, she thought as she sat there. Tall, muscular, built as a man should be with thick dark hair and very white teeth. His voice was deep and sensual. But it was his dark blue eyes she kept going back to—eyes that held a smoldering look one moment and were filled with anguish the next.

“Cursed by the gods for what he did!” She remembered hearing an old crone say, but no one could tell her what had been his crime, what he had done to warrant a curse from on High.

“Best not even think on it,” one of the elders had told her long ago.

Lying on the bed, she stared at the sculpted stucco ceiling with its intricate swirls and swags of flowers and butterflies. Though it was lovely—adding whimsy to the room—she was not mindful of its artistic value. All she could do was mentally count the butterflies stretching over the cream-colored surface. By the time she had counted the fifty-third one, her eyes grew heavy and she slipped into a peaceful sleep, and with it came a dream.

It was an odd vision that shifted lightly over her as she lay there with her legs together and her arms folded at her waist—an image she presented of the sacrifice she felt herself to be.

Though she could see nothing but the hem of a gown and occasionally the toe of one white kid slipper as she walked, she knew she was the one in the dream. A beautiful vista of rolling hills covered in sweet-smelling red clover stretched out for as far as she could see, disappearing into a molten blue sky with wispy white clouds pushed about by a soft gentle wind. Mixing with the scent of clover were honeysuckle and mimosa and the wondrous smells made her giddy with happiness. Birds flitted past overhead, and from far off in the distance, she could hear the lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep and irregularly the bark of a dog. It was an idyllic setting and soon she found herself sinking down to the cushion of the clover until she was at eye level with the crimson heads. Sweeping her hand idly over the soft foliage, she looked up at the sky, content and comfortable.

It was his shadow that fell upon her first, and where it touched it warmed her. His face appeared next with the sun backlighting his dark hair.

“Are you happy, *my ghraih?*” he asked, his deep baritone voice sending chills down her back.

“I am content, milord,” she answered him.

She saw him put his hands to his thighs as he hunkered down at her side. “I would have you happy,” he said, “not merely content.”

She looked up at his sad face and lifted a hand to touch his lean jaw. She smiled as he closed his eyes at the soft touch and turned his lips so they were pressed into her palm.

“You mustn’t bark so loudly at me, milord,” she said.

He put his hand over hers and when he spoke, his breath tickled her palm. “I am what I am, milady. A beast and nothing more.”

“Nay,” she denied as he put his other hand to hers and curled her fingers into the safety between his own. “You are what you will yourself to be.”

In the next instant he was lying beside her and they were naked, his strong chest pressed to her breasts. Between her legs she could feel the insistence of his manhood bidding entrance.

“Tame this beast, *my ghraih*,” he whispered to her, his lips at her ear. “Make me what you would have me be.”

Where their bodies touched she felt heat and pleasure so intense it took her breath away. Removing her hand from his, she threaded her fingers through his lush waves. “I would ask the same of you, milord,” she replied.

“Aeral,” he corrected. “I am your Aeral.”

His mouth came toward hers and a fraction of a second before their lips met, Aideyn woke, her heart pounding, her body throbbing in places she had not known existed.

She sat up as though a marionette whose strings have been pulled by the puppeteer. Once more she had lost track of time and found the sun had lowered until there was not even a sliver of light coming in through the pulled-back drapes. A look at the clock told her she slept away not only the afternoon but the evening as well. It was ten of the clock already.

“Oh no!” she whimpered and swung her legs from the bed. “I’ve only two hours before the Joining!”

Aideyn looked at the armoire in which hung the beautiful gown he had chosen for her to wear at their Joining. She hurried over to the massive chest and opened the double doors wide. Gently she stroked the soft white satin with its finely woven mesh overskirt. It was a sumptuous creation fit for a queen—or the bride of the Regent of the Winds. Lifting the skirt, she looked at the gems that edged the deeply scalloped hem and wondered if they were real. She thought perhaps they were. She fingered one of the gems that had also been sprinkled about the silver mesh netting.

“Diamonds,” she said, running the tip of her finger over the stone’s brilliance.

Circling the softly scooped neckline, the cuffs of the long silvery mesh sleeves and down the long train that had been carefully folded over a hanger, the gemstones twinkled like little stars in a white heaven.

The veil to the gown was draped over a large hook and it too was studded with the sparkling stones, the mesh flowing down from a beautiful diamond tiara.

Who, she wondered, would help her dress in this delectable construction? She knew she could never reach the dozens of tiny satin-clad buttons that ran up the back of the gown.

There were only three of them in the fortress and Conreeaght was out of the question. Her husband-to-be? Unlikely, and besides, everyone knew it was bad luck for the groom to see his bride in her gown before the wedding. So who would aid her?

It was a question she knew had to be answered if the Joining was to take place that night at midnight—the traditional hour of such ceremonies.

Screwing up her courage, she left her room in search of Conreeaght for she feared the Storm Lord would not be receptive to her intruding on him again this day. But no matter where she looked, the servant was nowhere to be found. Loath to enter rooms where the doors were shut, she called out to the servant and when there was no answer, climbed the stairs to the second floor. Not finding him there, she went up to the third floor, calling for Conreeaght as she went.

"He is out."

Aideyn jumped at the sound of the Storm Lord's voice. She turned to face him and found him standing in a doorway to what she supposed was his bedchamber. He was leaning against the jamb, a brandy snifter in his hand.

"What is it you need, milady?" he asked before taking a drink of the golden liquid.

Frowning at his drinking, she lifted her chin. "I need to know who will help me get dressed for the Joining."

His eyebrows slashed together. "You need help?" he asked, as though such a thing had never occurred to him.

"Did not your previous brides need help, milord?" she asked, a little annoyed with him for his words were slurring again—a good indication he was well on his way to drunkenness.

"There has been only one Joining in this fortress and that was long, long ago. My bride wore a simple frock as was the custom of her clan. She needed no help in putting it on."

"But since then?" Aideyn queried. "Surely..."

"No woman has agreed to a union with me since, so there was never a need for a gown. Why the hell are you agreeing to Join with me?" The tone was more growl than question.

"I was chosen and I gave my word," she said, her chin up. "And I've need of help because I can't get dressed on my own."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why the hell not?" His gaze swept down her. "You're not crippled."

She folded her arms over her chest, not realizing her foot was tapping an irritated rhythm on the carpet. "No, I am *not* crippled, but if you will tell me just how I am to manage a hundred tiny pearl buttons on my own, I will gladly attempt the deed. Otherwise, I will need help in doing so unless you prefer I come to our Joining half clothed."

He seemed to have to think about that for a moment. When he had, he shook his head and pushed away from the jamb to disappear back into his room.

"Milord?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

Pursing her lips, Aideyn lowered her arms and went after him, entering his bedchamber unbidden, she was so put out. "Milord, did you hear me?" she questioned.

"Aye, *bwoirrinagh*," he said with a heavy sigh. "I heard you." He ran a hand through his hair. "I didn't think about the fucking buttons."

"Milord!" she gasped, her face flaming at the vulgar word.

Aeral looked to the heavens. "Will you send her a maid?" he asked. He cast her a peeved look. "Now!"

Instantly a flash of pure white light flared in the room—causing Aeral to curse violently as he hid his eyes in the crook of his raised arm. When the light vanished, a middle-aged woman in a homespun gown was standing in the center of the room, a sweet smile on her face.

"Good day to you, milady," the woman said, hurrying over to Aideyn. "Let's see to what you'll be needing for your Joining."

Aideyn opened her mouth to speak, but the woman hooked her arm through Aideyn's and led her out of the room at a goodly pace. Glancing back at her husband-to-be, Aideyn saw him plopping himself down in a chair, the goblet once more to his lips.

"Pay him no never mind," the woman said. "He can be a sullen brat at best."

Feeling a strange vibration coming from the woman beside her, Aideyn knew her companion was not human. That should have unnerved her, but she found she was relaxing more and more with each step she took alongside the woman.

"What is your name?" Aideyn asked as they came to her room.

"You can call me Morri," the woman said. "But I'll answer to whatever name you wish to give me." She nodded toward the bathing chamber. "Make haste now, sweeting. Your bathwater is ready."

Aideyn looked behind her, surprised, but she did not question Morri. She meekly took herself into the chamber and hastily began to undress.

"Do you like the scent?" Morri inquired. From the other room, Aideyn could hear the older woman bustling about.

"Very much. Is that the gardenia Conreeaght mentioned to me?" she asked as she began soaping herself with the satiny bar of soap provided for her.

"Aye. It is Aeral's favorite. You are the first of his intendeds to like the smell."

Lathering herself with the delightful-smelling soap, Aideyn felt a lassitude that seemed to be spreading over her to calm her and give her courage. She wondered if the gods were providing such comfort to her in fortification of what was to come.

Morri came into the bathing chamber carrying a large fleecy robe and oversized cotton towel. "Don't forget to wash your hair, sweeting," she advised. "A man loves to bury his face in a woman's hair, you know."

Aideyn blushed and ducked her head. She reached up to obediently pull the pins from her long hair and let it cascade down her back.

"Here," Morri said. "Let me."

The older woman took a pitcher of warm water and—tilting Aideyn’s head back with a light press of her hand to the younger woman’s forehead—poured the water over Aideyn’s hair. From out of nowhere a small vial appeared, and when it was uncorked, Aideyn caught a whiff of the gardenia-infused shampoo as Morri worked it through Aideyn’s hair.

“Did your mother tell you what to expect on your Joining night, sweeting?” She lowered her voice. “Did you have *the talk*?”

Aideyn’s face burned. “Aye,” she whispered, twisting her fingers in the washcloth.

As though she were probing Aideyn’s memories of that *talk*, Morri sighed. “I fear there is some discomfort but it is not the raging pain your mother suggested. Aeral will be gentle with you. He knows I would have it no other way.”

Aideyn looked up at the older woman, wondering at what she’d just said. Who was this woman really?

“There is more pleasure in the act than pain,” Morri went on, “although there is something to be said about a little playful pain mixed into the loving.” She snapped her fingers and out of nowhere another pitcher of warm water appeared. “What I thrill to almost as much as the release is the weight of a man’s body upon mine.” She sighed. “That is a feeling unlike any other and one of which I never tire.”

“Aren’t they heavy?” Aideyn heard herself ask, and her blush deepened so fiery she hid her face in the washcloth.

“That is the point, sweeting,” Morri said with a laugh as she worked the lather from Aideyn’s curls. “The weight of his body presses down on your breasts, your belly, and it is the pressing down on your belly that pushes blood between your legs to heighten the feeling. It is a glorious feeling.”

Aideyn felt Morri moving away and lowered the washcloth. The older woman was standing there with the large towel spread out in her arms.

“Come, sweeting. You must not get all pruny on him this night.”

Other than her mother, no other person had ever seen Aideyn naked, yet with Morri she felt no embarrassment as she stood up in the water and stepped out of the tub, allowing the older woman to envelop her in the warm, soft towel. She didn’t even feel self-conscious as Morri rubbed the towel over her to help her dry off.

“The one thing to remember about men is that they have such fragile egos,” Morri was saying as she produced another warm towel in which to wrap Aideyn’s wet hair. “Aeral especially has been hurt so deeply you will need to be very gentle with him. It has been eons since he has lain with a woman. He might well be unsure of his abilities as a lover. You must not allow him to have such doubts.” She led Aideyn to the vanity and urged her to sit upon the sculpted bench.

“Did not his other brides...?”

“Since his first lawful wife, no woman who ever won the lottery has ever completed the Joining with him,” Morri interrupted. “No Joining, no mating with Aeral. Such has been his fate for centuries now.”

“What happened to bring about such hurt to him?” Aideyn asked.

“A wicked child who thought only of herself and her wants,” Morri replied, her lips pursed into thin lines. “She dallied where she should not have—not once but twice—and in the doing brought evil to a good man.”

“Is she the one he murdered?”

Morri’s hands stilled as she rubbed her charge’s wet hair. “Who said he murdered anyone?” she asked.

For the life of her, Aideyn could not remember anyone saying such a thing about the Storm Lord to her and she had no idea from whence that notion had come. Thinking on it, she felt as though it had been dropped into her mind by some wicked outside force, but when that had happened, she could not say.

“Aye, he’s been at it again,” Morri said as though she’d plucked Aideyn’s thoughts from the ether. “He likes to cause Aeral as much grief as he can.”

“Who?” Aideyn asked. If her husband-to-be had someone out to get him, she wanted to know.

“Don’t worry about that troublemaker,” Morri said from between clenched teeth. “I will handle him in due time. Though I was browbeaten into siding with him the once, I have never cared for his interventions and he has balked me one time too many as it is.”

Staring at Morri’s pinched face in the mirror, Aideyn fancied she saw another woman behind the façade of the older woman—a stunning beauty with silken red hair and emerald green eyes that crackled with lightning.

“Who are you, Morri?” Aideyn asked, awed by what she suspected but dared not voice.

The older woman put her hands on Aideyn’s shoulders. “Consider me your ally, sweeting,” she said.

It was then Aideyn realized her hair was completely dry and piled upon her head in an intricate twist studded with white flowers whose delicate scent drifted into her nostrils.

“Gardenias,” Morri said as she reached up to adjust one of the flowers. “I’ve arranged them so they will not interfere with the tiara and veil.”

Looking at herself in the mirror, Aideyn barely recognized the woman in the glass. She had to put a hand up to her cheek to make sure the ethereal image was her. In the mirror, the woman had flawless skin with just a touch of blush at the high cheekbones and a shiny gloss to lips tinted the color of ripe pomegranates. Her emerald green eyes gleamed behind long, thick, sooty lashes and her eyelids held a tint of soft lavender that fanned out to her perfectly arched brows. Her neck seemed more swanlike than usual

and her ears were delicately set upon her head with large diamond studs sparkling at the lobes.

"I..." she said, unable to find the words.

"You are beautiful," Morri said for her. "And you will set him back on his heels when he lifts your veil this night."

Wishing her mother and father could see her on this her Joining day, Aideyn felt a trace of sorrow shift through her breast. As little girls, she and Teagan had spent hours daydreaming about their wedding days and pretending to be brides draped in old blankets and stiff netting. She had always wanted Teagan there at her side as her maid of honor, to be walked down the aisle by her father, and to have Emmet standing as Niall's best man.

"There is fantasy and then there is fantasy," Morri said. "Sometimes what we dream we want cannot compare to what we will ultimately have." She bent down and put her cheek to Aideyn's. "Trust me when I tell you that your dreams have taken a turn you will never regret."

"Will I make him a good wife?" Aideyn asked.

"What will you say when the Question is asked?" Morri countered.

"The Question?" Aideyn repeated. "What Question is that?"

"You will know when it is asked."

"I will honor the lottery and I will answer whatever is asked truthfully."

Morri smiled slowly. "You are the only one who has ever cared enough to want to please him, sweeting, and I have no doubt of your answer." She straightened. "Now let's get you into that lovely gown he designed just for you."

Moving to the armoire, Morri opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of silk stockings that were so sheer they were barely visible. They slid like cream over Aideyn's legs and the lacy blue garters that held them in place on her thighs had the same knotted design on them as the thumb ring Aeral wore.

"It is part of his family's crest," Morri said. "The Sigil of the Wind."

Next was the silky chemise that fit her like a second skin as it was dropped over her head. It was cool and soft against her body and she could not keep from running her palms up and down the satiny material.

When her Joining gown was brought over to her, Aideyn could feel her heart thudding wildly in her chest. The gown was so lovely, so wraithlike it seemed unreal. In awe of the fine silver netting that covered the white silk, she lovingly stroked it, looking up at Morri with wonder.

"Aye," Morri agreed to her charge's silent comment. "It is the most beautiful of gowns. It was spun of the finest silver thread to be had in Diabolusia and knew the hands of over a hundred expert artisans to fashion it. The diamonds are from a mine in Necroman where no human foot has ever trod and the silk is the most luxurious ever

woven in Chrystallus. The lace at the hem and neckline was tatted in Chale by a blind woman whose fingers work miracles with the shuttle."

Looking down at the scalloped lace, Aideyn whistled softly. "A blind woman," she marveled.

The gown fit her to perfection, molding to her as though she had been born to wear it and the gown created to her exact measurements. How, she wondered, could he have known what size would be right?

"He has excellent taste, does he not?" Morri asked. "He's never taken such care with those who came before you." She cocked her head to the side. "One wonders why he felt the need to do so now."

Aideyn jumped as slippers suddenly encased her feet. She drew aside the hem of the luscious gown to peek at the white satin embroidered with silver flourishes along the toe.

"He thinks of everything," Morri laughed.

Her eyes widening, Aideyn put a hand to her mouth. "Is he watching us?"

Morri shook her head. "Nay, sweeting. He knows better than that. It is bad luck for him to see you in your gown before your Joining." She frowned. "He needs no more ill fortune in his life."

Dressed in her lovely finery and feeling like a fairy-tale princess, Aideyn turned this way and that to get a look at herself in the full-length floor mirror that sat beside her dressing table. She was stunned at her appearance, and as Morri moved up behind her to place the veil upon her head, she felt a lump gathering in her throat.

"Exquisite," Morri pronounced as she stepped back, her hands clasped at her waist. "Utterly exquisite."

All that was left now was the final Gracing of the Gifts.

"Something old," Morri said, fishing into her pocket to withdraw a gold necklace. There was a medallion hanging on the delicate chain. "His family crest."

Aideyn did not get a chance to look at the image on the medallion as Morri unlocked the clasp then draped it around her charge's neck, but Aideyn saw that it too held the knotted edge that looked the same as the Storm Lord's thumb ring.

Something new was a dainty linen handkerchief embroidered with the soon-to-be initials of the bride—ABD—tucked into the sleeve. Something borrowed, a diamond bracelet that appeared suddenly on her wrist.

"Who?" Aideyn breathed.

"A friend," Morri replied, and then told her the something blue was the pretty garters that held up her stockings. "Now you are decked out as a bride should be."

Almost as though waiting for those words, music sounded from below stairs and Aideyn drew in a ragged breath. It was the traditional peel of the wedding gong that bid the bride approach her groom.

“Be happy, sweeting,” Morri said. She smiled gently. “Make him happy. Well he deserves it and let no one tell you otherwise.”

With that said, the older woman vanished in the same bright flash of light from which she sprang, making Aideyn blink her eyes from the glare.

The music grew louder, more insistent, and Aideyn lifted her chin, attempting to calm the nerves that threatened to send her reeling. Smoothing down the front of her gown, she walked slowly to the door, feeling the rush of her blood pounding in her ears and the moisture gathering in her palms. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, her destiny waiting one floor below.

Chapter Four

Aeral was as nervous as a fledgling boy about to meet his first date. He was having trouble swallowing for his mouth was dry, but his palms were oozing with moisture. He stood before the emissary as the sound of the wedding gong continued and shifted anxiously from one foot to the other.

"I have never seen you so fretful, your grace," the emissary said. "You have done this enough to know what is to happen."

Aeral locked gazes with the tall, thin man in the bright red robe of his office. "You believe she will deny me as all the others have?"

The emissary shrugged. "That is not for me to know, your grace, but let us pray – as we do each time – that she will accept you."

Pity, Aeral thought, was rampant in the ancient man's lined face. He could not help but wonder if despite his denials the man did not already know how this night would end. As the rustle of silk sounded behind him, he closed his eyes, silently praying this time would be different. The chiming of tiny silver bells signaled his bride's approach and he swallowed hard.

"Oh my, your grace. She is lovely," the emissary whispered. "The gown is perfection."

He did not turn as she came to stand beside him. The sweet, intoxicating scent of gardenia drifted under his nose and he almost groaned with the pain it brought forth in his loins.

"It is now the designated hour of Joining," the emissary called out. "Who comes to seek the blessings of the gods on this ritual?"

Aeral had to clear his throat and hope his voice didn't break as he answered. "I, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin, Regent of the Winds, have come to seek the gods' blessings."

"And who has come to Join with this man?"

There wasn't a bit of hesitation. "Aideyn Bennett, daughter of Jarlath, has come to the Joining," Aideyn replied in a soft voice.

Aeral cut his eyes to the woman at his side, but he could see nothing beyond the veil that kept her face hidden from his view.

"Can you vouch for your purity, daughter of Jarlath?"

"I can," she answered. "I am a maiden, untried and true."

The emissary nodded. "Is there anyone who has reason to believe this Joining should not take place or that it would be invalid?"

Aideyn looked around her. Conreeaght and Morri were the only other people in the room beside her, Aeral and the emissary.

"Speak now, *bwoirrinagh*," she heard the man at her side say, "or forever hold your peace."

She turned to him and saw the misery in his eyes. She longed to reach up and lay her hand to his cheek, to comfort him. He looked so unsure, so miserable, and her heart ached for him. "I have nothing *to* say, milord," she said, and returned her attention to the emissary.

Aeral breathed a sigh of relief. The first hurdle had passed and she had not bemoaned the fate that had brought her to him. Others before her had also passed the first test, but the telling one lay ahead. He tensed, knowing what was to come.

"Aeral Chiarn Dorrin," the emissary said. "Do you willingly give yourself to this woman?"

"With all my heart and all my soul and all my being," Aeral said, though he felt his heart breaking, believing she would deny him as all the others had. "I pledge myself only unto her. What is mine will be hers."

"Aideyn Bennett," the emissary said. "Do you willingly give yourself to this man without reservation, without protest?"

She thought this must be the Question of which Morri had spoken. Had no woman before her ever willingly accepted the Storm Lord as her mate?

"Think before you answer," Aeral said quietly, and she heard the pain in his voice.

She turned away from the emissary and to the man at her side, and the words came from somewhere deep within her. "He, I have chosen as my very own. I will walk the day and sleep the night at his side and at no other's. I pledge myself only unto him for as long as there is life for us both. I will be his true mate in word and deed."

Aeral gasped loudly and nearly collapsed. He stared at her with thunderstruck eyes. "Milady, are you sure?" he whispered, his voice shaking, unable to speak above that merest sound. He had not been prepared for such an answer.

"I am very sure, milord," she replied, and smiled tenderly at him.

The emissary was staring at her. "Do you understand what this means, milady?" he asked. "Do you realize you will spend your life with this man? Once the Joining is performed you can never go back. You will always be at his side."

Aideyn nodded. "I understand. I was chosen by the lottery for that purpose," she said. "The Fates have sent me to this man. I will abide by what They have granted to me. They know better than either of us what should be."

"But is it of your own freewill though?" the emissary pressed.

"Aye," she said. "Of my own freewill and without reservation or protest."

It was Morri who stepped forward. Gone was the garb of a servant and in its place a splendid gown of sparkling copper cloth covered her from head to toe. Gone was the middle-aged woman. Here, there was a goddess.

"The Question was asked. The Question was answered. Now this man and this woman will kneel before Us in obedience to the wishes of their gods. Here, before Us, they will pledge themselves only unto one another. One flesh, one inseparable entity, until the end of time," Morrighunia, the Great Goddess, intoned. "Once mated, never separated."

Aideyn was trembling violently as she realized who had helped her to dress for her Joining. Her teeth were clattering together she was so shocked, and she feared her knees would buckle beneath her.

"Tell them you have changed your mind," Aeral said, observing the trembling and mistaking it for fear of him and what came next. "You don't have to go through with this. I will not hold you to it."

"Milord, she is..." Aideyn said. "She is..."

"Your bride is not quivering because of you, brat," the Great Goddess smirked. "She trembles for she is in My presence."

He reached down to take Aideyn's hand. "Is that true? Is it She who frightens you?"

Aideyn nodded and gripped his hand. "I do not fear you," she said. "I could never fear you."

"Kneel, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin," the Great Goddess said sternly. "Accept the bride the Fates have finally agreed to allow you to keep!"

He didn't need a second command. He helped Aideyn to kneel before the emissary and sank heavily to his knees beside her, refusing to relinquish her hand.

Conreeaght stepped forward with a silken pillow upon which rested two broad gold bands. The emissary took the smaller of the gold bands and held it up for all to see.

"As this woman has agreed to become one with this man, a part of him, so shall these rings be a part of you. As your wife and your husband may not be taken from you, so shall these rings never be removed. They are the symbols of eternal union blessed by the gods, sanctioned by ancient law, acknowledged and accepted and witnessed by those gathered and given to you by my own hands as a representative of the gods on this earth." He handed the small ring to Aeral.

His hand shaking so badly he was afraid he'd drop the ring, Aeral managed to get it on the third finger of Aideyn's left hand. When she was handed his ring and calmly placed it upon his hand, he wanted to shout his happiness to the heavens.

"We know how you are feeling, brat," the Great Goddess said. "Do not hurt our ears with your raucousness."

His heart was singing. The blood flowing through his veins pumped with such joy he felt lightheaded. When the emissary gave his permission for the unveiling and the kiss that would seal the Joining, he could barely restrain himself from laughing as he helped his new bride to her feet. As he folded back the glorious material to reveal the gentle smile that awaited him, he thought his heart would burst.

"Milady," he said, his palms going to her cheeks to cup her sweet face.

“Milord,” she replied.

It was the tenderest of kisses he placed upon her lips. It was a chaste kiss, but hidden within it was a lifetime of need and a promise of untold pleasures to come.

The room dimmed until only a handful of candles were left glowing in their candlesticks. Gone were the emissary, Conreeaght and the Great Goddess.

Aeral stepped back and took her hand in both of his. “We are alone now, milady,” he said softly.

“Aye, I see we are,” she whispered.

“Do you regret what you’ve done?” he asked, searching her face in the low light.

She shook her head. “Nor will I ever,” she answered.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles. “I wish I could be sure it will remain that way,” he said.

Someone—she thought—had hurt this man so deeply he was unsure of himself. He appeared to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders, and though they were wide, strong-looking shoulders, they were mentally bowing beneath some terrible burden.

“Will you tell me what has you so concerned?” she asked.

“Not now,” he replied, and took a deep breath. “Now I wish to show you something.” He dropped one hand from hers and tugged her toward the doorway. Though he did not need it, he took a candlestick holding a single taper to light their way.

He led her up the stairs—never releasing his firm grip on her hand—and up the winding staircase farther than she had been before. When he stopped, they were facing a narrow copper-plated door. The door had four panels, and on each panel was a rendition of the Four Winds.

“Beyond this door is the Viewing Chamber,” he told her. “It is my only view on the world beyond the stone walls of *Carrick Ard*. I have been a prisoner in my own home for centuries now.”

“But won’t that change now?” she asked, looking up at him. “Has not our Joining broken the curse?”

He reached out to cup her cheek. “Only time will tell, *lhiannan*,” he whispered. “I can have only what the gods will grant me.”

The door swung open as though pulled by unseen hands. Light from the candle flickered in an errant draft and splayed shadows over the dark walls. But it was not the darkness of the room that took away Aideyn’s breath. It was the wide expanse of mullioned windows that covered one entire wall from ceiling to floor.

“Oh my!” she breathed as he led her to the sweeping vista.

The valley in which she lived was spread out before her from as far as she could see. Lights from the windows, curling smoke from the chimneys, the gleaming landscape of snow and ebony mountain, the sapphire blue lake beyond the village, the

serpentine roadway that led from the center of the village and out of sight beyond the scope of the window toward the heaving sea.

"This," Aeral said, "is the Viewing Chamber." He glanced down at her. "Do you see your hut?"

"Aye," she said in wonder, lifting a hand to the window and pointing. "There!"

He didn't need to look where she was indicating for he was acquainted well with every family and every structure in the village.

"If you but whisper your family name, the hut will appear closer and you can even look inside if you are so inclined."

She turned wide eyes to him. "That can't be!" she gasped.

"It is as I say. The gods graced you at your birth with certain abilities," he assured her. "You have the Sight with which to see much of what I see when I come to this room."

"But it is not something I was encouraged to use, milord."

"Perhaps not in the village, but here it is different. Here your ability will always be encouraged." His voice softened. "You can watch over your family as often as you like."

Aideyn stepped back. "I don't think I want to do that," she said. "It would hurt too much."

"I understand, but the opportunity to do so is yours whenever you care to partake of it," he said, and reached up to sweep an errant wisp of hair behind her ear. He moved closer. "And I will always be here for you."

She turned her head and looked up at him. "I appreciate that, milord."

"Aeral," he said.

"Aeral," she repeated. Her tentative smile was so endearing, he wanted to shout to the heavens the happiness that had not been his for what seemed like an eternity.

"Shall we retire to my room?" he asked, his heart slamming against his rib cage in fear she would say no.

"I would like that," she said, and his world became a sweet, bright ray of sunshine in the barren dark.

With her hand tucked safely in his, they descended the stairs to the next floor down and he escorted her to the room they would share. He opened the door, but before she could enter, he swept her up in his arms in the time-honored tradition and carried her over the threshold.

Aideyn was astounded at his strength. His muscular arms were like bands of steel as they held her against him and his chest was rock solid. As he swung her down to her feet on the thick burgundy carpet, he did so in a way that allowed her hip to slip down over the taut bulge at the front of his trousers. Her face turned as hot as a roaring fire and she trembled.

“You have nothing to fear, milady,” he said, and once more took possession of her hand. “If you want time to get to know me before we consummate our Joining...”

“No,” she said. Though her blood was racing so rapidly in her veins she felt faint, she would not make him wait for such a thing. She knew men were ever eager to possess their women, and with a man who had been so long without companionship as Aeral had, she realized his needs would be great – though she had little notion of what such needs entailed.

“Do you not know what it is a man and woman do together?” he asked, drawing her against him but keeping her hand in his, pressing it to his chest as he held her.

“Aye, I think so,” she said, her face flaming even hotter. “My mother told me and my friends and I have discussed it.”

“Yet you have no notion what a woman needs to make her happy in bed?” he teased.

She couldn’t answer that for she had suddenly become tongue-tied and nervous. Her palms were slick with perspiration and her head was throbbing unmercifully with the heated flow of her blood.

“Come, little one,” he said, and drew her to the bed where he bid her sit. “Let’s discuss this, you and I.”

Obediently taking a seat on the soft mattress, she kept her head down, but when he slipped his arm around her shoulder to draw her close to him, she lifted her chin, turned her head and looked up at him. When he smiled at her, her heart did a funny little squeezing sensation in her chest.

By the gods, she thought as she stared into his eyes. This man was the handsomest male she’d ever seen. His eyes were the most unusual shade of blue and they seemed to draw her into them – down into a vortex that threatened to pull her into his very soul.

“I would have your first time be very special,” she heard him saying.

“I know there will be pain,” she said then blushed hot and lowered her eyes.

“Aye, there could be, but if I am very careful with you – as I intend to be – and you are well prepared for my body to enter yours, the hurt will be minimal and hopefully the pleasure will far outweigh any unpleasantness you may experience,” he told her gently.

She loved listening to his voice. It was soothing, calming, a deep rumbling from his broad chest that made her feel very womanly, cherished, protected. His hand slipped over hers and he lightly caressed her, adding to her sense of being sheltered.

“I want to give you the very best life has to offer,” he said, running his thumb over her knuckles.

“Give freely of yourself,” she said gently. “Hold nothing back. Keep nothing from me. That is all I will ever ask of you.”

Aeral felt his heart swell with pride in this beautiful woman. She was not asking that the moon or stars be brought down from the heavens and laid at her feet. She was

not asking for riches or possessions of any kind. All she was seeking was to be with him as the gods intended woman to be with man—in honesty and companionship, as help-mates.

But he wanted to be sure, everything seemed a dream to him at that moment, too good to be true. If he was to be awakened from it, let it be now before it was too late.

“And that will be enough for you, *bwoirrinagh*?”

She eased her hand from under his and laid her palm against his warm cheek. “Will I be enough for you?” she countered.

He turned his lips into her hand and kissed it. “Aye, *my ghraih*. You are all I will ever want or need.”

“Then we will each have what we want,” she whispered.

He stared into her lovely eyes for the longest time—seeking the demoness, the evil entity that he prayed was not there, looking for the trap that would spring upon him and finish off what was left of his soul. He held his breath as he delved into her soul, and when he had settled lightly in that innocent core, saw nothing but goodness and kindness within her.

“The gods help me,” he said, “but my heart is yours for the taking.”

“And I will take great care with that heart, milord,” she promised. “I will never knowingly do anything to hurt you.”

Aeral slid off the bed and knelt at her feet. He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. “And I swear before gods and man that I will be a husband worthy of you, Aideyn Dorrin.”

“Aideyn Dorrin,” she repeated with a sigh. “I like the sound of that.”

“As do I,” he said.

She tilted her head to one side. “Do you think you could help me out of my gown, milord husband?” She lowered her voice. “As lovely as it is, it does scratch a bit.”

He laughed—surprising himself, it had been centuries since the sound of merriment echoed against the walls of *Carrick Ard*. He jumped to his feet with her hand still in his and tugged her gently from the bed, sweeping her into the strength of his arms, bringing her against his body as he had wanted to from the first moment he saw her sleeping in her hut.

“Things are about to change here,” he said, his chin nestled on the crown of her silken hair. “You are going to be good for me, *bwoirrinagh*. I can feel it in my bones.”

He eased her back then asked her to turn so he could see to her buttons. When she did, he groaned.

“Now I see why you needed someone to help you dress,” he acknowledged. He put his fingers on the top button. “I’m of a mind to rip the thing down the back rather than work each of these little demons.”

“You’ll do no such thing!” she was quick to tell him. “We will save this gown for our daughter’s Joining day.”

Aeral's hands stilled on the dress. "Our daughter?" he questioned quietly.

"Or daughter-in-law," she said. "One or the other."

Having a child by Aideyn had not occurred to Aeral. His first wife had not lived long enough to conceive a child by him, and even if she had, their union had not been one either had wanted. Sex had been perfunctory between them and not at all satisfying. A child of his would have been unwelcome in Deirdre's world.

"You do want children, don't you, milord?"

"Aeral," he corrected almost absently as he thought about her bearing his child.

She craned her neck so she could see his face. "You do, don't you?" she pressed.

He nodded slowly, shock rife on his handsome face. "Aye, *bwoirrinagh*, I do. I really believe I do."

"Good, then that's settled," she said, and turned back around. "I would like a houseful of them, if truth be told."

The Storm Lord's eyes widened. "A houseful?" he repeated, and looked about him, imagining little ones scampering across the carpeting and scrambling onto the huge bed. A smile tugged at his lips. "Aye. That would be something, wouldn't it?"

"At least a boy for you to teach and a girl for me to spoil," she said wistfully as his fingers continued down the long length of buttons. She shivered now and again as her gown came undone and she felt his warm breath along her bared flesh.

"It might be the other way around, you know," he said, fumbling with one recalcitrant button.

She heard him heave an irritated sigh and knew he was becoming annoyed with the buttons. To take his mind from ripping them off—which she was fairly sure he was considering doing—she asked how he spent his days.

He stopped and lifted his head, stared over her shoulder across the room. "Brooding," he answered, paused a moment then shrugged. "Feeling sorry for myself."

"That will stop," she said, and when he grunted, she asked if he played chess.

"I used to love playing chess and backgammon," he said. "I was especially fond of all kinds of card games."

"Does Coni play?"

"I've never asked, but he's a sharp one. He could learn if you're thinking of including him."

"At least some of the time," she said. "When we don't wish to be alone."

A gentle smile spread over his lips at her words and he felt a momentary tug on his heart strings before he reached the final button with a loud explosion of relieved breath.

"There," he said and stepped back. "All undone." His gaze was on the slender curve of her back beneath the silk chemise and he had to wipe his suddenly sweaty palms on his pants.

"Thank you, Aeral," she said softly, and with her hands pressed to the bodice of the gown to hold it in place, started across the room.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

Aideyn gave him a look that made his knees weak.

"To finish undressing and put on the beautiful peignoir set I see hanging over yon screen," she said, nudging her chin toward the elaborate parquetry divider. "Is that all right?"

He swallowed hard, unable to speak, and simply bobbed his head in agreement. As she disappeared behind the screen and the sound of the gown rustling as she stepped out of it drifted to him, he felt his heart begin to pound. Suddenly more nervous than he had ever been in his life, he looked around him frantically and would have fled the room had she not called out to him.

"It's a bit chilly in here, Aeral. Would you add a log to the fire?"

He froze—torn between doing as she asked and bolting.

"Aeral?"

"Aye," he said, and had to clear his throat. "Aye, *bwoirrinagh*, I heard you."

Like a condemned man, he walked to the fireplace and bent to add the wood. When he straightened, his gaze fell on the chair where he'd spent so many nights staring into the flames, wishing for something he never thought to have. Aching for things to be different.

And now they were.

He looked toward the screen for a second or two then, as calm as he was capable of being, went to his chair and sat down, leaning forward to remove his boots. By the time the vision of beauty skirted the screen and joined him there at the fireplace, his boots and socks had been set aside and the collar of his shirt loosened halfway down his chest.

"That's much better," Aideyn said as she took the chair across from him.

Aeral gawked at her. The long blonde braid that had been wrapped so primly around the back of her head in a chignon was now loose. The thick waves of her hair flowed like a molten gold waterfall upon her shoulders and down her narrow back. Glints of light caught in the lustrous strands.

Had he thought her beautiful before? he wondered as he stared at her with his lips parted, his mouth suddenly dry. If she had been beautiful then, she was radiantly glorious now. The pale blue satin peignoir clung to her bosom in a soft swell and flowed down over long, silky legs that ended with the cutest little toes he could ever imagine.

"I didn't see any house slippers," she said, and tucked one foot over the other, running her right sole along the top.

“Here,” he said, and surprised her by pushing out of the chair and coming to kneel before her. His hands were warm as he took her feet between his palms and began to rub them.

“You really must stop that, milord,” she said.

He frowned. “What?”

“This habit you have of falling at my feet,” she said with a giggle. “That’s too much power for a woman to have over her man.”

He looked up into her laughing, teasing eyes and felt himself falling so deeply in love it actually hurt to take a breath. Her hands were clasped lightly on the arms of the chair, her head cocked at the most attractive angle as she gazed at him. There was no fear, no trepidation and no nervousness marring her lovely features. She was looking back at him with trust and – dare he even think it? – budding affection.

“I would die for you,” he swore, his hands tightening on her insole.

Aideyn saw the raw pain registering in his blue eyes, heard that pain resonating in his deep voice. She recognized deep, abiding hurt when she saw it, and this man had been crippled by it. Her heart ached for him and she leaned forward, putting her hands to either side of his face.

“Aeral, I want you to live for me,” she said, her gaze fused with his.

The man who had spent hour after hour in lonely silence for centuries could not contain the happiness that was slowly leaching into his withered soul to make it fresh and alive once more. He threw back his head and bellowed, rose to his feet and swept his new bride into his arms, standing there staring down into her face as she looked back at him with confidence that he would do her no harm.

“I have waited ten lifetimes for you, *tarrishagh*,” he said, calling her his beloved.

Aideyn stroked the hair at the nape of his neck. “Make me truly yours then, *dooinney*,” she replied.

“*Dooinney*,” he said the word as though it were a rare delicacy bursting upon his tongue. “It is an honor to be your husband, Aideyn Dorrin.”

He took her to their bridal bed.

Chapter Five

He laid her down upon the soft fur coverlet then put his hands to the buckle at his waist. His fingers trembled as he removed his belt and then unbuttoned his fly. She was staring calmly at him though he could see the rapid beat of her pulse in the slender vein at the side of her throat. To stall, he shifted his hands to the remaining closed buttons on his shirt and slowly undid them. When the shirt hung open, he shrugged out of it, letting the garment fall to the floor.

"I hate ironing," she said with a softly arched brow.

For a moment he didn't understand what she meant, but then he glanced down at the shirt and was quick to retrieve it.

"I'll find a maid or two or three," he said, clumsily folding the shirt then standing there trying to decide what to do with it before hooking it like a ball toward his chair. At her laugh, he shrugged. "Can you tell I'm not accustomed to stripping before a lady?"

Aideyn lifted her arms and put her hands behind her head. "I'm rather enjoying the show, milord." She winked. "Pray continue."

The saucy wink, the playful twitch of her sultry lips made Aeral's heart swell near to bursting—and another portion of his anatomy leapt as well and turned hard as stone. He actually grunted beneath the dual onslaught.

"Is something wrong, my love?" she inquired.

It was the endearment that brought him up short and sent wave after wave of pleasure rippling through his tall frame. For the first time in his long, long life, he took hold of the repression that had claimed him and with uncharacteristic fervor shucked his pants with another forceful grunt. When he saw her startled gaze, he wondered if he had taken a large misstep.

"Oh my," Aideyn whispered, staring at the length and breadth of what had sprung from its leather covering. She could not force her attention from that part of him jutting toward her. Her mouth sagged open. Her eyes widened. Her breathing stopped, and when she finally managed to tear her stare from that immense offering, she gave her new husband an uneasy look. "You are..." She tried again. "You are..."

No more words would come, and when he straightened his shoulders, lifted his chin and spoke those three words that made her shudder uncontrollably, Aideyn thought she would faint.

"It will fit," he assured her, and there was a certain amount of smugness in his voice.

Aideyn slowly shook her head, her gaze lowering once more. "I don't believe so."

"It will," he said, and came closer.

Her eyes grew wider still for he was close enough for her to reach out and touch had she the nerve to do so. But the impressive organ straining toward her was enough to quell even the stoutest woman and she tensed, fearful of such a powerful tool, and on its tip was a single pearly drop that held her riveted.

"Touch him, *tarrishagh*."

Aideyn pushed herself up on the bed so her back was to the headboard. He accommodated her by moving closer still. With her bottom lip tucked between her teeth, she lifted a shaking hand and put a fingertip to the tip of him where the broad head pulsed at her touch. She snatched her hand back and he laughed.

"He won't bite."

A heady sense of empowerment flooded her breast and Aideyn reached for him once more. This time, she slid her palm along the upper length of him and slowly tried to close her fingers around the width. He was so broad, her fingertips did not meet and she released a long, nervous breath then lifted her eyes to his.

"He's hard as stone yet the flesh covering him is like silk," she whispered. She released him, her face stained with a deep blush.

"Have you never seen a naked man before?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. My father and brothers were very careful around me."

"As they rightly should have been," he agreed, and put a knee to the mattress. "I'm going to lie down and let you look 'til your heart's content."

Aideyn felt the power of him move over her as he straddled her and stretched out on the other side of the bed. She felt very small and defenseless with all that muscle so close, yet oddly serene for she knew he would protect her always.

"Touch me wherever you like," he encouraged, his head turned toward her on the pillow.

At first all she did was turn toward him and run her hand down his brawny arm from shoulder to thick wrist. She liked the feel of the coarse hair that tickled her palm, the hardness of his biceps. But curiosity got the best of her and she sat up so she could pass her palm over the thick mat of hair on his chest, lingering over the sturdy plane of his pectorals.

"Why do men have nipples do you think?" she asked, lightly tracing one dark pap with the tip of her finger.

Aeral quivered beneath that innocent touch. "I've often wondered about that," he answered. "At the moment I'd say to heighten the sexual experience."

She pulled her hand back. "What I was doing was pleasurable for you?"

"Very much so."

Her face flamed again and she looked away from the dusky flesh that had turned pebbly hard and swept her gaze down his lean waist and flat belly, mentally tracing the line of hair that ran from his chest to the thick nest of wiry curls at the juncture of his

thighs. She looked no farther for a moment, her attention riveted on his shaft as it flexed to gain her attention.

"When it does that, I feel a..." She pondered the right word then tore her scrutiny from his manhood to his handsome face. "A tightening within me here." She put a hand to her lower abdomen. "What causes that, Aeral?"

"Passion, *tarrishagh*. It is your body desiring mine." He gave her a soft look. "Did your mother not explain how you would feel?"

"No."

"Come here," he said, opening his arms for her.

Aideyn hesitated only a moment then slid her body over his. The rustling of the silk against his hard length brought about that curious clenching sensation still again. She settled upon him as his arms enclosed her and laid her cheek on his shoulder, all too aware of his shaft trapped between them.

"She told you that a man places his shaft inside the woman and that there is slight pain when he breaches her maidenhead?"

"Um-hmm," she muttered. She'd moved her finger to a tight curl of chest hair and was testing its springiness.

"And that he moves within her until he releases his seed."

"She said it was something every woman has to endure."

Aeral frowned, wishing every young woman could have the benefit of talking to a woman who actually enjoyed the act so there would be no fear or dread involved. "Aye, well, there's much more to it than that."

She craned her head back to look up at him. "Like what?"

"Like this," he said, and slid a hand down her back and beneath her to cup her breast.

Aideyn sucked in a breath at that touch and her eyes widened. Not only had that strange clenching struck, a very odd heaviness pressed between her legs. But when his thumb stroked over her nipple, she gasped, feeling his touch all the way to her toes and back again.

"And this."

She moaned when his hand left her breast only to slide beneath the fabric of her peignoir and cup her naked flesh. The moment his thumb touched her nipple this time, she felt a strange release of warmth and liquid between her legs. Before she could ask him about this odd new occurrence, he was turning her to her back and looming over her with his hand lightly kneading her breast.

"A caring man who wishes to please his woman doesn't just thrust his cock into her sheath and rut like a base animal, milady. He takes tender care to see she is as aroused as he. There is great joy in that for both of them."

The heat of his hand upon her was doing very odd things to Aideyn's body. She felt boneless yet tense at the same time. She felt warm all over, but between her legs a fire was beginning to build.

"He doesn't use only his cock but his hands and his mouth to pleasure her."

Aideyn drew in her breath at his use of a word she'd only heard whispered among her friends, but then ceased to breathe at all as he leaned over her and put his lips to hers. His were soft yet firm, incessant as he nibbled at her bottom lip and she realized he wanted her to open her mouth. When she did, he thrust his tongue gently inside and another wave of spasms clutched at her belly. She groaned into his mouth and heard him growl low in his throat.

He was pressing atop her and his weight was doing other strange and wonderful things to her untried body. His scent filled her nostrils to send spirals of need through her. His breath was sweet in her mouth and as she gazed up at his half-lidded eyes, she was struck with the deep possessiveness revealed in those blue orbs. As he pulled back from her and lay there lightly pinning her to the bed, she became caught in the hunger she saw emblazoned on his chiseled features.

"May I undress you, *ben heshee*?" he asked in a husky tone.

Aideyn's heart soared at him calling her his wife. It was such an intimate thing and, to her, it was far more enticing than any tender words of endearment. All her life she had been preparing to be Niall's mate. She would leave her father's house and take up residence in her husband's family home until he could afford to build them their own hut. That was the correct order of things in her mind. Every instinct she had clamored to be wife and mother. It was all she'd ever really wanted – or expected – in life.

"Aideyn?" he questioned, and she heard the uncertainty.

Though every natural modest feeling she'd ever had screamed against it, she nodded eagerly, suddenly wanting nothing between her and this glorious warrior. A part of her wanted very much to bare her body to his sight.

Aeral rose and drew her with him to a sitting position. His hands shook, his mouth became drier than the Diabolusian deserts, and his heart thumped so wildly behind his chest bone, he feared it might burst free.

"You are trembling," she said.

He couldn't seem to find his tongue for it was stuck to the roof of his mouth as he closed his fingers around the small buttons that held her bodice together. When he said nothing, she wrapped her own fingers around his wrists, forcing him to look into her face rather than at the rise and fall of her bosom.

"Who hurt you so badly, milord?" she asked, concern in her pretty eyes.

Aeral forced down a swallow then licked his dry lips. "We'll talk about it later," he said.

"Promise?"

"Aye."

She slid her palms up his forearms, smiling tenderly, holding his gaze until a smile quirked at his mouth. Hers widened and she dropped her hands as he returned his attention to the buttons.

With the separation of each pearl fastener from its hole, his body temperature rose and his breathing increased. The creamy expanse of her neck, the soft flesh upon her slender shoulders, and the hollow at the base of her throat where a pulse throbbed so sensually all combined to overwhelm him with desire. He yearned to rip the clothing from her and throw himself upon her curvaceous body, and it became a true struggle for him not to give in to the temptation.

Slowly and with infinite care he undid her buttons until the bodice was opened all the way to her tiny waist. The sight of her bellybutton made his cock throb so brutally he had to squeeze his thighs together to keep from falling upon her like a berserker. He sucked in a harsh breath as he peeled the lace-edged silver over her shoulder and down, revealing her breast to him. A hard tremor ran down his frame with enough force to make the bed shake beneath them.

His eyes slowly lifted to hers. "You are beautiful, milady," he whispered. "So very beautiful."

Aideyn lifted her chin with pride. Her courage was soaring, the nervousness at him seeing her naked rapidly disappearing. The appreciation she saw seated in his gaze gave her confidence and chased away any lingering apprehension. "I am happy you think so."

"Lie back and let me pull the garment from beneath you," he said in a voice that sounded alien to his ears.

Aideyn did as he instructed—lifting her hips as he tugged the peignoir under her hips and down her legs.

Her face turned as hot as a glowing ember when she saw he was staring avidly at her pubic area. She had to dig her fingers into the coverlet to keep from slamming her hands protectively between her legs.

Aeral tossed the gown away without taking his eyes from the tight curls at the juncture of her thighs. His palm itched—nay, it *burned*—to touch that silken offering and he had to shake his head to clear it of the lustful thoughts that were crowding in.

"T-Turn over," he growled, and had to clear his throat. "Please."

Though a momentary burst of trepidation shifted through Aideyn's belly, she obeyed, watching curiously as he rose from the bed and padded over to the armoire.

"Milord, what are you doing?" she asked, her voice betraying her unease.

"Oil," he said as he opened the armoire door and reached inside. "Scented oil." He took out a dark green glass bottle and brought it back to the bed, leaving the armoire door hanging open. He climbed on the bed and uncorked the bottle and held it down for her. "Smell."

The scent that wafted up to her was fragile and flowery yet made her entire body clench with need. "What is that?" she asked.

"Jasmine," he said, and poured a generous portion of the oil into the cup of his left hand. He leaned over her to put the bottle on the bedside table then swung a leg over her and sat down gingerly on her upturned rump.

Aideyn closed her eyes to the remarkably erotic sensation of his naked body straddling hers. She could feel the press of his engorged shaft lying along the small of her back, and the thought of it there sent chills down her legs.

"I'll warm it," he said.

She raised her head from the pillow and swiveled it around to look up at him. "Warm it?" she asked then realized he meant the oil while her mind was on the hard length of him probing at her back. He was rubbing the oil between his palms and the sound the action made brought another spasm to her womb.

"Pull your hair out of the way," he said. "I don't want to get the oil in it."

Aideyn gathered her hair in one hand and twisted it, pulled it under her shoulder. She was no sooner settled than she felt his hands on her shoulders. It was a heavy weight that kneaded her muscles and made her groan with the pleasure of it.

"Has no one ever given you a massage?" he inquired.

"Nay," she said, and felt as though she were floating. Her body was loose, melting into the mattress as his strong fingers worked their magic on her shoulders, her neck and down each arm—his weight pressing her limbs deeper into the fur coverlet.

"Then we'll make it a regular job for your husband," he said. "It will help you relax and sleep better."

"If I relax any more, I'll go to sleep," she said with a sigh.

"Go ahead," he encouraged as he used both hands to rub the tension out of her left arm.

The oil made his hands glide like warm silk over her skin, and as he worked each of her fingers in turn, Aideyn groaned over and over again.

"Like that?"

"Aye," she said on a long, satisfied sigh.

He drew his palms from her wrist to her shoulder blade and began a rhythmic flexing of his fingers over the top half of her back, slowly working his way down the spine. His thumbs pressed firmly against her backbone as he worked the muscles at the small of her back.

"This is heavenly," she told him.

"For me, as well," he said. The feel of her skin beneath his touch was a heady sensation for him.

He shifted off her upturned ass until he was kneeling over the crook of her knee. Very gently, in a non-threatening way, he nudged her legs apart with his knee, and

when she spread her legs, he smiled and positioned himself between them, sitting back on his haunches to begin working the sweet curve of her backside.

The moment his fingers touched her ass, Aideyn tensed, held her breath, but the feeling was so compelling, so comforting, she relaxed under his ministrations and closed her eyes.

"I never knew married life could be so soothing," she told him.

Aeral smiled at her words but made no comment. He was staring down at her firm buttocks and the enticing crease between them. He wanted to run a finger down that deep cleft but knew she wasn't ready yet. He had to content himself with touching her, massaging her. His fingers radiated down her hipbones and then onto the top of her thighs.

"You have a birthmark right here," he said, and ran his thumb over the dusky blemish that hovered just below the soft curve of her right cheek.

"Really?" she said, opening her eyes. "I never knew that."

"Aye, well, it's not in a place you can easily see." He passed his thumb over and over the dark spot then moved on, aching to bend down and lick the birthmark—knowing he eventually would—but biding his time as he firmly kneaded her thigh muscles.

Moving as far down the mattress as he could before stopping at the tall footboard, he massaged one leg to the ankle then the other, and before he was finished, lifted her foot and began to work each toe of both feet.

"Oh my," she whispered, closing her eyes again. "That is... That is..." She couldn't find the word to describe the delight the firm pressure of his fingers on her toes was bringing to her entire body.

"I'm glad you are enjoying it."

When he finished a lengthy manipulation of her feet, he moved back up in the bed, and before she knew what he was about, slid the palm of his right hand between her legs to cup her, his thumb lodged firmly along the crease of her rump.

Aideyn jerked, her head popped up, her eyes flew open and she grabbed handfuls of the pillow. "Aeral!"

"It's called foreplay, *ben heshee*," he said as he stretched out beside her, his warm, oil-slicked hand just holding her. "I told you there is more to mating than the man mounting his female and pounding into her like a madman." He put his lips to her ear. "Although there is a lot to be said for a mating like that once you are accustomed to my body."

His warm breath entering her ear, his lips against that sensitive organ, sent undulations of prickles down Aideyn's neck and side. The moment he thrust his wet tongue into the opening, she could not stop the moan nor the instant leaping of her womb that made her want to grab him and kiss him as hard as she could.

"Relax," he whispered at her ear. He drew her earlobe into his mouth and nibbled on it, sending more waves of sensation through his lady.

Aideyn became aware of him gently stroking her between her legs, moving his palm back and forth. With each movement, his thumb pressed into the cleft of her ass and she had a wild urge to buck against him, to have him touch her in the place she thought no one would ever see or touch.

"Does this please you?" he asked as he stroked her.

"Oh aye, Aeral, it does," she heard herself say.

"Good. That was my intention."

She became aware of an unusual smell and realized it was coming from her. There was wetness between her legs and she didn't think it was coming from his oily palm. The scent was subtle but it seemed to add to her desire.

"You're becoming wet," he said, and touched her high on her vaginal opening, making her squirm. Her entire body pulsed at the touch and she arched her back like a contented cat.

Once more he ran his tongue into her ear and chuckled as a great shudder took hold of her.

"Turn over, milady," he said, and moved back so she could.

Aideyn would have done anything he asked at that moment. Her entire body was alive with a need she could not name, but if that need was not soon met, she believed she would scream with frustration. She wanted his hands on her again, but he had lain back and laced his hands behind his head. Confused, she sat up.

"What are you doing?" she asked, unaware of the way she was breathing heavily or the fact the artery in the side of her neck was pulsing rapidly.

"Waiting for you to get as acquainted with my front side as I am now with your back."

For a moment she moaned with disappointment then lowered her eyes to his cock, realizing it was no longer sticking straight up but lay at a soft curved angle along his thigh.

"What happened?" she asked.

Aeral lifted his head, looked down and chuckled. "Don't worry, *bwoirrinagh*. You didn't break him. He's just resting."

"He doesn't look so big now," she said, and before he could tell her to touch the part of him that was her object of scrutiny, she reached out and took him in her hand, running her palm over the entire length.

Her husband sucked in a quick breath, tensed for a second then released the air in his lungs in wavering little bursts as he forced himself to relax. To have her touching him like this was heating his blood to boiling.

Aideyn shifted her hand to the puckered flesh of his scrotum and cupped him. She kneaded his sac tenderly until she noticed his shaft was stiffening again. Realizing she was arousing him, she smiled knowingly.

“You’ve got an evil grin on your face,” he observed.

“I like the power I am wielding over you, milord,” she teased, and used her other hand to wrap around his thickening cock.

“I like you having that power too.” His voice was husky and low, and when she glanced at him, his fingers were gripping the rungs of the headboard.

“Am I hurting you?” she asked.

He swallowed hard, listening to the blood pounding in his head, trying to ignore it pounding in his cock. “Nay, but you’d best stop for me.”

She locked her eyes on his. “Would you touch me again like you did before?” she asked shyly, still squeezing him gently before removing her hand.

“With the greatest of pleasure,” he said, and sat up to grip her shoulders and turn her so she was beneath him, his front pressed tight to her hip. “But there is even more I want to show you.”

Aideyn stopped breathing for he was leaning over her, his mouth coming down on hers in a kiss that made her toes curl under. His tongue slipped past her lips and she flung her arms around his neck, holding him to her as she boldly pushed her own tongue against his. The low growl he gave as he moved onto her – covering her with his hard, muscular body – was the sweetest sound she’d ever heard.

His arms were wedged beneath her, fingers digging into her ass as he intensified his kiss, grinding his mouth atop hers. He insinuated one leg between hers and hiked his knee so the heat of her rode his taut flesh. Instinctively she arched her hips to meet him, and that was all he could take. He broke free of her mouth and trailed hot, passionate kisses down her chin and along her throat – sliding farther down on the bed – until his lips closed over her tight nipple.

“My gods!” Aideyn exclaimed, and her hands went to his hair, threading her fingers into the midnight curls to anchor him to her breast.

He drew upon her flesh and licked a taut little bud, nibbled it, curled his tongue around and around it. With every pass of his tongue, every light tug of his teeth, the fingers in his hair tightened but he barely felt the pain. All it managed to do was goad him to turn his attention to her other breast and the lonely little nubbin that was crying for his attention.

Aideyn threw a leg over her new husband’s back and pumped against him – mutely asking for something she did not understand but wanted to experience so badly she was finding it difficult to draw breath. As his hand slid from around her and wedged between their bodies, his fingers finding her wetness and rubbing her gently but briskly, she arched her head back upon the pillow and grunted with pure lust.

Aeral released her nipple and wriggled lower on the mattress, pulling her hips up to meet his mouth as he pushed her thighs apart with his elbows. He covered her clit with his lips and began to flick his tongue across it.

"Aeral!" his lady called out and bucked beneath him. She let go of his hair and slammed her hands to the bed beside her, grabbing up handfuls of the fur coverlet and pulling on them, twisting them as she writhed beneath his fluttering tongue.

Wanting more of her, needing the taste of her in his mouth, he thrust his tongue along her folds, dipped into her heated moistness and felt her come so powerfully it shocked him. He could feel the ripples as her muscles began to spasm.

"Aeral!" she said again, and thrashed her head back and forth on the pillow.

Aideyn had never felt anything to compare with the wicked, exquisitely wonderful vibrations rocketing through her. She held her breath as those pulses undulated inside her and would later swear to her husband she saw stars behind her closed eyes.

While she was so wet, he pushed his fingers inside her and she howled so loudly he thought he had hurt her as the delicate membrane of her hymen parted until he felt another round of tremors rippling around his fingers. As the last little quiver claimed her and she released a long, wavering breath, her legs fell apart as though devoid of bone and she lay there wantonly, staring up at him with a look he could only pray was complete fulfillment.

"Aye?" he asked, eyebrow arched in expectation.

"Oh aye," she moaned, breathing hard. Her body was coated with a fine sheen of perspiration and a wisp of hair was stuck to her cheek as she puckered her lips and tried to blow it away.

"Alas, my sweet love, your maidenhead is no more," he whispered.

Her eyes widened. "Truly?"

"Truly," he replied.

"But it didn't hurt like they said it would," she said with wonder. "It felt gods-be-damned good, Aeral!"

Aeral reached up to smooth back the errant tendril of hair. He was hard as stone, aching, throbbing, his cock burning, but he tamped down his need until he could see fully to hers.

"Liked that, did you?" he queried.

She smiled slowly, lazily, and nodded, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth—an endearing little habit he was beginning to realize he'd see often over the years.

"Want more or are you finished for the night?"

Her smile warped into a slight frown. "Of course I want more. You could not have gotten any enjoyment from mine," she said, for she could feel his shaft pressing against her leg. "Tell me what to do to bring that kind of pleasure to you."

"I can wait," he said, although he thought he might die if he did.

"Absolutely not," she said, and reached for him, tugging a bit roughly on his cock, but it pushed all self-sacrificing thoughts from his male mind. "I want to do for you what you did for me." She caressed his cock. "Can I nibble him like you nibbled me?"

Aeral had to bite his tongue to keep from growling at her innocent words. His entire body tightened with hunger and he had a wild urge to throw himself on her and ravage her until she begged for mercy.

"You can," he said, and had to swallow against the lump in his throat. "And he would like that very much. He's a greedy fellow."

Before he could stop her, she let go of his shaft and shoved him to his back, scooting down on the bed until she was between his legs. He accommodated her by spreading his thighs as widely as he could. Seeing her kneeling then reclining above his crotch did things to him he'd never dared hope he'd ever feel.

"Do I just lick him?"

This time he couldn't stop the growl that thrust from his throat. "Aye, *lhiannan*," he replied, calling her sweetheart.

"Like this?"

Time suddenly stopped for Aeral Chiarn Dorrin. His eyes went wide and his breath caught in his throat. She was holding his cock aloft with her fingers wrapped just under the head and her sweet little tongue had flicked him from the base upward. The warm moistness of her tongue, the heat of her breath and the constricting band of her fingers would have been enough to drive him wild, but she had also instinctively cupped his balls with her other hand and was kneading them as she lapped at him again.

The Storm Lord was completely lost lying there like a sacrificial lamb as she licked him again then moved her fingers to drag the broad plane of her tongue over the head.

"Oh gods!" he gasped, and his hands shot up to the headboard, gripping the rungs as though his life depended on it.

Aideyn raised her head immediately, concern in her eyes. "Did I hurt you that time?"

"No!" he was quick to tell her, lifting his own head to look down at her. "Aideyn, no. You are giving me such sweet pleasure..." He couldn't continue. He was grinding his hips on the coverlet, wanting more of that sultry little mouth on his cock.

"You want me to continue?"

"Oh aye. I do! I surely do!"

She smiled at him then lowered her head but this time she took him between her lips and Aeral had to turn his face into the pillow to keep from howling his delight. As she worked the tip of him – acting again on instinct as she thrust her tongue repeatedly at the slick opening – he thought he might well die of the pleasure she was giving him.

"It's salty," she said. "And slick."

He turned his head and lifted it again. "If the taste or the feel of the fluid bothers you..."

"I like salty things," she said. "Do I taste salty too?"

Her innocuous words made his cock leap in her hand. He had to strain against his hold on the headboard lest he leap upon her and drag her beneath him.

"No, *lhiannan*," he assured her in a strangled voice. "You taste sweet like raw honey."

She lightly shrugged at his answer and lowered her mouth on him again.

Aeral squeezed his eyes shut and gave his very soul into her keeping, but he knew if she kept suckling him as she was doing—and the sound of it was increasing his need—things would not end as he wanted them to.

"Aideyn?" he asked gently. He almost groaned when she stopped drawing on his shaft.

"Aye?"

"It's time I prepared you. I..."

He barely had the words out before she was up on the bed beside him.

"All right!" she said with an eagerness that shook him to his core. It was all he could do not to laugh. Her face was intense with expectation, her eyes bright and shining without the faintest glint of trepidation.

Prying his hands from the headboard, he shifted to loom over her, his hand going to the juncture of her thighs. "I need you wet for me." He stroked her clit with his middle finger but stilled when one of her hands shot down to grip his wrist.

"When you do that it makes me want to claw at you like a cat in heat, Aeral," she told him.

He shivered at her words then let out a shaky breath. "Does it bother you?" he asked.

"Aye, it does," she said. "It is driving me wild with want of you."

"Then put your hands down and lie back," he said. "Let me worship you as I need to, *ben heshee*."

Slowly lowering her body to the mattress, Aideyn was shivering as he continued to stroke her clit. As she twisted the coverlet with each hand, every instinct screamed at her to stop him from torturing her so, but it was a pleasure-pain he was giving her and she was grinding her teeth to keep from whimpering. The moment he slid a finger inside her, her hands went to the headboard as his had. She heard him chuckle then he inserted another finger and her hips jerked upward in an unconscious attempt to impale her cunt on the hard, strong digits.

"Uh-uh," he said, shaking his head. "Lie still, *lhiannan*. You'll know when it's time to thrust against me."

"Aeral, please," she whined. "You are killing me here."

"The Ionarians call orgasms *la petite mort*," he told her. "The little death. Now you know why."

In and out—very slowly—he moved his two fingers, twisting them even as she ground her hips into the mattress, writhing beneath his invasion. At one point, he withdrew them from her sheath and brought them to his lips, opening his mouth to savor her juices. He licked his fingers clean as he held her gaze.

Another spasm hit Aideyn's belly as she watched him. The scent of her fluids drifted beneath her nose and her lower body began to quiver. She wanted this man so badly. She wanted to feel him stretched out on her, wedged between her legs, his weight pressing her—confining and imprisoning her—to the mattress. She wanted to lace her fingers through his dark hair and grip it tight as she wrapped her legs around his lean waist. She wanted to sink her teeth into his shoulder and have him thrust hard into her aching body. She wanted to be fully his, to be branded his female, his mate.

Aeral seemed to sense her growing need for he put a finger inside her again, but this time it wasn't her sheath he conquered but the tiny puckered ring of her ass.

"*Argh!*" It was a strangled cry that was ripped from Aideyn's throat and her hips shot up from the bed so abruptly her backbone made a cracking sound.

"Easy, *bwoirrinagh*," he laughed.

"The gods-be-damn it, Aeral. Take me!" she begged, eyes wild. "Take me now before I go mad with wanting you!"

He knew she was ready, primed. The juices were flooding her sheath and her body was undulating on the bed. He withdrew his finger from her ass, wiped it on the towel he had tucked under the pillow earlier that evening then positioned himself above her, his cock hard and thick, the tip weeping for want of her. He lowered himself atop her and she put her arms around his neck as his mouth claimed hers in a hot, searing kiss.

He pushed the head inside her folds but went no farther. Instead, he thrust his tongue deep inside her mouth, withdrew it and thrust again as he pushed just a little deeper into her tight, hot channel, stretching her.

Aideyn gripped his shoulders hard, unaware her fingernails were digging into his flesh. His tongue was sweeping into and out of her mouth, curling around hers, sparring with hers, stabbing deep one moment then flicking across her lips the next. She relaxed beneath the delicious assault.

He went a bit deeper inside her cunt. He stilled and began thrusting his tongue into and out of her mouth like a piston, grinding his lips against hers. He could feel her climax starting and he pushed into her fully, absorbing the small grunt of discomfort his size brought to her.

Aideyn felt the full-blown rush of her climax and unconsciously raked her nails down her husband's back, drawing blood. She gripped him hard as wave after wave of intense pleasure rippled through her. The combination of his thrusting, the hard fullness of him stretching her, filling, battering at her very womb, his delectable weight bearing down on her as he rubbed his body against hers, drove her wild. Instinctively, she wrapped both legs around his hips—drawing him in as deep as he could go—and rode him as hard as he was her.

With his hands shoved under her rump to hike her closer to him, Aeral pumped into her with all the need and longing and cessation of loneliness having her had given him. He was sweating like a race horse as he pummeled her sweet body, galloping toward a release he thought might blow off the top of his head. He didn't care. When he came—hot and gushing and powerful—he growled like a beast, his body slamming into hers with total abandon.

“Aideyn!” he howled, his head thrown back, his body quivering one final time as the last of her little pulses milked him completely dry.

He collapsed atop her—panting, covered with perspiration and totally sated.

Aideyn smiled knowingly and tightened her legs around him, tightened her arms, and then with a calmness and surety that it would seal the deal, sank her teeth into the soft flesh of his shoulder. When he trembled like a leaf in a stiff breeze, she traded the bite for a tender kiss.

“Mine, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin,” she whispered in his ear. “I have branded you as mine. The gods help you if you ever stray. The demons take any woman who dares tempt you!”

So depleted he could barely draw breath much less speak, Aeral simply smiled, his eyes growing heavy, his body as limp as an overcooked noodle. His head was on her shoulder as he was vaguely aware she was humming to him, stroking his damp hair much as a mother would her sleepy child.

“I love you,” he said. “With all my heart, I believe I’ve loved you from the first moment I saw you.”

She craned her neck so she could kiss his forehead. “I believe you, *fer caggee*,” she said, naming him her warrior, “and that’s a good thing.”

“Why is it a good thing?” he muttered, already half asleep.

“Because I think I just fell head over heels in love and lust with you.”

He made a snuffing sound and was almost on the verge of succumbing to slumber when he remembered he was pinning her down. He shifted, rolling to his side, but gathered her into his arms to hold her against him. He asked if she wanted to get her peignoir.

“I want to always sleep beside you with nothing between us. I want our flesh to touch, our arms to be wrapped around one another,” she replied. “Is that all right? Will you keep me warm, my husband?”

Aeral thought his heart would burst free from his chest. The images she painted were something he had longed for so long he had forgotten such sweetness existed in the world.

“I’ll keep you as hot as you’ll ever want to be,” he said, and finally surrendered to sleep.

Chapter Six

Aeral woke and for a moment lay there without so much as blinking. He stared up at the ceiling, wondering why he felt so relaxed. The early morning light was creeping in between a crack in the draperies as he raised his arms to yawn and stretch. He could not remember when he had slept so soundly – or so long from the intensity of the bright light invading his chamber. Surely it had been ages since he'd awakened feeling refreshed and peaceful, a smile hovering on his lips and...

Naked!

The Storm Lord shot up on the bed and stared down at his nude body with lips parted in shock. His eyebrows drew together like the storm clouds he controlled and he started to bellow for Conreeaght, but then his thunderous glare fell on the silk peignoir lying draped over the footboard and his mouth clamped shut with an audible click.

Aideyn!

His wife Aideyn!

His *mate* Aideyn!

The words ran through his dazed mind much as a river released from its banks.

His heart began to accelerate and he swung his head from side to side, searching for her.

"Aideyn?" he questioned, his voice so thick he had to clear his throat and try again. "Aideyn?"

She did not answer and because she did not, fear tore through in a painful gouge that caused him to grunt from the sheer force of it.

Swinging his legs from the bed, he snatched up his leather pants and nearly broke his neck stepping, staggering and hopping into them. Leaving the damned things unbuttoned with chest and feet bare, he stomped to the bedchamber door and threw it open.

"Aideyn?" he bellowed at the top of his lungs, increasing his speed as he ran toward the stairs. "*Aideyn!*"

Like a madman he tore down the stairs, tripping along them without a care for his safety. He kept calling her, and when he reached the bottom of the stairs, he saw the door to the keep was standing open.

"No!" he snarled, and hurt spiked in his heart.

"Milord, what is it?"

He barely heard Conreeaght's query as he stumbled toward the door, tears already gathering in his eyes. "She's gone," he whispered, and the words brought a sharper pain to his soul.

Bright, unrelenting sunlight—the first true sunshine in many a year—shone like a beacon through the opened door. It glinted off the snow in icy shards. A soft breeze came through the opening. It wasn't a cold wind from the snow mounded beyond the entrance to *Carrick Ard*, but a pleasant draft that brought the scent of pine.

For centuries he had not been allowed beyond the door of his fortress. He had been kept a prisoner there for so long he had almost forgotten what it felt like to walk upon grass, sand, rocks—even the causeway leading down to the village. The curse that had been laid upon him did not allow for the natural freedom of a normal man and so he had been trapped, caged like the beast his enemy named him.

Tears streaking down his cheeks, he reached the door and sank to his knees, staring out into the beautiful vista that stretched beyond his front door to the tall firs and lofty mountains. He should have known it was too good to be true. *She* was too good to be true. They'd given him a taste of the first real happiness he'd ever known, the first true peace, and then snatched it back.

"Milord?" Conreeaght asked. "What's wrong?" The servant came to stand behind his master.

"They took her away from me," Aeral said. His shoulders slumped and he buried his face in his hands, giving in to the horrible grief and despair that was the last straw for his sanity. "I should have known it would not last."

"Aeral, for the love of the gods. What on earth are you doing on the floor?"

Aeral's head snapped up and his eyes flared as he saw Aideyn standing just beyond the door. In her hand she held a small basin filled with freshly fallen snow. She was bundled against the cold with heavy coat and muffler, yet the coat was undone and the muffler simply dangled free around her neck.

"You came back," Aeral said, relief making his voice break.

"Came back from where, *dooinney*?"

She stepped over the threshold and held the basin toward Conreeaght. "Would you take this to the kitchen for me, Coni, and put it somewhere it won't melt?" she asked. "I believe his grace and I have a few things to get settled here."

"Aye, milady. I'll cover it and set it outside the door in the herb garden," Conreeaght agreed, and took the basin. He cast a knowing look over his shoulder as he ambled toward the kitchen. There was a broad smile on the servant's face.

"Pray get yourself up and button your pants, Aeral," Aideyn growled. "You will catch your death of cold like that."

Aeral stood quickly and snaked out an arm to catch her, dragging her against him in a punishing grip that drove the air from her lungs.

"Don't ever do that to me again!" he hissed, squeezing her so hard she could barely move. He was trembling from head to toe. "Do you hear me, Aideyn?"

Aideyn strained against his bare chest, pushing him back enough so she could lift her head and give him a stern look. "All right, milord. We are going to sit down and you are going to tell me why you thought I'd left you." When he said nothing, did not release his tight hold on her, she narrowed her eyes. "You did, didn't you? You thought I'd left you."

He stared at her for a long moment then silently nodded.

"Well, you won't get rid of me that easily," she stated.

"I don't want to ever be rid of you, Aideyn," he told her, his heart glinting in his blue eyes.

"That's good because you're stuck with me for life. Now let go. You're breaking my bloody back!"

Reluctantly he released her but reached down to grasp her hand, but she batted it away.

"Button your pants!" she ordered as she took off her muffler and shrugged out of her coat. She laid them on a chair in the foyer.

Aeral growled but quickly did as she commanded then grabbed her hand again and started walking, pulling her along behind him.

"Where are we going?"

"To the solarium where it's warm," he said. At her gasp, he swiveled his head to look down at her. "What? Why did you make that sound?"

"Your poor back," she said, looking up at him with apology. "You've scratch marks all down it."

He smiled despite the unease in his soul. "War wounds," he said. "Nothing more."

"No, Aeral. They are fresh. I believe I did that last eve."

"I know you did," he said. "Unless another wild woman snuck into my bed and clawed me."

Despite the rapid color that rose in her cheeks, she tossed her head. "No other woman had better do such a thing to you," she said with a sniff.

"Then don't be up and about and leaving me without telling me again, *bwoirrinagh*, or I'll have to rethink the part about keeping myself only unto you."

"You'll rethink it at your own peril if you do," she warned, hearing the playfulness pushing aside the brusqueness from his deep voice. She felt his hand tighten around hers. "I can be a mean *bwoirrinagh* if needs be."

He stopped, spun her around into his arms again and dipped his head down to take her lips in a molten rush of passion. His kiss was sweet and hot and made her body want to mount his right there in the hallway.

“But you’re *my* mean *bwoirrinagh*,” he stated then continued on toward the end of the hallway, his bare feet making no sound on the thick carpeting.

“Possessive old man, aren’t you?” she countered as he stopped and opened a door, flinging it wide to usher her inside.

“You have no idea,” he said as he closed the door behind them.

Aideyn was awestruck as she stared at the room into which he’d led her. One entire wall was nothing but glass from floor to ceiling, letting in the bright sunlight, casting a yellow glow over hundreds upon hundreds of plants growing in terracotta pots and long metal boxes or hanging from huge copper bowls suspended from the ceiling, which was fashioned from long strips of glass that curved downward into the window wall.

“Aeral,” she whispered. “Oh Aeral.”

“I spend a lot of time here,” he said, pointing to a set of comfortable-looking wicker chairs.

“I can see why,” she said, and moved away from him to inspect plants she’d never seen, marveling at the texture of their leaves, the clusters of their flowers or the strange ways in which they grew. One plant caught her attention immediately and she hurried to it, craning her head back to look up at the tight columns of growth that resembled silvery blue-green dragon scales as it tumbled from the ceiling.

“It’s called burro’s tail,” he explained as she fingered the tiny pink waxy blooms that sprouted from the tip of one drooping stem.

“It is glorious,” she said.

“Aye, I think so too.”

She moved reluctantly away from the plant and went to several more. He noticed she was as fond of the succulents with their cylindrical leaves as was he. One by one he named them for her until she sighed contentedly.

“I could stay the entire day here and learn each one by heart,” she said then turned to him. “But we’ve matters of urgency to discuss.”

“We do,” he agreed, and swept a hand toward the tall wicker chairs.

Once they were seated, she crossed her hands gracefully in her lap and gave him her full attention.

Aeral took a deep breath then crossed his right ankle over his left knee and leaned back. His foot bobbed for a moment then stilled. He chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, finally took a deep breath and started his tale.

“It began when this world was brought into existence by *Jee yn Ayr*, the Father God. He fashioned the world and named it *Yn Rhuillick*.”

“God’s Acre,” she said.

“Aye. First came the land then the sea and after them fire—or first light—and then finally the weather. For each, He named a Prince Regent or rather a Lord Guardian, an

Arreyder. The land he gave into the keeping of Coair. The sea was the responsibility of Llyr and the fire was governed by Belenus."

"And the air was Aeral's."

He nodded. "Aye, the air became my domain."

"Air is very important lest there would be no life," she stated. "Go on."

Aideyn watched him turn to stare at a profusion of flowers clustered in a nearby pot.

"Each of us was born of *Jee yn Ayr's* loins, created in his likeness." His brow furrowed as though he were in pain. "We are brothers, quadruplets actually."

"You all look alike?" she asked, eyebrows up.

He nodded. "Aye, unfortunately so." For a while he said nothing and she knew he was gathering his thoughts. When he spoke again, his voice was filled with sorrow.

"Coair mated with the goddess Berecyntia and the world sprang to life with all manner of living and growing things. Belenus mated with *Taillte*, the goddess who bore the sun as her child and also with *Gwen*, the goddess of the moon. Llyr gave himself to the *Morrigu* and from his loins sprang the oceans, rivers, lakes and streams that abound upon *Yn Rhuillick*. Also from his matings with the witches came all manner of evil and magic into the world. As for me..."

Aideyn saw great hurt welling up in her husband's eyes. She wanted to reach across to him but instinct told her to remain still.

"As for me," he continued, "against my better judgment I mated with *An Cailleach Bheara* and from our ill-fated union came the *Gaey*, the Four Winds and the breezes." He closed his eyes. "It was not a happy union for she loved another with all her being so from our mating also came tornadoes and all manner of blustery weather, the storms with which she punished me. Of all the goddesses, she was the most vindictive. She despised me, thought me weak and behind my back she met with her lover, wrecking havoc wherever they went."

"Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee, the Lord of the Sea," she said quietly.

"Aye, the Sea Lord and my bitterest enemy. From their illicit affair they spawned hurricanes and waterspouts, blizzards and ice storms, floods and tidal waves. It was because of a mighty flood that occurred when she and he were having one of their trysts that she separated herself from humankind and I was cursed for all time by her lover who blamed me for her loss."

"The flood that created the Great Loch," she whispered.

"Where hundreds of thousands of humans and animals alike died beneath its rushing waves," he reminded her.

"But how could they blame you for something they did?" she questioned.

"We had argued that morning and I was so angry at her and her infidelities that I unleashed the *Gaey*, giving them free reign to cause as much havoc as they wanted. I didn't care what they did, but then I had no idea the destruction that was to come. She

thought to spite me and flew to her lover, spent the day and evening locked in his arms. It was her duty to oversee the well at Ben Cruachan, to make sure it never overflowed, but because she was tired from her lovemaking with my brother, she fell fast asleep and the well escaped its rim. To make matters worse, the *Geay* were out of control, whipping the flooding waters to a frenzy. As for me, I was drunk out of my mind and because I was, I had a hand in causing the deaths. I am as much at fault as they were. When she saw what her carelessness had wrought, her guilt consumed her. She turned herself to stone and she now sits above *Carrick Ard* as a part of the mountain upon which this fortress was built."

"And was lost to your brother for all time."

He nodded. "Though now and again she comes to haunt me, pointing a finger at me to remind me I was complicit in the deluge that nearly destroyed mankind."

"I've never heard this tale," she said.

"It was thought best that humankind not know," he said, "though some suspected what had happened. Either way, Llyr was so aggrieved he brought me before the *Ard-Choyrle*, the High Council, and asked that I be put to death. Unexpectedly, it was one of the *Morrigu*, Queen *Morrigunia*, Who had the only nay vote among the gods and goddesses and so my life was spared. But I did not escape punishment. Because I had vindictively unleashed the *Geay* and was just as neglectful of my duty and my wards as An *Cailleach Bheara* had been, I was condemned to remain a prisoner in *Carrick Ard* just as she is a prisoner in the mountain, and because I had taken my brother's true love from his side, every woman who has come to me has been taken from mine."

"Until now," she said, lifting her chin.

He smiled sadly. "Until now."

"And you thought like all the rest I had left you."

He lowered his head. "Aye, *bwoirrinagh*, I did."

"Look at me, *Aeral*," she said firmly, and when he did, she sat forward, her elbows on her knees. "Know this about your wife, *fer caggee*. When she gives her word, she stands by it. What she says, she means. What she does, she does with a true and honest heart." She reached out to put her hand on his leg. "Last eve I gave myself to you – heart and soul. I promised to be your wife until the end of time and that is what I intend to do. I will not lie to you. I will never deceive you in any manner. That means I will never make a cuckold of you, *Aeral Chiarn Dorrin*. But most importantly of all, I will never leave you."

"What if they were to take you from me, *tarrishagh*?" he asked, his voice full of strain.

"They'd best not try," she said. "I would fight them tooth and nail should they attempt something so wicked when it was they who gave me to you in the first place!"

"It would break me, *Aideyn*," he admitted. "If I were to lose you, it would drive me into the *realm of the baanrys*, the land of insanity."

"You need not worry about that," she said then rose to her feet, all business. "Now come along, husband. I have a fast to break, my snow is most likely melting, and both our stomachs are growling."

He looked up at her with such adoration on his handsome face, such glowing love in his pale blue eyes that she stepped closer and threaded the fingers of her right hand through his hair, smoothing it back from his forehead.

"Don't worry so, milord. It causes wrinkles."

"I can't help it, *tarrishagh*. I have been so lonely, waited so long..."

"Your waiting and your loneliness are at an end." She threaded her fingers through his. "Now stop moaning and groaning and let's go break our fasts." She swept her gaze over his bare chest. "And I'll send Coni to fetch you a shirt and your boots!"

* * * * *

As Aideyn fried ham steaks, eggs and potatoes with onions at the stove, her husband and Conreeaght were staring at the concoction she had placed before them. The two men were seated at the cook's table where it was comfortable and warm, and to Aideyn's mind it was far more homey than the formal dining room.

"It will not bite you, children. You are supposed to bite into it," she said with pursed lips.

Aeral poked his spoon at the stuff in his bowl then scooped some up. He brought it to his mouth but continued to glare at it.

"Oh for the gods' sake, Aeral. Eat!" his wife ordered.

Obediently, although there was a tight grimace on his face, he put the concoction in his mouth then his eyes widened. He returned the spoon to his bowl and ladled more of the treat past his lips. Conreeaght followed suit and within a few seconds the bowls were scraped down to the finish and were being held aloft.

"More," Aeral demanded, eyes beaming.

Aideyn grinned and turned from flipping the potatoes to spoon more of the snow and maple syrup delight into his and Coni's bowls. "I thought you men might like it."

"I love it," Conreeaght said between quick shovels of the treat.

"The wolf has a sweet tooth," Aeral said.

"He said the same of you," Aideyn replied then realized what her husband had called the servant. She slowly turned her head and looked at Conreeaght. The meaning of his name – werewolf – finally registered and a slight shiver ran down her spine.

"I will not bite you, milady," Conreeaght said with a playful snicker.

"You'd best not," she mumbled. "And no snapping at me either." She clicked her teeth together, making both men laugh.

She brought platters of the crisply fried ham steaks and potatoes and a bowl of the fluffy scrambled eggs to the table, asked the men if they wanted refills on their coffee then retrieved the pot when they both nodded.

“Conreeaght will journey down to the village and see about hiring maids and a cook,” Aeral said as he scored his steak.

“I don’t mind cooking, but the cleaning I can do without,” she said. She waved the men down when they would have stood as she took her seat. She sat, snapping open her napkin then laying it in her lap. “*Carrick Ard* is far too large for a single woman to clean.”

“Or a single man,” Conreeaght ventured.

“Perhaps you could find a woman in the village you could court, Coni,” she said, and when she noticed he was firmly shaking his head, she asked why not.

“Don’t need a woman,” Conreeaght stated. “Don’t want one neither. Life is fine just the way it is.”

“He has a bitch he sees when the urges strike,” Aeral told her, smiling around a gob of potatoes he was chewing.

Aideyn flinched. “By bitch, you don’t mean in temperament but in actuality?”

“A wolf bitch,” Conreeaght acknowledged. “Prettiest little white fluffy tail you ever did see.” He wagged his brows. “And can she switch that tail!”

Aideyn salted her eggs and realized what should have frightened her—even disgusted her—she accepted without question or qualm. In fact, she was happy Coni had a mate. There was powerful magic at *Carrick Ard* and the supernatural held reign there. She thought about that for a moment then made a decision.

“You know, *dooinney*, it would be best if you and I went down to the village to hire the workers,” she told him. When her husband remained silent, she looked up from her plate to find him frowning at her.

“Aideyn, I cannot leave *Carrick Ard*,” he said, fusing his gaze with hers. “I told you that.”

“Have you tried since we Joined?” she asked, taking a graceful forkful of her eggs.

“You know I haven’t,” he grumbled.

“Then how do you know you cannot?”

Conreeaght looked from master to mistress then sat back, chewing thoughtfully on a hunk of steak.

Aeral didn’t answer her question. He swallowed the food in his mouth then reached for his coffee.

“Nothing beats a failure but a try, you know,” his wife reminded him.

“That’s true enough,” Conreeaght agreed.

“Keep your mouth shut and eat your food,” Aeral ordered the servant.

“He can’t do both, Aeral,” Aideyn admonished with a grin. “Pick one or the other for him to do.”

Her husband gave her a narrowed look. “He knows what I meant.”

“Are you afraid to try?” she asked softly.

Aeral’s eyes narrowed even more. “No.”

“Then get your arse up and let’s see if you can walk out yon door,” she said, nudging her chin toward the door that led outside.

He stared at her for a long moment then snatched up his napkin, wiped his lips, threw the napkin on the table and scraped his chair back. He stomped over to the door and shot out his hand to take the knob but stopped before his fingers touched the metal. He drew his hand back—clenching and unclenching his fist several times—then reached for the knob again, closing his fingers around it. Yet still he did not attempt to turn the knob. Instead he looked out through the frosted pane of glass in the middle of the door, his hand tensing and loosening around the knob.

“I bet if you tried, you could will it open and wouldn’t need to turn that tricky old knob,” she teased. “Obviously, it’s become stuck since Coni last opened it.”

Aeral’s head snapped around and he actually growled at her playfulness, but when it had only the opposite effect than the one he intended and she grinned mercilessly, he turned back to the door, sucked in a deep breath and snatched the portal open.

A cold breeze came skirling through the kitchen to lash the flames in the hearth and a few flakes of snow drifted down from the overhang to pepper the Storm Lord’s face. He made no move to step over the threshold but rather stood there letting the wind buffet him.

Conreeaght arched a brow at his mistress and Aideyn shook her head, pursing her lips with obvious irritation. She laid her napkin aside and pushed back from the table, going over to her husband and putting a light hand on his back.

“Move,” she said gently, and was surprised when he did just that without protest. She walked past him and onto the flagstone path that ran between the raised beds of herbs that grew outside the kitchen door. She turned to face him then extended her hand.

Aeral shuddered then lifted his own toward her. The moment their fingers touched, she clasped his hand and pulled him off the threshold and into the bright, surprisingly warm winter day.

To begin with he just stood there, shock bleaching the natural color from his chiseled features. For as long as he could remember he had been jailed in his own keep and had not stepped foot outside in centuries. When first the curse had been laid upon him, he had tried to leave *Carrick Ard* but met with an invisible wall that would not allow him to put even a fingertip beyond the thresholds of his home.

“I am outside,” he said in an awed voice.

"Aye, so you are," his wife replied, and tugged him farther from the safety of the door.

"I am outside." He gazed about him.

Walking backward, she pulled him along with her, taking him deeper into the broad expanse of flagstone and wooden beds and then onto the craggy soil that stretched to the base of the tall bluff behind the fortress.

"Aideyn," he said, almost in a whisper, "I'm no longer a prisoner."

"Then we can walk down to the village and..." She stopped for he was shaking his head. "Why not?"

"We will ride down to the village!" he said, his eyes filled with excitement. "I'll bring us a pair of spirited steeds and we'll ride to the village as the Storm Lord and his lady should!"

Aideyn smiled at him. "Aye, *dooinney*, that should be the way of it." She knew the villagers would be suitably impressed if the Storm Lord showed up—dressed in a fine suit of clothing—with his lady-wife riding beside him. Her heart swelled just thinking of the envious looks her friends would give her when they realized her husband was not the ogre they thought him but a prime example of gorgeous manhood. She giggled.

"You find something funny, *bwoirrinagh*?"

"I was thinking of how Teagan is going to react when she sees you for the first time!" she replied. "She's going to be so jealous!"

He pulled her toward him then swept her up in his arms, swinging her around and around as he laughed.

"I'm free, Aideyn!" he said then said it again, only louder. "I'm free!"

"Put me down, Aeral! You're making me dizzy!" Aideyn laughed before her husband returned her feet to the ground.

From the kitchen doorway, Conreeaght watched his master and mistress cavorting in the snow. He leaned against the jamb as the Storm Lord's lady bent down, gathered a handful of snow, molded it into a ball then threw it at her husband. The servant chuckled when his master returned the favor then ran after his lady to stuff snow down the back of her gown and the Storm Lord's lady squealed loudly.

"Like two children frolicking," Conreeaght said approvingly, but when he saw his master gather the lady into his arms and lower his head to kiss her, the servant turned away, giving them their privacy.

Aeral rid himself of all the pent-up frustration and disappointments of his long life in the kiss he bestowed upon his wife. His heart and soul was in the kiss as he molded her to him. He backed her toward the potting shed and the seclusion the little building provided.

Clinging to her husband's brawny neck, Aideyn realized his destination and—just as eager as he was to escape from prying eyes—sprang up, wrapping her legs around

his lean hips. She felt him chuckle more than heard him as he reached the shed entrance and kicked it open with his booted foot.

The door swung inward and he carried her inside where the air felt humid despite the snow blanketing the ground outside. With a grunt but still crushing his mouth to hers, he kicked the door shut. What little light there was came from cracks around the door but he seemed to know right where he was going and in a moment was leaning forward with her.

Aideyn felt the roughness of burlap touching the back of her neck and the musky scent wafted up to her as he stretched out atop her. She couldn't see anything but she was glad he obviously could else they'd be reclining on the floor at that moment.

"Tell me you love me," he whispered against her mouth.

"I love you," she said, and sighed as he caught her bottom lip between his teeth for a moment.

"Tell me you want me to make love to you right here, right now."

Her arms were around his neck and she nuzzled her lips against his chin. "I don't need to ever tell you, *dooinney*. Anytime, anywhere, I am there for you."

He groaned deep then shifted his hand until it was between them. His fingers snagged in the skirt of her gown and drew it up until he could put his palm on her bare thigh, sliding along the sensitive inner plane until he touched the heat and slight dampness of her panties.

"You're wet for me already."

Aideyn would have answered, but his fingers slid beneath the leg of the lacy garment and into her in one smooth move that caught the breath in her throat. She arched her neck back and his mouth left hers to trail along her neck, flicking his tongue in the hollow of her throat. She ground against his sensual invasion.

"I need you, *lhiannan*," he said in a husky tone. His cock was like steel as it pushed against her.

"Then take what is yours."

He withdrew his fingers and fumbled at the buttons of his pants, making quick work of undoing them and releasing his straining shaft. Unerringly he placed it at the moist opening of her cunt. He went still as she tensed against him.

"It won't hurt this time," he promised. "I swear it."

She relaxed and nodded, though as large and as hard as he was, she wasn't so sure his vow held credence. But the moment he slipped inside her, she felt only the stretching, the filling and the deep penetration that was like velvet sliding into her. She sighed with satisfaction and lifted her legs to encircle his waist.

"Wanton hussy," he laughed, and pushed his hands beneath her hips to bring her to him.

"Insatiable satyr," she countered, and nipped him playfully on the chin.

The long, slow glide of his cock in and out of her was stimulating every nerve ending in her body. His physical weight upon her, sheer delight. He had added a new dimension to his thrusts by swiveling his hips against her and that only served to heighten the pleasure his muscular body was bestowing upon hers.

"That feels *so* good," she said, drawing out the word.

"You like that, do you?"

"It's uncommonly nice, aye."

He snorted and increased the rhythm of his thrusts, and with them the depth, until he knew he was as far inside as her channel would allow.

"That's nice too," she told him, "but I don't believe I'll break. You can be a bit rougher – if it pleases you of course."

Another snort was his answer as he accommodated her request.

Aideyn couldn't see his face—just the dark silhouette of his head above her—but she had the feeling his teeth were grinding together as he thrust into her. His fingers were digging into her ass and she rather liked that. She was thoroughly enjoying the way his cock moved in and out of her, his hips ground against her, and his hot breath fanned across her face. She clenched her vaginal walls around him and jumped when he let out a grunt that told her she had not only surprised him but added to his pleasure. His speed increased until he was slapping into her with force. She clung to him, locked her ankles together behind his back and gave herself completely to him.

Aeral felt the climax coming like a speeding avalanche bearing down on him. His balls tightened so painfully he almost cried out from the tension. His cock was hard and slick with her juices, and the scent of those juices combined with his own made him pound even more fiercely into her shapely body. He was like a crazed man—unable to stop himself from ramming into her like a bull.

"Aeral!" he heard her cry out, and then felt the sweet little ripples of her cunt squeezing him. He let go of any semblance of control he had and poured into her, coming so hard he roared with the release, shuddering as each gush left his engorged shaft.

Depleted, drained, milked, he hovered above her with shaking arms keeping the full weight of his body from crushing her and hung his head as he gasped for breath. His shirt was soaked with perspiration and a lock of his hair had fallen over his forehead into his eyes.

"My poor man," his wife said in a soft, sweet voice. "If we keep this up, I'll wear you down to a mere nubbin no bigger than mine own."

Aeral smiled, snorted with laughter and raised his head. With his immortal senses he could see her as clearly as though she lay beneath a beam of bright sunlight. Her face was so incredibly lovely, so filled with sated pleasure—her eyes half-lidded with that pleasure—and her lips swollen from his kisses. She was the most beautiful thing in the world to him. Just looking at her made his very soul ache.

"I'm willing to chance it," he told her, and groaned as his cock shrank back and pulled out of her. He rolled gently to the side and lay on the stack of burlap bags with his arm thrown over his face. His heart was still racing but he was breathing almost normally. He sighed when she rolled over and put her head on his shoulder.

"What kind of horses will we ride, milord?" she asked as she slid her fingers into the collar of his shirt and played with his chest hair.

"What kind would you like me to bring us?" he countered.

She thought a moment before answering. "A spirited Rysalian black for you and a white Diabolusian mare for me," she suggested. "With full trappings as befits your rank."

"Our rank," he corrected.

Aideyn nodded. "Aye, our rank."

"And a plush fur robe for you with a long, pointed hood that falls delicately in folds?" he queried. "Perhaps in white ermine?"

"Aye," she whispered. "To wear over a scarlet red velvet dress trimmed with elaborate silver braid at the square neckline and full bell sleeves and hem." Her voice took on a rush of excitement as she continued. "And it must have an elegant train to spread over the mare's rump and a beautiful silver brocade belt to sweep down in front."

"And a diamond circlet for your hair," he said. "Which should be worn unbound beneath the hood of your robe."

"And you should be all in black," she said. "Leather pants and black silk shirt with wide sleeves, a black leather belt with a silver buckle upon which is a replica of your sigil and highly polished black leather boots." She sat up. "Oh, oh, oh, and your robe should be black as well!"

"Studies in black and white," he said. "I rather like that." He turned his face toward her. "The bad and the good. The demon and the angel."

"You are not a demon," she stated, sweeping her gown down over her chilled legs.

"They believe I am."

"They will soon learn different."

"If we are to go, we should leave now," he said. "The weather might not hold."

"Will we take Coni with us?"

"He'd frighten the horses," her husband said as he sat up. "Besides, he cares not for the company of others." He stood and held his hand out to her. "Come, *bwoirrinagh*. Your steed awaits."

"Already?" she gasped as she slipped her hand into his.

"You ask, I provide. It will always be so," he said with a grin, and led her out of the shed.

Aideyn came to an abrupt stop behind him as they moved out into the herb garden for there on the flagstone pathway that disappeared around the side of the fortress's far wall stood two of the most spectacular beasts she had ever seen. The black male was ideally suited to the white female, and each had long flowing tails and braided manes. Upon their backs were elegant silver-tasseled black wool caparisons with the Sigil of the Wind embroidered in silver thread upon the skirts of the blankets. The breast collars gleamed with the silver tassels and the nose chains were highly polished silver disks bearing the intricate knotwork of Aeral's crest. The bridles were fashioned from braided silver cord.

"Oh," was all she could say as she stared at the magnificent animals.

"Name them, *lhiannan*," he bid her.

She glanced at him then back at the magnificent steeds. Her chin came up. "His name is Dorraghey and hers is Gillid," she said softly.

Aeral sent her an assessing look then a slow, pleased smile tugged at his lips. "Black as storm clouds and white as snow." His hand tightened on hers. "Well done, milady. It suits them."

When she would have taken a step forward she saw a flash of red at her feet and stopped, looking to find the clothing in which she had dressed that morn had disappeared. In its place was a soft velvet gown with silver embroidery on the long bell sleeves and elegant train. Her lips parted and she turned her head toward her husband.

She blinked.

Gone was the soft white shirt he had been wearing. The billowing black silk shirt that replaced it was open halfway down his broad chest and the tight leather pants fit him so snug she felt her face turn hot as her gaze passed over the slight bulge at the juncture of his thighs.

"Does the clothing meet with your approval, *ben heshee*?" he asked.

She slowly nodded then drew in a long breath. Exhaling even more slowly, she looked up at him. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to you doing this, Aeral. Please warn me before you do it again."

Her husband laughed at her woebegone expression and swung her up in his arms to carry her to her steed. As he swung her into place atop the sidesaddle, a flowing white ermine robe unfolded down her body and settled with elegant grace upon the rump of her horse.

"You did it again," she complained as she took the reins he gathered for her.

"And most likely will another time," he countered as he stepped over to his own mount and swung into the saddle like a well-seasoned warrior, disdaining the use of the stirrup. Seated upon his steed, his own black robe suddenly appeared.

"Ready, milady?" he asked, leaning forward to pat the stallion's neck.

Aideyn gave him a wink. "I will always be ready, milord."

"We'll see," he chuckled. "We'll see."

He put his heel to the beast's flank.

Chapter Seven

Jarod O'Shay glanced up from cutting a mitered corner for a new roof truss, his saw blade dug deep into the seasoned pine. He did a double take, his mouth dropped open, and his arm stilled as his eyes nearly popped from his head.

"Good day to you, Jarod!" Aideyn called out. "I see you're beginning to make real progress on Patty's barn."

Jarod slowly straightened as he gawked at the fine lady and gentleman who rode toward him. He appeared so stunned by the sight that he couldn't find his voice. His mouth opened and closed but no sound came forth.

"Don't you recognize me, Jarod?" she asked with a laugh. "It's only been a few days since last we saw one another."

"Aideyn?" Jarod gasped, taking a step back.

"Aye," she acknowledged. "And this is my husband Prince Aeral."

As the couple reined in before him, O'Shay at least had the presence of mind to snatch the cap from his head and go to one knee before his visitors.

"M-Milady, forgive me!" he stammered with his head bowed, eyes squeezed tightly shut. "A thousand pardons, your grace! A million pardons!"

Aeral smiled. "No harm done, Jarod," he said. "You weren't expecting visitors."

"Especially not the Storm Lord himself, *dooinney*," Aideyn stressed.

Slowly Jarod raised his head and he wedged his eyes open. He looked from Aideyn's smiling face to the man beside her and realized it was no ogre, no monster to whom Aideyn had been sent. The man to whom she was now joined was a handsome warrior who sat his horse proudly.

"Your mother will be pleased to see you," Jarod said, finally letting go of the saw handle. "We never thought to see your face again, Deynnie."

"We're here to find women who might be interested in earning a wage as our housekeeping staff," Aeral said. "We'll provide room and board as well as a small stipend for their work. Do you know of any young women who might be interested?"

Aideyn had suggested coming to O'Shay first for he was the father of nine females ranging from age fifteen to twenty-three. Only two of the girls were married, but instead of going to their husbands' homes at the Joinings, had brought the young men to theirs. It was a cramped and stifling existence for sixteen poor souls, including Jarod's three grandchildren.

Jarod was clutching his cap tight in his massive hand as he lifted it to rub at his nearly bald pate. His florid face was open and friendly even if his eyes were a bit wary of his visitors.

"I don't rightly know if any of my brood would be interested," he said. "I can ask if it be your pleasure, your grace," he replied.

"As you can see, my husband is not the beast we thought him," Aideyn said, "and I can vouch to you that his home is not a flea-ridden sty. No harm will come to your girls, Jarod. This I swear to you on my honor as a Bennett." She reached over to take her husband's hand.

Jarod nodded. "A pledge so given is not to be taken lightly," he said. His gaze shifted to the Storm Lord. "We thought you unable to leave *Carrick Ard*, your grace. It is good to know that is not so."

"I have visited your village many times, Jarod," Aeral replied, "if only in my mind. Until my lady came to me, I was indeed a prisoner at *Carrick Ard*." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Aideyn has set me free of my imprisonment."

"And broken the curse, as well?"

The new voice was harsh and as stark as the look of the woman who had spoken the words.

"Lilith," Aideyn said softly, her eyes concerned. "She is the village..."

"*Caillagh*," Aeral said, supplying the old word for witch. Beneath him the black horse pranced sideways—made uneasy as the thin, narrow-eyed old crone came limping toward them, a long stick clutched in a spindly hand.

"Aye," Aideyn agreed. "She is greatly feared among the clans."

"You did not answer, Storm Lord," the old woman accused. "Did the *Teiyt* break the curse or not?" She paused, leaning heavily on her walking stick.

"I am beyond the walls of *Carrick Ard*. I would say the curse has been broken, *Shenn Voir*," Aeral answered, giving the crone a title of great respect among her people.

An ancient pair of shrewd eyes bore into Aeral—missing nothing—then shifted to Aideyn. "And you, girl. You ride beside this man, but are you at his right hand?"

Aideyn met the level stare calmly and with truth written on her pretty face. "I am," she replied, "whatever he needs me to be."

A small crowd had started to gather behind Jarod O'Shay, keeping its distance from the Storm Lord, his lady and the old woman. No words passed the lips of the assemblage but every gaze was locked upon the trio.

Lilith nodded slowly. "A Joining well-met this time, Storm Lord," she declared. "Well-met and blessed by *Morrighunia* if no other god."

That said, the witch turned and shambled away, ignoring those who moved well out of her path lest they garner her notice.

Aideyn breathed a sigh of relief. "We just received what amounts to approval from her," she told her husband.

"Approval not come by easily," a gruff male voice said, and Aideyn's face lit with happiness.

"Father!" she cried out, and would have scrambled from her mount had her husband not held her hand. At his gentle tugging, she snapped her head around to see him surreptitiously shaking his head in denial of her actions.

"A lady awaits her husband's aid in dismounting," he said beneath his breath, letting go of her hand and swinging his leg over his horse's head. He slid to the ground and tossed the reins to a young boy who seemed to come out of nowhere to catch them.

Aeral went to his wife and held his hands up for her, a soft smile on his handsome features as she placed her hands on his broad shoulders. His wink made her smile brighten to the point he thought his heart would break at the sight of her pleasure. When he'd set her feet upon the ground, he slid his hand to hers, locked their fingers together then turned to greet the burly man who kept a respectful distance from them.

"You are Jarlath Bennett, the chieftain of the village and my lady's father?" Aeral inquired.

Jarlath bowed deeply before the Storm Lord. "I am, your grace, and it is an honor you bestow upon us by coming to Currym."

"It was an honor to receive as my bride a lass such as the one the lottery provided for me," Aeral replied. "Your daughter has won this man's heart and soul." He put out his hand. "You and the village have gained my unwavering appreciation."

A low gasp went through the crowd that had grown to every able man, woman and child. Not only had the Storm Lord ventured down to their humble village—something he had never done—but he was offering his hand to one of them.

Jarlath rubbed his hand down the front of his jerkin before accepting the Storm Lord's greeting. From the prideful look on the village chieftain's face, that handshake proved to be firm and bonding as a son-in-law should rightfully acknowledge his wife's father. He looked behind him and motioned a pale woman to his side, turning back to introduce her to Aeral.

"My lady-wife Caoilainn," he said.

Aeral released his wife's hand and took that of her mother's, bowing and bringing the weathered hand to his lips. "It is with the deepest gratitude that I thank you for the gracing of your daughter to my home, *Mayragh*," he said, giving her the title of mother. As he straightened, he fused his gaze with Caoilainn's. "I had never known happiness and peace until she came into my life, and I have you to thank for that blessing."

The blush that stained Caoilainn's cheeks stood out vividly against her pale complexion. She clutched the hand he had kissed to her breast, apparently so stunned by his words she could not find ones of her own.

"Come! To the *halley chymsee!*" Jarlath said. "We must prepare a feast for the bride and groom!" He looked to his eldest son. "Cearul, you and your brothers break out the best wine from the storehouse. This is a day to long be remembered in Currym!"

A cheer went up from those assembled, and though they parted respectfully as Jarlath led Aeral and his lady past them, smiles greeted the couple along with bows and deep curtsies.

But among the villagers who laughed and joked as they followed the chieftain and his visitors to the sacred assembly hall was one who did not share in the happiness that had befallen the Storm Lord. Standing in the shadows of an old oak—unseen and unfelt by all around him—one man glared with enraged eyes aimed at the couple. Hate roiled from him like putrescence from a gaping wound.

“You will rue the day you knew any happiness, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin,” the man hissed. “I will see you in hell again before this day is over!”

* * * * *

Leaning back in his chair, Aeral rolled the wineglass between his fingers as he watched his lady-wife conversing with her friends. Her giggles and sly looks his way told him more than he wanted to know about the conversation. He felt the heat gathering in his cheeks as the other young women shot him furtive glances then put hands to mouths to hide their laughter.

“Such is the way with all women, your grace,” Jarlath said quietly. “Don’t let it bother you.”

“I fear I am unaccustomed to company, *Ayr 'sy leigh*,” the Storm Lord said with a sigh. “I’ve never known the love of a woman nor lived with one who would brag of what she and I have together as does your daughter.”

Jarlath’s shoulders went back at the title of father-in-law and his chin came up. “My little girl is a very happy woman and you are the one responsible for that.” He put a hand to his heart. “It gives me such pleasure to know she is joyful of her lot in life.”

“That is not always the way it is with us women,” her mother put in. When her husband glanced at her and they exchanged a smile, she patted Jarlath’s knee. “I am glad she has found the same kind of contentment I was lucky enough to be granted with her father.”

“I will do everything in my power to make her happy,” Aeral vowed. “You have my word on that.”

“Then you must be sure when you leave our little village that you have girls who will accompany you back to *Carrick Ard* to do the cleaning Aideyn has always detested,” her mother quipped. “Cooking? She excels at that, but cleaning?” She shook her head. “I fear she is sadly lacking in that department.”

“Will I have problems in finding such women to go back with us?” Aeral asked.

Jarlath scratched his cheek. “I cannot say, your grace. I have watched several young women covertly studying you. My fear is that your reputation may hinder them from volunteering.”

Aeral frowned. That was what concerned him. He turned his head to look at the young women gathered around his wife.

"Aideyn will convince them," her mother insisted with an emphatic nod. "The O'Shay girls have been stuck to her like feathers to molasses since the toast was given. I don't believe you'll have any trouble getting workers, your grace."

"Aeral," the Storm Lord insisted, giving Caoilainn a gentle smile.

Caoilainn giggled as becomingly as her daughter then hid her mouth behind her hand. "Aeral," she repeated then giggled again.

"Women," Jarlath said with a roll of his eyes, but Aeral could see the pride in the man's gaze.

Someone brought out a fiddle, another musician produced a tin whistle and the fiddler struck up a gay tune as a third creative soul took up a bodhrán and began to beat a lively rhythm in cadence to the joyful music. Skirts flashing, women ran to their menfolk and tugged at the reluctant males to join them in the middle of the floor as benches and tables were pushed back for dancing.

"Ah no," Jarlath said, shaking his head as his wife indicated her desire to dance. "You're still recuperating so there'll be no dancing for you, 'Lainn."

Despite the pout on her lovely face, Aideyn's mother rapped her fingers on the tabletop in time to the music and watched as her daughter and youngest son Colm joined in a reel that took them from one end of the hall to the other.

"She likes to dance," Jarlath informed Aeral of his new bride.

"It has been centuries since I danced," Aeral said, and winced. It was not good to remind these happy folk that he was not one of them – not even human – but his father-in-law didn't seem to notice.

"A slow dance won't hurt me none," Caoilainn complained. "Ask them to play a slow song, Jarlath." She squeezed his hand. "You know the one I mean."

Jarlath nodded and excused himself, pushing back his chair to do as his wife asked. He skirted the frolicking couples and gained the attention of the fiddler who leaned down to hear what his chieftain was saying. At the musician's nod, Jarlath patted the man jovially on the back and then began winding his way back through the crowd.

"Is the song he requested your favorite?" Aeral asked his mother-in-law.

"It has special meaning to our clan, aye," Caoilainn said. "They always play it at our Joinings." She reached over to put her hand on Aeral's. "You should ask Deynnie to dance it with you then Jarl and I will join in."

Aeral felt a rush of anxiety flash through him. It was on the tip of his tongue to decline, but then the music stopped and every eye was turned toward him as the strains of a lovely tune wafted over the assembly hall. He saw Aideyn standing alone at last and rose to his feet. As though he walked through a dream world, he went to her and held out his hand.

Aideyn placed her hand in his and he slipped his arm around her waist and stepped back, moving them out into the center of the room. With her firmly in his hold, he waltzed her to the mesmerizing strains of the song as a young woman took her place beside the fiddler and began to sing.

"Come over the hills, my bonny blushing lass,
"Come over the hills to your darling
"You choose the rose, love, and I'll make the vow
"And I'll be your true love forever.

"Red is the rose that in yonder garden grows
"Fair is the lily of the valley
"Clear is the water that flows from the Boyne
"But my love is fairer than any."

Around the room he waltzed her with her body close to his, her eyes locked with his, and the swell of pride and love in his heart making him dizzy. The room darkened until it was lit with a single flickering candle flame. Everyone and everything disappeared until there was only the two of them and the haunting music weaving its magic around them. The words of the song he had never heard before drove deep into his soul and took possession, claiming him for all time.

"'Twas down by Killarney's green woods that we strayed
"When the moon and the stars they were shining
"The moon shone its rays on her locks of golden hair
"And she swore she'd be my love forever."

"I want to walk in the green woods with you," he said, his voice husky. "Under the stars in the moonlight."

Aideyn's hand tensed in his. "And there I will pledge to be your love forever," she vowed.

Neither of them was aware of her mother and father joining them on the dance floor, or of other couples circling beside them as well. Their eyes were for one another only and when the music ended, they stood alone in the center of the floor as around them hushed silence filled the room.

"I love you," he whispered, and lowered his head to claim her lips.

Aideyn felt those three words to the depth of her soul and her womb clenched at the touch of his mouth upon hers. His breath was sweet as his next words came to her.

"I want to lay you down beside the water's edge and make love to you beneath the light of the moon. Come the spring, I will do just that."

She shivered and heat pulsed between her legs as she put a bit of distance between them, suddenly conscious of curious gazes staring at them. Words failed for her body was suddenly on fire with need and the hand holding hers tightened in tandem with another pulse of her womb.

"We should go home," her husband said.

Aideyn nodded. They had spent the entire day in Currym, partaking of an impromptu feast that had lasted from noon until that moment. The sun was beginning to lower in the western sky and she was anxious to be alone with her husband.

With her hand in his, he led her to her parents.

"*Carrick Ard* is always open to you," he told them, surprising himself for he had never uttered those words to another living soul before that time.

"We will come to visit soon," Jarlath promised. He shook his son-in-law's hand, tears filling his eyes.

Caolainn embraced her daughter then opened her arms to Aeral. He did not hesitate but accepted the affection as though it happened every day. When the goodbyes to her brothers and friends had been said, the Storm Lord led his wife from the *halley chymsee* and into the still evening where snowflakes were beginning to drift lazily down from the heavens.

Lifting Aideyn to the back of her mount, he paused to stare up at her.

"I feel like I have been reborn," he said.

She reached down to cup his face. "No, *dooinney*. You are finally alive."

From the shadows angry eyes watched the Storm Lord and his lady as they took the road that would bring them to *Carrick Ard*. Fury buried deep in the watcher's heart made the sea waters surge and boil beneath the causeway.

Aeral reined in his mount as the waters lashed over the causeway and held up a hand to stay his wife. He had been so happy during the day, so content with Aideyn at his side he had not felt the evil that had slowly begun to creep around him. He felt it now for it was slithering down his spine. He shifted his shoulders uneasily, his blue eyes turning as cold as the ice riming the ditches beside which they passed.

"What is it?" Aideyn asked.

The Storm Lord turned his head to seek out the center of his apprehension. If it was his old enemy, he knew Llyr would keep himself well hidden, though the Sea Lord could not dampen the anger permeating his evil soul. That was coming from the bastard in reckless waves.

"Take my hand," Aeral said as he nudged his mount closer to hers.

Aideyn did as he ordered, gleaning a small measure of the disquiet that had settled on his features. As the sun lowered behind the mountain, those features were less distinct, but the unrest in his glacial blue eyes was apparent.

With ease he swept an arm around her and brought her over to his horse, settling her before him with his embrace tight.

"Forgive me for being a fool, *Ihiannan*," her husband said. "I let myself become distracted. Had I not felt his hatred so keenly, you and your mount might have been swept into the sea as we crossed the causeway."

Aideyn shuddered. Her eyes went wide as she stared at the undulating water flowing up and over the sides of the causeway. The sea was churning violently and the air had turned even colder. What had started out as a few delicate flakes drifting lazily around them was becoming a cascade.

"*Hold tight to the pommel!*" Aeral shouted, and drummed his heels into his mount's flanks. The steed shot forward, its thundering hooves digging into the frozen ground as the pretty mare followed in its wake, white mane flying.

The waves that crested over the causeway were brutally cold, and as they receded, threatened to drag the black horse over the side and into the turbulent heaving far below. White foam like ghostly talons reached out to pluck at Aideyn's cape and the frigid water chilled to the bone as it splashed over her. By the time the black steed was halfway across the causeway, the Storm Lord's lady was shivering and her teeth chattering as she struggled to keep a grip on the pommel. Had not her husband's arms been locked securely around her, she might well have been snatched away into the roaring darkness below.

"I will take you from him. This I swear..."

The ghostly voice stunned Aideyn as it whispered jarringly in her ears. Even over the crashing of the waves and the pounding of the horses' hooves on the causeway she had heard the insidious threat. It made her feel unclean, tainted by the oiliness of the menace. By the time the steed had cleared the causeway and was streaking for the gates of *Carrick Ard*, she could feel spectral fingers caressing her cheeks and she batted them away with a cry of distaste. Obscene laughter wound its way through her head and settled in a tight knot in the pit of her belly.

The causeway heaved beneath them. The mountain appeared to soar higher. A loud crack echoed across the firmament and then rocks tumbled down from the higher elevations of Mount Riojit to crash into the roiling sea.

Conreeaght was there at the stairs as the mounts raced across the causeway, yet still the shrieking laughter followed and Aideyn slapped her palms to her ears to drown it out. Beneath her, the black horse shuddered to a stop, its sides heaving as it dug its hind legs into the snow-covered ground and skidded forward a few feet.

"The bastard tried to take her!" she heard her husband tell Conreeaght.

"I feared he might do so," the servant said as he gathered the reins of the horses that were suddenly shying away from his feral scent. He held tight as his master dismounted and reached up to help Aideyn down.

"Be still!" Aeral ordered the horses in a harsh tone that brooked no disobedience from the animals, and at once the beasts quieted, though both continued to shiver in the grip of the servant.

Aideyn clung to her husband—fearful of being snatched from his arms—and he swept her up, hurrying up the steps to the doors that swung open wide as if pushed by ethereal hands.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Aeral vaulted to the upper chambers with his lady securely in his grip. He could feel her shivering and knew it was more than the cold that caused her reaction. Her face was buried in his shoulder, her arms tight around his neck, her body stiff as he carried her.

"It's all right," he said. "You're safe. He cannot venture inside *Carrick Ard*."

Through her mind the sinister laughter curled until it drowned out anything else her husband was saying to her. She did not want to release her hold on him when he laid her upon their bed but clung to him as tenaciously as ivy to a brick wall.

"Don't let go!" she pleaded. "Aeral, please!"

Still garbed in their heavy fur robes, he laid down beside her on the bed and molded her body to his, throwing one leg over hers, crooning softly to her as he pushed the hood back from her chilled face and placed light, warm kisses on her brow.

"I'm here, *tarrishagh*," he assured her. "I'm not going anywhere."

She shuddered against him and hid her face in the warmth of his neck. She barely noticed the magic he used to rid them of the snow-dappled robes and the elegant clothing and mud-coated boots they had worn to the village. She was only dimly aware of the soft cotton gown into which he draped her and the heat of his naked chest as he rocked her gently. His bare toes dueled playfully with hers until she finally began to relax, his long legs pressed to hers.

"I'll not let him take you from me, Aideyn," he vowed. "I swear to you I will not."

Her lips moved over the rapidly throbbing vein in his neck and he groaned. Pulling back, he looked down at her beautiful face and it was the pleading in her eyes that spoke volumes for what she needed most from him at that moment.

Hand trembling, he put it to her breast and molded the light cotton in his palm, squeezing gently as he lowered his mouth to hers. He slipped his tongue past her lips and moved over her, gown dissolving beneath him as though it had been made of mist, his legs now bare and hard along hers.

Their bodies fit like spoons in a drawer, he thought as he eased her thighs apart and settled between her legs. The silky expanse of her firm thighs bracketed his then he felt her foot rubbing leisurely along his calf and broke the kiss. He smiled as he gazed down into her beautiful face.

“You’ve no idea what having you touch me so innocently means to me, *lhiannan*.”

“I love you, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin,” she told him. “With every fiber of my being I love you.”

He threaded his fingers through hers and lifted her hands to either side of her head, flexing his hips so he could position his cock at the warm entrance of her sheath. His cock needed no urging, no guidance. It wanted what he wanted and knew the way home. Gently but firmly he pressed the glistening tip into her channel—already wet and eager for his taking. She drew him in, the muscles of her vagina gripping him with velvet fingers, sucking him down into sweet, hot bliss.

“You are so tight,” he whispered against her lips. “I could stay inside you forever.”

Their eyes locked, he took her with slow, sure strokes. Though his body screamed at him to quicken the pace, he kept it rhythmic, measured and unhurried. His gaze dropped to her bottom lip, which she had drawn between her teeth. He drove deep, held it tight against her womb until a shuddery breath escaped her.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered.

She released the hold on her lip. “You,” she said.

He ground his hips against her, reveling in the small groan of pleasure that left her open mouth. He withdrew, drove deep again and held.

“For how long?”

“For always,” she swore, her fingers tightening around his.

He rotated his lower body—swirling his pelvis over hers—withdrew then eased into her only a fraction of an inch. Her moan made him smile.

“Are you ready for me, *ben heshee*?” he asked, his voice a growl of lustful desire.

“Aye,” she replied on a long, quivering sigh.

He pushed farther into her velvet warmth, the blood rushing through his ears like the harsh wind slamming against the window.

He frowned, lifting his head and turning his face toward the portal, stunned to see the raging face of *Geay Hwoaie* pressed against the pane for he had not set the wind loose.

“Aeral?” Aideyn questioned, sensing the stiffness of his body that had nothing to do with his arousal.

“Who the hell let you out?” he asked.

The harsh north wind rattled the glass then swept back with a sound that was eerily like that of laughter.

“What’s wrong?” Aideyn asked.

“The winds are loose,” her husband snapped. “At least the most destructive one is.” He gave her a longing look then eased from her body. “I need to get him under control.”

Aideyn nodded—knowing he had to leave her—but her body was on fire with need. She reached for her pillow and drew it to her, hugging it tight as she watched him pull on his pants, knowing he was so distracted by the appearance of the wind it didn't occur to him to wave the garment into place on his body. Watching him stride angrily to the door—bare-chested and bootless—she was aroused by the play of the muscles in his back.

"I won't be long," he said, closing the door behind him.

Scooting under the covers for the room had grown chilled, Aideyn settled beneath the plush fur comforter and silk sheets with the pillow once more clutched to her chest. Her head lay on her husband's pillow as she drew in his scent, closing her eyes to the dark spice of his body. She fell into a light doze with that sensual perfume in her nostrils.

Sighing as the bed dipped, she snuggled against the warmth of his body rolling to hers. She opened her eyes and smiled up into glittering blue eyes that were smoldering with desire.

"Everything all right?" she asked, battling a yawn.

"Aye," he whispered, bringing his hand up tenderly to cup her cheek. His fingers caressed her flesh. "I have things well under control now."

"You're cold," she said. His chest and bare legs were like ice. She felt him shudder as she ran her hand along his waist.

"Then warm me, *ben heshee*," he said softly then leaned over her, his lips claiming hers in a soft press. He pulled back, his gaze fused with hers. "Love me, Aideyn."

"With the greatest of pleasures, *fer caggee*."

She put her palm in the center of his chest and pushed him to his back then slid over him, stretching her soft body atop his hard one as he enveloped her in a tight grip. With their bodies molded together, she put her hands to either side of his face and pressed her mouth hotly to his, thrusting her tongue between his lips. The low groan that came from deep within his chest sent a shiver of chills racing down her sides. His arms tightened even more around her as their tongues mated and he lifted one leg to insinuate it between hers. It was her turn to groan, and when she did, the sound he made was one of spiraling pleasure.

"Touch me," he pleaded against her lips. "Put your little hands all over me."

She sat up, her shapely rump settling over his groin. His hands grazed down her arms to settle on her hips, her waist so small his thumbs nearly met over her navel. Long hair hanging to her thighs, she swept the golden cascade behind her shoulders then leaned forward to run her fingers through the crisp mat of hair on his muscled chest.

He closed his eyes—audibly sighing—and his fingers flexed on her waist as though he'd never let her go.

Aideyn stared down into his handsome, chiseled features and her heart swelled with love and pride in the man. A lock of dark hair had fallen over his forehead to give him a boyish look that made her smile. His long lashes fanned the ridges of his cheeks. The full lips were parted to reveal just a glimpse of the white teeth behind them. Her gaze dipped to the cleft of his manly chin, the strong column of his neck.

"I love you," she said. "With all my heart."

His eyelids fluttered open and she was stunned to see terrible pain lurking in the blue depths. The thick arches of his eyebrows drew together as though her words had hurt him.

"Aeral, what's wrong?" she said, thinking her weight atop him might be the cause. She started to ease off him but his hands tightened.

"It has been so long since I was held," he said, his voice infinitely sad. "So long since I knew the sweet touch of a woman's gentle hand. Longer still since I had someone who loved me."

In that moment she knew the man beneath her was not who she thought he was. Her eyes flared.

"You're not my husband," she said, heart racing.

A fleeting smile tugged at his lips. "Alas, pretty one, I am not," he said.

Fear struck a sharp chord in Aideyn's heart and she jerked, scrambling away, snatching up the sheet to cover her nakedness. "Where is Aeral?" she asked, trembling. "What did you do to him?"

The man—nay, the god she now knew was Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee—sat up, dragging a hand through his thick dark hair. "I've not harmed your husband, *lhiannan*," he told her. "He's cooling his hot head in a dungeon cell at this very moment. Cursing me for all I am not worth. Fearful of what I am doing to his lady-wife."

With wide eyes, she watched the Sea Lord swing his long legs from the bed and stand. In the blink of an eye he had clothed his bare body. They were too much alike—the brothers—and she realized there were two more who looked exactly like her husband. That knowledge drove a spike of horror through her heart.

"Coair and Belenus would never come to you," he told her. "Coair has a very possessive mate and Belenus has two who would emasculate him should he ever stray. I alone am without a mate to ease my lonely existence."

"An existence you forced upon my husband!" she said, breathing raggedly.

"One he brought upon himself," the Sea Lord corrected.

"You cuckolded him," she accused. "Took his mate from him."

"Cailleach was Morrighu," he said. "All Morrighu belong to me." His handsome face crinkled. "Or did until Cailleach turned herself to stone. Her sisters and queen cursed me then. They'll not come near me now."

"Do not expect pity from me," Aideyn said. "Not after the centuries of hurt you handed the man I love!"

Llyr cocked his head to one side. "You truly do love him, don't you?"

Despite being on her knees upon the mattress with the sheet wrapped protectively around her, Aideyn felt like a warriorress clothed in battle armor as she lifted her chin. "With all my being do I love him."

The Sea Lord straightened his shoulders. "And would defend him even against a god."

"With my dying breath," she asserted.

His smile was bitter as he moved toward the door. "This isn't over, little one," he cautioned. He stopped to look back at her. "I thought to take you, to ruin you for him, but my fight is not with you. My fight is with Aeral and I will have my revenge."

She watched him flow through the door as though the portal weren't there. Sucking in a breath, she shot off the bed, snatching her nightgown from the armoire to hastily drag it over her head. On bare feet she ran to the door, flung it open, shouting her husband's name.

Chapter Eight

Conreeaght appeared out of the gloom as his mistress came tearing down the stairs. "Milady, what's happened?" he asked.

"My husband!" she managed to gasp, dragging breath into her lungs. "Where is he, Coni? Where would the bastard take him?"

"What bastard, milady?" the servant asked, his brows drawn together. "Who do you mean?"

"The Sea Lord!" she hissed. She reached out to grab Conreeaght's arm. "Where is the dungeon? He put Aeral in the dungeon."

Eyes flaring, the servant spun around, breaking her hold on him. "This way!" he said.

Pausing only long enough to light a lamp, Conreeaght led her to a small door nearly hidden beneath the incline of the main staircase. He dragged it open and hurried before her, holding the lamp high to illuminate their passage.

"How did he gain access to the keep?"

Aideyn winced as the soles of her feet came in contact with the cold, damp and rough stone steps that led downward at a sharp, twisting plunge. The walls beside her were slick to the touch as she put out a hand to steady her descent.

"I don't know. The north wind was set loose and Aeral went to investigate," she said, feeling the cold sinking into her body. Already her lips were trembling as the frigid air swirled over her nightgown.

"How could that happen?" Coni asked. "Only Prince Aeral Chiarn Dorrin can control the winds!"

The air was fetid with a stench that made her nose wrinkle. She hesitated putting her hand to the stone again, but there was no handrail and the spiraling steps were steep, her feet sliding on the slick surface. With a grimace she flattened her palm on the stairwell wall, hating the greasy feel of it on her flesh.

Downward they moved into the dismal, dank darkness. The scope of the lamp cast only a marginal halo of light to lead the way into the cobweb-festooned passage. In the distance the sound of wind rushing, rats squealing and the roar of the ocean pounding at the foundations of *Carrick Ard* was unnerving.

"Could he have hurt Aeral?" she asked, having kept the question to herself for fear of learning the answer.

"Aye," Coni answered. He looked around at her. "They are brothers and each has the power to harm the other, but neither can take the other's life."

Her husband was immortal and she had had no fear on that account. What concerned her was the Sea Lord inflicting pain upon Aeral. Even a bruise would be more than she could bear for it would be her fault.

"With his powers how could his brother confine him in a cell?" she asked, so afraid the answer lay in the fact that her husband had been incapacitated.

"There is a control cell," Conreeaght replied. "All six sides of it are sheathed in plated iron. Iron prevents magical powers from being used. It will be there where the Sea Lord has taken his grace."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask why such a cell was necessary at *Carrick Ard*, but now was not the time for more questions. She was having a hard time negotiating the incline of the slippery steps and her feet felt encased in ice they were so cold.

"Not much farther now," Coni said as though he sensed her discomfort.

The servant's idea of not much farther was not the same as Aideyn's. It seemed to take forever to reach the bottom of the steps and the ice-cold depths of the keep where a long passageway with barred doors lined up like teeth in a monster's maw stretched beyond the range of the lamp.

"What need does Aeral have for a dungeon?" she asked, lips trembling from the icy blast of air swirling around her.

Conreeaght shrugged. "He did not build *Carrick Ard*, milady. Who knows why the gods do what they do?"

The cell to which Coni led her was at the very end of the long, dismal corridor. Its iron door had thick bands welded horizontally across the slender expanse and a sturdy lock into which a key had been thrust.

"Hold this, please," Coni said, handing her the lamp. "It will take two hands to drag open the portal."

Shivering uncontrollably for the cold was biting deep into her flesh, Aideyn tucked one foot atop the other to warm it as she waited for the servant to unlock the cell and pull open the heavy door. She backed to give him room, crying out as she felt the cloying feel of a cobweb sticking to her hair. Hastily, she batted the gossamer strands away, hoping no eight-legged beastie had been lurking in the web.

The clank of the lock's tumbler falling, the scrape of the iron against the stone, the utter pitch-dark of the area beyond caught the breath in Aideyn's throat. The ebon stretch inside the cell terrified her.

"Aeral?" she called out, and when there was no answer, her heart squeezed painfully. "Aeral?"

Coni reached for the lamp, took it from her trembling hands. "Stay here," he ordered as he squeezed through the opening and into the cell.

Blackness quickly fell around her as the lamp's meager glow was muted behind the door. She hurried forward, needing to know why her husband had not answered. She

slipped easily into the opening, coming up short when she saw Aeral lying curled up on the floor and the servant hunkered down beside him.

"Your grace?" she heard Coni say.

"I'm all right," was the listless answer.

Relief washed over Aideyn and she rushed to her husband. She dropped to her knees, reaching for him as he sat up. His arms went around her with such a grip she felt as if her ribs might break.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked.

"No," she answered, her palms to his face, fingers stroking back his tousled hair, eyes searching his face.

"Did he...?" He could not finish the question for his voice broke.

"No," she was quick to assure him, she could see the agony filling his eyes. "He only kissed me."

The lamp cast red flares of anger through his gaze before he looked down, seemingly unable to look at her. She felt him wince.

"You are barefoot," he said, and before she could react he scooped her into his arms, sweeping her from the floor.

"You can't carry me up those stairs. They are too narrow," she said, but could have saved her breath for in the blink of an eye he transported her from the dank cell to the warm comfort of their bedroom, striding purposefully to the fireplace where he deposited her in one of the two wingback chairs that flanked the hearth. He went to his knees before her, cradling her feet in his hands.

"They are like ice," he said, chafing the chilled flesh. "Conreeaght!"

"It will take him a while to get up..." she began, but the servant was suddenly there beside his master, giving her a careless shrug as she blinked at his sudden appearance.

"Warm water and disinfectant. There are cuts on her feet," Aeral snapped.

"Aye, your grace," Coni acknowledged.

Aideyn sighed. She doubted she would ever get used to the magic that happened within the walls of *Carrick Ard*.

"I failed you," he said.

"How can you say that?" she asked. She reached out to smooth his hair as he bent over her feet, massaging them briskly.

"He could have done despicable things to you and I could not have stopped him," he said, his voice tight with pain. He raised his head and she was stunned to see tears in his dark blue eyes. "I died a thousand times fearing what he was doing to you."

She leaned toward him to put her hands to either side of his face. "Aeral, he did not harm me."

He didn't seem to hear her denial. Tears were easing down his face, his hands clutching her bare feet. "I remember leaving our room then nothing until I woke in that

gods-be-damned cell. I knew I would never escape it on my own, that you would not hear my shouts, but I yelled anyway in the hopes Conreeaght would. The longer I lay there, the worse were my imaginings."

"He kissed me," she said sternly. "That is all. Nothing more, Aeral."

"The disinfectant is already in the water. I brought salve as well, your grace," Coni said as he came back into the room. He hunkered down beside his master with a steaming pan of water clutched in his hands, a towel tossed over his arm.

Aeral tore his gaze from his wife and moved back so she was forced to lower her hands to her knees. He tested the water, nodded then told the servant to set the pan on the floor. He lifted Aideyn's feet and placed them gently in the warm water, running his hands over and over her soles.

"How did the Sea Lord get inside the keep, your grace?" Coni asked.

"He had help," Aeral said between clenched teeth.

"You don't think I...?"

"Nay, old friend," Aeral interrupted Coni. "I know you did not." He lifted Aideyn's right foot and set it on his thigh, held his hand out for the towel Conreeaght had brought. "In the morning, we will search every nook and cranny in *Carrick Ard* and find out how the bastard entered. Unless I miss my guess, somewhere there is a crack in the foundation and he slithered through that." He began drying Aideyn's foot.

"And *Gaey Hwoaie*?" Coni pressed. "How did he manage to break free of the cave?"

"The mountain was restless, the land heaving as we crossed the causeway. A vent must have appeared in the cave and he escaped through that." He looked around at the servant. "As I said, Llyr had help."

"You fear she is rousing from her self-imposed exile after all these centuries?" the servant asked, face suddenly pale.

"Either she is or Coair has thrown in his support to see my life remains as miserable as Llyr can make it," Aeral replied. "Whichever the case, it doesn't bode well." He plucked his wife's left foot from the cooling water and ran the towel over it.

Conreeaght fished in his pocket for a little jar of salve, unscrewing the lid and extending the jar to his master. The scent of spices filled the air as Aeral dipped two fingers into the salve.

With care the Storm Lord slathered the cool salve along his wife's insteps then wiped his fingers on the seam of his pants before rising to his feet and scooping her from the chair. Taking her to the bed, he was about to ease her down, but then he sniffed, sniffed again and with a muted curse the bed linens disappeared in a puff of pale yellow smoke. From the thin air, fresh linens settled upon the mattress with a soft rustle of air and cloth, tucking themselves neatly at the corners.

"Oh, now that's a nifty trick," Aideyn said, smiling at her husband. Her arm was curled around his neck so she was aware of the tension that had turned his body hard with fury. "Remind me to come get you when the linens need changing each week."

Aeral snorted but the anger died from his gaze as he laid her on the bed. "I would not wish to spoil you by doing all your chores for you, *lhiannan*," he told her. "Such would make you lazy."

It was Aideyn's turn to snort, and the unladylike sound brought smiles to both the Storm Lord's and Coni's faces.

"I told you I would cook, but I draw the line at changing the bedding," she said with a *humpf* for emphasis. "Did we not go to the village for girls to do that so I don't have to?"

"Spoiled," Aeral said as he pulled the covers over her. "Here less than a week and spoiled so rotten salt would not help."

"And whose fault is that?" she countered sweetly, her smile making his heart ache.

"If there will be nothing else?" Coni said.

"Go back to bed," Aeral ordered. "There will be no more intrusion tonight."

"Let us hope not," Coni said, bowing.

"I *know* not," the Storm Lord snapped, eyes flashing. "And tomorrow I will go before the *Ard-Choyrle* and state my case against that bastard brother of mine. There will be no more sneaking into my home!"

The door closed quietly behind the servant's exit. After he made a quick trip into the bathing chamber to clean up, Aeral joined his wife in bed, pulling her close to his side, nestling her head upon his shoulder. His arms were firmly around her, his chin resting atop her golden curls. For a long time neither spoke. Both sets of eyes were on the flickering shadows cast by the lamplight on the bedside table.

"He was courteous," she said at last, and felt her husband stiffen.

"Do not defend him to me, *ben heshee*," he growled through clenched teeth.

"I was not defending him," she denied.

"And don't assign him attributes he does not have. He's an evil son of a bitch."

"I believe him to be a very sad and lonely man."

He sucked in a breath and pulled back from her, looking down at her with blazing eyes. His voice was tight with irritation when he spoke. "You pity him?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "He brought his loneliness upon himself and gave you your own painful share of that useless commodity. I am merely stating what I felt."

His eyes narrowed. "What did he say to you to make you think he is lonely, Aideyn?"

"It wasn't what he said, but rather the look in his eyes. They were haunted, Aeral, and filled with hurt."

"Then let him suffer," he said, "as he made sure I did all these centuries. He took one woman from me. He'll not take another!"

There was steel in his blazing eyes as he moved over her, slanting his mouth ruthlessly upon hers, his knee shoving her legs wide as he wedged between them. His fingers laced hers, drawing her hands above her head while he ravaged her mouth with hard lips and heated tongue. Hips grinding on hers, cock stabbing at the restriction of her nightgown, he growled, and the barrier of clothing vanished. She felt the slickness of his shaft head sliding along her inner thigh as he arched his lower body to impale her.

Aideyn knew he needed to take her as a conquering warrior would his woman. She could feel his frustration, his fear that she could well have been taken from him. He was angry – not at her but at his thieving brother – and he was desperate to stake his claim. He needed to assert his dominance – not over her – but over his brother. His hard body wasn't hurting hers, and if truth be told, she found his overpowering assertiveness very erotic. The weight of him pressing her to the mattress was heady. The forcefulness of his blistering kiss made her blood race, her womb clench. She welcomed the boldness he was exerting for it made her feel very womanly.

"You are mine," he whispered raggedly against her lips. "Mine, Aideyn. Mine and no other's!"

"Aye, *fer caggee*," she acknowledged. "Never to another."

He released her right hand and pushed his own between her legs to grasp his cock. With a grunt, he thrust into her – seating his manhood tight into her velvety folds, pushing deep until she was fully impaled. He released her other hand and slammed both hands under her rump, lifting her to meet his body.

"Mine," he said again, his breathing ragged as he drove into her.

Aideyn brought her legs up to cage his lower body. Locking her ankles, she draped her arms around his neck, her breasts flattened against his muscular chest.

"Yours," she agreed. "Always yours."

The bed shook beneath them as his powerful strokes claimed her. Sweat dripped from his brow. His blood raced. His heart pumped furiously. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her rump. The sound of his body slapping against hers, the scent of their combined sexual fluids filling his nostrils, the slick heat of her gripping his cock spurred him to a frenzy of need. Her fingers were clawing at his back as his muscles strained. Her teeth were clamped to his shoulder. Her legs were constricted around his waist, her heel rubbing against the cleft of his ass.

"Mine!" he hissed from between grinding teeth as his strokes increased in speed until he was slamming so hard into her she groaned with each forward plunge.

The pressure of release was building inside Aideyn's body. She could feel the itch, the tickle that she knew only this man would ever be able to calm. His body was so powerful thrusting into hers, so commanding. He was drawing from her every ounce of submission, every drop of compliance and surrender. He was branding her so deep that nothing could ever remove his stamp of ownership of her. Her legs clamped even

harder around him and she heard him growl brutally. Felt the saltiness of his blood on her tongue and removed her teeth from his flesh.

“Yours,” she whispered. She swept her tongue over the indentations of her teeth on his shoulder and he shuddered.

Aeral was completely lost. Nothing and no one—not even the gods—could have separated him from Aideyn at that moment. He was fused to her. His body was buried so deep it would have taken a team of oxen to pull him free. Fierce determination narrowed his eyes. Ferocious intent drew his lips back from his teeth. Fiery desire drove him over the edge and he spilled his seed into the waiting vessel of her body with a bellow of primal satisfaction. In that moment he knew—he *knew*—he had impregnated her. His seed spread powerfully and he could almost feel it racing toward her womb, piercing the membrane of her egg to make a home for itself there.

Her husband’s cock throbbing inside her, releasing its juices was so powerful it overwhelmed Aideyn. Her entire body shivered. She clung to him, raked her nails down his back for her own orgasm rocked her so potently she moaned with the force of it. Her vision blurred and darkness claimed her for a second as her blood pumped wild and furious through her veins, her heart stuttered. It was almost as though her body had opened for him, had drawn his cock in as far as it would go—and with it—the very essence of life. There was no doubt in her mind he had seeded her with his young.

The after-tremors shook them both once, twice, until the Storm Lord collapsed atop his wife, panting for breath, shuddering convulsively. His body was covered with a thin film of sweat as he struggled to still the shivering. Even his teeth clicked together.

Aideyn’s arms were tight around her man. She was striving to get her own breathing under control, to stay the quivers that rippled through her body. The pounding of her heart was loud in her ears and she could feel Aeral’s thumping brutally against her chest. She felt limp, boneless, devoid of energy, capable only of keeping her death grip upon her husband’s sweat-slick body else she thought she might melt completely away into the mattress.

“Mother of the gods,” she heard her husband whisper.

“There will be a child from this,” she told him.

“Aye,” he said. His cheek was against her shoulder, his hot breath fanning over her flesh.

“Our child,” she said with the last bit of vigor she had left in her depleted body. She yawned, her eyelids fluttering closed.

They fell asleep with the Storm Lord lying atop her, her arms around him. When morning came, life was already growing in Aideyn’s fertile womb.

Chapter Nine

It had taken Aeral and Conreeaght less than an hour to find the crack in the foundation of *Carrick Ard* through which Llyr had entered the Storm Lord's domain. It took only a moment for Aeral to psychically seal the rent as he hunkered over it.

"She did this," he told the servant. "As surely as I am standing here, this was her doing."

"You believe she is pulling free of the mountain after all this time?" Conreeaght asked, worry rife in his voice. "Why would she do that, your grace?"

"I will soon know," Aeral said. He rose to his feet. "Watch over my lady until I return. Guard her with your life."

"On my honor will I do so," Coni vowed.

An instant later the Storm Lord vanished, winging his way to *Ard-Choyrle*, the High Council of the Gods deep in the blackness of the limitless space. His destination was the Court of Justice located in the black marble depths of *Plaasagh Mooar*, the Grand Palace of the Gods.

Situated at the top of the stygian world of Jeeoil, the soaring black castle in which the gods resided was forever cloaked behind tumbling ebon clouds that hid it from the human eye. Now and again lightning stitched across the midnight heavens, but no illumination ever revealed the massive structure that had been fashioned by *Jee yn Ayr*, the Father God, upon the summit of Mount S'Yrjey.

Created two-hundred and sixty-five floors high, each floor of the construct was the domain of its assigned god or goddess. The highest story was the abode of the Father God. The goddesses – the *ben-jees* – resided on the top floors while the gods – the *jees* – were restricted to the lower. Beneath the lowest floor within which was housed the *chaglym* or the gathering hall where social events among the gods and goddesses took place and the *shamyr vee* – the dining hall – were the Courts of Law – *Quaiyl* – and Justice – *Quaiyl Vriwnys* – as well as the dungeons and at the very lowest strata, the Abyss, known to the gods as *Charvaal*.

Walking the frigid corridors of his ancestral home, Aeral realized it had been many centuries since he'd visited the hallowed halls. Nothing had changed for nothing ever did in *Plaasagh Mooar*. The black marble walls, floors and ceilings were as slick as ice and just as cold to the touch. Every ten feet black torches blazed in ebony brackets – casting only a modicum of light in this dismal section of the palace. No color broke the unrelieved darkness for it was believed law and justice, retribution and reckoning were best served in gloom and shadows. The robes of the magistrate gods – the *briw beg* – and the Tribunal Judges – the *Briw Binsch* – would be as funereal as the most lightless night.

Those attending the court would likewise be adorned in vespertine cloth just as the Storm Lord was as he took the steps down into the nether regions of the palace.

No sound accompanied Aeral as he traversed the spiral-work stairway. Not even the torches sputtered as he passed them—garnering the only warmth to be had in the sub-zero clime of these levels. He passed pitch-black doors behind which only those who governed the courts were ever allowed. Kept locked, the chambers beyond emitted an unearthly feel that made shivers run down his back. The lower he went, the colder the air until he could see his breath in the flickering weave of the torchlight.

When he was four levels down in the bowels of the palace, he came to a dead end with a single door to his right and a single door to his left. Each door was guarded by a *fer coadee*—a fierce warrior whose glowing red eyes impaled the Storm Lord with brutal intent. The warrior on his right gave a slight incline of his misshapen head in greeting, but the warrior on the left bowed to no one—not even a god—for he guarded access to the *dein*, the dungeon, and beyond that, the Abyss.

Aeral straightened his shoulders as the *fer coadee* on his right reached out a gnarled and warty hand to open the door that led to the courts. The stench that rolled off the twisted body with its suppurating sores was revolting and it was all the Storm Lord could do not to gag. He swallowed convulsively—face flaming as he heard the warrior snort contemptuously. Without another look into the hideously deformed face, Aeral entered the door, grateful when it closed quickly behind him to shut out the sight and smell of the keeper guards. Taking a deep breath, he continued walking toward the double doors at the end of the corridor. Behind the right door was the *Quaiyl* and behind the left, the *Quaiyl Vriwnys*. He opened the left door, not surprised to see the entire assemblage of gods and goddesses awaiting his arrival as he entered the chamber. They were all seated, heads turned toward him.

No one stood as he walked between the two sections of black leather chairs and toward the high dais upon which *Jee yn Ayr*, the Father God, sat. Flanking the massive throne were the benches of the *Briw Binsch* at *Jee yn Ayr*'s right hand and the *briw beg* on His left. The faces of the six gods of the law were stern and unwelcoming as the visage of the Father God.

Reaching the base of the dais, the Storm Lord went to his knees then prostrated himself before He Who Created Him. On his belly with forehead to the floor and arms stretched wide to either side, Aeral closed his eyes and awaited permission to rise. The silence was telling and sweat began to form in his armpits and along the crease of his back.

“It has been long and long since you have paid us a visit, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin,” *Jee yn Ayr* said in a voice that was as deep as the oceans and as cold as the highest northern summit of Mount S’Yrjey.

Aeral’s fingers flexed at the reprimand but he dared not speak until consent was given. To do so would be to court disaster and exacting retribution he had no desire to know. A tremor shifted through his body as the silence dragged on. When it seemed he would spend eternity abasing himself before his father, he heard an annoyed sigh.

“Rise and tell us why you have come.”

His mouth dry, hands trembling, Aeral pushed up from the floor, lifting his chin to look into *Jee yn Ayr*'s eyes. Those who did not, could not, meet the Father God's stony stare were punished for their discourtesy.

“I have come to beg the court's indulgence on a personal matter,” the Storm Lord said.

“It is always personal with you,” Becuma, the goddess, snapped.

“Hold your tongue, woman,” the Father God warned.

Aeral flicked his eyes toward Becuma—she who would sleep with any male capable of having an erection. That he had managed to escape her clutches was obviously a sore point with her still.

“You were granted a mate,” the Father God stated. “What more do you want, Storm Lord?”

Knowing he had to be careful in how he broached the subject of his brother's invasion, Aeral wished he dared turn his head to seek out Llyr's presence among the gathered but instead kept his eyes locked on *Jee yn Ayr*, whose savage frown made Aeral's knees weak. He knew he could not ask anything directly of his father but rather had to address his needs to the gods.

“I would ask the indulgence of His Grace Lord Dunatis,” Aeral said. “It is to him I seek redress.”

There was a slight murmur from the assembled then the god of fortifications, the protector of sacred places left his seat and approached the dais, bowing low before the Father God before turning to Aeral.

“To what do I owe the honor of your visit, Prince Aeral?” the god questioned.

A slight nod of the Father God's head gave Aeral the permission he needed to meet Dunatis' gaze. The god's eyes were steel gray but were not as cold as those of the judges and magistrates.

“*Carrick Ard* was given to me as my private domain,” Aeral said, wincing when there was a tightening of Dunatis' mouth. “I state that for the benefit of those not familiar with my home.”

“We all know where you live, Aeral,” Goewin, the goddess of sovereignty, declared.

“My pardon then, your grace,” Aeral said respectfully.

“Has something happened at *Carrick Ard* that would demand my intervention?” Dunatis asked, eyes narrowed. The god took his position seriously and his protection of the sacred homes of his fellow gods was of high importance.

“My home was invaded by an unwanted guest,” Aeral answered.

In the stillness, the unmistakable sound of heads turning behind the Storm Lord alerted him to the fact that those assembled knew of only one among them who would

be classified as an unwanted guest at *Carrick Ard*. He watched the Father God's eyes shift from him to somewhere off to his left then harden as they settled.

"Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee, come forward!" the irritated voice of *Jee yn Ayr* rumbled.

Llyr must have been seated in the front row of the gods for he was suddenly there beside Lord Dunatis without as much as a whisper of sound. He bowed as curtly as protocol allowed then straightened, his eyes on his father.

"Most Revered Great One, may we approach as well?" someone asked.

The Father God sighed with annoyance. "Aye, I suppose you should, Belenus."

The last time Aeral had stood before the *Ard-Choyrle* neither Belenus nor Coair had been present. Out of family loyalty they had refrained from interfering in the trouble between Aeral and Llyr, from taking sides, though he was sure they secretly allied themselves with Llyr over him. He felt them come to stand behind him and wanted to turn, to greet them, but knew he dared not.

"If this is a family matter only..." Airmid, the goddess of family understanding, began, only to be waved to silence by the Father God.

"Nay, I feel this is a matter for Us all," *Jee yn Ayr* stated. He turned his frosty blue glare to the Sea Lord. "What say you, Llyr? Did you venture uninvited into the Storm Lord's domain?"

"Nay, I did not, Most Revered Great One," Llyr denied with a smirk in his voice even the most dimwitted among the gods did not fail to intercept.

"You are aptly named, Llyr," Aeral said beneath his breath.

Llyr turned then, his cold gaze sweeping insultingly down Aeral. "I do not lie. I was invited into *Carrick Ard* by the mistress of that abode." He arched a dark brow. "It was she who opened a pathway for me in welcome."

A hiss of breath went through the assembled. The Father God sat forward, His mighty hands on the arms of His throne. Fury flashed across His face and His eyes glowed a frigid sapphire color.

"Do you tell us Aeral's lady-wife issued you an invitation to his home?" *Jee yn Ayr* growled.

"I believe he meant An Cailleach Bheara," Morrighunia spoke up.

Llyr inclined his head respectfully to the Triune Goddess. "Aye, *Mo Regina*, it was she who invited me."

Another hiss—much louder and filled with surprise—moved over the gods and goddesses.

"Does that mean she has awakened from her long slumber?" Chlaus Haistic, a powerful goddess of magic and sister of the woman in question, demanded.

"She has and even as we speak is removing herself from her self-enforced exile," Llyr replied. "Once she is free, she intends to resume her duties as consort to the Storm Lord."

Utter silence settled over the assemblage as Aeral forgot himself and looked away from his father, turning a shocked face to his hated brother. Llyr was grinning hatefully at him, his eyes glowing with spite.

“Not quite what you expected, eh, Aeral?” Llyr challenged.

Taking a single step toward his brother, Aeral was immediately restrained by his other two brothers, both hissing a warning in his ears as they gripped his arms tight.

“It’s what he wants,” Coair whispered urgently. “Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

“You’ll end up in a cell with no way to protect your lady!” Belenus cautioned. “Be still!”

Dragging breath brutally into his lungs, striving to still the killing rage that had come over him, Aeral held Llyr’s gloating stare with jaw and hands clenched. His breathing was so loud it echoed over those gathered.

For the first time in memory, Aeral saw his father rise from His throne and step down the dais. As He did, the rush of bodies moving quickly – knees going to the black marble floor – drowned out all other sound. He was jerked down between his brothers, his knees cracking painfully against the hard surface. So stunned by what he’d heard all he could do was kneel there, pain shifting miserably over his suddenly pale face.

“Lower your head!” Belenus hissed, and when Aeral failed to act, the Fire Lord slapped a hand behind his brother’s neck and roughly pushed.

Aeral saw the tips of the Father God’s boots peeking from the hem of *Jee yn Ayr*’s voluminous black robe and locked his thoughts on the shiny black leather. His heart was pounding so fiercely in his chest he feared it would rip through his rib cage to land at his father’s feet. Heat seared his face this close to the Highest of the Highs and he found he was having difficulty drawing air into his scorching lungs. The moment his father’s fingers gripped his chin and levered his face upward, he felt every molecule of moisture evaporate from his mouth.

“You know there is nothing even I can do to stay your former mate from reclaiming what is rightfully hers, do you not, Aeral?” *Jee yn Ayr* asked, his cold gaze searching Aeral’s.

Aeral heard Llyr’s derisive snort, but in the next instant the Sea Lord was flung violently across the room, crashing loudly into the far wall and sliding down it in a crumpled heap.

“Insolent pup!” the Father God shouted without as much as flicking an eye to see what His massive psychic strength had wrought. “I will not countenance such boorish behavior from one of Mine!”

The fingers on Aeral’s face tightened but not painfully so. There was an almost gentle tug.

“You do know I cannot intercede for you, do you not?” The Father God’s voice was harsh but not without warmth.

"Aye, Most Revered Great One," Aeral said, trying not to let his voice break. "I do know it."

"Women are a great nuisance in the best of times," *Jee yn Ayr* said. "In the worst of times they are a nightmare from which there is no awakening."

"The same can be said of men," *Morrigunia* said with a sniff.

Ignoring the queen's comment, the Father God spread His fingers along Aeral's cheek until His palm rested against the prince's flesh. "The good news in this is you are legally Joined to the little human and she can never be taken from you."

Aeral had been staring into the cold blue eyes of He who had given him life. Now he was surprised to see a warming in the frigid depths.

"Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Aeral was almost afraid to speak, to ask. "You aren't going to take her from me?"

"She was asked the Question and she answered," *Jee yn Ayr* said. He waved His free hand and a vision of Aideyn on their Joining night appeared before the gathering. Her words were spoken clearly for all to hear. "He, I have chosen as my very own. I will walk the day and sleep the night at his side and at no other's. I pledge myself only unto him for as long as there is life for us both. I will be his true mate in word and deed."

There was a gentle sigh through the room from female and male throats.

"She is yours for as long as time stands," the Father God proclaimed. "Not even I could break such a commitment as that which she extended to you of her own freewill."

"Nor will An Cailleach Bheara," *Morrigunia* stated. "That I swear to you."

"But that does not mean your former mate will not attempt to drive away your lady-wife," *Jee yn Ayr* warned as He removed His hand from Aeral's cheek. "There is nothing as cruel or unstoppable as a woman who believes herself scorned and tossed aside for a rival."

"She betrayed him first," *Morrigunia* reminded the Father God. "She hied herself from his side and into the mountain where he could not punish her for cuckolding him. She lost all say in the matter the night she first lay beneath his brother's thrusting body!"

Aeral watched his father roll His eyes.

"Aye, well, we know how you feel about such matters, *Morri*," *Jee yn Ayr* snapped. "Albeit what is fair for the goose does not apply to the gander in your scheme of things!"

"Once mated, never separated," the Triune Goddess declared.

"That may hold true of some breeds of your precious Reapers, but it doesn't work with all living things," the Father God told her. He narrowed his chilly gaze. "It hasn't kept you from warming the beds of men other than your rightful mate."

Morrigunia smiled nastily. "Well, He has earned the title of Father God, now hasn't He?" Folding Her arms over the black satin of Her robe, She arched a perfectly sculpted

red brow. "And if memory serves, it was with the mother of these four young princes that He first betrayed me."

Jee yn Ayr looked away from the stunning face of the Triune Goddess, His blue eyes flicking to a diminutive raven-haired beauty named Dechtere who knelt in the second row. As their gazes met, she smiled knowingly then looked down.

"Release him," the Father God ordered Aeral's brothers. "He'll do no harm to Llyr, although I am beginning to think we should have allowed them to settle this on the field of honor long ago." He swept his gaze over those assembled. "Those in the gallery, take your seats. There is a matter to which I must attend so be at ease for now."

The throng rose quietly then sat. As if they were one entity they ignored the groaning Llyr coming back to consciousness and directed their attention to the Father God.

Jee yn Ayr waved a negligent hand. "Rise, Aeral, and walk with Me." He cut His gaze to Morrigunia. "You as well, fyrecaster, but keep Your temper in check else I will tamp that flame of Yours to ash."

Aeral stood as his brothers' hands left him. He was only peripherally aware of Belenus and Coair returning to their seats for he had moved behind his father, but when *Jee yn Ayr* stopped and looked around with annoyance, Aeral was quick to take his place beside Him.

"You are a prince, boy," the Father God snapped. "Behave as one!"

"Aye, Most Revered Great One," Aeral agreed. He wished he could jam his hands into the pockets of his robe but he knew that would be an ill-considered move and looked upon as disrespect. Instead, he clenched and unclenched his hands at his side, feeling sweat slicking his palms.

Past the kneeling throng with their bowed heads, past the slumped figure of Llyr and to a doorway that appeared out of the solid black marble wall. The portal opened of its own accord and the Father God walked through and into a bright anteroom filled with thousands of glowing black tapers on black wrought iron stands. Underfoot, the marble floor was covered with luxurious black sable that cushioned their footfalls. Around them, the walls were lined with ebon silk wallpaper in a moiré pattern and the ceiling was draped with crushed satin. Four huge semicircular divans adorned with numerous sable vespertine suede pillows formed a ring in the center of the lush room. In the middle of the ring was a low black-enameled table upon which sat three tall onyx goblets filled with rich red wine – the only color in the lavish room.

"Chrystallusian plum brandy," the Father God informed His guests. "The true nectar of all gods." He plucked a goblet from the table then took a seat, reclining gracefully upon the thick upholstered divan.

Morrigunia shook Her head at the offer of the brew but kicked off Her high-heeled sandals and folded Her shapely legs beneath Her as She flung an arm over the back of the divan.

Seating himself carefully on a third divan, Aeral wiped his sweaty hands on the silk of his robe.

"Relax, boy," *Jee yn Ayr* said. "I promise I will not bite you." He took a sip of brandy then motioned with the goblet for Aeral to take one for himself. "Too deeply at any rate."

Morrigunia snorted.

So nervous he was afraid he was going to slosh the liquor down the front of him, Aeral nevertheless reached out a shaking hand. He put a death grip on the onyx goblet and brought it to his chest, his face flaming when his father snorted with humor.

"You are frightening him, *Ayr*," Morrighunia chastised Her mate.

"He should be afraid of me," the Father God reminded Her. His gaze locked on Aeral. "You know Cailleach will cause you as much pain and heartache as she can muster."

"Aye, Most..."

"Father," *Jee yn Ayr* stated. "When we are alone, you may call Me Father."

Feeling the heat rising in his cheeks, the blood racing through his veins, all Aeral could do was nod in accord to the command.

"We will not allow her to physically harm your lady or the precious offspring she carries within her," Morrighunia said, smiling at Her mate whose face snapped toward Her. "You are not as omnipotent as You think."

"One day Your pretty mouth will be Your downfall, *Morri*," the Father God grumbled.

The Triune Goddess made a rude sound before cutting Her eyes back to Aeral. "Unfortunately, we cannot prevent Cailleach from attempting to make your life a living nightmare."

"As all women are wont to do to the poor bastards who piss them off for whatever mystifying reason," the Father God mumbled before taking a healthy swig of brandy.

"What we can do is make it clear to her that as long as she aims her spite and vengeance at you and not Aideyn, we will allow her to draw breath," the Triune Goddess stated.

"I can take her spite, *Mo Regina*," Aeral told her. "I grew accustomed to it."

"It will be worse now," his father said. "Much worse, Aeral. A woman scorned and all that shite."

"She will hurt you in every way she can and we can do nothing to prevent it. The rights of a mate are nearly sacrosanct," Morrighunia said in a sorrowful tone. "I am afraid you are hers to bedevil."

"And bedevil you she will," *Jee yn Ayr* muttered.

"Had you not laid that nasty curse upon the boy, he wouldn't be in this predicament now," Morrighunia reminded the Father God. "Here he is with former mate and wife and all the headaches of both! Cailleach will make his life a living hell."

"Let her do her worst," Aeral said. He took a fortifying sip of the brandy—hard-pressed not to cough for the fiery brew scorched a path down his throat. His eyes watered, his mouth burned, but the brandy was indeed a sublime taste that rocketed through his senses. "As long as Aideyn stays safe, it doesn't matter what Cailly does to me."

"Though We cannot stay Cailleach's hand from causing you untold miseries, We can curtail Llyr's involvement in the matter," Morrighunia said. "There are those who are not pleased that he ventured to *Carrick Ard* to seduce your lady-wife."

Once more the Father God shot Her a surprised look. "You knew what that little bastard had done?"

"I knew the moment he slimed up through the crack in the foundation what his intention was," Morrighunia replied.

Aeral flinched at the reminder. "If he had succeeded..."

"There was never any fear of that happening," Morrighunia told him. "The Question was asked and answered. The little one loves you, Aeral. She will never betray you. On that score you should have no worries."

"Even if I had known what he was about before he slithered into your keep, I would not have attempted to stop him," the Father God stated.

Aeral's brows drew together. "May I ask why not?"

"Because we have faith in your lady-wife," Morrighunia answered for Her mate. "And now your brother understands what We've known from the beginning—Aideyn will never betray you. He also knows she will fight for you. He thinks it humorous that Cailleach will return to *Carrick Ard* to punish you, contemplating the misery you will soon be made to endure. He did not stop to reason that with her there, he will not have access to her."

"I dread telling you this, Aeral, but once your former mate steps foot inside that keep she will never be allowed to leave it. The only way she will ever be with Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee is if you allow him entry into *Carrick Ard*."

Aeral shook his head. "That will never happen."

"That is your decision to make," the Father God stated. He drained the remainder of the brandy then swung His legs from the divan. "Now we must allow the magistrates and judges to have their say in the matter to make it all copasetic." He stood, frowning as Aeral shot up as though a charge had been set under his flanks. He shook His head. "Come, Aeral, and pray try not to look as though I might hurl a lightning bolt at your cute little head at any moment. I want those gathered to know you have regained my respect. They'll let your part in the disaster begin to fade from their collective memories." He held His arm out for Morrighunia. "And you, fyrecaster, attempt a modicum of humility upon that puss of yours."

"Ain't gonna happen," Morrigunia said in a husky tone as She linked arms with Her mate.

Aeral followed the Father God and the Triune Goddess back into the chamber where the *Ard-Choyrle* presided. At the entrance of *Jee yn Ayr*, everyone rose to their feet. The *Briw Binsch* – the Tribunal Judges – were giving Aeral a stony stare and the *briw beg* – the lawyer gods – were studying him as though he were some alien specimen newly discovered.

"Be seated," the Father God said as He returned to His throne. He swung His head toward Llyr, who was hovering right where he'd been thrown – obviously not daring to leave the spot. "You," his father snapped. "Front and center."

Llyr hurried over to stand beside Aeral. He risked a quick glance at the Storm Lord, but when Aeral did not so much as blink, the Sea Lord swallowed loudly.

Jee yn Ayr looked to the *briw beg*. "What say you?" He asked.

The elder of the two stood then bowed deeply. When he spoke, his voice quavered. "We have conversed between us, Most Revered Great One, and see no need of our services to either Prince Llyr or Prince Aeral," the lawyer stated.

The Father God nodded, waved a hand for the man to sit. He swung His attention to the Tribunal Judges. "And you? What say you on the matter?"

The elder of the three judges rose, dipped his head respectfully then spoke in a clear voice. "With Your permission, Most Revered Great One, we decree Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee may never again enter *Carrick Ard* without its master's express permission and by its master, we make note for the record that is Prince Aeral Chiarn Dorrin and not his former mate An Cailleach Bheara nor his present lady-wife Aideyn."

"That covers all the bases, I think," *Jee yn Ayr* stipulated. He narrowed His frosty blue eyes at Llyr. "Is that clear enough for you, you addle-headed little twerp?"

Llyr's face turned beet red. "It is, Most Revered Great One," he acknowledged.

"Does that meet with your approval, Prince Aeral?" the Father God queried.

"It does, Most Revered Great One," Aeral answered.

"Then be gone, the both of you. This shite has given me a raging headache!" *Jee yn Ayr* declared and in a flash of blue light vanished.

"Most likely it was the brandy that gave Him the headache," Morrigunia said under Her breath. She left the far side of the dais, turned to the assemblage. "You are dismissed."

As the noisy throng rose from their seats and began to shuffle out – talking loudly amongst themselves – Llyr turned an angry face toward Aeral.

"This isn't over, Storm Lord," the Sea Lord warned.

"Go!" Morrigunia snapped, lifting a slender arm to point the way. "You have always been an annoying little bastard. Be thankful you are not one of mine." She flicked Her emerald green gaze to the woman who had given birth to the Four Elemental Princes.

Dechtere hissed at her son—beckoning him to join her—and Llyr spun on his heel, cursing under his breath. She threw Aeral a fleeting look that was filled with impatience then bent her head toward the Sea Lord, apparently giving him advice he did not appear to relish.

“He’s yet to understand he will not be resuming his affair with Cailleach once that slut is free of the mountain, but I imagine the mother-whore will so inform him,” the Triune Goddess told Aeral. When there was a loud roar of fury from the Sea Lord, Morigunia smiled. “That’s the sound of a very unhappy camper, Aeral.”

“Aideyn will be protected?” Aeral pressed, though he knew it an unwise thing to do where Morigunia was concerned.

“On My Reapers’ lives I swear it,” the goddess vowed. “Now leave before there is any more trouble and batten down your hatches this night at *Carrick Ard*. The sea will be a bitch.”

“Should I warn the village?” he asked, worried for his charges.

“There will be no need. The assault will be aimed at you, not the humans,” She said then did something that stunned the Prince Regent of the Winds—She leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Stay well, Aeral. Fight the good fight with that bitch Cailleach until your lady-wife and I decide how best to effectively neutralize her wide-load ass!”

That said, the Triune Goddess evaporated in a mist of pale green smoke that smelled of new-mown grass and lavender. Aeral took one breath and then he too dissolved, reappearing in the main hall of *Carrick Ard* where he found utter chaos awaiting him.

Chapter Ten

Aeral found Conreeaght sitting with his head in his hands on the curving steps leading to the upper levels of the keep. The werewolf looked as though he had been grinding his fangs ever since his master had departed *Carrick Ard*.

"What goes on here?" Aeral asked, looking around him at the young women who were bustling to and fro.

"They arrived not long after your departure, your grace," Coni said. "They are," the servant winced, "cleaning." He shook his head. "I was told to keep out of their way."

Hands on hips, Aeral looked around. "And where in this industrious horde is my lady?"

"In the kitchen preparing luncheon for the workers," the servant answered. "She has three of her childhood friends with her else I'd be helping." He lifted his head to look beseechingly at his master. "But the giggling, your grace." He shuddered. "It was more than I could take."

Grinning, Aeral reached out to pat Conreeaght's shoulder, and at that moment thunder cracked brutally overhead and the floating island upon which *Carrick Ard* stood quaked. Around him, the laughter, hustle and bustle ceased. Fearful eyes turned to him.

"It seems a storm is brewing," he said calmly, knowing it was his brother's ire that was building and about to be unleashed full-force on the keep. "You most likely need to spend the night." At the looks of discomfort, he shrugged. "Aideyn would never countenance you attempting to make your way back to the village in a gale. Best come to terms with it now lest we acquire her wrath."

Laughter followed his remark. He was sure no one believed his lady-wife capable of venting wrath on anyone.

"We've musicians among us, *dooinney*," the lady herself said as she came toward him. "Let it storm while we dance the night away!"

Aeral had never felt such wondrous, engulfing pride as he did when his lady flung her arms around him and kissed him full on the lips in front of everyone watching. "Welcome home, *tarrishagh*," she said, searching his blue eyes. "I missed you."

Aeral put a thumb up to a smudge of flour that streaked her nose before locking his arms around her waist. He arched a thick brow. "Cooking, are we?"

"Chicken stew, salad, muffins with fresh creamery butter, and for dessert—cherry cobbler." Her eyes twinkled. "How does that sound?"

"Fattening," her husband replied. His smile faltered. "Can you spare a few moments for a private word or two?"

Once more she searched his gaze then nodded slowly. "I will make the time." She slipped her arms from his neck to clasp his upper arms then turned to face the pretty girls who stood a few feet away. "Will you finish the meal for me?" When they agreed, she wrapped her arm through her husband's. "Will the solarium do?"

He agreed that it would and escorted her to the warmth of the room. Beyond the windows the sky had turned a bruised purple with lightning forking and leaves slapping against the glass.

"My brother is throwing a tantrum," he said.

"Tell me," she said, drawing him to one of the tall wicker chairs. When he had finished his tale, she sat back, gnawing delicately on her bottom lip. Not in worry – or so it seemed to him – but in thought.

"What is tumbling through your mind, *lhiannan*?" he asked.

She hesitated before she spoke, plucking at a loose binding cane on the chair's elaborately woven arm. "You say the goddess said She and I would decide how best to handle An Cailleach Bheara?"

"Aye."

She thought on the matter for a moment then shrugged. "Then we will – She and I. There may be a dicey day or two until matters are settled but neither Morri nor I will allow you any more pain than you've already endured."

"Morri?" he questioned, his eyebrows shooting up.

Aideyn left her chair and came to kneel in front of him. "Come upstairs with me and unlock the chamber that was hers," she asked. "I would have it ready for her when she arrives."

Aeral frowned. "I'll not have you kowtowing to that..."

His wife ran her hands from his knees to his thighs. "Trust the goddess and your wife to see things put to rights, *fer caggee*. Now..." She stood then held out her hand. "Show me her chamber so we can welcome her home as befitting a goddess."

He took her hand – fusing his worried gaze with her smiling one – then shook his head. "I'm not sure I like that look in your eye, *ben heshee*," he said as he allowed her to lever him to his feet.

Threading her arm through his, Aideyn leaned against her husband. "And when I've set the girls to cleaning that chamber, I believe we need to retire to ours to mess it up."

Aeral looked down at her. "Oh you do, do you?"

"The sheets need rumpling and getting damp," she said as she led him from the solarium. "My blood – as is yours – is running far too slow and needs speeding up. Our breaths are much too calm."

"Your hair needs mussing," he said, falling in with her silliness.

"Yours as well."

He slid a hand to her rump and cupped the perky little ass. "This needs a swat or two, I'm thinking, to get your heart racing."

She bumped him with her hip. "I can think of a few things that need to be manhandled," she told him with a giggle.

"Or womanhandled," he corrected.

Calling out to several of the girls, Aideyn and her husband led them up the stairs to the top floor and the chamber that had not been unlocked for centuries. When Aeral touched the keyhole, the portal creaked open to the accompaniment of a musty odor wafting from the long-unused room.

"I would like it spic and span," Aideyn told the girls as she looked around the dust-covered furniture. "Fresh flowers and perfumed linens." She walked to the armoire and threw open the door. A sniff told her all she needed to know about the gowns housed within. She craned her head around. "Air the garments well. Some may need laundering. The shoes and boots need polishing. Sara, go below and get everyone up here. This room will be your priority." She looked at her husband. "Who knows when it and all within it will be needed?"

* * * * *

Llyr was beside himself with rage and grief. He stood braced with legs apart on the deck of his flagship the *Marrinagh* as the waves lashed his scowling face and salt spray clung to his lashes and wildly tousled hair. His left hand had a death grip on a rope that ran up the tall spar by which he stood as the ship rolled and pitched in the gale. The sheeting above him flapped with thunderous snaps, tore with resounding shrieks as the sailors hurried to furl the sails. Ozone filled the air as lightning zigzagged furiously across the firmament, stabbed into the heaving sea and sizzled.

"Damn you to the Abyss, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin!" the Sea Lord cursed, his dark blue shirt tearing open to reveal his rain-speckled chest. Tears of frustration melded with the saltwater to crust his pale cheeks.

Glaring at the tawny lights of *Carrick Ard* where laughter and love filled the once dreary corridors, he threw back his head and howled in misery. His heart—lately coming back to life after centuries of being shriveled and barren—was a crushing pain in his chest. Soul bleak, body aching with needs that had long been denied it, the Sea Lord knew such crippling despair every breath he took seared his lungs.

"Cailly!" he called out to the mountain that sat like a huge black dragon guarding the floating island upon which the Storm Lord's keep rested. "I love you!"

The mountain shook then groaned as the base heaved upward. Sharp cracks rent the later afternoon air then a mighty avalanche rumbled down the slick sides of Mount Riojit as the storm rains slammed against the rocks.

Dashing the rain from his eyes, Llyr strained to see the crevice where the love of his existence had melded her being into the side of the mountain all those centuries before.

He had always known where to look to find her beautiful brown eyes for they sparkled like twin beacons in the moonlight—looking back at him with such sadness it tore at his being. Though he could not touch her, at least he could picture her lush body fused with the rock, talk to her, and know she was near. Now she was tearing free of her stony prison and the rockslides were crashing into the ocean, plates of shale shearing away from the face of the mount. He should be able to reach out his hand and have her come to him, but when he tried, lightning struck his palm. With a yelp, he snatched it back, his screams of agony rivaling the skirl of the fierce gale winds.

“He can control all but the winds that are sea-borne—the gales and hurricanes, the blizzards,” Cailleach had said with pride. “Those are my offspring. The children of our union, Llyr. Yours and mine!”

As the ship rolled beneath him Llyr thought he saw his love’s spirit breaking away from the mountain at last, but the rain was spearing into his eyes. He could not be sure he’d seen what he thought he had.

“Cailly, do not go to *Carrick Ard*!” he shouted. “You will be trapped there!”

He had to warn her, had to keep her from Aeral’s domain. Once there, she would be lost to him for all time and that he could not endure. As he had strove to keep love from coming to Aeral, so would the Storm Lord do everything in his power to see that Llyr was never reunited with the love of his heart.

“Cailly!” he screamed in despair. “Stay away from the keep!”

But even as he struggled to see through the blinding rain, he knew it was already too late. The gods and goddesses had garbled his words in the storm so Cailleach could not hear. They had thwarted his last chance for happiness and condemned him to an eternity of sorrow and grief.

“Cailly!”

Hanging his head, he sobbed wretchedly—chest heaving like the rampant waves underfoot.

“You reap what you sow, Sea Lord,” he heard a soft, musical voice chasten.

Shaking his head, he dropped to his knees on the undulating deck, the rope burning his left palm as the lightning had scorched the right.

“You always loved him and cared naught for me, *Mo Regina*,” he complained.

“Not true. I loved you once,” the Triune Goddess told him. “Before you took what did not belong to you.”

Guilt had never been a problem for Llyr until now. Women—human and goddess alike—had always looked upon him with desire and admiration. But that was before the Storm Lord’s wife had looked at him with reproach and repulsion. Unlike every woman he had ever known, she alone had not wanted his hands on her. She had not wanted *him*. Why it should matter to him what she thought he could not fathom, but it did. He wanted her to look with favor upon him and not with the disdain that had turned her pretty face hard. He wanted her to see him in a good light.

“Ask her forgiveness and it will be given. That is Aideyn’s way.”

Morragunia’s sultry voice was like a sandspur upon which he’d stepped barefoot. It pierced his flesh and stuck – its insidious spines going so deep they would be hard to remove.

“And will Aeral forgive me as well?” he asked bitterly, looking up at the roiling heavens where the green glowing eyes of the Triune Goddess had appeared to stare down at him with piercing accusation. “Will he let me be with Cailleach?”

“Doubtful, but only time will tell.”

Not that he wanted his brother’s forgiveness, he thought as he hung his head once more. What did he care what Aeral thought of him? He hated the Storm Lord. He despised him. Handing out pain to Aeral had always given him pleasure. The Storm Lord was the weaker of the Four Elemental Princes – blowing first one way and then the other. Too weak to be a true god. Aeral did not deserve respect.

The wind howled like a banshee and the waves crashed over the teak railing to push against the Sea Lord. He wavered beneath the onslaught and had to grasp hold of the spar or else be washed overboard. Salt water stung his eyes, plastered his dark hair to his cheek, his shirt to his chest. It was a struggle to rise to his feet as the power of the gale buffeted him.

Once more the whisper came, “Ask her forgiveness.”

“How?” he bellowed. “I cannot ever again enter *Carrick Ard!*”

“Call to her and she will come to you.”

A wild thought ripped through Llyr’s aching head. If he could get the Storm Lord’s lady-wife to venture outside, he could grab her, take her from Aeral. Hold her for ransom – the ransom of being allowed to enter the keep to be with Cailleach.

“Touch her and you will know the wrath of Us all, Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee!” came the warning.

Heart shattered into a million pieces, the Sea Lord lost all hope at that moment. Any revenge or retribution he might have had planned for the brother he hated rested with the slim beauty who had captured Aeral’s soul and held it in her tiny hand.

Hands Llyr had wanted to touch him, stroke him, love him because it had been so long since he’d known comfort.

“Ask...”

The sensual voice faded away in the crash of thunder – noise the Sea Lord no longer had the strength to maintain. He allowed it to echo away, the seas to still, the gale winds to lie. Slumped on the deck of his ship, he dropped his head to his chest and wept bitter, self-pitying tears.

* * * * *

"Listen," Aideyn said as she cuddled beside her husband amidst the wildly tumbled covers.

Aeral raised his head from her breast. "I don't hear anything."

"The storm is over," she told him.

The Storm Lord's handsome face creased though his wife could not see it. "I fear the storm is just beginning, *lhiannan*."

He had known the moment Cailleach had entered *Carrick Ard*. He had felt her chilly presence, but he'd known she would not show herself while the keep was filled with humans. Her arrogance would not allow her to let others know just how vindictive and cruel she could be. In most places, she was still revered as a beneficial goddess who brought the gentle spring rains and settled a fine blanket of snow upon a crisp winter morning. Somewhere within the vastness of the keep, she lay hidden, waiting until the humans were gone before appearing.

Aideyn sensed his mind was in turmoil and wound her finger around and around a length of soft chest hair. "Do you think we accomplished our goal, *fer caggee*?" she inquired.

Pulled back from his morose mind-wandering, Aeral planted a kiss on his wife's nipple before looking up at her. "What goal was that, *bwoirrinagh*?"

"To rumple the sheets and womanhandle your body?" she said with a giggle.

"I consider mine body well-handled if you must know," he replied. He squeezed her. "A bit sore but pleasantly so."

Aideyn slid her hand to his resting cock and caressed it. "Poor baby. Is'm him sore?" she asked in a childish voice.

"Him is, but him can be coaxed into performing if his mistress will but make a single vow that would ease his little head," her husband said.

Running her palm between his legs, she stared into his eyes. "What vow would that be, *fer caggee*?"

A stern look appeared on Aeral's face. "I want your word you will not leave this keep for any reason." He crooked his index finger under her chin. "That includes forays outside to harvest snowballs."

"Why can't I go outside?" she asked.

The Storm Lord locked gazes with her. "Because Llyr is very angry and when he is very angry, he is dangerous beyond measure. He has been warned by the gods not to lay a hand to you, but when he is angry, he doesn't always consider the consequences of his actions. And not only is he angry, he is frustrated and grieving because he has lost Cailleach for all time. It might occur to him to snatch you in the hopes he could exchange you for her." He shook his head when she would have argued. "No. You are not to leave the safety of *Carrick Ard* for any reason."

Her eyebrows came together. "Then I am as much a prisoner here as she is," she protested. "That hardly seems fair."

"I want your promise, Aideyn," he said. "I want you to swear to me – on our love – that you will not venture..."

A soft knock at the door interrupted him and he hissed, snapping his jaws together.

"Aye?" Aideyn called out.

"Luncheon is ready, Deynnie, ah..." There was a cough. "Your grace."

"We'll be right there, Teagan," Aideyn said then slipped out of her husband's arms. "We'd best get dressed, *dooinne*."

Sighing heavily, Aeral swung his legs from the bed. "We're not finished with our discussion, *bwoirrinagh*." He reached for his pants as his wife settled her gown over her head. "Not by a long shot."

Aideyn smiled as she made a quick twist of her long hair as she walked to her dresser to fetch pins for the hasty chignon she was fashioning. "I will make myself available for your lecture at a more opportune time," she agreed, and before he could snag her waist with a quickly extended arm, she laughed and lunged for the door, drawing it open before he could catch her.

"It isn't over, Aideyn!" he called after her, bending down to scoop up the slippers she had forgotten in her rush to elude him. Plucking his own boots from where they lay, he had one surprising moment when he wondered why he hadn't simply waved his clothing and boots into place as he normally did.

"You're becoming more disgustingly human with every breath you take."

The hateful voice washed over him like hot acid but he didn't look around. He knew Cailleach wasn't in the room with him but rather was watching from whatever hidey-hole it was in which she was hiding.

"Go to hell," he growled through clenched teeth, flinging the boots to the floor.

"*You first*." The words were followed by mocking laughter.

Stomping from the room in his bare feet, Aeral tried to push all thoughts of his former mate from his mind, but he could almost feel the cutting drag of her long, sharp nails down his back, the heat of her breath fanning his cheek with every step he took. Pain lashed along his neck and he slapped a hand to his flesh – half-expecting to see blood on his fingertips when he brought his hand down. Another bray of laughter shattered what was left of the good feeling he'd had while in Aideyn's arms so that by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs, his mood was dark and brooding.

"What the hell is this?" he snapped.

All around him were blankets and quilts spread upon the floor. The servants had stopped talking, moving, and were looking at him with timidity and perhaps a little fear.

"A picnic," Aideyn said, coming over to him to retrieve the slippers he held.

"Picnic?" he repeated, struggling to bring his anger under control. He had not missed the unease that had shifted over the faces of the servants as they regarded him.

What ground he had gained with them would quickly fall away if he wasn't careful. He smiled though it did not reach his troubled eyes. "I've never been on a picnic."

There was a slight relaxing of the tense postures of the servants, snatches of hesitant smiles as they looked to Aideyn for lead.

"Then it is high time you did, *fer caggee*," the mistress of Aeral's heart stated. She looked down then arched a brow. "Pray tell, where are your boots?"

He shrugged. "Do you wear boots on picnics, *bwoirrinagh*?"

Aideyn grinned. "Not usually," she said before tossing her slippers aside. She drew him toward one of the quilts. "Sit while I prepare a plate for you."

"No," he said, and once more the servants stilled. He put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed. "You sit and I'll prepare a plate for you."

Smiles stretched every face in the room—including Conreeaght's. Almost instantly the laughter and teasing resumed as the Prince Regent of the Winds headed for the table where a variety of foods had been placed.

"She's a good cook, isn't she?" he asked one of the girls. He grinned. "My lady. She's a good cook."

"Aye, your grace, that she is," the girl replied.

He ladled food onto two plates then brought them over to Aideyn, handing hers to her before dropping gracefully to the quilt, sitting tailor-fashion as he balanced the plate on his thigh.

"Well done," Aideyn said softly. "Very well done indeed."

Aeral grinned even though his back was on fire with ragged row after ragged row of invisible scratches that gouged into his flesh. He'd felt a slap, a kick and a pinch or two as he filled his wife's plate and it had taken all his playacting abilities not to let those around him know he was under attack by an unseen enemy. Physical pain was nothing new to him where Cailleach was concerned. He shifted as another vicious rake of his former mate's claws scraped down his side.

"Leave him be or I will petition the gods to lock you in that cell where your thieving boyfriend put him."

Aeral's head came up—fork halfway to his lips—as he turned a surprised look to his wife. Her words stunned him.

"Don't think I am not aware of what is happening," Aideyn said. "If she keeps it up, she'll be the one to suffer for it."

"Aideyn..." he began, but his wife cut him off.

"Everyone?" she called out, drawing the attention of the servants. "The old mistress of *Carrick Ard* is in residence once more. I am sure she did not want to burden you by appearing as you work. I am told she is thoughtful of humans in that way. If you happen upon her while going about your cleaning, please give her the respect she is due. After all, she is ancient and to her the rest of us are mere babes in swaddling. Help her if she seeks your aid. She might need assistance as the aged often do."

The Storm Lord's eyes grew wide. His mouth dropped open. He knew no one else save him and perhaps Conreeaght heard the loud shriek of fury that had shot over the hall at Aideyn's words, but no one missed the violent whip of wind that blasted over those gathered.

"You are welcome, Storm Lady," Aideyn said. "There was no need to thank me." She took a bite of chicken then smiled. "And pray please feel free to go to your chambers rather than stay in that dark dungeon. Your room has been prepared as befitting a goddess of your generation."

Another skirl of pure rage echoed over the hall and Aeral could have sworn the floor beneath his ass shifted. He felt a hard jab to his side, and from the corner of his eye saw lightning fork up the staircase.

"Old crone moves fairly fast for someone of her advanced years," he heard Aideyn mumble.

He gaped at his wife. "You saw her?"

"Aye," Aideyn said. "Whatever did you see in her, *dooinney*, or were you looking at her with the single eye of your little head?"

Those gathered on the blankets and quilts jumped as thunderous laughter exploded from the Storm Lord. They looked at him as he set his plate aside to wipe tears of mirth from his eyes before putting his palms to his wife's cheeks and giving her a resounding kiss that made every female watching him sigh.

"By the gods and all that is holy, or ever will be, I love you, Aideyn Dorrin!" he stated, looking into her smiling eyes. "I love you with all my being."

"Aye, well, you'd better," she said. "Now eat your food before it gets cold. I cannot wait for you to try the cobbler."

His heart swelling with pride and love, Aeral reached for his plate again. There was no doubt in his mind there would be no more furtive mauling of his body until the humans had departed *Carrick Ard*.

Chapter Eleven

An Cailleach Bheara stood in the center of the chamber she had not seen in more centuries than she cared to remember and had to grudgingly admit it was passable. The fresh flowers were a surprise she had certainly not expected nor the sachets of dried blossoms and herbs that lent a delicious smell to the chamber. A cheery fire blazed in the hearth. The copper tub sparkled in the glow of numerous tapers arranged in the tall candelabras. A pitcher of water sat on the dresser in its ewer beside a basket of soft, fleecy hand towels and washcloths. Even the gowns she had not worn in so long she had forgotten what they felt like had been aired and hung freshly pressed in the polished armoire.

“You are a formidable enemy, little human,” the Storm Lady said aloud.

Wind pushed against the window and Cailleach shook all thoughts of the blonde beauty who dared to defend the Beast—as Cailleach had always labeled the Storm Lord—from her mind. She swept the drapes aside to stare out. Although the gale had passed, the seas were still undulating wildly and the tide lashed the shoreline with high plumes of salt spray.

“Where are you, Llyr?” she asked, and though she strained to hear, could no longer discern his precious voice in the waves.

Her hand clenched on the drapery. She had feared the gods and goddesses might punish her and her lover for what Llyr had tried to do, but had never expected such an exacting reprimand. A slap on the wrist to be sure, but not such vengeance as had been meted out. Not once had she considered the possibility of her and Llyr being kept apart for all time.

It had been her blunder, she thought as she released the drapes and covered her face in her trembling hands. It had been she who had suggested to Llyr to seduce the Beast’s lady-wife to hurt the vile bastard. Once the seduction was foiled, she had decided to punish Aeral by taking the woman from him altogether.

But she had not counted on the fickleness of the gods and their eagerness to punish her at last for the mistake of so long ago. It was a grave miscalculation that had backfired in such a horrendous way she had no one but herself to blame for it. Now Llyr was lost to her forever and Aeral had at last found the happiness neither she nor her lover ever wanted him to know.

“Oh my beloved, I am so sorry!” she sobbed, sinking to her knees on the plush carpet. Rocking back and forth in her misery, she made a keening sound low in her throat.

There was but one thing that would make this horror endurable—drawing every last ounce of happiness from Aeral’s soul and replacing it with such crippling misery he

would be forced to take his own worthless life. Only then would she find any peace. If she could not have Llyr, the Beast would not take pleasure in his Aideyn!

* * * * *

Seeing the servants bedded down at last, Aideyn and her husband climbed the stairs slowly. It had been a wondrous night with laughter and music into the late evening after all the work had been done. Conreeaght had brought up a keg of ale from the cellars and broken it open as fiddle music skirled and girls danced with the few lads who had accompanied them to *Carrick Ard* to do the heavy lifting.

"You fair wore them out, *lhiannan*," Aeral chastised her. "They'll be hard-pressed to put one foot before the other on the way back to the village in the morning."

"We'll send them off with a hearty breakfast before they go, but not all will be leaving, you know. Four of my friends will be staying on as well as Dickie."

"Do you know I actually saw Conreeaght laughing tonight?" the Storm Lord asked. "He and Dickie were playing dice." He shook his head. "I think the old wolf has taken a shine to the lad."

"Everyone likes Dickie," she said, trying to hide a yawn. "The girls especially."

"Aye, so I noticed. One had him pressed against the door so hard he might well have left an impression in the varnish," he said with a snort.

"You should probably advise him to be careful," his wife suggested.

"Me?" Aeral queried. "Why me?"

"Well, I certainly can't."

"And just what advice am I supposed to dole out to the lad?"

"About how not to get a lass in the family way unless he has the intention to make her his bride," she stated.

"Oh, that kind of advice," he said in a sage voice.

They entered their room, closed the door, but before Aideyn could take the pins from her hair, her husband had waved an arm toward the huge copper tub in the bath chamber beyond and gardenia-scented steam began wafting.

"Ah," Aideyn said with a wide grin. "He knew just what I needed."

"He always will," Aeral said, not allowing her to undress but sweeping his hand over the both of them, and in a tick of the mantle clock they were seated in the warm, soothing water.

"You are my hero," Aideyn said. She settled back into his arms, stretching her legs out over his, their toes flexing against one another.

"He is a beast with a heart as black as pitch."

Aideyn flinched at the harsh tone that had interrupted them and turned to see the speaker standing in the doorway of the bathing chamber, leaning against the door.

Instinct told her to cover her bare breasts, but she didn't have a chance to do so for her husband folded his arms around her, hiding her from Cailleach's sneering view.

"Get the hell out of my chamber, Cailleach," Aeral ordered.

The goddess pushed away from the wall and strolled forward, her face lit with a leer. "This is my home, Beast. There is no chamber off-limits to me. I..."

There was a flash of greenish light and the goddess disappeared. The last sight of her was of eyes wide, mouth opened in a surprised O.

"Thank you, Morri," Aideyn said softly.

"My pleasure."

The Triune Goddess pulsed slowly into view, sitting in midair, shimmering copper gown clinging to Her shapely body like a second skin. Her long red hair lay in an intricate braid over Her right shoulder, Her green eyes glowing with mischief. She lifted Her chin to peer beneath the water.

"Nice package, Storm Lord. Very nice indeed," Morrighunia complimented.

Cheeks flaming, Aeral shifted uncomfortably in the water even though he knew there was no way the goddess could see his manhood since Aideyn was sitting in his lap.

Morrighunia's laugh disabused him of the notion that She couldn't see him then She winked. "I took the slut back to her room and put her to sleep for the night. It will be up to you to deal with her starting tomorrow. I told her she was to never enter this chamber again, but like most whoring bitches she's not to be trusted to do as she's told so I have placed an incentive at your door."

Aeral's brows drew together. "What kind of incentive, *Mo Regina*?"

"One that will ensure your chamber is not invaded by unwanted guests," Morrighunia replied. She turned Her emerald gaze to Aideyn. "Pick one maid to clean here and one maid only. No one else will be able to cross the threshold. They'll not understand they can't, but that poses no problem. And don't worry, Aeral. The incentive can only be seen by the eyes of a god."

Unease passed over the Storm Lord's face for he realized it was a *fer coadee*, the same kind of hideous being who guarded the entrance to the Abyss that was now guarding his. He wasn't sure he wanted to see the misshapen and deformed keeper guards each time he entered or left his chamber.

"At any rate, you have a sanctuary here where you will not be disturbed. Use it as you will without fear of being interrupted as you were this nooning," the Triune Goddess said then vanished as slowly as She appeared.

"Well, at least we have tonight before we are forced to deal with the shrew," Aeral said on a long sigh.

Aideyn twisted around in the water until she was stretched out with her breasts pressed to his chest, her arms around his neck, her lower body bobbing over his steadily hardening erection. "However shall we pass the time, do you think, *dooinney*?"

"How would you like to pass it?" he asked huskily, arms fiercely tight around her as his shaft slid along the crease of her sweet little rump.

"Well, we *could* talk," she said.

"We could," he agreed.

"Or we *could* bathe."

"We could do that too."

"Or," she said, bending her head to sweep her tongue along his bottom lip, "we could mate like bunnies."

His slow, evil grin made her draw in an expectant breath.

"I think I like that could best of all, *bwoirrinagh*," he growled. His hands went to her hips. He lifted her, arched his pelvis and settled her slick, hot cunt on his steely cock. "How's that for a could?" he asked.

Aideyn writhed on his shaft, loving the way he filled her, stretched her and pressed almost painfully against her womb. The tips of her breasts tingled against the abrasion of the wiry hairs matting his muscular chest.

"That's a mighty *big* could," she whispered before settling her mouth over his, thrusting her tongue between his parted lips to brand him with a hot, passionate kiss that made the poor man tremble.

Aeral delighted in having her ride him. She twisted and rotated her body over his, ravished his mouth, took him with such total abandonment it sent chills down his sides. There was no naïveté in his lady-wife as she put her hands on the sides of the tub and bore down on his shaft, flinging her head until the golden strands of silken hair cascaded down her back and the ends floated in the water lapping at her thighs. With her head thrown back, eyes closed, mouth open to accommodate the pass of her tongue over the top lip, she was the most beautiful, most alluring, most sensual, sultry and desirable woman he'd ever beheld. He was in awe of her ethereal beauty, but even more in wonder of her unabashed love of him and the keen pleasure she took from his body. Her inner muscles clenched and relaxed around him with each circuit of her hips upon his groin and with each movement she staked claim to another part of his eternal soul. She drew him into her, absorbed him and wrapped him up in velvet-clad chains of devotion no human or god could ever break.

He felt the release roaring upward and flexed his fingers on her hips, digging his blunt nails into the pads of her flesh. He guided her harder—slamming her down brutally upon him, insisting with his maneuvering that her movements quicken in pace until they were both gasping for breath. He stared up at the thrust of her breasts, the bounce of them as she rode him, the wildly throbbing pulse point in her neck, and ached to have his mouth on her, his lips suckling the hard little pebbles that were her nipples. He shuddered with that need, and when he did, his seed spilled so vigorously he cried out, growling with savage lust as he felt the first clutch of her climax taking her.

“Aeral!” she groaned, head lowering, eyes squeezed tightly shut as she came. Her mouth was wide, neck straining as she went completely still for wave after wave of hard little pulses were rippling through her cunt. He could feel her juices lapping at his flesh as the orgasm went on and on until she shivered violently, drawing in ragged little breaths as she slowly opened her eyes.

There was an otherworldly quality to her beautiful face. It seemed to glow from within. When she looked at him, he was stunned to see her eyes had changed color and were now as clear as diamonds, not a trace of green in the irises.

“Aideyn?” he questioned so softly he didn’t think she heard him.

“You belong to me,” his lady-wife said. “To me and no other.” Her eyes flashed. “Do you understand, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin?”

“Aye,” he whispered.

“Good,” she said then slid down him, pulling free of his limp shaft. “Now take me again so there will be no mistake.”

* * * * *

Aideyn had surprised herself with the demands she made on her husband. Twice more she had insisted he take her in the tub until the water grew so cold and clammy it became a distraction. When that happened, she had him lift her from the tub and take her to their bed where still again—and yet again—she had molded her body to his and gave him no respite until he was so drained from their lovemaking he fell into deep slumber, sprawled in the bed like a rag doll.

Now she lay awake and listened to the soft moan of the wind in the eaves. It was a sound that had always soothed her as a child instead of unnerving her as it had many a young villager. The skirl was music to her ears and she loved it though nowhere near as much as she loved the man lying beside her.

Turning her face toward him, she smiled as she looked at him. He was lying on his belly with one arm curled near his head, the other draped over the side of the bed. The sheet was wrapped around his bare hip, though his legs were splayed apart outside the covers. A thick lock of dark hair hung over his forehead and he was making the cutest little snoring sounds that brought a suppressed giggle to her mouth. For the longest time she watched him sleep then eased from the bed. There was something vitally important she had to do.

Drawing a silken robe over her nakedness, she thrust her feet into the soft fleecelined slippers and went to the door. The moment she opened it, she knew she was not alone, though she saw no one standing there. Closing the portal behind her, she took two steps then turned.

“The incentive can only be seen by the eyes of a god,” Morigunia had declared, yet Aideyn saw the creature as clearly as she saw the door it guarded.

“May I know your name?” Aideyn asked quietly.

The *fer coadee* turned its crimson orbs toward the mistress of *Carrick Ard* and in a voice that was more hiss than actual speech replied, "I am called Ruroic, your grace."

"Will you always be our incentive, Ruroic?" she asked.

No doubt surprised the human female could see him and in the doing not be paralyzed with fear, the *fer coadee* inclined its head respectfully.

"I will, your grace," it answered.

Aideyn frowned. "Every hour of every day?"

It nodded. The look in its eyes wary.

"Will you not grow tired standing there, Ruroic?" she asked. "Would you not like a chair at least?"

A very strange expression passed over the creature's face. Not once in all its existence had its comfort ever been considered. It had been created to do one thing—protect the gods and goddesses—and its greatest weapon in the doing was fear. Yet the human female was standing close without even a hint of either fear or disgust on her unblemished face. Though it knew the stench rolling off its body had to be noxious to her delicate nose, she gave no indication it bothered her. She was looking at it with compassion and what might well be friendliness.

"I do not sleep, your grace," Ruroic told her. "I do not grow weary."

"Do you eat?" she asked, her head tilted to one side.

"I do," it acknowledged.

"Ordinary food or something special?" she asked then held up a hand. "You drink water of course, for all living things do, but what of ale or wine or..."

"Water will suffice although..." It stopped, ducking its misshapen head as though it expected to be punished.

"Although what, Ruroic?" she asked, putting out a hand to touch Ruroic's gnarled fist clenched at its side.

Shock flared the *fer coadee's* scarlet eyes. Its rubbery lips parted but it did not move—seemingly stood frozen at the human female's touch.

"Is it whiskey?" Aideyn whispered as though the two of them were secretly discussing something no one else should hear.

The *fer coadee* swallowed hard. "Milk," it said, voice squeaking.

"You like milk?"

"Cold milk," it said, lips trembling at its own audacity.

"Then cold milk it will be," Aideyn said, shocking the creature even more by squeezing his clenched fist. She removed her hand. "No chair?"

It shook its head, obviously too astonished to do anything else.

"And regular food?"

Again it nodded.

“All right then,” Aideyn said. She turned away, throwing a warm smile over her shoulder as she headed for the stairs, the creature’s eyes locked on her like iron filings to a magnet.

As she moved down the stairs, Aideyn felt the weight of those red orbs but it was the pleasure she had seen in the monstrous gaze that had made the feel of its warty flesh, the stench of its horrid body endurable. She made a mental note to touch it again from time to time no matter how distasteful it felt for she had a feeling that was something it had lacked in its existence yet—like most living things—needed in order to thrive.

“You’ll get used to it,” she said to herself, resisting the urge to run her palm down the skirt of her dressing gown for she knew there was nothing on her flesh save the feel of that malformed flesh.

* * * * *

Opening the door that led out to the kitchen courtyard, Aideyn stood in the doorway and waited for the visitor she knew would arrive at any moment. She was shivering from the cold, wishing she’d had the forethought to have donned a heavy coat, when of a sudden a warm, tropical breeze moved over her, warming her.

“You should have dressed more carefully, *Ben Vraavey*.” The Sea Lord walked out of a patch of silvery mist.

“I did not think, *Braar ‘Sy Leigh*,” Aideyn responded, calling him brother-in-law since he had addressed her as sister-in-law. The warm air blowing over her stirred the loose hair at her temple and she reached up a hand to tuck it behind her ear. “Thank you for warming me.”

Llyr smiled at her but the smile held a measure of ogling. “I would have heated you well had you not realized too quickly who I was last night.”

Aideyn felt the blush wash over her face but refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d embarrassed her. She sniffed. “Last night was a mistake neither you nor your lady-love should have made,” she reminded him.

The Sea Lord’s smile slipped away. “Aeral ruined everything,” he accused. “Had he not...”

“Do not blame my husband for your carelessness, *Braar ‘Sy Leigh*,” she chided. “It was neither your home that was invaded nor your woman who was touched. Make no mistake. The injured party in this is not you.”

“I can no longer be with the woman I love!” Llyr said, eyes flashing. “Is that not injury enough for you, Aideyn?”

“Why are you here?” she asked, ignoring his outburst. “Why did you come knowing you could not enter? Could not see this woman you hold so dear?”

The Sea Lord turned his face away. He was clenching and unclenching his fists, a muscle working furiously in his cheek. "I came..." he started then narrowed his eyes. "I came to ask forgiveness." He turned back to her. "From you."

"But not from Aeral," she said.

"There is no forgiving from that quarter, I assure you," Llyr insisted with a snort.

"What would you do to gain entry to *Carrick Ard* and be with your woman, Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee?" she asked.

His scowl did nothing to mar the sheer male beauty of his face—a face so like Aeral's it hurt her to look upon it. Were it not for the darkness in the Sea Lord's eyes, she would have thought it her husband at whom she stared.

"It will never happen," he said in a fierce voice.

"What if I told you it could?"

The disbelief that came over his face turned it ugly. He laughed—the sound a sneer.

"What do you think he would ask of me other than debasing myself by going to my knees to beg his forgiveness?" he countered. "Should I cower before him? Let him beat me to the ground? Get on my belly and drag myself in the dirt like a diseased cur to lick his boots?"

"A simple 'I am sorry I hurt you' would be a good beginning, *Braar 'Sy Leigh*," she replied. "I swear on our father's head it won't happen again' thrown in to seal the deal would not be amiss."

"Oh, and then we hug, give one another a kiss of peace, pat one another on the back and let bygones be bygones?" Llyr scoffed.

"I am sure he would not hug you, and a kiss is certainly beyond the scope of his ability to execute, but a pat on the back?" She shrugged. "Well, that might be doable, although it is highly unlikely to happen any time soon."

"You don't seriously believe he will forget what I did to him, do you?"

"Forget?" She shook her head. "No, *Braar 'Sy Leigh*, he will never forget and it would be too much to ask that he do so. Forgive? Now that's a different matter. I'm not altogether sure he will, but he might choose to ignore it. Since there was never any love lost between him and Cailleach, and since he knows gods-be-damned well you will never steal me from him, he might decide to overlook your coming and going if it is during the night while he sleeps."

"And you think he won't lie awake worried I'll sneak into his bedchamber to thrust a dagger between his ribs?"

"Our trusted *fer coadee* isn't about to let that happen," she said smugly, and had to stop herself from smiling at the sudden pallor that crept over his handsome features.

"You have a *fer coadee*?" he asked.

"A present from Morri," Aideyn bragged. She winked. "She doesn't trust Cailleach beyond being able to see her."

Llyr turned away from her, walking toward the potting shed. He stared at the structure for a moment then looked back at her. "I would come at night?"

"Our day will be your night and your night will be our day," she said. "That way we need never see one another. You would have run of the keep while the rest of us sleep."

He thought about it for a moment then shook his head, plowed a hand through his hair. "Cailly will never agree to any of this. She considers herself mistress of *Carrick Ard*. She would want the daylight hours."

"In one regard she is still mistress, but I believe if this is the only way she can be with you she will accept it," Aideyn told him. "It is a matter of giving you up entirely or giving up a portion of her pride. Which do you think is the most important to her?"

He smiled ruefully. "I would like to think I am," he responded, "but she can be a termagant when she's riled."

"So I've noticed," Aideyn mumbled. "Which brings up another matter."

Once more the smile left the Sea Lord's face. "That being?"

"I'll not have her harming my husband with her petty cruelties," Aideyn stated. "Lest she want her claws pulled out at the root, she'll not lay her hands to him again." She narrowed her eyes. "If I can see the *fer coadee*, converse with it and not shit myself, do you think I would hesitate to exact revenge on her for trespassing on what belongs to me?"

Llyr blinked. "You can *see* the creature?" At her nod, he whistled. "Then that explains why your eyes have changed color. You are changing as well."

"Mayhap," she agreed, "but it doesn't matter. Human or otherwise, if that woman touches my man again, there will be hell to pay!"

He surprised her by laughing. "Where is the quarrelsome brat now?"

"Asleep in her chamber," Aideyn replied. "Put there by Morri's own hand."

"Ah," Llyr said, nodding. "Then she'll sleep through 'til morning."

"Come morning I will put this bargain to her. Will you meet me again here at sunset for her answer?" she queried.

"It will be a long day," he said, "but, aye, I will do so."

They said nothing for a moment then the Sea Lord let out a shuddery breath. "Will you forgive me, Aideyn, for what I attempted to do?"

"I will, but I cannot nor will not speak for my husband. His forgiveness you need to seek on your own."

Llyr winced. "Will you ask him to meet with me so I may do that?"

Aideyn tilted her head to one side. "Are you serious in your wish to seek his pardon?" she countered.

"As much as it pains me, if it means I can be with Cailly at last after all these centuries, I will go to my knees to beg his forgiveness."

“He would never ask that of you,” she said quietly.
Llyr shrugged. “He might ask even more.”

Chapter Twelve

After handing Ruroic a cold glass of milk she had brought upstairs with her, saying a few words to the *fer coadee* then quietly opening the door to the chamber she shared with her husband, Aideyn came up short when she saw the Storm Lord leaning against the bedpost, arms folded over his brawny chest, legs clad in black silk slacks.

"Where have you been, *lhiannan*?" he asked in a deceptively soft voice.

"Kitchen," she said.

"Why were you in the kitchen?"

How she knew her husband knew precisely why she'd been in the kitchen, she didn't know, but she threw her hands into the air and stomped over to the bed, kicking her slippers off as she went.

"He is lonely, Aeral," she said, peeling off her dressing gown, tossing it aside. "And mayhap she will leave you be if she is otherwise occupied."

Aeral made no move to intercept his wife, simply watched her climb naked into his bed then fling the covers over her legs, drawing them up to conceal her bare breasts. It pleased him she liked to sleep in that fashion beside him, but at the moment it was a slight distraction. He shook his head to clear it of the wicked thoughts rumbling through it.

"Did you barter with him?"

She kicked her legs beneath the covers. "I did."

"And what deal did you strike with the lying bastard?"

She frowned at his insult. "If he asks for your forgiveness..."

"Which I will never grant."

"And promises not to come to *Carrick Ard* except during the evenings when we are abed," she continued as though he hadn't interrupted her, "then they can have the run of the keep from moon up to moon down."

"Not going to happen," he said. "He will never step foot in my home again."

Aideyn pursed her lips with annoyance. "You are being stubborn, *dooinney*," she told him.

"And you are fooling yourself if you think for one minute either of them will hold to any bargain they make with you," he said, turning to wrap his hands around the horizontal post that ran between the two foot posts. He stared hard at her. "They are liars, thieves and evil beyond redemption, Aideyn. You cannot trust anything either of them says or does. They'll tell you one thing and do another."

"Why not let them be together?" she countered. "Mayhap if they are happy and at peace, they'll allow us to be."

"And mayhap they will set the place afire around our heads, woman!" he snapped.

"Ruroic wouldn't allow that to happen," she said.

"Who the hell is...?" He flung out an angry hand, realizing who she must mean. "Aideyn, I will not let that prick into this keep and that is the end of it!"

"Well, then I hope you are content to be the whipping boy every waking minute of your day, Aeral, because I will not run interference for you with that viper in yon chamber!" she said, pointing toward the room where Cailleach slept.

"I don't need you to run interference for me!" he shouted.

"And you'd best be content to take matters into your own hand for I'll not put mine on you until you see reason!" she asserted.

"I've taken matters into my hand many a time, *bwoirrinagh*," he grated, jaw clenched as he skirted the bed and flung himself onto it. The bed shook beneath his heavy weight. "I'm gods-be-damned good at it too!"

"Good!" she said, flipping to her side to present her back to him.

"Aye!" he retaliated, turning the opposite way.

They lay there rigid and unbending for over an hour with the lamp burning down, their eyes open and staring dismally at the wall. They sighed at the same time and in unison turned. His eyes locked with hers.

"I don't want him in our home where he can cause mischief," he said.

"I don't want her in our home where she can vent her spite on the man I love," she argued.

"I have no say in her being here, but I do have a say in whether he can enter or not. I don't want him near you."

"He is no threat to me," she said. "He is not a fool, Aeral."

"That's debatable," he mumbled, and was silent for a moment.

They sighed again in tandem then he put out a hand. She took it, lacing her fingers through his.

"Our first real fight," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should not have yelled at you, but you did what I expressly ordered you not to."

"What did I do?" she countered.

"You went outside this keep."

She shook her head. "No, I did not. I stood in the doorway and talked to him."

"He could have reached out and grabbed you, Aideyn," he pointed out.

"He didn't."

"He could have," he stubbornly insisted.

She inched closer to him.

He inched closer to her until his hand was resting on the curve of her hip.

“At least let them be together tomorrow night,” she said, searching his eyes for a hint of giving in.

He caressed her hip. “You disobeyed me even if you did not go out that door.” He lightly swatted her rump. “Bad *ben heshee*.” He swatted her again, a bit harder. “Bad, bad *ben heshee*.”

Aideyn wriggled closer still until she was pressed up against him. He spanked her once more – hard enough for it to sound – then massaged away the hurt.

“Don’t do it again,” he warned, “or I’ll turn you over my knee next time and the spanks won’t be playful.”

She smiled, looking up at him through her lashes. “Promise?” She rubbed her groin along his.

“Count on it,” he growled, moving over her so quickly she barely felt the removal of his silk pants as he wedged between her thighs, spreading them wide with his knee. With one thrust, he was inside her, moving slow and deep as her juices enveloped him in a heady scent that made his nostrils quiver.

Aideyn brought her legs up to enclose his waist, her arms going around him.

“We’ll try it once,” he said before getting down to the business of staking claim to his woman.

His lady-wife smiled, winking at the glowing green mist that was slowly dissipating in the far corner of the room.

“Gods-be-damned interfering voyeuress,” Aeral warned as he quickened his thrusts. He looked down at Aideyn’s grinning face. “Stay out of our room, *Mo Regina!*”

He lowered his mouth to his lady’s breasts and drew hard on one rosy nipple. If he had to give in to her silken blackmail, he was going to make her enjoy every moment of his admission of defeat!

* * * * *

When morning came to *Carrick Ard* and Cailleach was allowed to wake from the spell the goddess had cast, she thought to sneak into Aeral’s room and cause mischief, but as she glided down the corridor as quiet as a mouse and came upon the *fer coadee* glaring at her with such brutal intent, she scurried back to her chamber, slamming the door as hard as she could behind her. She looked to the ceiling.

“This is your doing, *Morrighunia!*” she accused, flinging herself to the bed to pound the mattress with fists and feet. “It isn’t fair!”

“It wasn’t fair to cuckold a good man either,” the insidious voice slithered through Cailleach’s anger.

Raging at the injustice of it all, Cailleach whipped over to her back and brought her knees up. She had grossly underestimated the human who was Transforming with every tick of the clock. To her way of thinking, that too was unfair. By what right was the petty human being allowed to achieve godhood?

“Love,” the Triune Goddess whispered. “A love such as you will never know.”

“Llyr loves me,” Cailleach stated as tears filled her eyes. “Just as I love him.”

“Lust is not love, little witch,” Morigunia corrected. “Love is stronger than all else.”

“I love him!” she shouted, slamming her fists into the mattress then bringing them to her eyes that were silvering tears. “With all my heart I love him!”

“Then ask the real mistress of *Carrick Ard* to forgive you and beseech her to speak to her husband in your favor.”

It was on the tip of Cailleach’s tongue to proclaim herself the real mistress of the keep, but she hated the dismal place with a vengeance—just as she hated the man who made it his home. Digging her fists into her eyes, she kicked her heels against the mattress like an impetuous child.

“I want Llyr!” she said, lower lip thrust in a pout that turned her lovely face comical. “I want him!”

“Then cut your pride, stitch up your arrogance and mend the fabric of your relationship with your former mate,” Morigunia reasoned. “If you do not, you will remain a lonely, bitter woman with nothing to keep you warm of a night save your conceit and that does not a good bed partner make!”

Turning to her side, Cailleach drew up her knees and curled in around herself. She was miserable. Her self-enforced imprisonment in Mount Riojit had been a barren, bleak time, but it was nothing compared to being within arm’s reach of the one she loved and yet unable to touch him, see him, even hear his musical voice.

“Llyr,” she cried, burying her face in her hands. “I would do anything to be with you!”

“Then bend, An Cailleach Bheara. I am not asking you to break, witch. Simply bend!”

As a single sunbeam struck through the draperies, she decided that bending was better than spending an eternity without.

* * * * *

The last of the extra servants departed not long after the household had broken its morning fast. Laughter and gaiety filled the halls of the keep and those villagers who were staying on to see to the day-to-day needs of the inhabitants of *Carrick Ard* were setting off to begin their morning jobs.

“That was a particularly good breakfast,” Aeral said, rubbing his stomach. “I enjoyed it immensely.”

Grateful her husband's former lover had yet to make an appearance to ruin the sweetness that had begun the day, Aideyn smiled at Aeral and reached up to caress his cheek. She knew the peace would not last long once Cailleach came strutting down the stairway.

"It is such a lovely morning," Conreeaght said. "I believe I will take a run if that's all right."

"Go," Aeral said. "We may see snow again before nightfall."

"Aeral."

The haughty tone made the Storm Lord sigh before he looked around and up the staircase. "Aye?" he asked, flinging a leery glance toward his wife.

"I would speak with you and your lady-wife in the solarium," Cailleach said then turned on her heel and vanished from the landing.

Aeral released a longer, louder sigh.

"Would you like me to stay, your grace?" Coni asked.

"No," his master replied. "Run for me as well, old friend. I've a feeling this is not going to be a pleasant meeting."

"You never know," Aideyn said, slipping her arm into her husband's. "Mayhap she's come to a decision with which we can all live."

"More likely she awakenend thinking of ways to torment his grace," Conreeaght mumbled. He bowed and slipped away, obviously not wanting to be there when the manure started flying.

"She will do so at her own peril," Aideyn stated as she led her husband to the stairs.

Husband and wife were silent as they climbed. Aeral's hand rested atop his lady's and she wondered if he was aware he was kneading the flesh over and over again.

"Be at ease, *dooinney*," she said softly. "All will be as it is meant to be."

When they had awakened that morning, Aeral had been stunned to see his wife had very little human traits left within her. Her skin was luminous, glowing from within. Her hair even thicker and more luxuriant than it had been before. It now fell beneath the curve of her very saucy little ass in springy curls and he ached to wrap those golden strands around his hardening cock.

But it was the diamond glitter of her eyes that surprised him so. There was no longer even a trace of color in those beautiful orbs. They sparkled like the gemstone with an inner brilliance that could only come from having a pure heart and deserving nature. Not even *Jee yn Ayr* had such vibrant, untainted eyes.

"When next I go to *Ard-Choyrle*," he had said with pride, "you will accompany me. I want my brothers and mother to see you." He had wrapped her in his arms. "I want all the gods and goddesses to see you."

They stepped onto the landing and stopped, turning to look at one another. Each knew the next few moments would seal their fates for all time.

"Let me do the talking," Aideyn said.

"I've no desire to say anything to that witch," he assured her.

She released his arm then walked to the solarium door. She squared her shoulders, opened the portal and walked through, conscious of her husband only a few steps behind.

"I don't like having noise in my home," Cailleach said. She was staring out the windows, her back to them.

"You will grow accustomed to it if you are awake during the day," Aideyn told her.

Cailleach turned around. "And why would I not be awake during the day? Do you think me a lazy human who would spend the hours abed?"

Aideyn didn't answer the snide question but instead took a seat in the wicker chair that was her favorite. She folded her hands in her lap and gave the goddess an expressionless look.

"I spoke with the Sea Lord last eve," she said.

Cailleach's eyes widened and she hurried over to where Aideyn sat, taking the other wicker chair. "How is he? Is he suffering terribly for loss of me?"

Aeral rolled his eyes. He had taken a position behind his wife's chair with his arms folded, his gaze steady on his former mate.

"Well, he loves me, you odious man!" Cailleach snapped when she saw his reaction to her words.

"Prince Llyr is well," Aideyn said. "He came to ask our pardons so he might be allowed to be with you here at *Carrick Ard*."

Cailleach blinked and her head snapped back as though she'd been slapped. She put a hand to her throat. "What? He did what?"

"He asked my pardon for his attempt to seduce me. He has also asked to meet with his brother to ask for Aeral's forgiveness."

"He would never do such a thing!" Cailleach hissed. Her gaze shifted upward to pierce her former mate with a hateful glower. "He hates that man as much as I!"

"Mayhap he sees the wisdom in letting go of that hate," Aideyn said. "Mayhap he is a better man for the trying."

"Mayhap he has become a fool since last I saw him," she sneered.

"You do yourself no good by your insults, milady," Aideyn told her in a reasonable tone of voice. "It seems your lover would do whatever it takes to be with you, but you do not hold him in the same regard."

Shock spread over the lovely features of the goddess. "I love him as much as you love the Beast!"

Aideyn unfolded her hands, put her palms on the chair arms and levered to her feet. Without another word she turned away, heading for the door.

"What is it you do?" Cailleach asked, standing. She threw Aeral a perplexed look before she spoke again. "We are not finished with our talk!"

Without turning around, Aideyn replied in a steely tone. "When you insult my husband, you insult me. I have no use for ingrates or women too stupid to understand when they are being offered their fondest desire."

Aeral smiled. He didn't move as his former mate hurried after his wife, putting out a beseeching hand to stop her.

"Please, let us reason together!" Cailleach was quick to say and Aeral knew it had to be the first time the word please had ever left the witch's lips.

Aideyn stopped but still did not face the goddess who moved in front of her, eyes pleading.

"I love him," Cailleach said. "I want to be with him." She flung out a hand. "Day or night, it matters not as long as we are together." Her shoulders dropped, her lips trembled. "What must I do, what must I say to see this done?"

"She's good at playacting, *lhiannan*," Aeral warned. "That's what she's doing now."

Cailleach snapped her head toward her former mate. Tears were gleaming in her eyes. "Stay out of this, Aeral. This is between Aideyn and me."

"Now there is where you are wrong," Aideyn said. "It concerns my husband more than it concerns me for the only way..." She looked deep into the eyes of the other woman. "The *only* way you will ever be with your lover is if you ask Aeral's pardon for all the hurts you gave him from the first to the last. If he deigns to forgive you, so shall I, but if he decides it is not in his best interests to do so, I will abide by his decision and the matter will be dropped." She narrowed her eyes. "For all time."

Cailleach drew in a stunned breath. "For all time?"

"For all time," Aideyn stressed.

Slowly Cailleach swiveled her head toward Aeral. "If I abase myself to him and he flings it back at me like so much offal, what then?"

"You'll never know until you ask," Aeral said.

The witch had never humbled herself to anyone. From the pained look on her pretty face, it went against the grain to do so. But she was not a dim-witted woman and knew the only way to achieve her goal was to bend as the Triune Goddess had charged her to do. Digging her nails into her palms, she lowered her head. She also knew if she did not stop the feud between her and Aeral now, all hope of having Llyr at her side would vanish forever. She understood there were no other options left to her but the one she hated the most.

Silence settled on the solarium. The ticking of the heat from the warm winter sun against the windows was the only sound. The stillness dragged on until it became another entity in the room. When at last the goddess spoke, her words fell like petals to the floor.

"I ask your pardon, Aeral, for the injustices and hurts I have given you," she said as though the words were being drawn from her mouth with a hot pincher.

"I know how hard that was for you," Aeral said.

Cailleach raised her head. "Am I forgiven then? May Llyr and I be together?"

Aideyn looked to her husband. His handsome face was devoid of expression, but she saw the brittle glow in his eyes and silently prayed he would relent. Before he could deny the lovers their time together, she spoke up.

"I would think if you met during that time when Aeral and I are abed, it would be the best. The servants will be abed as well, so their noise will not disturb you. But if we hear even a pin drop, a feather hit the floor while you are up and about so it disturbs *our* sleep or the sleep of our servants, all bets would be off."

"We cannot laugh nor dance nor chase one another through these dismal halls?" Cailleach demanded. "What must we do then? Sit idly by the fire and talk quietly amongst ourselves? Make love without any expression of the great joy it would give us? Not take pleasure at all in being together?"

"I did not say that," Aideyn said. "You and I both know it is within your power or—if not yours at least his—to deaden sound, to wrap it in some silencing cloth where it is not audible to us. Where it does not intrude on our peace and rest." She cocked an eyebrow. "What I am stressing is that no *deliberate* noise be issued that would disturb our slumber or the slumber of those who also live in this keep."

"Well done, *bwoirrinagh*," Aeral told his lady-wife, admiration stirring in his blue gaze.

"As if we would be concerned about intruding upon you," Cailleach said with a sniff. "We would not give either of you a second thought."

"I've absolutely no doubt of that since the two of you think only of yourselves," Aeral said dryly.

"You have yet to say you forgive me," Cailleach reminded him.

"Nor will you ever hear me say those words to you or him," Aeral said. "I am not a forgiving man when my nose has been rubbed in shite until that was all I could smell."

"Aeral," Aideyn said softly. Her eyes beseeched him. Her tender heart called out to the part of him that had begun to thaw the moment he'd beheld her sleeping in her safe little bed in the village.

"I am not saying I intend to keep them apart, but I want stipulations here too, my love," he told Aideyn.

"Such as?" Cailleach questioned, squinting suspiciously at him.

"That you will cause no harm to the people residing in this keep or those who might come to visit," he said. "That you will not flaunt your affair in front of either me or my wife. We care not what the two of you do together, but we would not care to be a witness to it. That when I bid him go, Llyr go then and there, that minute, and not argue with me about it." A muscle worked in his cheek. "Nor you either, for that matter. You

both must agree that my word and the word of my lady-wife is the law in *Carrick Ard* and that you will abide by that word whether it suits you or not.”

“You don’t dare ask much, do you?” Cailleach questioned with a snort.

“I’m not the one asking for reprieve here, Cailly,” he insisted. He flexed one shoulder. “Abide by my word or spend your life alone. It’s up to you.”

Aideyn held her breath for she wasn’t sure the goddess was smart enough to recognize all the cards were stacked against her. If she balked at even one of Aeral’s stipulations, the whole thing would crash down around them like brittle leaves in autumn.

“My husband is an honorable man,” Aideyn told Cailleach. “He will abide by the word he gives. Will you abide by yours?”

“She doesn’t know the meaning of the word honor,” Aeral scoffed. “Rather ask her if she understands that should she or her lover renege on any part of the deal, there will not be a second chance.”

Cailleach walked to the window, looked out at the bright sunshine glimmering on the snows atop Mount Riojit. “Will you bring him here?” she asked, her voice sounding disconsolate.

Aideyn looked to her husband, awaiting his decision.

Aeral gazed back at her for a long time then said, “Llyr, you may enter *Carrick Ard* until such time as I bid you take your leave.”

Instantly there was a knock at the front door. Aideyn knew since the servants had not been told to bar entry to any visitor, the portal would be opened, the guest bid entry. That that guest would bear the same visage as their master would perplex them until they realized it must be one of the three other Elemental Princes.

The sound of boot heels ringing on the marble treads of the staircase brought a brilliant smile to Cailleach’s pretty mouth but she did not turn from the window. Her breathing was loud in the solarium, ragged, and when there was a scuffling sound at the door, she turned around slowly, her lips trembling when she took in the expectant face of Llyr Y Lhuingys Caggee.

The Sea Lord stood just inside the doorway – panting, his eyes gleaming and filled with hope. He cast his brother a quick look, eyebrows slashing together when Aeral gave no sign of welcome. He looked to Aideyn, pleading silently with her for information.

“I believe my husband has agreed for you to meet here with your lady-love each night,” Aideyn said. “In the nighttime from moon up to moon down. There are stipulations she will explain to you.” She looked to Aeral. “Do I have the right of it, *dooinne*?”

Aeral nodded. He unfolded his arms, walked from behind the chair and to his lady-wife. He reached down for her hand.

“Aeral, am I forgiven?” Llyr asked, searching his brother’s still face.

"No," Aeral replied, surprised when Llyr's shoulders sagged. His fingers tightened around Aideyn's. "But you can be with her as my lady-wife stated it to you, and for now you have one hour to speak with her before you must leave." He stared into his brother's eyes. "You *must* leave," he repeated.

"You have my gratitude," Llyr said. "It was more than I dared hoped you would grant us."

"Thank my lady-wife," Aeral said. "If it were left up to me, you would not be in our home." He tugged on Aideyn's hand. "Come, *lhiannan*."

Aideyn looked back as Cailleach and Llyr rushed together. Her heart did a funny little squeeze when she saw them lock their bodies together, kiss with such passion it made her cheeks heat.

Though she thought her husband had not noticed the ardent embrace his brother had bestowed upon Cailleach, apparently he had glimpsed it and the sight prompted him to lead his wife back to their bedroom. He nodded curtly at the *fer coadee* though his wife greeted the creature warmly.

"We wish not to be disturbed," the Storm Lord said as he closed the door.

"Aeral!" Aideyn said. "In the middle of the morning?"

"Morning. Noon. Night," he mumbled as his hands went to her bodice. "It matters not one whit when I crave my woman."

She had no time to gainsay him for he bared her breasts and locked his mouth upon one pert nipple. His hands roamed over her as he pushed the bodice down past her hips.

"It's a good thing the neckline has elastic," she grouched though her own hands were tugging playfully at his dark curls.

Her words received a grunt before he swept her up in his arms and took her back to bed, drawing the skirt of her day gown up to bare her thighs.

"I want you," he said against her throat.

"I would never have guessed," she teased. Already he was fumbling with the buttons of his fly, nudging her legs apart with one insistent knee.

With one powerful thrust he was inside her, moving to his own rhythm, creating their own volcano as desire rose hot and heavy to their loins. He laced his fingers with hers, slammed her hands to either side of her head and rocked his body upon hers, his gaze never straying from hers.

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you with all my being," she replied.

"Tell me you will never leave me."

"It would take more than the gods in all the heavens of the megaverse to pry me from your side, Aeral Chiarn Dorrin."

He lowered his mouth to hers and took her with a kiss that was so powerful, so filled with love and need it sent shivers down her spine. She locked her legs around him to draw him into her as far as nature would allow.

“I love *you*,” he whispered against her lips then thrust his tongue deep, swirled it with hers, withdrew. “And I will *never* leave you.”

The rush of their release erupted at the exact same moment and it was potent enough to make them both see stars. His came with a howl of satisfaction and hers with a contented purr.

Outside their room, the *far coadee* smiled with pleasure for the first time in its life.

Epilogue

Aideyn watched her husband bouncing the little girl in his arms as he cooed nonsensical words to the flaxen-haired darling. The baby was waving its little arms and making noises eerily similar to her father's although she was only six weeks old.

"She has my eyes," he said, glancing around at Aideyn who was lounging in the bed this late morning. They had both been up with the child Aideyn had insisted on naming Aeryn nearly the entire night.

"And your temper," Aideyn grumbled.

Aeryn started fussing again – her little face screwing into a scowl and turning red – and Aeral looked to his wife for help. He ran his hand under her bottom. "She's dry. What ails her now, *ben heshee*?"

"Bring her here. She's probably getting hungry." She let the sheet drop from her bosom.

His eyes lit for there was nothing this side of *Sheidaghan* that he loved more than seeing his wife suckling their child. When Aeryn was finished, he always insisted on laving his lady's nipple clean of any residual milk.

"Spoiled brat," she accused him, his eyes gleaming into hers as he swept his tongue over the sensitive bud.

Placing the babe gently into her mother's arms, Aeral took a seat on the bed, crooking one knee so he could rest his elbow on it, propping his chin on his fist as he avidly watched Aideyn lift her breast to draw the nipple over the tiny questing mouth, squeezing a drop of pearly milk from the tip to entice the babe. A loud sucking ensued as soon as Aeryn took the nipple into her mouth, drawing greedily while she made little chuffing noises. One tiny fist pushed against her mother's breast and her dark blue eyes closed as though she'd found supreme rapture.

"She is so incredibly beautiful," Aeral told his lady-wife. "I am a very lucky man."

"I am the lucky one, milord," she said, her direct gaze fusing with his, her love glowing deep and true. "I am the luckiest woman in the world for I won the lottery."

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over seventy books. Married 42 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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