

*New York Times* bestselling author  
of the House of Night series

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Divine Beginnings

Prequel to the tales of Portholón

# Divine Beginnings

P.C. Cast



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## Chapter One

Aine liked the irony of using a funeral urn to draw water for the herbs in her healer's garden. It was a beautiful urn, large and graceful, with a ridged lip and a curved handle balanced off one side. The scene painted around it was framed in black, as was typical for Epona's funeral urns, but it seemed to Aine that there was something especially lovely about this one. The Goddess's Chosen reclined with her outstretched arm motioning regally to the line of supplicants that stretched around the urn before her. A riot of auburn hair cascaded like water down the priestess's back.

It was ridiculous that something so beautiful be relegated to the dreary job of pouring libations on graves, or worse, holding the ashes of the dead. So Aine had "rescued" it.

Too bad there would be no one to rescue her from the dreary job she'd taken.

"No," Aine muttered. "It's not the job that's dreary. It's the place." She sat at the edge of the herb bed and looked around her. She'd been at Guardian Castle for a little over five full turns of the moon, but she still wasn't used to the overwhelming grayness of everything. The castle was gray. The pass through the

mountains the castle had been built within was gray. The autumn sky was gray. Aine sighed. “Epona’s shield! Even the people are gray.”

She understood that the castle had been built for one specific purpose: to keep the pass between the Wastelands and Partholon guarded so that the demonic Fomorians who had been banished to those Wastelands would never enter Partholon again. Even though there hadn’t been a Fomorian sighted in generations, still they needed to be on guard. So beauty and color and the things that made Partholon such a lovely goddess-blessed land weren’t exactly priorities here at the edge of the civilized world. Protection and defense was the focus.

It was just so hard to get used to this stark place after four full seasons of studying the art of healing at the exquisite Temple of the Muse, where Aine had been surrounded by all the most talented, beautiful and brightest women of Partholon.

Camenae, her mentor, had warned her against accepting the austere post, but Aine had known that Guardian Castle was where she belonged. Just as she had known that it was her destiny to be a Healer.

But since Aine had arrived at Guardian Castle she’d felt so uneasy that she’d begun questioning that intuition, that *knowing* which had served her so well all her life. Restless, Aine picked at a few sprigs of mint, breathing deeply of the distinctive scent of the plant. She had to stop second guessing herself. It wasn’t her intuition that was the problem. The problem

was the people here. They felt wrong. They were as colorless, inside and out, as the landscape surrounding them.

Well, the human people that is. Aine had only made one friend since she'd taken up her position as Healer of Guardian Castle. She and the centaur Maev, who had only recently been posted as Huntress for the castle, had instantly clicked.

"Probably because we're the only bit of color hereabouts. Maybe that's why I believed so strongly that I needed to come here—to spread some color around."

Aine picked up a raven-colored curl that had fallen over her shoulder. She smiled as the wan sunlight made her hair shine with flashes of mahogany and a black so dark it almost appeared blue. With her dark hair and startlingly sapphire eyes, and Maev's blazing copper hair and shining roan equine coat, the two of them definitely stood out amongst the dish soap, milk toast complexions of the stone-faced warriors and their equally boring women.

It was just so odd. She'd had no idea before she'd arrived how washed out everything—*everyone* would be. But then, why would the rest of Partholon know? Besides families of the warriors and a few traders, people rarely visited Guardian Castle.

Aine couldn't help but compare the people of Guardian Castle to sleepwalkers. Or worse—they were like the stories told to frighten children about people who had been led astray by darkness and who ended

up wandering the earth as soulless husks eternally searching for but unable to ever find the light within them that had been bled away by...

“Aine! There has been an accident. You’re needed!”

Aine startled at the appearance of the stern warrior she thought was called Edan, but she had been well trained and recovered quickly. She was on her feet and running for her Healer’s basket in an instant. Then instead of heading to the infirmary wing of the castle, the warrior called, “This way!” and began jogging towards the massive rear gate that opened to the Wastelands side of the pass.

She stifled her questions, concentrating instead on keeping up with the silent warrior as they ran out the raised, iron-toothed gate.

The instant Aine passed beyond the walls of the castle she felt the change. It was as if the air had solidified. It pressed down upon her, thick...heavy...cloying... Aine stumbled.

Edan grabbed her arm to steady her. “We only have a short way to go.” He jogged down the narrow, slate-colored pass. Aine rushed after him. The path took a sharp turn. Not far ahead of them Aine could see a warrior standing in front of a pile of something that was lying in the middle of the pass. She caught the scent of fresh blood and centered herself so that she would be calm and able to think clearly in the whirlwind of emotion and activity that accompanied

injuries as surely as blood and death accompanied them.

The warrior turned to her and Aine looked beyond him to see—

“Maev!” She gasped and dropped to her knees beside the centaur Huntress, instantly assessing the gaping slash wounds that appeared to cover her body. Her friend was unconscious. Her breath was shallow and her skin, that which was not covered with blood, was so pale it appeared colorless.

“We found her like this. She was hunting wild boar today. One of the beasts must have attacked her,” said the Warrior, pointing at the centaur’s terrible wounds.

Aine glanced up at him. “She’s been unconscious the whole time?”

“Yes.”

“She needs to be moved to the infirmary.” Aine snapped the order, the steadiness of her voice completely belying the tumult within her. “Get a stretcher and more men.” Aine was vaguely aware that Edan nodded and rushed off. All of her attention was focused on her fallen friend as she pulled linen strips from her basket. She had to stop the bleeding. But there were so many wounds...so much blood lost.

Aine was leaning over the centaur’s torso, pressing a linen cloth to the ripped flesh of her neck and trying to staunch the flood of her friend’s lifeblood when Maev, eyes still closed, lips barely moving, whispered “Send him away.”

Aine drew in a shocked breath, but before she could respond further, Maev's strained whisper continued. "Do not betray me."

Used to relying on her instincts, especially during emergencies, Aine made her decision quickly. She turned to the warrior. She didn't know his name, but she recognized his heavily lined face as one of the senior guards. "I'm going to have to close some of her wounds before we move her. I'll need everything in my large black surgical box in the infirmary." When the warrior didn't move, Aine lifted her chin and said, "Now."

Expressionless, the warrior hesitated for only a moment more before he turned and sprinted down the path towards the castle.

Maev's eyes opened instantly. "Must listen to me." The Huntress was growing weaker by the moment. She struggled to speak as the breath gurgled wetly in her throat.

Aine wanted to soothe her friend—to tell her to save her strength, but she'd already seen the end written in the color of Maev's skin and the copious amount of blood she'd lost. Even a centaur Huntress couldn't survive such terrible wounds.

"What is it, Maev?"

The centaur's eyes widened and she coughed, raining scarlet down her chest. "It—it's come here. The darkness...the claws and teeth in the darkness."

"Maev, I don't understand."



The Huntress gripped Aine's wrist. "Don't let my pyre be built here, or inside the walls of that tainted castle. Send me to Epona from the forest of Partholon."

"You're not going to die," Aine lied. "Rest now."

"Promise me!"

"Yes, of course, I promise." She soothed. "What did this to you, Maev?"

"The warriors know! They know."

"About what?"

"Fomorians." Maev spoke the name and then, as if the dreaded word had taken her soul with it, her eyes went wide and blank, and the Huntress died.

## Chapter Two

“You said a boar did this?” Numbly, Aine watched the warriors put Maev’s body on the stretcher and carry her back to the castle.

Edan nodded. “Urien found the tracks of the beast not far down the pass. He said there were signs of a great battle between it and the Huntress.”

Deep in thought, Aine followed the warriors and their bloody burden. Guardian Castle’s Lord and Chieftain of Clan Monro met them at the rear gate.

“It is the Huntress,” he sighed wearily and shook his head. “She was too young and inexperienced to tangle with a wounded boar.”

“Those gashes don’t look like any boar goring I’ve ever seen,” Aine heard herself saying.

The Monro’s sharp eyes locked on her. “Aine, is it? Our new Healer?”

She nodded. “Yes, my Lord.” Aine had been presented to the Chieftain when she’d arrived, but their paths had rarely crossed since. Actually, this was the first opportunity she’d had to study the Monro closely and she was surprised by how gaunt and unhealthy he appeared. *A wasting sickness...* The thought had her pitying him. Until he spoke again.

“How many boar wounds have you tended?” His words were thick with sarcasm. “You couldn’t save the centaur, could you?”

“No,” she said softly. “I couldn’t.”

“It appears you’re as young and inexperienced as she was. See that you come to a better end. Perhaps you should begin by leaving the details of hunting and such to those who are older and wiser.” He turned his back on her and spoke to the warriors. “Send a runner to notify her herd, and then build a pyre near the burial mounds within the east wall. We will fire it on the morrow.”

Aine drew a deep, fortifying breath and stepped in front of the Chieftain. “That’s not what she wanted.”

The Monro raised his brows at her. “Indeed?”

“Yes, my Lord, Maev asked that her pyre be built out there.” Aine pointed towards the distant forest that spread south of the castle and marked the beginning of Partholon.

The Monro snorted. “Partholon is also within the walls of this castle.”

Aine countered with, “She was a Huntress. She deserves to be sent to Epona from the forest.”

The Monro shrugged. “It matters naught to me, but if it means so much to you, Healer, then you see to it. I’ll not interfere.”

It took the entire next day for Aine to prepare Maev’s pyre. The Monro had been true to his word. He hadn’t interfered with her. He also hadn’t ordered any of the warriors to help her. At least Edan had aided her in

loading and then unloading the cart with boughs for the fire. He'd also gathered enough warriors to carry Maev's body to the bier.

They hadn't liked that she'd picked a spot in the middle of a clearing that was quite a ways from the castle. Aine hadn't cared. She'd known Maev would have wanted to be far enough away so that the gloomy walls wouldn't be visible above the pines.

It was almost dusk when everything was ready. Aine faced the south—the direction of Partholon and the Centaur Plains beyond. She was nervous. A Shaman should be doing this, but there was no Shaman living at Guardian Castle and the taciturn warriors who stood restlessly beside her certainly weren't going to evoke the Goddess's blessing.

"Epona, centaur Huntress Maev of the Hagan Herd, was my friend. We laughed together a lot, even when things felt really grim. She died too soon and I'll miss her. I ask that you welcome her to your verdant meadows so that her spirit will gallop free by your side for eternity." She touched the torch to the pyre. With a *whoosh* the oil-soaked boughs caught fire.

*Well done, daughter.*

Aine jumped and gasped when the Goddess's sweet voice drifted through her mind.

*And now prepare yourself, my child. I have need of you.*

## Chapter Three

“Aine, won’t you return with us?” Edan asked, hanging back when the other warriors headed back to the castle almost immediately.

“N-no,” she stuttered, running a shaky hand over her forehead. *Had she really heard Epona’s voice?* “I’m going to stay with Maev for a little while.”

“It’s not safe in the forest after dark, so you don’t have much time. I’ll leave the horse and cart for you,” he said.

Aine nodded absently, paying little attention when he left. All of her concentration was focused internally. “Epona?” she whispered, feeling foolish.

*Listen, daughter. One who needs you is near.*

Aine’s body trembled with excitement. The Goddess was speaking to her! Holding her breath, she listened.

A low, painful moan seemed to drift on the cool night air, mixing with the scent of death and smoke and pine. Aine turned into the breeze and followed her Goddess’s urging.

The panting sounds of pain weren’t hard to track. Aine was amazed that she and the warriors hadn’t heard them earlier. She’d walked only a few feet into the surrounding pines when she came to the gully.

What she saw at the bottom of the trench in the earth had her freezing with shock and disbelief.

The winged creature lay crumpled on the ground, its leg caught gruesomely in an iron trap so large it must have been set for the vicious brown bears that liked to lurk close to the castle.

*It is your choice, daughter, whether you aid him or not.*

“But he’s a Fomorian!” Aine said.

Epona didn’t respond, and Aine could feel that the Goddess’s presence had left her. At the sound of her voice the creature’s head snapped up. With eyes glassy with shock and pain he stared at her.

“Are you a goddess or a spirit?”

His voice was a surprise. It was deep and beautiful, almost musical in quality. And he sounded frightened.

“I’m neither,” she replied. Then she pressed her lips together, thinking that it was madness that she was speaking to him, to *it*, instead of running screaming for the warriors.

“You look like a goddess,” he said.

Then he smiled and even as Aine cringed back from his fangs that glistened in the dying light, she felt drawn to the unexpected gentleness in his eyes that so perfectly matched his expressive voice.

“You’re a Fomorian,” Aine said, as if to remind herself.

“And you’re a goddess.”

“Fomorians are demons!” she blurted. “What could you know about goddesses?”

“Some of us know of Epona. Some of us...” he trailed off, sucking in his breath as a spasm of pain shot through him.

Responding automatically to his pain, Aine was halfway down the gully before she realized she’d moved. The Fomorian had closed his eyes to ride out the wave of agony. His forehead was pressed to the ground and he was breathing in shallow, panting gasps. *Just like any man in terrible pain*, she thought.

Then his wings, which had been tucked along his back rustled in restless agitation and she stumbled to a halt mere feet from him, eyes riveted on those dark pinions. They weren’t made of feathers, but seemed to be a soft membrane, lighter on bottom than top. They were huge, and they proved what he was—what he must be. A demon.

*This was what killed Maev!* The knowledge rushed through her mind and she stumbled back.

“My name is Tegan.”

At the sound of his voice she stopped. His eyes were open again, and even though his face was shadowed by pain he tried to smile at her once more.

“What is your name, goddess?”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped.

“I meant no disrespect. I only—”

“You killed Maev!” she interrupted.

## Chapter Four

“I have killed no one,” he insisted. Making an involuntary beseeching gesture, his arm lifted and Aine saw the short sword sheathed at his waist.

“I don’t believe you. How could I? You’re a Fomorian. A demon. My enemy.” Aine’s stomach knotted as she looked frantically around. “Where are the rest of your people?”

“It’s only me. I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t have sneaked through, but I wanted to see it.”

“It?”

“Partholon,” Tegan spoke the word like a prayer.

“But there are more of you?”

“Of course. In the Wastelands.”

Aine started backing away again. “I have to warn the Guardian Warriors. Your people have to be stopped.”

“But it’s only me who is here,” he said.

“No...you killed Maev.” Then the Huntress’s words lifted from her memory. *The warriors know! They all know.* What was happening? How could the Guardian Warriors know about the Fomorians? Then all of Partholon should know. Maev was dying. She’d been almost incoherent. Or things had been happening so quickly maybe Aine had misunderstood. Shaking her



head she spoke more to herself than the fallen demon, "It doesn't matter. I have to tell them."

"Please don't leave me." Even though she was well beyond his touch, he reached out for her and then moaned, crumpling to the ground again.

*It is your choice, daughter, whether you aid him or not.* As if battling against Maev's warning, Epona's voice filled her mind. The Goddess had led her to this creature. Surely she had brought her to him so that Aine would return to the castle and tell the men. But then why had Epona said that there was one near who needed her? When she'd followed the moans Aine had had no doubt that she was supposed to help whoever had been injured.

All right. Couldn't she do both? She could dress his wounds and then go to the castle and warn them that Fomorians were near. Aine glanced down at Tegan's trapped leg. He might be injured so badly that he'd still be here when she brought the warriors back. Was there rope in the cart? Perhaps she could tie him up.

She drew a deep breath and looked from his wound to his eyes. "How do I know you won't try to kill me if I help you?"

"I'm not a killer," was his instant response.

"You're a demon," she said.

He frowned. "Is it because I have wings that you keep calling me that?"

"It's because your people betrayed the good faith of my people and tried to slaughter them that I call you that."

“How long ago?” he asked quietly.

“What?”

“How long ago was the war between our people?”

Aine moved her shoulders restlessly. “It’s talked about in our legends. The bards sing songs about how demonic and hideous your people are.” She closed her mouth, then all too aware that even though the winged man trapped so painfully on the ground in front of her might be a demon, he definitely wasn’t hideous.

“Three hundred and twenty-five full passes of all four seasons have gone by since my people fought yours,” he said. Tegan paused to grimace in pain. After several short, panting breaths he continued. “So it is for something that happened between people long dead that you hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” Aine said automatically.

“Then help me. Please, goddess,” he said.

## Chapter Five

“Stop calling me a goddess,” Aine said, beginning to walk slowly towards him.

“I don’t know what else to call you,” Tegan said.

“Aine. I’m a Healer,” she said briskly, kneeling beside his bloody leg.

His sudden laugh surprised her. What especially surprised her was that the infectious sound of it caught her attention more than a second glimpse of his fangs.

“A Healer! And I believed all luck had deserted me.”

She frowned at him, thinking that luck was certainly a relative thing, and then fell into her normal pattern of distracting her patient through conversation. “How did this happen?”

“I was foolish.” He paused sucking in his breath as she began her examination. Through gritted teeth he continued. “I know better than to step into a gully filled with leaves. My attention was elsewhere and I made a mistake.”

“Your attention was on what?” Aine was intrigued by Tegan’s physiology. His leg appeared human, but it ended in a taloned foot that reminded her of the old stories she’d read about Partholon’s long extinct dragons.

“My attention was on this.” Tegan gestured weakly at the pine forest surrounding them. “It’s so green and alive. Everything here is so much more beautiful than the Wastelands.” His eyes met hers. “Everything...”

Clearing her throat, she broke eye contact with him and continued her assessment. The trap had closed just above his left ankle. There was a lot of blood on it and in the leaves, but the bleeding appeared to have stopped. The odd-looking foot was already swelling, though, and his skin... she glanced up his body. His skin was paler than a human man’s, but it seemed to glow faintly, as if it had been lit from within by a moon-colored light. His body was very man-like. He was tall and muscular and well-formed. His hair was so silver blonde that it reminded her of the moon, too. His eyes were slightly slanted and an unusual light amber color. He was, she realized, exotic and odd-looking, but not an unattractive man. Aine shook herself mentally. *Men* didn’t have down-lined wings that tucked against their bodies.

“I need to open this trap, but I’m worried about the bleeding that might happen once your leg is free.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

“I need something to...” she paused, considering. “The leather tie that holds your hair. I need it.”

Tegan started to reach back, but the movement made him stiffen with pain.

“I’ll get it.” Businesslike, Aine moved to his head. Forcing herself not to hesitate, she untied the thong. His silver hair was long and felt like silk against her

fingers. She could see that his ears were surprisingly small for such a large being, and slightly pointed, as if the fairy people had touched him there.

*By the Goddess! Fairy people? This creature is a demon, not a harmless sprite.*

She moved back to his leg, glancing up but not meeting his eyes. "I'm going to tie a tourniquet above the wound, but hopefully you haven't severed a major blood vessel."

"It can't hurt much more than it does now." Tegan tried to smile again, but only succeeded in a small grimace.

"You're wrong about that," Aine said grimly, tying the tourniquet in place. Then she did meet his gaze. "Ready?"

He dug his fingers into the ground and Aine thought she caught the flash of more talons. Then he nodded. "Ready."

Aine positioned her hands on the trap, drew a deep breath, and forced apart its fang-like jaws. Tegan screamed, but she hardly heard him. As if a dam had broken, his leg was spurting the scarlet of a severed artery.

She grabbed a small piece of wood, twisting it into the tourniquet to attempt to slow the flow, but it made little difference.

"It must be cauterized. That's the only way," Aine murmured to herself, wishing frantically that she was in her well-stocked surgery with a variety of metal irons already heated and awaiting her use. Her gaze

lifted unerringly to the short sword sheathed at his waist. Aine ignored his wing, which fluttered weakly as she leaned over him and pulled the sword free. "I'll be right back."

Tegan nodded, although he didn't speak or open his eyes.

Aine ran back to the hotly burning pyre. Shielding herself against the blaze with the edge of her cloak, she thrust the sword into the fire and then stepped back.

"Hurry...hurry..." she whispered, as if the flames could hear her.

## Chapter Six

Aine wrapped a piece of her cloak around the hilt of the glowing sword and pulled it free from the flaming pyre. Then she sprinted into the woods. Thankfully, Tegan wasn't far away. It was almost fully dark and Aine would have hated to have to search for him in the thickness of the forest.

Goddess, there was so much blood! Tegan was lying perfectly still in a growing pool of scarlet. She called his name, but he made no response. She dropped to her knees beside him and felt quickly with her fingers. He didn't respond to her touch. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the hot blade of the sword flat against the severed blood vessel. Tegan's body jerked in automatic response, although he didn't regain consciousness. The smell of burnt flesh was nauseating, but when she pulled the sword away the fountain of blood had dried and blackened.

Aine looked up at Tegan's face. He was so still. She might have been too late. It took so little time to lose a life-threatening amount of blood when a major vessel was severed. Then shock set in. Often that killed as easily as blood loss.

Shivering, Aine took off her cloak and covered him with it. Tegan was wearing a worn linen shirt and

patched leather breeches—no coat or cloak. Did Fomorians feel the cold as humans do? She knew so little about them. Aine bent to rest her fingers against the side of his throat, feeling for the pulse that should throb there. She had to press hard before she found a slight flutter. He might be dying, and there was little more she could do to help him.

*Perhaps I shouldn't have helped him at all.* Epona had led her to him and given her a choice, and then the goddess had left. Had this all been a test, and had Aine's choice made her fail it?

Aine was pulling her hand from Tegan's neck when his eyes opened.

They glowed a terrible golden color. With a movement so fast that it blurred, he grabbed Aine's wrist. She tried to twist away from him, but his other hand shot out and a vise-like grip closed behind her neck.

"Stop! Let me go!" Aine choked and struggled against him, but he was amazingly strong.

"Imposssible..."

His deep, musical voice made the word a seductive hiss as he pulled her down to him. His lips touched the place where her neck sloped into shoulder before his teeth claimed her, and she shivered, only this time not from cold. His touch was a delicious poison, seeping cloyingly into her body. Then his teeth broke open her skin and she moaned. There was no pain. Only dark pleasure coursed into her body as Tegan sucked the blood from her. His lips and tongue teased her skin as



his hands gentled on her, caressing where they had been bruising.

“No... oh Goddess no...” Aine whispered, even as her own arms wrapped tightly around his broad shoulder and she pressed herself more firmly against his hard body.

As Aine’s vision began to gray, Tegan shifted, so that he was on top of her. Her last sight was of his massive wings rippling and then spreading erect over them as if he were a mighty bird of prey.

## Chapter Seven

Tegan came back to himself locked to Aine's body, drinking her lifeblood.

"No!" he cried, releasing her instantly and scrambling back. The pain in his leg jolted through him, but he gave it little notice. How much had he taken from her?

In control again, he dragged himself to her, touching her face and neck, calling her name. "Aine! Aine you must awaken."

But he knew she wouldn't. She couldn't. He'd almost drained her. Already the healthy flush had faded from her cheeks. He could feel her heartbeat getting weaker by the moment.

"You can't die. I can't bear it if I killed you."

Later he told himself he'd had no choice. That wasn't the entire truth. Yes, what he did next he'd had to do to save her. But he'd only had to save her because he hadn't sent her away or warned her about him. He'd foolishly thought he could control the urge to taste her. Instead, he had been wounded too deeply and the instinct to take that which would heal him had been too great. Tegan had known it, even if he hadn't admitted it to himself. Or to her.

Tegan searched around in the leaves until he found his short sword. Then he ripped his shirt and with one quick slash, opened the skin over his left breast. Gently, he lifted Aine's unresisting body and pressed her slack lips to the bleeding cut.

"Drink, Aine. Save yourself."

At first blood trickled from her mouth, but as some of it washed down her throat, Aine swallowed. The change within her was instantaneous. Her eyes remained closed, but her arms lifted, encircling his torso so that she could press her lips more firmly against him.

Tegan groaned in pleasure as her arms brushed the sensitive underside of his pulsing wings, and her tongue flicked across his skin. He'd known that the exchange of blood was an intensely erotic experience, something shared only by a mated couple because of the side effects of such intimacy, but he had no mate, nor had he ever expected to. As Aine drank from him, Tegan thought how inaccurate the dispassionate descriptions the elders had given for bloodlust had been.

Then Aine's eyes opened. With a terrible cry she lurched away from him. She was scrubbing the sleeve of her dress back and forth across her mouth, her eyes wide with disgust and horror.

"Aine, wait. Let me explain." He spoke softly, as if she was a frightened fawn.

"There's nothing to explain." She got shakily to her feet. He made no move to stop her as she grabbed the

sword from where he'd dropped it, holding it defensively in front of her, and backing away from him. "I tried to help you. You tried to kill me. That's obvious."

"I'm sorry. I thought I could control myself, but I was dying."

"So you tried to kill me to save yourself?"

"It's true that I needed your blood to save myself, but I would never have killed you." He passed a hand over his face. "That's why you had to drink from me. You saved me, little Healer, and in return I restored you."

"Restored me? You used me!" Aine whirled around and started to run up the side of the gully.

"Don't go, Aine—" Tegan tried to stand, but his leg gave way and he crumpled to the ground.

At the same instant Aine cried out and fell to the ground, too.

Deathly pale, she stared wide-eyed at him. "I feel your pain. What have you done to me?"

## Chapter Eight

“We’ve shared blood,” Tegan said.

“I know that, and while it’s disgusting it doesn’t make *this* understandable.” Aine pointed to her ankle where the pain that had spiked through it was fading, but still entirely too real to have been a hysterical hallucination.

Tegan looked away from her, sighed, and then reluctantly met her gaze. “The sharing of blood is part of how my people mate. It binds us together.”

“That is not possible.”

“Listen with your heart and you will know the truth.”

“Listen with my heart? That’s ridiculous.” But even as she spoke Tegan’s eyes seemed to trap her. Aine felt pulled within their amber depths. Before she realized what she was doing, she’d taken a couple steps towards him. She came to herself suddenly and stopped so abruptly it was as if she’d slammed into a glass wall. “This can’t happen.”

Tegan cocked his head to the side, and gave her a sad, slight smile. “Do you find me so repulsive?” He hurried on. “I thought you a goddess when I first saw you.”

“You’re a demon. If there’s a bond between us it’s an evil spell you’ve placed on me.”

Tegan sighed, shifting uncomfortably. “I’m too tired to place a spell on you. Evil or otherwise.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So you admit you worship a dark god.”

Aine thought she saw something flicker in his amber eyes.

“I do not worship darkness.”

“Why should I believe you? You did just try to kill me.”

“I did not try to kill you. I’m sorry I drank from you uninvited, but my intention wasn’t to harm you—it was to save myself.”

“At any cost.”

“No. Not at the cost of your life. I stopped before I...” he trailed off, unwilling to continue.

“Before you *killed me*. And then you did this to me!”

“I’m sorry,” he said somberly. “But what I did can’t be undone.”

“What! You mean I’ll always feel your pain?”

He didn’t speak for a moment, and when he finally did that rich, musical tone was back in his deep voice. “It isn’t only my pain you can feel, Aine.”

His voice...his eyes...they drew her. Aine took another step forward. And then another.

“This bond we’ve forged,” he said. “It’s not so terrible. It’s how my people mate—how they love.”

The attraction Aine felt for him was raw and strong. Even lying there, wounded and battered, she could see the powerful male creature he was and be drawn to the mystery of him.

*It's because I drank his blood!* Aine took a step back, shutting her mind to the fact that even before he'd forced her to drink from him she'd been intrigued enough by Tegan that she'd chosen to help him.

"I've done all I can for you. Leave. Return to wherever you came from. Just hurry because as soon as I get back to the castle I'm going to send them after you."

Aine closed her mind and her heart. Resolutely, she turned her back on him and began to retrace the short path to Maev's pyre.

She'd taken up the reins of the cart and had pointed the horse's head down the road to the castle when the first of the pains speared down her leg. Aine gritted her teeth and clucked the horse into a sluggish trot.

The next pain made her gasp. He'd fallen. She could feel it. He was trying to walk and he couldn't. Not by himself.

"You shouldn't care." Aine told herself. But care or not, she was a Healer, and the suffering of others affected her—it always had. "Epona!" She called into the night.

"Help me. What should I do? Did you lead me to him so that Partholon could be warned or so that he could be saved?"

The silence of the night was her only answer.

Aine closed her eyes. She did her best to shut out the phantom pain from Tegan. *I need to follow my instinct.* So what did her instinct tell her to do?

The answer came at once with all subtly of a rampaging wild boar. Her heart, her soul, her body, all were screaming at her to return to Tegan.

It was only her mind that called her a silly, stupid girl as she turned the cart around and urged the horse to take her back to him.



## Chapter Nine

Tegan wasn't difficult to find. He stumbled into the clearing where Maev's pyre still smoldered when Aine pulled the carthorse, who was suddenly acting uncharacteristically skittish, to a halt. He collapsed to the grass, not bothering to look up at her.

"Were you trying to follow me?" Aine climbed from the cart and approached him warily, wishing the piercing pain in her leg would stop.

He drew several gasping breaths before he answered her. "Not following you. Just trying to get back." He did glance up then, motioning vaguely in the direction of the castle.

"By the Goddess! To Guardian Castle?"

His brow wrinkled and he gave her a look that clearly said he thought she might be soft in the head. "Of course not. My cave is in the Trier Mountains. I've stayed clear of the castle." Then his gaze focused on the pyre and understanding widened his expressive eyes. "This is Maev. The woman you thought I killed."

"She was a centaur Huntress." Speaking slowly, Aine corrected him. Then the truth hit her. Tegan hadn't killed Maev. She felt it just as surely as she felt the pain in his leg.

"I didn't kill her," he said.

"I know." She made her decision quickly. "Get in the cart. I'll take you back to your cave."

"And then you'll bring warriors there to kill me?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to do about you," she said truthfully. "If I touch you—help you into the cart—will you bite me?"

The slight, sad smile touched his lips again. "Do you want me to?"

"No." Aine said firmly, rubbing at the bruised spot on her neck.

"You are safe from me, little Healer. I lost control before only because I was on the brink of death. Your blood strengthened me. I am in no danger of dying, so you are in no danger of me drinking from you." He paused before adding, "Unless you wish it."

"Then I'll be safe from you forever," she said under her breath as she went to him and offered her hand.

Moving slowly, Tegan let her help him to his feet. She sucked in her breath when he stood beside her. Goddess, he was tall! He loomed over her, blotting out the darkening sky. His wings were at rest, tucked neatly against his back, but he still looked like a wild, masculine bird of prey.

"You're so small," he said suddenly. "I'm afraid I'll crush you if I lean on you. Maybe you should find me a branch I could use as a crutch. Or bring the cart closer and I'll hobble to it."

They stood there staring nervously at each other while he balanced precariously on one foot. Finally, she had to stifle the urge to laugh—albeit a bit

hysterically. Could he be as scared of her as she was of him?

“I’m stronger than I look,” she said.

Aine moved to his injured side and put her arm around his waist. His arm went instantly over her shoulders. She led him to the cart, careful not to go too fast. His body was warm and strong, and she could feel his wings behind her like a living mantle. She hadn’t noticed his scent before, but it came to her now. He smelled of the forest and sweat and man. He also smelled vaguely of blood—his and hers. Aine was disconcerted to realize that she found the scent alluring.

“I can only take you part of the way in this.” They’d managed to get him into the flat bed of the cart and she had started the horse down the castle road. “I’ll have to stop before the walls are in sight or the warriors might see us.”

“So you’ve decided not to betray me?”

Aine looked over her shoulder at him. “I’m betraying Partholon by keeping you a secret.”

“No you’re not. I mean no harm to Partholon. I’m not dangerous to your people.”

“Just rest while you can. You’ll need your strength to get yourself back to that cave.”

Tegan closed his eyes and cradled his head in his arms.

He hated lying to her.

## Chapter Ten

“I can’t take you any farther. The castle is too close.” Aine pulled the carthorse to a halt.

“I understand. If you can find a branch I can lean on I will be able to make it from here on my own,” Tegan said.

Aine gave him a doubtful look, but hurried to the side of the dirt road, searching under the ancient pines until she found a sturdy branch. When she returned to him, Tegan was already standing beside the cart. She handed him the branch and readied herself for the pain they would share.

“You can lessen it.” Meeting her questioning gaze he continued. “The pain—you don’t have to feel it with such intensity. Close yourself to it, much like you would close yourself to an annoying sound.” He paused, thinking, then his lips tilted up. “Like a screeching blue jay. Ignore it. Tell yourself it’s not there, and soon it will fade from your consciousness. Also, it won’t be so strong when we aren’t together. Our nearness intensifies the bond.”

Aine grinned at him. “Yes, I’ll think of you as an annoying bird.”

“Not *me*. The pain in my leg.” He touched her cheek. “You should smile more.”

She should have pulled away from him, but his hand was warm and it felt so right against her skin. Her body liked his nearness and she found it difficult not to lean into him.

“Thank you for saving my life,” Tegan said.

“You’re welcome,” she managed.

“I shouldn’t ask anything more of you, but I must. Give me a chance to prove that I mean you no harm. Let me earn your trust.”

“I don’t know how you could do that.”

He framed her face with both of his hands. “You know I didn’t kill your centaur friend, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I can earn your trust in the same way. Our bond will strengthen and you will be able to tell beyond any doubt if I lie or if I tell the truth in all things.”

“I don’t—” Aine began but his thumb pressing gently against her lips stopped her words.

“I am alone in Partholon. No other Fomorian are with me. Listen with your heart. Do you believe me?” Aine stared up into his eyes. It was full dark by then, but Tegan seemed to be illuminated with a light of his own. She could see into him and she knew that he wasn’t lying to her. He was truly alone in Partholon.

“I believe you.”

He let loose his breath in a rush of relief. Impulsively, he pulled her into his arms. “Thank you, my little healer.”

Just for a moment Aine let him hold her. It felt good to be in his arms—too good. Clearing her throat,

she began disentangling herself. He let her go, but only to an arm's length.

"Say you will come to me tomorrow."

"I don't know if I can."

"You must. My leg will need your care. I have no herbs or potions for healing in my cave."

Aine frowned, looking down at his offending leg. It was torn, swollen, and blackened from the cauterization. It was a miracle that he was standing at all. A man would have been completely disabled by such an injury. Clearly, Tegan was stronger than a man, but would he be able to recover if it festered? Or would he suffer and die slowly, with Aine feeling every bit of it?

"How do I find you?"

His smile was so joyous that Aine hardly noticed the sharpness of his fangs. "I could find you anywhere, but it would be easiest for me if you would walk to the west, as near the mountains as you can and think of me."

"On the Wastelands side or the Partholon side of the mountains?"

Tegan's expression sobered. "Never on the Wastelands side. It's too dangerous. The weather changes instantly. Instead of sweet deer and fat sheep there are wild boar and mountain lynx."

Aine felt a shiver of foreboding at his warning. She sensed that there were things he wasn't telling her. It was on the Wastelands side of the pass that Maev had been killed...

“You have nothing to fear from me. I will never drink from you against your will again, and I will protect you against anything,” he said.

She wanted to question him further, but his head snapped up. He scented the air.

“Men from the castle approach!”

## Chapter Eleven

“Go! Now!” Aine pulled away from him and climbed up on the cart seat. “I’ll meet the warriors and keep them away from here.”

“Tomorrow, Aine. Come to me tomorrow!” Tegan called after her.

Aine didn’t take even a moment to look back or respond. She urged the horse into a brisk trot, trying to put as much distance as possible between herself and Tegan before the warriors found her.

Edan was the first of the warriors to reach her. He galloped up to the cart, looking irritated and sounding worried. She noticed the other four men just seemed bored and annoyed.

“Aine, why have you not returned to the castle?”

She blinked several times, putting on innocent surprise. “But I am returning to the castle.”

“It has been hours, and it is fully dark,” he said, now sounding more irritated than worried.

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t want to leave Maev.”

“Maev is dead. Nothing more can happen to her, unlike you,” Edan said severely.

“I’m sorry,” Aine repeated sheepishly.



One of the warriors she didn't know made a scoffing sound and told Edan, "You see? The Monro said she didn't need a watchdog."

For the rest of the way to the castle none of them spoke and Aine focused on thinking of the pain in her leg as an annoying bird and not thinking of Tegan and her strange feelings for him.

Even though she didn't consider Guardian Castle her home, Aine felt a very real sense of relief when the cart passed under the iron front gates and entered the square courtyard. It was almost not dreary with all the torches lit and the scent of food coming from the Great Hall.

"Developing a liking for the forest, Healer?"

The Monro stepped out of the shadows. Reeking of strong spirits, he blocked her way back to her chamber, which adjoined the infirmary.

Caught off guard, she wasn't sure what to say to him. Then her promise to meet Tegan the next day jolted through her. "Yes. I, uh, I'm homesick and the forest reminds me of the Temple of the Muse. The pine trees are the same," she finished inanely.

"A word of warning—this isn't the neutered forest that surrounds the Temple of the Muse. Ask Maev." The Chieftain's words were slightly slurred and his smile was cruel. "I'm mistaken. You can't ask her. She's dead." Chuckling to himself, he walked away. Tegan collapsed on the floor of his cave. He needed rest. He needed blood.

He needed Aine.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on slowing his breathing and controlling the ache in his leg. She could feel it, and he didn't want to cause her any more pain than he'd have to.

He hadn't planned on meeting Aine—he hadn't planned on meeting any Partholonians. He'd only wanted to escape what was coming and live out his life in peace. The loneliness had been inconsequential. The alternative was so much worse.

Until Aine—she had changed everything. He must warn her—ready her. But how? She didn't trust him. If he told her the truth now, she would turn from him. And he couldn't bear that—not after being bonded to her.

He shook his head, amazed anew at what had happened between them. Tegan had given up the idea of ever mating years ago. Aine was a miracle—his miracle, and he wouldn't lose her. Their blood bond drew her to him, but Tegan knew that were it not for that exchange of blood she would have run from him, probably betrayed him to her people. So he must win her trust. Perhaps her love would come later.

He would have to act quickly. That time was running out was one thing of which Tegan was certain.

## Chapter Twelve

With Epona's urn clutched in her arms, Aine walked through the front gate.

"Healer, where are you off to?"

Aine sighed at the sound of Edan's all too familiar voice. Carefully, she covered the open top of the urn with an edge of her cloak. Her face a mask of polite neutrality, she turned to look up at where the warrior called down at her from the gate watch station.

"I'm going to Maev's pyre to collect some of her ashes. Her Herdsmaster will most likely send for them, and it would be respectful to keep them ready for him."

"You're probably right." He glanced up at the morning sky. "At least you have plenty of time until dusk. Be sure you're back by then. I'm hunting in Maev's place today. I won't have time to come fetch you." Edan smiled, showing that he was no longer annoyed with her.

Aine nodded, smiled, and called "Happy hunting" to him before turning away.

Edan's newfound attention was ill-timed. Until he'd taken notice of her, no one—outside the few minor injuries and illnesses she'd dealt with—had had much to do with Aine. The men ignored her; the

women made no friendly overtures towards her. Actually, the women were particularly odd. Instead of loosening up and accepting her, they seemed to do the opposite. The longer she'd been there, the less she'd seen of the women. That was yet another reason why she and Maev had become such good friends so quickly.

Maev...she felt terribly guilty about using her as an excuse. *I will collect her ashes* she promised herself as she stepped off the road and entered the forest. Circling around until she was out of sight of the castle, Aine left the forest and headed to the edge of the austere Trier Mountains.

Aine thought of Tegan.

It was easy to think of him. She'd done little else since leaving him. She should have been terrified of Tegan, or at least disgusted by him. Aine was neither. Of course it was because of the blood they'd exchanged that she felt like this. Aine's stomach fluttered as she remembered his lips and teeth against her skin and the erotic pull of him drinking from her. Her mind insisted she was only going to him to treat his wounds. Her body had a different agenda.

The pain in her leg had just become impossible to ignore when he spoke.

"Aine! Over here, my little Healer."

Tegan's voice led her into the rocky recesses formed at the base of the mountain range. He appeared before her like something out of a dark dream—mysterious and tantalizing. He held out a hand,

beckoning her deeper into the shadows. Aine hesitated, struggling to sort through the wash of emotions that seeing him filled her with.

“I can not come out there to you. Direct sunlight is harmful to my people, and in my weakened state it would cause me much pain.” His lips tilted up in that alluring half smile she remembered so well. “It would cause *us* much pain, and I would rather spare you that.”

She joined him in the shadows. They stared at each other. Aine was more than a little shaken by how badly she wanted to touch him.

“Have you lost the ability to speak?” he asked softly.

“No! I—I see that your leg is better,” she blurted, even though her eyes had not left his face. “I brought medicines.” Aine nervously held up the urn.

Tegan didn’t even glance at it. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“I had to.”

“To heal me?”

“Yes.” *And to touch you and be with you and see you smile again.*

“Come, my cave is close.”

Tegan led her through a crevasse that cut deeply into the slate colored mountains. He moved slowly, heavily favoring his injury. Because of the narrowness of the path she couldn’t walk beside him, but followed close behind. His wings mesmerized her. They were huge...dark. She’d never imagined anything like them.

She had only brushed against them briefly last night and she wondered what it would be like to touch them on purpose—to stroke them.

She almost ran into Tegan when he stopped abruptly. He looked over his shoulder at her. She felt a breathless thrill at the passion reflected in his amber eyes.

“I can feel your desire. It’s making it very difficult for me not to take you in my arms.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Aine forgot to breathe. “Your wings are beautiful.” She watched them shiver, as if her words had been a caress. Surprised, she took an involuntary step back.

“Please don’t fear me. We are bound, you and I. I would tear these wings from my body before I harmed you.”

“Could you do that?” She stared at his wings. “They seem so much a part of you.”

“To my people wings are the seat of our soul. Destroy my wings and you will probably destroy me.”

He’d given her the gift of his vulnerability and it frightened her terribly. Not for herself, but for him. What would have happened if the bear trap had closed around one of his wings and ripped it off? It made her sick just thinking about it.

“Aine, are you worried for me?”

She pulled her gaze from his wings and met his eyes. “It’s just that they’re so...out there. If your wings are that important you’d think they’d be better protected.”

Tegan laughed. “You’d be surprised. I’m not usually this helpless.” Still chuckling to himself, he continued down the narrow path.

They hadn't gone much farther when Tegan told her, "You'll have to bend down to enter the cave, but it widens soon."

She watched him crouch and then disappear into what looked to be nothing more than an ordinary niche in the side of the mountain base. She ducked and went after him. After only a few feet the entrance spilled into a large, oblong room. There was a round opening in the ceiling, but it only let in a weak, indirect light. Mostly it served as an escape for the smoke from the well-banked fire that gave soft light and ample heat. She heard falling water and saw that the rear wall was wet with a steady waterfall which ran out through a crack in the rock floor. Along another wall were strips of smoked meat interspersed with drying herbs. The cave smelled pleasantly of pine smoke and spice.

"How long have you been here?" she asked as she began to unload the urn.

Tegan was gingerly lowering himself onto a pallet of furs. "Two full passes of the seasons."

She blinked in surprise. "And no one knows?"

"Only you. I rarely go out into the Partholon forest, and was only there yesterday because winter is coming and the hunting there is better than the Wastelands side of the mountains."

Aine began examining his leg. "So there are really no other Fomorians here with you."

"You said you believed me yesterday."

"I did. I do. It's just that this is all so incredible."



He sucked in a sharp breath as she poured a cleansing solution over his wound. Aine grimaced, but didn't pause until the leg was clean and dressed. Then she sat back, breathing as heavily as Tegan. She studied him with Healer's eyes. His wound was better today, but he looked worse. There were bruised shadows under his eyes and his skin had lost much of the luster it had the previous day.

"I'll be better now that you are here."

She frowned at him. "Stop reading my mind."

"I'm reading your face, not your mind." Tegan smiled. "Sit beside me and tell me about yourself."

Aine sat, noticing that the tip of his wing was almost touching her knee. "I'm a Healer," she said, trying to keep her attention from his wing. "I grew up at Laragon Keep. The women in my family have been Healers for generations."

"A legacy of kindness and strength." Tegan covered her hand with his as if it was a completely natural thing to do. "I have been given such an amazing gift in you."

Aine was going to pull her hand away, but then she felt it. His pulse against her skin. And in that pulse she also felt the beat of his need for her.

"You want to drink from me again." Aine's voice trembled.

"I do. I will always want you."

"Your need is especially intense now because of your injury." She concentrated on him, staring into his eyes. "It would help you heal, wouldn't it?"

“Your blood has the power to heal me, body and soul.”

She did pull her hand from him then, rubbing at the spot that was still warm from his touch.

“Aine, I gave you my word I would not drink from you against your will.”

“What if it isn’t against my will?”

## Chapter Fourteen

“I want you to drink from me and be healed. Then I want you to return to your people,” Aine said.

“You want...” Tegan began, trying to reason through the haze of desire her words had caused to pulse through his body. Then all of what she’d said broke past his need. “No. I won’t leave you.”

“You have to. It’s only a matter of time before the Guardian Warriors find you. They’ll kill you. They won’t care that you’re not a monster—a monster is all they’ll see.”

He touched her cheek. “Then I am not a monster to you?”

“How can you be? You’re in my blood. I feel what you feel. I’d know if you were a demon, and you’re not.” Aine pulled a small knife from within the urn. Without looking at Tegan she drew the blade down the inside of her forearm. Then she turned to the winged creature beside her, offering him her arm. “Drink.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing to me.” Tegan’s voice was rough, but he cradled her bleeding arm gently in his hands.

“I do. I can feel it, too.”

With a moan of ecstasy, Tegan leaned forward to touch his tongue to the narrow slash in her skin. At the first taste of her, his wings shivered.

“So beautiful...” Aine breathed the words. She ran her fingers along the soft down that covered the underside of them.

He gasped her name. Pressing his mouth against her arm he sucked and licked, causing pleasure to ripple through her body. She lost herself in sensation, thrilled by the power in the wings that were unfurling over her. Tegan continued to drink from her as he pulled at her clothing. Dizzy with need—both his and hers—Aine helped him, until she was naked.

Tegan took his lips from her arm. Reverently, his hands glided over her body, pausing to cup the fullness of her breasts.

“I’ve never known such sweet softness.” He touched his tongue to the pink tips of her nipples. As Aine moaned with pleasure he sucked the delicate buds into his mouth, gently grazing them with his teeth.

“Tegan, please.” Aine’s hips lifted to rub herself against the hardness sheathed in his pants.

Tegan pulled away from her so that he could look into her eyes. “I can stop now. I will if you wish it. You must know that if we do this—if we join—then we will be fully mated, and I will not, *can not* leave you.”

Aine tried to think, but all she could do was feel. She felt his passion and need, along with the heat of

her own desire. Then she realized that she could feel something more than raw lust. Aine could feel Tegan's kindness, and along with it she sensed a soul deep sadness born of loneliness and isolation.

"How long have you been alone?"

"Longer than you've been alive."

"No more," she whispered.

She felt his despair before she saw it reflected in his eyes. He pulled out of her arms and turned away from her.

"You don't see me as a demon, but that does not mean it is your wish to be mated with me."

"You misunderstand." Aine sat up, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and drawing him back to her while the tips of her fingers splayed across the inside of his wings. "I meant that you will be alone no more."

Tegan kissed her with such fierce joy that it made her cry out. He released her instantly.

"Did I harm you?" He smoothed her hair back, peering anxiously into her eyes.

"No, love. Always remember, I'm stronger than I look."

She smiled as she worked the ties of his breeches, finally pulling the throbbing heat of him free. Aine stroked him with her hands, marveling at the thick stiffness and length of him.

He moaned her name and she straddled him, slowing impaling herself. Aine closed her eyes and arched back, taking him fully within her. With a snarl,

Tegan wrapped his arms around her and shifted their bodies so that he was on top of her. Aine bared her throat to him, pulling his mouth down so that he could drink from her as her hips thrust up to meet his again and again.

With wings spread erect and pulsing over them, Tegan claimed Aine as his mate and spilled his seed deep within her.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Don’t go,” Tegan said sleepily.

Aine looked up from lacing her dress. “If I don’t return the warriors will come looking for me. They may be able to track me to you.”

“Then we’ll find a new place—deeper in the mountains. Just don’t go.”

Aine stroked the downy underside of his wing. It quivered, causing Tegan to close his eyes and moan softly.

“I will come back to you.” She kissed him.

“Tomorrow?”

“I’ll try. Rest and finish healing. I have a plan.”

He raised a brow. “A plan?”

“I’m going to tell the Lord of Guardian Castle that I’m not happy there. They’ll have to find a new Healer. It won’t surprise any of them. Maev was my only friend, and now that she’s gone there’s really nothing for me there.”

“Then you will come to live with me?” Tegan rolled a dark lock of her hair around his finger.

“Yes.” She was unable to keep the sadness from her voice.

“Why does the thought of being with me sadden you?”

“My family is going to have to believe I’m dead. That’s what makes me sad.”

Tegan didn’t speak. There was no other way. With what was coming no one would accept their love—Aine wouldn’t even accept it if she knew. That was why he had to get her away from here—before what they had was destroyed by an evil he couldn’t stop.

“Perhaps you and I will begin a new family.”

She looked startled. “Can we?”

He smiled and shrugged. “After the miracle of you, I believe anything is possible.”

Tegan thought she looked a little dazed as Aine wrapped her cloak around her shoulders. He stood up, flexing his leg, pleased at how good it felt.

“It’s much better,” she said.

“Because of you.”

Even when they couldn’t walk beside one another, Aine and Tegan made sure their bodies touched. She brushed his wing with her fingertips. He stopped often to pull her into his arms. By the time they came to the edge of the mountains, dusk was near.

“I have to hurry.”

Tegan kissed her once more, long and possessively. “Come to me tomorrow.”

“I’ll try,” she assured him.

He watched until he could see her no longer.

“Healer! Where have you been?”

The Monro’s gruff voice accosted Aine as she slipped quietly inside the front gates, thinking she was well hidden in the deepening shadows of dusk.



“I went to—” Aine paused. She’d left the funeral urn in Tegan’s cave! Thinking quickly, Aine glanced around them. They were alone with no Edan nearby to contradict her. If she was lucky, he’d been hunting all day and hadn’t even spoken to the Chieftain. “I went to Maev’s pyre and offered more prayers for her.”

“You should have been here. You’ve been needed.”

“What is it?” Aine frowned. The Monro’s words weren’t slurring, but he smelled like a pub. How could the Chieftain of a Clan, and Lord of Guardian Castle be a drunk?

“The warrior Edan was wounded while he was hunting. It was that same Goddess-be-damned boar.”

“Edan! Is he in the infirmary?” Monro’s drunkenness forgotten, Aine began hurrying through the castle grounds.

“No. We thought it best not to move him. His spine may be broken. You’ll have to go to him. He’s not far outside the rear gate.”

“Oh, Goddess! I’ll need my surgical box and a board to brace his back.”

“Those things already await you.”

Aine jogged beside the Chieftain down the path that emptied into the Wastelands side of the pass, feeling a terrible sinking in her stomach. The air was thick, oppressive. This was too much like what had happened to Maev. Then she noticed that Monro was wheezing and dropping behind her. He stumbled and almost fell. Aine paused, but he brushed off her aid.

“Go on.” He motioned feebly down the path. “Take the first right hand fork. Edan and the rest of them are waiting. I’ll catch up.”

Aine nodded and jogged away from him. *Pathetic. Before I join Tegan I’ll get a message to the Muse. Guardian Castle needs a change in leadership.*

When she came to the fork in the road, she sprinted to the right, finding her second wind. In the thickening darkness she almost fell over Edan. He was lying in the middle of the path—alone. He had been disemboweled and his throat had been ripped out.

## Chapter Sixteen

Aine sank to her knees beside Edan. She didn't have to touch him to know he was dead. Her surgeon's box was sitting neatly beside the body, just as the Monro had said it would be. There was no back brace, though.

"He doesn't need it," she whispered numbly.

"Ahhhhh, there you are, Healer."

Aine looked up into the eyes of evil.

A Fomorian stood before her. Several other creatures were behind him, carrying torches. The flickering light slicked off Edan's blood, which covered the leader's hands and face. He smiled and his dark wings rustled. There was blood in his fangs.

"I have need of a Healer," the Fomorian said.

"Who are you?"

"You may call me Nuada...or master." His laughter was horrible. The creatures behind him echoed it, making the sound bounce eerily off the walls of the pass.

Aine sprang to her feet and ran. Nuada opened his wings, gliding easily to cut off her retreat. He grabbed her arms, sinking his claws into her cruelly.

"I need your services, but that does not mean that you must remain completely undamaged."

He bared his fangs at her and bent down, but he didn't complete the attack. As he got near her skin his almost colorless eyes widened. He seemed to consider, and then pushed her so that she stumbled back towards Edan's body.

"Take her to the camp, but treat her carefully. We wouldn't want our Healer broken." His laughter followed Aine as the others grabbed her and dragged her along the pass.

Aine studied the Fomorians as they traveled. She forced herself to be dispassionate and use medical logic to assess them. Physically, they were similar to Tegan. They were the same species. That was obvious. But these males were different. They looked more insectile. They were taller, thinner, and their claws were more prominent. Some of their fangs were visible even when their mouths weren't open. Their leader, Nuada, was the most grotesque of the group. He was larger and stronger than the others. That they feared him was obvious.

Her Tegan was not like these creatures. These were the beasts of nightmare stories—what she had accused him of being. Instead of rejecting her mate, she understood what it was that had driven him into lonely exile. He didn't belong with these demons any more than she did.

The Fomorian camp was laughably close to the castle at the bottom of a ravine. Maev's dying words came back to her, *The warriors know! They know!* Fomorians had killed the centaur, and the warriors of

Guardian Castle knew they were here. Not Edan, though. Aine knew in her heart that he had not been corrupted. That was why they had killed him.

Nuada grabbed her arm and dragged her to a tented structure that was guarded by several Fomorians.

“Healer, I expect you to make sure they live for at least as long as it takes the young to be brought forth.” He shoved her inside the tent, throwing her surgical box in after her.

Aine blinked, trying to accustom her eyes to the sudden brightness. The opulently decorated tent was lit by hundreds of candles. Women lounged on cushions, sipping wine and eating pastries. She recognized several of them as women who had ignored her when she had first arrived at Guardian Castle.

They were all pregnant.

“Oh, good. You’re finally here.” A blonde with a bulging abdomen motioned regally at Aine. “I’m having some discomfort and the wine is not dulling it. I need you to give me something to relieve the pain.”

Aine stared at her, swallowing down her fear and revulsion. Those creatures out there were not Tegan, just as she was not these women. “You’re pregnant with a Fomorian’s child.”

“Of course.”

“Why?” Aine said, not hiding her disgust.

The blonde’s eyes went cold and mean. “That is not your concern. You’re here for us.”

“We’re bringing a new species into this world,” a plump redhead said dreamily.

“An army that will worship us and our beautiful, three-faced god.”

Aine felt sick. They worshipped evil; they reveled in it.

“Quiet! She’s only here to stop our pain.” The blonde gave Aine a cruel look. “Now, do you brew us something or do I call Nuada and tell him we don’t need you after all?”

Aine pulled opiates from her surgical box while she concentrated her mind on one thing, over and over: *Tegan, be wary, but come to me...*

## Chapter Seventeen

Tegan arrived with the next dusk.

His sword slicing through the rear of the canvas tent made a distinctive sound. He held open the flap and offered his hand to her. Aine looked at the women she'd drugged one last time before taking his hand and turning her back on them. They didn't speak until they were well beyond the Fomorian camp.

"Did you know about them?" Aine was facing him, arms wrapped around herself as if anticipating a physical blow.

"I knew my people had given in to evil. I knew they were planning an attack on Partholon. I did not know about the women."

"They're dead," Aine said in an emotionless voice.

"The women?"

"I killed them. They were all completely mad. I gave them an easy death before they could bring more demons into this world."

Tegan's head shook back and forth over and over. "You shouldn't have killed. The darkness taints you like that."

"And what should I have done?" Aine was weeping openly. "Run away? Hide?" She rounded on him, shoving hard against his chest. Tegan made no move

to defend himself against her. "You're not like them! You're not a demon, but you did less than nothing. You didn't stay and fight. You let evil win."

His voice was hollow. "If I'd stayed I would have become what they are. The darkness infected them. I left because I wanted to live without darkness."

"You left and let darkness rule. What did you think would happen to Partholon if you stayed silent? What did you think would happen to us?"

"I wasn't thinking about Partholon when I exiled myself. I just wanted to be free of evil and death. I didn't expect to meet you. I didn't expect to love you."

Mocking applause sounded from the darkness. Nuada stepped out of the shadows. "What a moving speech, brother."

Tegan stepped between Nuada and Aine. "We're not brothers anymore," he said.

"We still share the same blood." Nuada's smile was feral as he looked beyond Tegan to Aine. "I see more blood that I'd like to share with you."

"You'll have to kill me first."

"As you wish."

The shadows behind Nuada stirred. Aine saw at least a dozen Fomorians awaiting their master's command.

Then Tegan changed before her eyes. His wings unfurled. His fingers became talons. His eyes blazed with anger. "Run and live! I will find you." He told her in a voice magnified by power before he leaped forward to meet Nuada's attack.



Aine ran, but only until she understood no one was following her. She doubled back, creeping quietly along the mountain paths until she heard an odd sound. It was out of place in the night, and it reminded her of something. She almost didn't identify it, but just before the screaming started she realized that it sounded much like Tegan's sword slicing through the canvas tent.

With the first scream the pain hit her, driving her to her knees.

Aine didn't know how long she'd been unconscious. She woke up in the gloaming of predawn with a single thought: find Tegan.

Her body felt heavy and off balance as she stumbled, drawn forward by a relentless invisible thread.

When she found him it was too terrible for her mind to fully comprehend. She could only stand there, immobilized by despair and loss.

They'd cut his wings from his body. That sound she'd heard had been metal slicing through the flesh of his soul.

Then Tegan moaned and the Healer in her took over. She ignored everything: the raging pain that seared through her body in tandem with his and his pleading to let him die. Aine worked methodically. She pulled him into the shadows. Calling on strength she didn't know she had, the Healer half-dragged, half-carried Tegan to his cave. Then she went to work with his sword, trimming the ragged edges of his

eviscerated wings. She used the same sword to sear the flesh that wouldn't stop bleeding. Finally, she filled Epona's funeral urn and bathed his body, mixing cool mountain water with her tears.

His eyes opened when it was all over. "You should have let me die."

"I couldn't," she said.

"He took my soul."

"No, love, he couldn't. Your soul is safe with me."

Tegan closed his eyes against the tears that streamed down his pale cheeks.

Aine did the only thing left to her. She prayed.

## Chapter Eighteen

Aine used Epona's urn to pour a libation circle around her. Then she knelt in the middle of the cave under the round opening that showed a night sky filled with the brilliance of a full moon. The Healer spread her arms wide and lifted her face to the heavens.

"Gracious Goddess Epona, please hear me. I have nowhere left to go. No one else to turn to. Forgive me. I killed those women. I love a Fomorian and I'm too weak to leave him, even after I've seen what he could become. Goddess, I've felt you throughout my life, even before I heard your voice. I used to believe I only knew your presence when I healed someone, but I've come to understand that you were always closest to me when I failed. I don't deserve your love or your help, but I'm asking for both. And I'm asking for Tegan, too."

The sky above Aine shifted. The stars that littered the night began to whirl wildly, funneling into a shimmering cone that rained light through the roof of the cave. Aine heard Tegan's gasp of shock as the figure of a woman materialized in the air above them.

Aine's eyes stung with the effort it took to gaze upon the Goddess. With a gentle smile, Epona passed a hand before her visage, and her divinity dimmed and

became bearable. Aine felt the raging pain as Tegan struggled to lift himself so that he could bow before Epona. She started to move to help him, but the Goddess was there before her.

Epona knelt. She took Tegan's face between her hands and kissed him gently on the forehead. The phantom pain in Aine's back instantly cooled.

"My Goddess!" Tegan cried. His body was trembling, but his eyes were no longer haunted with pain and grief. "Forgive me for not being stronger."

"Tegan, my son, your strength is a deep, quiet well that rests within you. It nourishes without drowning your judgment. And when it's needed, you pour and pour from it. I am well pleased by you."

Then Epona turned to Aine. The healer began to kneel, but the Goddess's hand on her arm stayed her.

"Not long ago I gave you a choice, my daughter," the Goddess said. "As with the mate of your soul, I am well pleased by you."

"I killed those women." Aine's voice was choked.

"You did. Again, you had a difficult decision to make and you followed your heart. Would it help you to know that the people of Guardian Castle made their own decisions, and because they invited darkness into their midst they have been corrupted by evil? For many years to come they will pay the consequences of their choices. The ones whose spirits you set free are lucky. Their death was painless. Others will not be."

"So you forgive me for it?"

“You had my forgiveness before you asked it.” The Goddess smiled. “Your life has been short, but you have a strong spirit and you are ready for the journey ahead of you. So Aine, Healer and daughter, I give you one last choice.”

Epona took Aine’s hand and led her over to where Tegan sat looking strong and whole again, though he no longer had his beautiful expanse of wings. The Goddess joined their hands before she continued.

“I give you the choice of your destiny. You may warn Partholon of the coming Fomorians or you may escape from this world into one where technology rules and the beings here are merely stories of myth and magic. If you stay in Partholon you will not be safe and your love will not be accepted. If you escape to the world of technology, you will begin new lives and grow old together. Know before you choose that I will bless your decision either way. I give all of my people free will—even my champions.”

Aine met Tegan’s eyes. She didn’t need to ask him. Their bond told her that his choice was the same as hers. She didn’t blame him for it. It was who he was in the deepest well of his soul. She should know—she held that soul safe for him.

Aine looked into her Goddess’s eyes. “We choose Partholon.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Epona's smile was blinding in its brilliance. "Well done daughter! You have passed my final test. You've chosen the difficult task, to save my people. And because of your courage, you will actually have both worlds—and by living in the one, you can know that in time you will save the other. And you will need this. It is your destiny to keep it safe until the day Partholon has need of it." The Goddess made a graceful gesture with her hand and the funeral urn floated to Aine. Startled, the Healer reached for it, but it slipped through her hands to clang against the floor of the cave.

Chagrined, Aine hastily picked it up, horrified to see that a hairline crack had appeared in its base.

"Forgive me Goddess!" Aine cried.

Epona laughed joyously. "Little Healer, you couldn't be more perfect. I want you to remember this urn. The next time you see it you will know that the time of your destiny is near."

"I don't understand," Aine said miserably.

"You will. Just remember that this urn must return here with its likeness, and you and Tegan will be the ones to ensure that happens."

Before Aine could ask any of the many questions swarming through her mind, the Goddess placed one hand on her forehead and one on Tegan's. "Go with my eternal blessing."

Aine, Tegan, and Epona's urn disappeared.

*Fifty years later. Northwest Oklahoma not far outside the town of Locus Grove.*

The enormous mansion was a sprawling Victorian, as out of place in the Oklahoma countryside as it would have been on top of a slate colored mountain range. It was once beautiful, but age had cracked and crinkled it until it reminded some people of an old smoker's skin.

The ancient couple who had lived there loved it.

"Do we really have to leave this place?" The old man asked his wife. "I hate to see all of our things auctioned off like this."

"It's better this way—easier," she said. "Besides, our job here is almost over. Look, it's already happening." She motioned for her husband to join her at the window. Together, the two watched the scene in the backyard unfold.

"My God! What the bloody hell is this?" A man with an accent cried, placing the item haphazardly back on the table.

Another man picked it up and blanched in horror as he, too, saw the hairline crack in the urn's base.

"Sir, you are correct. Please accept my apologies for this damaged merchandise. Your bill will be corrected immediately."

The old woman smiled as she watched a beautiful girl with wild red hair approach the man and speak with pretended nonchalance. "Excuse me, but what will happen to the pot now?"

"It will be re-auctioned, *as is*, of course," the man said.

The couple continued to eavesdrop on the events of the auction, but only until the redhead bought the urn and drove off their grounds with it tucked into the seat beside her.

"She did look amazingly like the Incarnate on the urn," the old man said.

"That's because she *is* the Incarnate on the urn, or at least she will be very soon."

"Hard to believe someone so—" he paused, trying to decide on the right word, "—modern is going to stop the Fomorian invasion."

The old woman laughed. "At first she's going to believe that she's divine by mistake. As if Epona makes mistakes!"

"The Goddess's ways are not always clear," he said.

"No, but they are always interesting," she said. "Shall we finish this, love?"

Instead of answering her, he approached his wife. Facing her, he took both her hands in his own. "It has been a long, full life, hasn't it, Aine?"

"It has been, just as our Goddess promised."

"Because through her will we were able to escape *and* save Partholon," Tegan said.

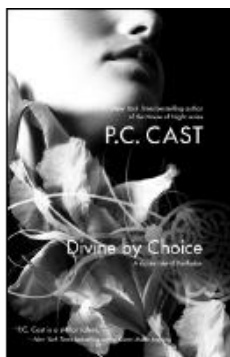
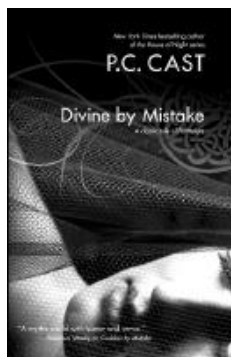


*Not only through my will, but also through your strength and willingness to sacrifice yourselves to defeat evil. Epona's voice filled the room with ripples of magic and love. Now, my children, it is time you came home.*

Still grasping hands, the old couple's bodies began to shimmer, and then their crooked, wrinkled forms fell away, leaving a beautiful dark haired woman with eyes the color of a spring sky, and a tall, lean man whose wings unfurled majestically as he threw back his head and laughed with absolute joy. Tegan took Aine into his arms and kissed her passionately as they faded from the modern world to reappear in their Goddess's verdant meadows, where she welcomed them with song and laughter and love.

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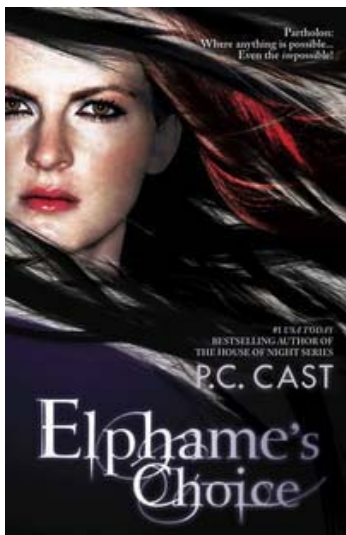
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