

Loose Id



# BARDIC TALES

MARAUDERS VOL. 3

CYNNARA TREGARTH

# MARAUDERS 3: BARDIC TALES

Cynnara Tregarth

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# **Marauders 3: Bardic Tales**

**Cynnara Tregarth**

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## Author's Note

*When I first started writing about the brothers Maraigh, I hadn't expected the fantastic response from the readers and reviewers that I received, so I was in shock for a while. But one thing that I was determined to do was tell what happens to them between books. I've always been curious in knowing what's happened after I've gotten to The End in a book and if the characters really stayed together or if they had more adventures before settling down. So for me, I was going to have that for the Marauders -- thus the book you have here. This is the first of the Bardic Tales, short stories written about the Marauders between the major stories so we can sneak a peek at what's to come. Though you won't always find romance, you will experience each brother in a way that gives deeper insight into their psyche, hopes, and dreams for when their book and their anamchara is found. I hope you enjoy the stories as much as I have writing them.*

*In starting this book, just as with all in the Marauder series, I've included the prologue to help set the tone for the stories that follow. For those who are familiar with the first two books, this might get your memories flowing. For those who are new to the Marauders -- the prologue will answer questions that might otherwise come up.*

*I also want to send a huge round of thanks to the staff at Loose Id as well as to those who have been supporting me as I coped with a very unusual last few months. Shar, Nik, Emma, Sierra, Jaime, Jenn, Eric, Joanie, and the rest -- I love you and treasure your friendship and your support.*

*Always,*

*Cynnara Tregarth*

## Prologue

The lone Druid wrapped in black robes approached the sacred ground that stood between the mortal world and that of the Otherworld. Though he and his brethren were cursed, Morrighu knew why he was here. He wanted concession from the curse she gave to them for their failure in serving her when she demanded it. Miach tossed a severed head toward her feet, blood and brains splattering around her.

She stepped back, not looking at the head, but at Miach, the eldest of the Maraigh Druids. "How dare you dishonour this sacred space?"

"Here's the reason for my brothers and I being wrongfully cursed, Morrighu." The tall, muscular, dark-haired man stood unmoving as she approached him. "These men slaughtered the nearby village of Caer Awyddion, helping to incite you to war against your brother, Taranis." He nodded at the head. "This was the one who told us that you'd changed your mind in how to carry out your order -- demanding that we leave your sacred town and negotiate peace outside of it, while your warriors dealt with the others."

Finally Morrighu looked down at the severed head, recognizing one of her followers -- one of her most trusted priests. When the fighting had started, she told him, Aritai, to warn the Maraighs to not leave their posts and to reinforce protection for the elders of the tribal village. Waving her hand over the head, she called forth a spell of revealing to show any touches by gods. To her surprise, a mark showed on the back of the man's neck, the type created only by those of the Pantheonic Realm. It was a lightning bolt, encircled. *Taranis! How dare you? I shall get even with you. You and I know what these men meant to me. You made me curse them to an eternal life of unhappiness in forms that people would fear.*

"I see perhaps I was too hasty in cursing you and your brethren. I cannot remove it fully, Miach. However, I can change the range and create a way for it to be broken." Morrighu smoothed back a black tress. "Though your family is cursed to walk the earth forever as

preternatural creatures, I shall grant you freedom through your *anamcharas*. Soulmates. If the woman you love bears my mark, then you're free. However, she must love you for what you are now, and you must respect her powers as equal to your own."

"Done. We never meant to disobey your commands. All of us were deceived." His tone sounded relieved, and yet cautious. The fickleness of the gods was something he'd been used to dealing with, and she couldn't blame him.

Thinking upon her shifting of the curse, she realized that something more was necessary to cover the possibility of Taranis interfering, possibly with a traitor wearing her mark, just like now. Morrighu removed the torc from around her neck. Tossing it to the ground before Miach, she nodded to it. "This is how you'll know if the woman has the potential of being your soulmate. If the woman's mark matches the marking on my torc, she's possibly an *anamchara* to one of you. The brother who is involved with her must place the torc on her to see if it recognizes her as one of my own, or one who may be a descendant of a true follower of mine, but doesn't practice my ways. If it glows, then you'll know that she truly that brother's *anamchara*. Now leave this place, unclean one. Go and hunt the world's evil."

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Miach bowed his head as he retrieved the silver and gold necklace. "Thank you, Morrighu. We will look for the women, our *anamcharas*, perhaps starting in your sacred priestesshood. Once the curse is broken, we can once again take our places among your dedicated, and continue teaching others."

"One can hope that you shall find release soon. I shall deal with the others who bear the mark of my brother," Morrighu announced, her voice colder than ice.

Miach tamped down the flash of anger at her taking away the revenge due to him and his brothers. As he turned on his booted heel, he ground out, "If we catch the god in avatar form off sacred ground, we will use our combined knowledge to destroy him. Be warned. Not even Arawn can prevent us from taking our revenge." Without waiting for her reply, he headed back toward the veil that separated the mortal world from the Otherworld.

An agonized scream rent the air as the souls of past, present, and future warriors protested against something beyond comprehension to the spirit realm. The pain filled him, bringing him almost to his knees. Looking over his shoulder, Miach watched Morrighu fall to the rugged ground as she let out another cry, echoing the screams of innocents unjustly killed.

"No, I cannot believe he'd do this! How dare he disrupt the balance with this act of treachery?"

Once he stood, Miach re-crossed the distance quickly and gathered up the goddess in his arms. Though he knew the punishment of holding her was death to those cursed, he

couldn't help following his training as a Druid and as a man. "What's wrong, my goddess? What has disturbed the souls to this extent?"

"Gone. They're all gone. The women of Caer Arian, the home of my priestesshood, are gone. Those who were dedicated and marked by me are dead."

Miach's heart clenched before sinking to the inky depths of despair. So, it was over after all. There was no way that he or his brothers would ever be free of the blood-induced curse. No woman would ever be found with the mark of Morrighu. Everything they had done to show their innocence, to have the curse lifted and changed was for naught.

They would roam the earth as Marauders, always preying on those who'd destroy the lives they protected. There would be no release. *None.*



## Samhain Healing and Blessing

*Note: This story, Samhain Healing and Blessing, takes place between The Mark of the Blood and Call of the Wyld.*

Miach approached the two-storied home, climbed the short set of steps and knocked on the door, the slight chill of the wind catching him off guard as evening approached. “Stupid Florida weather,” he growled. “Can’t figure out if it’s going to be hotter than fuck or actually dip into coolness this time of year.”

“You don’t say,” Donal retorted with a grin as he ran up the steps where Miach waited impatiently. “What the hell is that idiot Niam waiting for -- all of us to arrive on his door stoop? What gives?” Donal tried the door handle, only to find out what Miach realized -- it was locked so he banged his fist on the door. “Niam! Kirstie! Open up, dammit!”

A woman’s voice floated toward them as they heard a window open. “No. Go away, we aren’t buying any!” Kirstie yelled out the second floor window playfully, waving to both Miach and Donal. “Who invited you people here, anyway?”

A raven-haired man walked toward the house, appearing from seemingly nowhere as colours filled the sky from the western setting sun. Finn Maraigh joined his brothers while he answered Kirstie. “I thought it was you who sent the invite for us to join you for your first Samhain as a Maraigh.”

“No, Niam. Damn that man!” Kirstie cursed loudly. “I’m on my way down to open the door. He’s busy doing something and probably didn’t hear you all arrive.”

As they waited for Kirstie, the other brothers arrived -- Cuin, Dylan, Elathan, and Cadrus. Only Owain was absent. Still, no one came to answer the door as they crowded near each other.

“Do you think we arrived as they were having wild sex, and that’s what’s taking so long?” Donal smirked. Miach cuffed his youngest brother.

“Gods, I hope not,” Cadrus replied, running his hands through his hair. “I don’t think I can handle an overflow of sexual emotions feeding me when I’ve been celibate for the last couple of weeks.”

“You celibate? No fucking way,” Cuin countered, punching Cadrus in the arm. “You never refrain from wild, emotional sex when it means you can feed well.”

Cadrus growled. “The guys I’m training with, believe that not having sex before an extreme stunt allows you to have complete focus for that alone. It’s their way and since I’m working with them all day and night, I’ve not had one hot woman in all that damn time. Luckily our stunt is scheduled for November fifth, then I can make up for lost time.”

“I wonder why no one’s answered the door,” Miach interjected as he struggled to keep solid form, instead of assuming Wraith form as sunset flowed into twilight. Normally he had no problem with keeping his shape, having trained over the past millennium, but his worry over his brother finally finding happiness had his focus off-center.

Suddenly the door opened, and a short brunette smiled at all of them from the doorway, then ushered them in. “I’m sorry I took so long, but I had to find Niam first and let him know that you all had arrived.” As each walked past her, she gave them a hug and kiss. “Thanks for coming tonight. Niam’s in the kitchen waiting for everyone.”

Miach gazed into Kirstie’s bright blue eyes and found himself unable to read her expression. Niam must’ve been coaching her on how to hide her emotions from the rest of the Maraighs. He hugged her tightly and then wandered toward the kitchen, most of the other brothers in tow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elathan grabbed Kirstie and pulled her into a huge hug. “Have you told --”

She shook her head, placing a finger on his lips to quiet his protests. “Not yet. Later. Niam’s decision.”

“But --”

“Later. First things first, Elath. You know that. Breaking the ritual wouldn’t help anything. Trust me, that much I know.”

Elathan followed Kirstie inside, letting her shut the door as he watched her intently. The small wince as she exerted effort hadn’t escaped his attention. No matter what Niam thought, the others shouldn’t have been walking blindly into tonight’s gathering. If they had told his brothers, like they’d told him, preparations could’ve been made, allowing them even more of a chance of success. But Niam was stubborn, determined to do this his way, and Elathan hoped that everything turned out okay, because he knew the others would be upset once they learned the real reason they were here to celebrate the Celtic New Year.

He let Kirstie lead the way into the house while he looked around the huge, antiques filled home. This place resonated magick and energy, so perhaps things would go well after all. As he stepped toward the kitchen, he heard the cacophony that only his siblings could create at a gathering.

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Clannad's greatest hits filled the kitchen as some of the brothers poured drinks for all of them and the others helped set up the last of the food that had been prepared. The talk was non-stop and Niam allowed it to flow over him as he kept a watchful eye on his beautiful wife.

"You've heard the latest about Siobhan, I take it?" Dylan said to Miach, handing the oldest Maraigh a glass of Laphroaig, a single malt whisky.

Miach growled as he took his drink from the were-Eagle. "What about Siobhan? No one has told me shit. Last I heard, she was back at the agency, doing well after her close call with death."

"Well, Casper, it's like this --" Cadrus chimed in, clinking glasses with Dylan.

Miach snapped, "Enough, Count Chocula, before I put you back in your cereal box permanently. Now, someone tell me what's going on with Dylan's *cuntoir*."

The brothers laughed at the interplay, though Niam knew his chuckle sounded a bit forced. Kirstie smiled at him as she stepped into the fray. "Seems she wants a leave of absence for about two months. After everything that's happened, she managed to meet someone nice and would like to get to know him better while having a long-overdue vacation."

Miach's brow rose in question. "What do her brothers say?"

Kirstie was cut off from answering as two tall men, one blond, the other brunette, entered through the unlocked backdoor. Niam waved Davyd and Micheal Padraig O'Connor over toward the food as they answered Miach.

"We say only give her a couple of weeks off as none of us ever get that much down time. Plus, we know the guy and met the organization he's part of. It's been around a long time, has worked with us before on some cases, but I'll reserve judgment on him," Micheal said, taking a beer from Donal's hand. "Thanks, Donal."

"I think she should be allowed to date him, but I also think that she's not thinking with her head." Davyd nodded at Niam as the druid offered the Helsinger trainer a tall glass of juice.

Miach set down his glass, then faced Micheal Padraig. "You don't say. Do I dare ask about the organization?"

"You could." Micheal Padraig smirked, kissing Kirstie on the cheek in greeting. "But then I could deny ever revealing it to you. I've got to watch my step, you know."

Davyd reached out and smacked Micheal's dark head, much to Niam's amusement. They were almost as bad as his siblings, but tonight their roles served a special purpose, and he couldn't forget that. Davyd pointed to his brother. "Don't listen to his asshole supremeness. He's still looking over his shoulder, waiting for his punishment from Morrighu."

"Yeah, you'd be uneagerly waiting if it had been your life in her hands."

Davyd smirked. "I'm not as stupid as you are. As for the organization, it's the same one that one of our ancient-but-not-ancient ancestors is a part of. They have nothing bad to say about the guy, so take it as you want."

"Ahhhh," Miach replied before biting into a dip-laden chip.

"Then he's a good guy, this man she's interested in," Donal remarked, as he sipped on his drink. "We can always ask some others about him if we're still curious later on, though I think that Dylan's being over fatherly in his worry."

Dylan chucked a chip at Donal, who ducked in time. The chip hit the floor and Niam pointed toward the mess. "Clean it up, asshole." The dark-haired druid stuck out his tongue, but cleaned up the mess anyway.

"Yeah, he serves the Elements and he knows the old ways," Davyd answered, scooping up some pretzels. "So, I've got a question. Why are Micheal and I here? The invite was a bit unusually worded and didn't reveal much beyond a Samhain celebration."

It was time for Niam to explain things as all gazes landed on him, including his wife's. He gestured for her to come by his side as he cleared his throat. "There are reasons for that. First, let's eat then I'll explain everything."

"Oh, no, there will be none of that. I had enough of the fire surprise last year," Cuin spoke, anger tingeing his voice as he pointed at Niam. "Explain first, then there's no bad surprise after that makes me constantly look over my shoulder waiting for something that might never happen."

The other brothers chimed in with Cuin, and Niam glared at the O'Connors. Though they didn't know all that was going on, they did know a small portion. Before Niam could interrupt the speculation, Kirstie raised a slightly trembling hand to quiet them down.

"It's not anything like what happened last Samhain. Your help and your gifts are needed, nothing more or less."

A dark shape entered the kitchen through the back door, revealing itself as the missing Maraigh brother.

"I take it that my help would be welcomed, then?" Owain strode toward Niam and Kirstie, hugging her first, then facing his twin.

"Hello, twin-mine." Niam hugged his brother tightly, knowing that they stood a chance now that Owain arrived. "I wasn't sure you'd make it."

“I got your invite, and the mental summons. The unusual wording worried me, so I rushed over.” Owain looked at Kirstie carefully, taking her hand as she stepped toward him. “You’re in pain. What’s wrong?”

Kirstie looked away from Owain as Niam moved to her side protectively. This wasn’t going how he’d planned on it. Leave it to his family to fuck up his ideas on how to handle this.

“Yes, she is,” Elathan answered softly, stepping next to Owain, greeting him with a hug before gazing at the couple. “I first found out about it when she collapsed in my hotel room while she freshened up for supper. What’s wrong with her?”

The moment he’d dreaded had arrived. Niam closed his eyes briefly, concentrating on his wife’s presence at his side, drawing strength from her, though he hadn’t fed from her in weeks. “She’s pregnant.”

Owain laughed happily. “Congratulations --”

Niam held his hand up, interrupting everyone in their expressions of joy. “Wait. It’s not that happy a moment. When we fought Taranis and she was in his grasp, he managed to taint her with something. The pregnancy isn’t going well and the baby isn’t growing correctly.”

Cadrus and Owain knelt on either side of Kirstie, placing their hands on her slightly rounded abdomen. Niam watched anxiously as he felt a wave of power surround Kirstie while his siblings concentrated on deciphering what was happening that ordinary doctors couldn’t explain. Finally, with sweat beading on their foreheads and cheeks, they moved back, their hands falling to their sides.

“I’ll help any way possible. You know that,” Owain said quietly. The Twins shared a look and Niam knew that Owain was deeply concerned by what he sensed. He tried to mentally speak to Owain, but his twin rejected the link by turning away at the crucial moment. Niam gritted his teeth as irritation and worry threatened to break what little control he possessed. He watched as Owain and Elathan resumed their scanning of Kirstie’s body for information to cure her.

“I freely offer what skills I have, as well. I don’t wish to see any harm to come to either of you,” Elathan stated quietly. “Kirstie is our sister and we protect and heal our own.”

Donal sat back, closing his eyes. “When did this happen?”

Niam blinked at the question. “During the fight between Taranis and myself. At the time, none of us knew what Taranis had done beyond knocking her out before his avatar was killed. I think he might’ve placed a curse or a hex upon her, though nothing I’ve done has revealed that kind of godly magick.” Fear tugged at his heart. Their time together had just begun and the idea that she might die now tore at his heart. It wasn’t fair!

Cuin reached out to Niam, squeezing his arm reassuringly. “We’ll sort this out, Niam. Trust in us. Together we are able to work powerful magick, and powerful healing.”

Niam swallowed as his brothers all agreed to help, reminding him that though they didn't always agree on things, they wouldn't abandon each other or anyone they cared for. "I trust you all because you're my brothers and I know that you alone are capable of helping us."

Donal's lids snapped open and he stepped forward, his hands scrubbing his face. "You're wrong, but I'm not sure you'd accept help from another source."

"What source?" Kirstie asked, and Niam heard the pain lacing her words as his brothers gently palpated her stomach and other areas of her body.

Donal's gaze locked with Niam's. "There's Lysandra of the Ma'at Council. She has great healing abilities. Even Mandor from the Unseelie Court would help us in this."

Niam shook his head. He didn't want anyone else involved in such a personal matter. "No. They're not us."

Donal gestured at Kirstie as she winced in pain. "Are you willing to lose her because they are not us, but might be able to help cure her?"

Niam debated and realized that he'd do anything to save his wife. Nothing was sacred if it meant losing her. Donal was right -- he needed to consider any help available, if it proved necessary. "Go on."

"Lysandra is not only head of the Ma'at Council, she's an Elemental Guardian who specializes in Earth, which means healing. She freely helps others, and I doubt she'd say no to something this unusual. As for Mandor, time and again he's stood at our side helping us fight against those who'd use the fey magicks to cause trouble. Remember too that we've often helped them with healing and creating potions that allow them to hide their true appearance while walking the Earth."

"This is true," Miach said, kneeling before Kirstie, taking her hand and smiling softly. Niam knew that if Miach offered his help, then his wife had a chance. Still, Niam was afraid that his siblings' power wouldn't be enough on this most powerful night.

"Mandor is both Seelie and Unseelie," Miach continued. "He's both Warrior Mage and a Healer to both Courts though neither claims him fully as theirs. If we don't succeed, we might need to call upon them, Niam."

"Agreed," Niam acquiesced, holding his wife's hand tightly while watching three brothers touch and stroke his wife's body, searching for answers. "We know that in doing this that we might lose the baby, and we've accepted that fact. But the main thing is to save Kirstie and remove Taranis' taint. Please help us."

Owain looked up at him as Niam stopped talking. "I need to sample her blood, Niam. It will allow me to know more about what might be doing this to her."

"Bite or needle?" Kirstie asked, nervously.

"Bite. It's easier for my body and talent to scan the blood than to bring a sample to the lab for testing since we're all here only for tonight."

Kirstie looked at Niam, then toward Owain, a wan smile curving her lips. "Please be gentle. I hate needles and I'm not so sure about that whole "biting me" vampire thing."

Owain grinned sexily at her, wiggling his brows. "One sweet, erotic vampire bite with little pain coming right up. Maybe once you're feeling better, you'll let me taste that sweet flesh of yours."

"I prefer my husband's method of feeding, thanks," Kirstie shot back playfully. "Though the idea of being treated like a goddess by twins does have some merit."

"I think my brother and I are more than capable of giving you the goddess treatment once you're healed. But let's get this done first." Owain took Kirstie's free hand, turning it palm up. Niam watched as his brother brushed light kisses up and down the wrist before his lips opened, allowing the long incisors to pierce Kirstie's wrist.

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She let out a gasp of pain, then moaned as the feeling faded into something else. Niam squeezed her hand reassuringly, letting her know that he wasn't leaving her alone. Finally, when she thought the pain/pleasure would never end, Owain's mouth opened, his teeth releasing her wrist. Before she could pull back her hand, his tongue darted out and pressed against the marks, healing them completely.

Glancing down, she noticed that his gaze was pinned on her. She wondered if he felt her sexual reaction to his bite. She hoped not because she loved Niam, not his twin, and didn't want to feel this attraction, even if it was bite-activated.

Her gaze slid from Owain to each of the other brothers caressing her belly through the sundress she wore. Then she took in the others, whose concentration seemed aimed at her. Feeling unnerved by their intent gazes, she blinked and shifted her weight a bit, trying to regain her inner calm.

"Am I okay?" she asked quietly.

Elathan stood up, grabbed a kitchen chair, and then placed it behind her so she could sit down. "You're going to be fine. Owain can taste a person's essence within their blood and any contaminants. If he feels that Taranis has infected you to that degree, we'll have an idea of how to combat him. Cadrus tastes your emotions for the same. Miach senses any magical spells wrapped around or within you."

Cuin, one of the were-shifters, moved toward her side, changing into his gray wolf form. He nudged against one of her hands, and she instinctively ran her fingers through his alternately rough and smooth coat. She felt a bit overwhelmed. "I had forgotten the special powers each of you has." Her gaze went down to Cuin. "You surprised me with transforming so quickly like that. I've not ever seen anyone shift before. Why shift now?"

*It's okay, little sister. This form is easier for me to tap into not only my Were powers, but my magickal connection to the Earth. And I hope this form will reassure you that we're here to help you, not to overwhelm you with our maleness.*

Kirstie chuckled softly. "Thank you for your concern on that. You all are a bit ... testosterone loaded in such a small area."

Each brother took his turn, touching, caressing, and murmuring reassurances to Kirstie as they examined her from head to toe. Though each touch was clinical, there was something more ... possessive, loving to them as well. She didn't quite understand it, but as they continued, Kirstie's trust in her new family grew deeper.

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Two hours later, they moved to the living room so Kirstie could lie down on one of the long suede couches. Next to her curled Cuin, comforting her by his warmth and closeness. "Thanks, Cuin," she whispered. "This hasn't been easy to deal with. I wish I knew what they were talking about." She gestured to the other side of the room where the others had gathered. "They're making me a bit nervous."

*I know, but realize that they're discussing what they've discovered and the best way to heal you this night. Samhain is a night of power, one where those trained can tap into the Otherworld and bring about the miraculous. The wolf grinned at her. They're some of the best in the world in any age, Kirs. Let them do their job while we relax for a while. The flight here from Scotland was atrocious.*

Owain, Miach, and Cadrus stood near Niam in the far corner, ignoring the armor, swords, and other antiques that decorated the room, reminders of their past. Donal finished lighting the last of the candles that encircled the room and then approached the group.

"You're sure about this, Miach?" Niam asked worriedly. "I don't want her hurt. As it is, the idea of each of you touching her in that way ... she might not like it. And honestly, I'm not sure that I like the idea myself. She's *my anamchara*, soulmate."

Miach sighed as the others tried to speak up, then slashed his hands downwards and gestured for silence. "Don't you think I know that, Niam? Trust me, if I thought there was any other way, we'd be doing that first. But we know the poison hasn't spread from her womb. You're the only one who'll have his cock in her, while we work this, but without our help, it's a limited cleansing. You know that from when you and Elathan tried last time."

Niam turned his head, drawing Miach's gaze to the woman on the couch. Though she was beautiful, he felt no desire for her, just affection for his sister-in-law. What he suggested wasn't going to be easy for any of them ... but it was the only viable way to destroy what Taranis had accomplished.



“Let’s do this,” Niam said, then moved toward his wife. He knelt behind her head and kissed her cheek. “The guys and I are going to help, Kirs. Trust in us.”

“I do. Just hurry up. I feel ... a bit nauseous, like something inside me is aware of the energy you all used to examine me. It could be just the baby, but I don’t think so.”

The brothers and the O’Connors carefully moved the sofa to the center of the room, then moved other items out of the way, until there was a circle of empty space around Kirstie. Miach smiled down from his position at Kirstie’s right side. “What we’re going to do isn’t going to be easy, Kirstie. Plus, there are going to be aspects that might alarm you. I’m going to tell you what we need to do and allow you the choice to stop this now or continue on.”

Swiftly, Miach explained the ritual and the spell, assigning parts to everyone. Kirstie’s eyes widened as he explained the part that had upset Niam, and Miach glanced at his younger brother. “You both have to decide if you’re willing for this to continue. It is possible to do the ritual without that portion, but it’s impossible to guarantee that we’d remove all traces of Taranis’ taint from Kirstie.”

Niam knelt down, brushing his wife’s chestnut hair from her face. “These are my brothers. I trust them, Kirs. I’ll be the only one in you. The others won’t go that far. I don’t want to lose you now that I have you, *gra*.”

The young woman swallowed as her right hand gripped the gray wolf’s fur. “It’s not that I don’t like the idea of being sexually aroused by so many men, but it’s that whole family thing.” She held up a hand as Miach opened his mouth to say something. “I know, Miach ... this transcends things and it’s the only way. As long as it’s only Niam that sinks his cock in me, no one else ... I can find a way to handle the rest.”

Miach inclined his head, pride filling his heart at his sister-in-law’s bravery. The ritual and spell weren’t difficult, just demanding -- especially in the requirements. Had they the choice, none of them would even think of touching Kirstie in such a manner, but there was no choice, there was no time. “I know ... and know that we do respect you more because you’re willing to do this and live. You are our sister, a daughter of Morrighu, and a damn courageous woman to get this far without any major help.” Turning his gaze to the rest of the assembly, he nodded. “Let’s get started.”

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Niam and Owain stood south, at Kirstie’s feet. Miach and Donal stood west; Finn, Elathan, and Davyd stood north, while Dylan and Cadrus stood east. Cuin remained at Kirstie’s side for her grounding as Micheal Pdraig took his place at the makeshift altar that stood at the western portion of the living room. The Weres had shifted -- Dylan to were-eagle form, Cuin remained in his were-wolf form and Finn into his were-leopard. Though they couldn’t speak verbally, their telepathic communication included all within the room. Their roles within the ritual were limited but essential as were the others. Everyone,

including Kirstie had disrobed, so nothing was hidden from one another. This ritual called for absolute trust in each other.

Miach spoke out loud, raising his hands toward the heavens. "North, East, South, and West. Directions of Elements, balance and powers undefined. The gods and goddesses of all pantheons -- hear our words and protect us as we try to help our sister, the soulmate of Niam." Picking up the dagger at his feet, he pierced his thumb, then offered the bloody digit to Kirstie's mouth. "Blood of mine, I give to you. Blessed you be, Kirstie, and the child within. May my blood help cleanse that which harms you. May my touch give you comfort."

Her pink tongue darted out, quickly swiping away the blood. Then she gasped as Miach's other hand gently cupped her right breast. Kneeling beside her, he leaned in and gently kissed her stained lips. His body tensed in arousal as it solidified into corporeal form when his finger brushed over her taut, dusky nipple. Power flew from him to her as he continued stroking his thumb across her nipple while withdrawing from the kiss.

"Your touch brings comfort, brother of my husband," Kirstie said, slightly breathless.

Donal took the dagger from Miach and repeated the nicking, then spread his blood upon her belly, his words echoing Miach's. Watching the younger man, Miach noticed how Kirstie's body relaxed a touch more as Donal's hand stroked her slightly rounded belly, then down her outer thigh. *Good. So far, so good. If this continues, she'll be able to let go, allowing the ritual spell to do its job.*

Elathan then Davyd repeated the sequence as they received the dagger, their words joining together as each caressed Kirstie's cheeks, neck, and upper shoulders with their free hands. Kirstie closed her eyes and Miach knew that the power of their touches and the ritual words were building up within them all. He nodded at Dylan and Cadrus.

They pricked their thumbs, allowing Kirstie to suck on each of them while their free hands caressed her other breast and hip, in tandem. Miach, Donal, Dylan and Cadrus shared a look, then changed their caresses from just relaxing to more sensual. Kirstie's body tensed as Miach and Cadrus gently tugged her nipples, then a slow sigh of acceptance escaped her lips.

"Continue," Miach whispered, nodding at Niam and Owain. "It's time to build more energy within her and ourselves." As Niam picked up the dagger, Miach shifted his attention toward Kirstie's breast, amazed at how tightly budded the nipple was. Dipping his head forward, he caught it in his mouth, suckling it gently. Kirstie shuddered and he felt it as if it were his own. Their link was complete.

Then after another minute or two, Miach became aware of the others within the link. Each one had given ritual blood to Kirstie as their hands continued to relax yet arouse the young woman. Soft animal sounds encircled them as Cuin, Finn, and Dylan became part of the link, blood given in their form, though their bodies were the links to grounding for the spell -- keeping them to their individual identities.

Miach watched as Owain kissed up one leg and Niam did the same, both stopping at Kirstie's exposed mons. As one, they gently opened up her nether lips and their fingers stroked her. Donal's hand slid down, playing with the soft curls, then caressed upwards, ending under Kirstie's right breast.

He glanced over and saw Cadrus teasing Kirstie's other nipple with tongue and teeth; each tug causing Kirstie's body to bow slightly toward them. "Continue the words, Micheal Padraig," he whispered hoarsely, then bent toward the enticing, budded tip.

Micheal Padraig's voice rang out loud and clear; power surrounded them and filled them as Kirstie moaned and arched toward the loving touches of those around her.

"To the gods, we give thanks. We ask that you cleanse this woman and child.  
 Take away the touch of a god who knew he was in the wrong.  
 Blessings and balance to this woman, this druid who serves the truth.  
 Cleanse her body, heart and soul as we touch her with love and reverence.  
 Let the darkness of Taranis touch her or hers not.  
 But let the hand of Morrighu bless and protect, just as she commanded us to do.  
 Remove the taint that would bring death and destruction.  
 Let the ancestors hear our cry, this day, Samhain, where death and life are so close.  
 With our touches and our hearts, we show this woman our love and devotion.  
 Let this cleansing remove all things belonging to Taranis.  
 Once again, let this woman be dedicated fully to Morrighu and those who love her.  
 Thus from the directions of the elements and the voices of love, we ask this."

The assault on Kirstie's senses continued as she felt hands and mouths upon her. Arousal raged with embarrassment at how her body writhed beneath their sensual touches. Never before had two gorgeous men sucked her nipples while the rest of her body was caressed by others and someone ... or more than one person ... slid their fingers in and out of her pussy.

Power and the need for release warred within her as her body arched upwards, granting the hands access to touch more of her. She tensed slightly as wetness slid down the slit of her pussy, followed by a finger. As it probed her ass, gently, power slammed into her. She clenched at the fur next to her, realizing that even its touch was erotic against her sensitized skin.

"Please ..." she whimpered, her legs opening wider, as she felt not just one, but two fingers slide into her ass while three fingers thrust deep within her pussy. "Goddess, yes!"

The caresses increased as her body rocked against the finger thrusts, causing her to need something more ... something else to allow her release. But she couldn't think, couldn't quite figure out what she needed when suddenly the fingers in her pussy pulled out.

A whimper tore at her throat at the loss of contact, but then as she felt the nudging of something bigger against her wet opening, Kirstie's body trembled. This was what she needed, and she moaned Niam's name as his cock slid deep into her pussy. As he thrust deeply within her, she felt the fingers in her ass continue to slide in and out, always the opposite of his thrusts. The sensation intensified as teeth bit her nipples, tugging them gently.

"Goddess, oh goddesses ... please ..." Kirstie moaned. "Cleanse me, make me whole ... let the magick within this special day start a new beginning that will bring happiness to us all."

She wasn't sure how she managed to remember, much less speak aloud her part of the ritual, but a burst of power slammed into her as her pussy clamped hard on Niam's cock -- her orgasm sending her into a burst of sensations, words, thoughts, emotions that were hers but not hers. Everyone was there as she tumbled over into the oblivion of sensation and power, and she knew that they would catch her when she came down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Micheal repeated the oath once more, with each of them adding their voices as Kirstie's body shuddered and her magickal and psychic defenses fell away before them all. Considering the control they used, they simultaneously started caressing her in loving but non-sexual motions as each withdrew strands of darkness that seemed to flow from her belly toward their fingertips. Niam withdrew from his wife's pussy, taking the small towel Micheal Padraig offered and wiping himself before returning to his place of honor and trust at her feet. With his fingers, he scooped up large quantities of black, sticky goo from her belly, though there was no visible opening.

Before they finished, the candles around them then brightened enough to almost blind them before settling back to normal. As Niam's sight returned, he saw that Morrighu stood near Kirstie's head, looking at each one of them with glittering, angry amethyst eyes. He saw that the others had noticed her arrival, but none said anything to distract from the ritual.

"What the fuck is going on?" The words seemed to explode from the goddess' mouth. None reacted to the unseemly question, each continuing their part within the ritual.

Miach stood and faced Morrighu, and spoke quickly, in a low voice. When he was finished, he looked down at Kirstie, then to the collection bowls filled with the poison that had been in her.

"We are almost done with the ritual, my lady." Niam thought there was something cold in Miach's tone as he addressed Morrighu, but he had to be mistaken. Miach was her favourite

and one of her devout followers. Yet, there were times when it seemed as if the two were more friendly enemies than goddess and devoted follower.

Morrigu turned from Miach and knelt beside the young woman who had awoken and smiled softly. "I just needed some help from my family, Goddess. They shouldn't have summoned you."

"The ritual they invoked caught the attention of all the pantheons, not just me, darling daughter." Morrigu glared at Miach before turning her attention back to Kirstie. "Their ritual is almost complete and has done well. But as a goddess, I can do a bit more to completely erase what my good-for-nothing brother has done to one of my priestesses. Will you trust in me to help you, Kirstie?"

Kirstie winced and tried to sit up. "Of course, I trust in you, Goddess."

Morrigu placed her hand upon the woman, forcing her to lie down, much to Niam's relief. His wife was still in pain; plus, there was the baby. When he and his twin were one with Kirstie during the main portion of the ritual, he'd felt that the baby had been completely tainted by Taranis and there was nothing left of the child that was salvageable. His heart ached for his child, but there was no way they would let a child tainted and possessed by Taranis into this mortal world. But now was not the time to mourn the loss that would come later -- first he must be sure that his wife was safe and healed.

Amethyst eyes met his and the goddess nodded slightly. Niam knew that Morrigu would take care of the fetus, causing no harm to Kirstie. At that moment, relief hit him and he stepped back into his brother.

"It's going to be fine, Niam," Owain whispered to his brother. "Watch and obey Morrigu."

The goddess gestured to them all, including Niam. "You lie down, Kirstie. This won't take much longer, I promise." She placed a hand on Kirstie's forehead and one on the center of her belly. "I need each of you to touch her once again. You don't need to caress, just place your hand or paw where you did before, renewing the link among all of you."

Once everyone complied, Morrigu lifted her chin, concentrating on Kirstie's essence as well as that of the fetus. In Gaelic, she chanted, calling upon her power. With each stanza, the power built within her hands. Power within the men also flowed to her, enhancing the magick further.

"Cleanse and wash.

Purify and make new.

From the water to the fire, let it be."

After repeating the words for the third time, Morrigu shifted the power into Kirstie, cleansing the woman from head to toe before focusing on the fetus. With a quick prayer for

the child's soul to be reborn without taint, the goddess allowed the child its wish -- a quick, painless death. Though not fully cognizant, the spirit was old and didn't want to be the pawn of a god like her brother. Then, with the last of the power generated, Morrighu cleansed away the taint and the fetus. After a moment of sending word to Arawn, the Celtic god of the dead of a new arrival for him -- one to be protected until rebirth-- Morrighu opened her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirstie cried out, wrapping her arms around her belly. Niam shuddered as a small link snapped, completely gone from his soul. He watched his wife sob. "He's gone ... the baby is gone."

Morrighu nodded as she brushed away a stray lock of Kirstie's hair. "I'm sorry, but the child --"

"We knew that might happen, Morrighu," Niam whispered as he moved toward the goddess. "Thank you for helping save my soulmate."

"Will you heal the pain left by the cleansing of the child?" Miach asked. Niam noted how his brother glared at their patron and how the goddess returned it with equal measure. Something had happened between them, but he didn't know what. Right now, it didn't matter, only that his wife was alive and healed. He kissed Kirstie.

Morrighu respond. "Yes, but only because she's mine. Not because *you* asked."

"You should've protected her better. This is partly your fault, Morrighu. You never warned your other servants who aren't the Marauders about Taranis or his minions."

"Don't push further, Miach Maraigh. You, of all people, tread on the thinnest ice."

"I've nothing left to lose and we both know it, Morrighu, the Death Crow." The resignation in Miach's voice caught Niam's attention, as well as the others.

"One day, you might learn otherwise, Miach." Morrighu turned her attention to Kirstie. "You need rest, young lady, and the loving protection of your husband. No more trying to save the world and facing raging gods with delusions of universal singular rule. My protection can only do so much when you suffer the physical touch of a god."

"I promise to not do that again," Kirstie whispered as she wrapped one arm around Niam's neck, keeping him close. "Is the baby truly gone?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry, but the child didn't want to risk putting others in danger and knew that it was better off starting over cleansed. When he's ready, he'll return to this world."

"Thank you again. I wouldn't have asked you because I know of your curse upon the brothers and your dislike of them, though they serve you faithfully."

Morrighu waved Niam away from Kirstie as the goddess whispered in the woman's ear. A radiant smile filled Kirstie's face as the goddess pulled back, then stood up. "Thank you for your words, Morrighu. They mean a lot to me."

Standing, Morrighu looked at each man, stopping on Micheal Padraig. “You. When it’s time, you will come to me and beg for mercy so that I don’t kill you.”

“Yes, my goddess.” The young druid’s words trembled slightly and Morrighu smiled at the fear and respect in the tone.

“Nice. Perhaps if you’re that submissive, I might let you survive your punishment.”

All eyes went to Micheal Padraig. Cadrus snickered. “Way to go, *cântior*. Get yourself on the death list of a war goddess. Smart move, you arse.”

“You don’t know anything, Cadrus!” The belligerent tone was back in the young man, but Morrighu knew that Maraigh teasing often ruined any proper behavior. She allowed them to continue the teasing a few moments before stepping away from the group. She inclined her head at them all.

“Remember that though you may be mortal or close to immortal, the gods can help you, should you but ask. Tonight you wielded great magick and were heard by many sympathetic to what has happened. Be wary that times are changing and Taranis and others like him will seek this unsettled time to further their ambition to rule both the Pantheonic and the mortal realms. But now, I must return to my home.”

Niam helped Kirstie sit up, shifting Cuin toward the end of the sofa. “Thank you for helping. It wouldn’t have been over completely without your blessing.”

“Indeed, Niam. You’re both welcome. After a good night’s sleep and a good breakfast, Kirstie, you should start feeling your strength returning. Niam, make sure you don’t let her get into trouble like this again.”

“I’ll make sure that she doesn’t.” He felt Kirstie punch his arm. Leaning over, he whispered, “There’s no way in hell I’m ever putting you in that kind of danger. Yes, you can help me and Micheal but never, ever directly against Taranis like that. I love you too much to risk you.”

“Feeling’s mutual, Niam.” Kirstie brushed her lips against his. “Just remember that.”

Niam smiled, then faced the goddess as she raised her right hand into the air. Another flash of bright light filled the room, then died away. Morrighu had left them once again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Weres returned to their human forms, then everyone dressed. Once the furniture was restored to its original place, Kirstie smiled at her family.

“Blessed Samhain to you all.” She struggled to sit straighter but Niam placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Rest, my love.” She reclined against the couch as the others fetched the food and drinks from the kitchen. After everything was laid out for them to enjoy, she asked Miach to lead them in a ritual of thanksgiving for Samhain.

Miach nodded and everyone joined hands. “This is Samhain, a time to remember those who have left this world for the Otherworld. A time to remember the good that has been done and to resolve to defeat the bad. This is Samhain and we give thanks to those who give us guidance and have shown us the way. We remember you. This is Samhain, a new year, a new chance at those things once thought to be out of our reach. May the blessings of this day be upon all of us and last throughout the year.”

“So mote it be!” Everyone chimed in; after which, everyone dove into the food and drinks, sharing memories and stories about themselves and others who touched their lives.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, under the clear, starry sky, Miach sat with Donal and Finn.

As they sipped on their beers, Donal spoke. “Do you think that we will be as lucky as Niam?”

Finn pointed to the Orion constellation. “Just as Orion the Hunter was given a chance, so shall we. At least, that’s what we’ve been promised.”

“Seems a bit open to interpretation,” Miach answered before allowing his solid form to phase away into his natural Wraith state.

Donal nodded as he put down his beer. “But we have proof that Morrighu’s curse can be broken, and has been at least once. By now the torc will be on its way to Egypt. Wonder if it’ll get there before Owain does.”

Finn chuckled as he mussed Donal’s hair. Miach smirked, realizing that Donal had a point. Owain had left to return to his research in Egypt.

Finn’s baritone voice interrupted his thoughts. “Little does Owain know what’s in store for him with Dr. Colette Wylde. If she’s half as independent as what Niam, Kirstie, and Davyd told us, then he’s going to have his work cut out for him.”

“Hell, I don’t think Colette is any better off, either,” Donal responded with a wicked grin. “She’ll be flat on her back before she realizes it. Our brother does have a way with women.”

“Ah, but if she’s the one for him, that’s not a bad thing,” Miach countered softly. He dismissed the memory that Mabdh had given him after his brothers fell asleep that last Samhain. There was no way he’d ever earn release, but his brothers would ... that he was promised. “In fact, if she’s the one for Owain, just as Niam predicts, it’s one step closer for each of us.”



“Once again we’d be free to live our lives as men, not just as Marauders,” Finn whispered, and Miach knew that his brother’s thoughts had to be on his own vision from the year before.

“True, but I’m not sure I’m quite ready for my *anamchara*. How can I be sure that Morrighu will allow my release?” Donal’s words carried onto the light breeze, reminding them that the curse still ruled their lives and shaped their dreams. Miach hoped that Donal’s release would come sooner rather than later. Of them all, he needed the healing of a soulmate the most.

“Blessed Samhain, *mo dheartháir*. May this year be one of happiness for us all,” Miach intoned as he saluted the night sky.

“Blessed Samhain,” Donal whispered then saluted his brothers.

“Blessed Samhain,” Finn responded, then poured the rest of his drink on the ground in honor of those dead. “Let’s go back in before Kirstie sends one of the O’Connors after us.”

Together, they headed toward the house, and only Miach noticed the black crow that watched them from the top of the home. He saluted his goddess’ totem, then slid inside the welcoming home. Samhain had come, and with it a chance at freedom.

## Imbolc Fire

*(This story takes place after Call of the Wylde)*

Finn rubbed the back of his neck, groaning as he worked away the knots of tension. He needed a shower, a shave, and a fucking holiday. He felt and looked like a bad day. *Screw this all, I need a break!*

“Slept like shite too?” Cuin asked, walking into the living room, his bare feet barely making a whisper of sound against the pale beige carpet.

“Yeah. Torturous dreams of fire and flames.” Finn grunted as he stretched his arms over his head. The popping sound was in sync with the air bubbles being released from his joints. He murmured his joy at the discharge of the pressure. “What about you, *deártháir?*”

“An island of fire and one of mists. Some kind of journey, where I’m beyond pissed at being sent.” Cuin repressed a shudder as he shrugged into his gray sweatshirt. “Personally, I’m tired of the continual dreams. Ever since Samhain --”

“Ain’t that the truth? I wonder if it’s an omen.”

“Fuck that, Finn. We’ve had enough shit to last us a while. Don’t need an omen. Ever since Niam’s curse was broken ...” Cuin trailed off.

“I know, I know. It’s been hard. The Otherworld has been quite rowdy since Niam’s freedom. But I don’t think these dreams are from Morrighu.” Finn rolled his head, stretching the muscles in his neck. His dark hair gleamed in the morning light. Stroking his goatee, he considered what he’d said.

“Well, it’s Imbolc, Finn. This is the time of Brigid.” Cuin grabbed a plush pillow from beside Finn and put it behind his head while he sat back in the recliner. “Perhaps she’s got something to do with this?”

Before Finn could respond to his almost-twin, a flash of burnt orange light lit up the room, giving everything an unusual sheen. Both Marauders jumped to the balls of their feet, slightly crouched, ready to attack whatever had caused this magickal illumination.

A woman's powerful voice filled the air. "You dare threaten my presence?" The swirling lights coalesced into the form of a tall, red-haired woman. Upon her head was a crown of mistletoe and holly, with small candles flickering on it. "Have you forgotten your manners? Don't you bow before deities anymore?"

Finn and Cuin dropped to their knees, heads bowed in reverence as they realized the woman before them was Brigid, Celtic goddess of fire and *awen*, inspiration. "You honor us with your presence," Finn murmured with respect.

"Welcome to our hearth, Brigid," Cuin chimed in. "What may we do for you?"

"Arise, *deárthair* Maraigh. I have need of you." She placed her hands on their heads briefly and Finn felt the goddess' blessing sooth his raw soul for a brief moment. She spoke after a moment of silence. Her amber-flamed eyes burned into both Marauders' eyes. "You must retrieve what was hidden so long ago. My daughter shall protect the treasure once you recover it."

"Daughter?" Cuin looked from Finn back to Brigid. "You have a daughter? Finn, I don't remember ever hearing of Brigid giving birth to a mortal daughter, have you?"

Finn shook his head but held his tongue as Brigid chuckled.

"I have three who are blessed by me. They are part of the Avalonian priestesshood. Just as Morrighu and Arianrhod each have three, so do I."

Finn moved back, looking up at the goddess. "You mean the Grail Maidens?"

Brigid rolled her eyes. "You are not stupid, Finn Maraigh. Yes, some have called the Nine the Grail Maidens, but they go back to a further time."

"What treasures will they be protecting? What treasure are we retrieving?" Cuin asked, sidling up next to Finn. Best to stand together, especially with a goddess before them. You never know when you might need to take the first step to getting the hell out of there when a goddess lost her temper.

"The one that you both placed in the Otherworld. My daughter cannot travel alone as she's not been apprenticed to one who knows the journey. You shall take her, and retrieve the Stone of Fal. You took it when Arthur died and I expect it back."

"The Lia Fal is where it always stands," Cuin pointed out.

"That's not what I refer to, Cuin Maraigh," Brigid countered. "I refer to the original stone. You shall retrieve it."

Their mouths gaped open in shock. In unison the two brothers stood up and looked the goddess in the eyes. "Milady Goddess, you must be mistaken --"

Brigid snapped her fingers, the flames from the tips spewing their way without burning them. "Do you think I'm so ignorant as to not know you took the stone only because of the

sufferance of Cymra, Lady of the Lake? That only in her pain of losing Arthur did she allow you to hide the stone until it was time for his return or until she called it forth?”

“How --” Cuin started to ask, but Brigid interrupted him.

“Do you really think I wouldn’t know your names of that time, or any other?” Brigid sighed. “Now, you have thirty minutes to prepare.”

“We need longer than that, Brigid,” Finn grunted. “It’ll take at least a couple of days to open the Otherworld to that extent.”

“There are others after the Fal Stone.”

Cuin cursed as Finn growled. “Others?”

“My half-brother, Taranis, and his high priests have been studying and searching the old texts. Some have gone to the Otherworld in small forays. They’ve disturbed the peace of the Isle of *Tir na Ban*, the Isle of Women. This cannot be allowed.”

Finn nodded at Cuin imperceptibly. They had to go and take care of this. It was true; as two of the few most entrusted knights of the kingdom known now as Camelot, they had hidden the Fal Stone from all seekers. Protecting the Hallows of the Celts was most important. How the hell had anyone figured out where the Fal Stone was?

“Is Avalon safe?” Finn asked, his dark eyes filled with concern for Arthur.

“Yes, the Nine protect it and his tomb. None of Taranis’ people, nor he himself can set foot upon the Isle of Apples.” Staring at the two men, Brigid snapped her fingers while uttering in an arcane language. They found themselves dressed in leather pants, boots, and linen shirts. Finn’s shirt was a deep forest green; Cuin’s was a pale cream color, emphasizing his coloring. “Now, all you need are your supplies to take with you. You shall be provided with food and water.”

Finn said nothing, but turned on his heel toward his bedroom. His anger was almost palpable to Cuin, and he knew that Brigit must feel it as well. Rubbing a hand through his spiky dark blond hair, Cuin apologized. “You don’t understand, Brigid. Finn just got back from fighting Taranis’ minions and he couldn’t prevent an unnecessary death. The death of a child that meant the world to him; though not his, it’s affected him.”

Brigid smiled softly. “I know, Cuin. This is why he must take this journey; his gifts are Otherworld based, even though he may shift form. He has to realize that all people are limited in what they can and can’t do. Sometimes we win battles, but there are casualties, even deaths. He’s been overly lucky in not losing anyone until now. Finn is truly a seer among Druids and we gods cherish one such as he.”

“Then understand his anger and don’t take it personally. I can understand his reluctance in this.” Cuin released a pent up breath. “I must go and grab what I need to bring with me.” He bowed slightly then turned away, walking to his bedroom.

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Finn glanced at his room. Everything seemingly colored in the light of flames. He pulled out his dagger, a cord of rope and his necklace. Holding the corded necklace with the small bead in the center, he bit back the emotions that threatened to overrule him. The bead was dark green with navy blue streaks. It wasn't the most professional bead, but it had been made by a small child filled with love. A child no longer on this realm. *I'm so sorry, Robin. I didn't mean to fail you.*

Straightening his shoulders, he grabbed his mobile phone and dialed a number. "Shane? Finn. Cuin and I are going away on a mission."

"Do you need help?"

"No, nothing beyond that you keep watch on the house. We've been summoned by Brigid. She's asked for help and we must give it."

"Can she do --"

"Yes and she has. We're retrieving a sacred artifact in the Otherworld."

Shane paused. "When will you be back? You know your brothers won't like this."

"Miach will just have to live with it and be grateful he's not going. If we're not back in three days, notify the others."

"As you wish, Finn," Shane responded, his voice filled with concern. "Are you sure you don't need backup?"

"I've got Cuin with me. Plus, I doubt Brigid will allow anyone else to go along with us."

"Travel well and safe. Return unharmed."

"Thanks, Shane. Take care. See you soon." Finn hung up the mobile and tossed it onto his bed. It'd be of no use to him in the Otherworld. Looking around the room, he grabbed a couple of items -- a crystal, a flint stone, a piece of rope, and a knife -- nothing that would be of assistance here, but could be powerful magick in the Otherworld. Shutting off the light, he walked toward the living room.

Cuin met him before they passed through the archway into the living room. "I let Miach know the deal. He's unhappy."

"If he'd get laid, he'd be less unhappy," Finn snorted. They shared a mutual grin. Teasing about their older brother was one of the few joys they had when dealing with Miach's bossiness.

"We don't need to?"

"Some of us make sure that isn't a problem. Others of us seem to forget about that until it's necessary," Finn chortled, slapping Cuin's arm. "Let's go before she gets pissy. I hate pissy gods."

"What's her name?" Cuin said, poking Finn's back. "You can't get laid and not let me know until this moment. You've got to tell me her name!"

Brigid interrupted as they walked through the arch. "Are you both ready? Time is drawing close. The sooner this is done, the sooner you can return to your lives."

"I will know her name," Cuin whispered in Finn's ear.

Finn smirked and nodded at Brigid. "We're ready."

Brigid chanted in an arcane language that seemed similar to Gaelic, but even more ancient. As they stood by her side, a doorway opened up before them. An isle ringed with fire stood before them -- the Isle of Fire. "One of my daughters awaits you on the island. When you have the treasure, either you or she can contact me and I'll bring you back."

The fiery curtain surged at the men, surrounding them and closing them off from their home at Powerscourt. Finn motioned for his brother to move to the scout position while he checked their back. Moving cautiously, both men began their walk toward the center of the island. "Perhaps we'll be lucky and not run into any major problems," he softly commented.

Cuin's snort echoed in the air. "Yeah, right. Has that ever been the case?"

"Well, granted, Camelot fell, even though it wasn't due to us, but sometimes things did go well. Just not often enough." Finn grunted as they started the steep climb. They knew the top of the hill was flattened and was made for offerings, meditations and other assorted aspects of worship and internal thoughts.

They climbed silently after that, each pulling at his soaked linen shirt as the heat increased. Flames sparked around the edges as fire opals glistened in the sunlight. Each step they took increased the temperature by three degrees. By the time they reached the summit, their hair was plastered to their heads. "Let's not tarry here any longer than necessary," Cuin panted as they stepped onto the summit.

"Agreed. It's too fucking hot." Finn wiped his brow with the edge of his shirt.

A woman knelt in prayer at the fiery-colored altar. She was dressed in browns, and oranges, with touches of scarlet. As they moved in closer, they heard her in prayer. "Let me be worthy of this quest. Let me be of help to the men sent to retrieve the Fal Stone. Being of the Nine means that I cannot allow myself to forget my place in this world or any other. Do not let me be deceived by those who serve you out of fear and not respect."

Finn cleared his throat, startling the titian-haired beauty. She stayed kneeling but shifted her body to look at both of them. Finn spoke first. "Actually, Brigid is one of our birth patrons. We do give her honor and we're here to help."

"My name is Cuin. That's Finn. And you are?"

"I'm Scarlet MacNessa." She pushed back her braid and stood up. Wiping her hands on her breeches, she looked past them. "Are you ready for this? Where do we head?"

Cuin nodded. "Ready as can be."

"We head where we take us. There are two stops before we can get the Lia Fal. There are keys to retrieve," Finn said brusquely. He headed down the hill, heading toward the pier on other side of the island.

“Is he often like this?”

“Often enough. Finn knows the Otherworld better than he knows our world.”

“This must be hard for him, taking an uninitiated person on this trip.”

“How can you be of Avalon and not be initiated?” Cuin asked as they followed Finn down.

Scarlet’s blush was almost as fiercely red as her hair. As they approached where Finn stood, she answered, “I’m a Visual. Without the help of a detailed description, I have trouble making my way to even Avalon. It took a long time for my mentor to get me comfortable traveling to Avalon. The others of the Nine haven’t been able to help me as much as I’d like, but with everything that’s going on, it’s not surprising.” They stopped as Finn turned around to face them.

“You mean that without visual aspects to look for, you can’t find your way around during Shadow Journeys?” Finn asked with a strange look on his face.

“Yes.” She sighed. “Basically, you’re talking to someone who has to have visual cues or I have to be brought to a place at least once, in order to come back to it. I don’t have the ability to craft it from opening myself to the place; I need some kind of visual reference.”

“No wonder Brigid sent us to be with you. You’d have trouble on a couple of the Isles if you blindly walked into where the invisible creatures were,” Cuin added.

“But then again, if she had no fear ... she could be a kender,” Finn joked, referring to the small boned, thieving characters found in the Dragonlance series by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman.

They chuckled, including Scarlet. “Actually Cymra said something to that effect the last time she Journeyed with me. For some reason, the invisible creatures either become visible to me or they end up rendered harmless, depending on my concentration.”

Finn raised his left brow in amusement. They approached a pier, where a skiff appeared to wait for someone to use. “There might be a use for you and your Visuality, Scarlet. Climb on in. Let’s blow this Popsicle stand.”

Cuin shook his head. “You’ve been waiting to use that for a while now, haven’t you?”

“Damn right.” Finn held the skiff while Scarlet and Cuin climbed in. He pushed the skiff into the water, then leapt into it. “Hold on. It’s going to take me a minute to communicate with the boat to get to our next destination.”

“Where are we going?”

“A place where your ability will help us retrieve the first key.” Finn looked out at the ring of fire and sighed. “You wouldn’t perhaps know how to get us through the fire without our getting slightly burned?”

She grinned at the brothers. “Why, in fact, we’re safe. Just head through it. Being one of Brigid’s own means anything I touch or am in contact with is impervious to fire. That would include you all as you’re under my protection, just as I’m under yours.”

The men sat back as Finn gave mental commands for the skiff to head out to sea. Scarlet kept scanning the distance, her back slightly rigid. Cuin shared a glance with Finn and cocked his brow. *Do you think she's afraid?*

*No, I think she's trying to memorize the Journey so she can come again, probably on her own,* Finn answered mentally. She's a brave one.

*There's something about her that just seems too young.*

*Like the fact she's uninitiated and yet she's one of the Nine?*

*Exactly,* Cuin agreed. *That just doesn't make sense, deárthaír.*

*Agreed. We'll have to get the information out of her when she relaxes more. I find it hard to believe any of the Nine would be inexperienced at Shadow Journeying, regardless of the cues.*

Cuin placed his hand on Scarlet's shoulder. "Scarlet, I have a couple of questions, if you don't mind."

They were passing through the fire and her skin began glowing slightly. It was as if her skin took in the sheen of the flames themselves. "Sure, what's up?" She turned around and faced the Maraighs. "What do you want to know?"

"Are you one of the Nine?"

Scarlet's hand drifted to her dagger sheath before stopping. Her voice was steady. "Yes."

"One of the Nine on Avalon?" Finn questioned. "Or one of Nine from elsewhere?"

She said nothing. Her gaze drifting out to the sea, she seemed to be considering the answer. They waited for her. Without knowing the truth, Cuin and Finn knew the risks they'd be taking with her along with them. Here in the Otherworld, truth was more precious than anything else. Without truth, their way would be blocked by foes even they couldn't defeat. Scarlet had to know that without being told.

"I'm not of the Avalon of your time," she finally said quietly. "Brigid summoned me from a time outside of time. My family has been sworn to protect the Treasures of Mankind, particularly the Hallows. But I am one of the Nine."

Finn tried to interject, but Cuin placed a restraining hand on him. "No, brother, let her speak. You must know, Scarlet, that absolute trust is imperative in a place like the Otherworld."

She nodded slowly, one small tear slowly rolling down her cheek. "Then know that I mean you no harm. I am here for Brigid, because in my time, one who knows how to manipulate magick seeks the Fal Stone and plans on crowning himself king of the known world. Only the Nine can stop him."

"Why send someone uninitiated?"



“Because we are without training. Cymra comes in our dreams, trying to help us, but it is hard when the one you train can only see in dreams, because in regular life she cannot.” Scarlet turned away slightly, the words hanging upon the wind.

“Wait a minute. You mean to tell me you’re only visual in the Otherworld, when you astral walk? You’re *blind*?”

“Yes.”

Cuin released his breath. That explained much. “What is the average age of the Nine?”

“Between twenty-three and thirty-seven.” Scarlet cast them a look. “You regret being saddled with me, right?”

Finn shook his head. “I worry more on our Journey, but no, there are no regrets, Scarlet. Brigid doesn’t choose irresponsibly. However, the fact that you’re blind does make it difficult.”

“Only in my world. In the Otherworld, I have my sight. It makes it a bit disorienting when I’m done Journeying,” she replied softly.

“I can only imagine,” Cuin said, clasping her hand, flashing her a wide smile. “You’re very brave to do this, especially since you’re only blessed with sight during Journeying. How do you cope when you’re in your world?”

“My other senses are very acute. Plus, I have a special crystal that lets me see aura colors of anything, animate or inanimate.” Pulling out a bluish-purple stone, she handed it to Cuin. “It’s called iolite. Among my people, it allows some to possess Other Sight.”

“It radiates power. Thank you for showing me.” Cuin handed back the stone. “So you can see in color, perhaps outlines, but you don’t see otherwise.”

“No, just shapes and the colors. Colors also have degrees of temperature, so that helps as well. Here in the Otherworld, it’s like being blessed with sensory overload.”

“Thus why you going on an Isle where there are invisible beings helps.” Seeing her confused look, Finn grinned. “Because you are a Visual in the Otherworld, your senses will not pick up anything not visible. It forces them to choose to be visible or be cast into obscurity.”

“That’s a good thing?”

“In our particular case, a very good thing. They can either come after us, or they can go away. If they stay, because of your Visuality, they’ll have to show themselves. That gives us an advantage,” Cuin explained. “Finn’s right. You’re a distinct advantage in this case.”

“I’m not quite sure I understand, but as long as I’m a help, not a hindrance, then I’m happy.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They sailed for a day until land came into view. Finn eyed it and nodded at Cuin. Scarlet slept, huddled on the bottom of the boat, covered with a blanket. The men had taken watch that night since they knew where they were heading. "I've not been on this Isle in a long time," Cuin stated quietly.

"I come to check on things every so often, but I do avoid it myself." Finn rubbed his goatee. "Personally, I find it funny we're here to retrieve the key after all this time."

"I can't believe we made two keys and that combination of elements to recover the Fal Stone."

Finn nodded as he mentally urged the boat forward. "Well, we were trying to prevent Mordred or anyone else from claiming the Fal for evil purposes."

Cuin sighed. "Yes. But we know that it only claims the rightful king. It wouldn't have reacted to Mordred."

"Are you sure about that?" Finn's dark eyes bored into Cuin's. "Are you absolutely sure on that point? He was Arthur's heir at one point."

"Owain also beat him at *gwyddbwyll* chess, for the rights of Sovereignty."

"He was Sovereignty's champion, but I doubt Owain would've been the heir."

"What about Lancelot?" Scarlet asked, rubbing her eyes. "Would he have been heir to Arthur's realm? Or because of his love for Guinevere, would he have been dismissed?"

Cuin looked at Finn. "You want to tell her, Bors, or shall I?"

"Neither. It's not something we discuss." Finn turned from them both. "We'll be landing in a couple of minutes."

Scarlet glowered at Finn. "How can you start to speak of Arthur and the time of Camelot then drop it because I'm awake?" She appealed to Cuin. "Why did you call him Bors? Bors was one of the Grail Knights."

Cuin grinned. "Well, that part isn't correct, but Finn, back in the day, was known as Bors. He was one of the Knights of the Round Table, just as I was." Seeing her shocked look, he bowed slightly. "Percival at your service, Lady Scarlet."

"But that would mean --"

"We're beyond fucking old, yes. It's part of the curse of Morrighu. Not only do we retain our age at the time of the First Night, we also keep our appearance, and we don't die -- at least not yet. We lived before Arthur and after his passing."

"So none of you Maraighs are Arthur?" Scarlet rubbed her forehead, as if trying to understand the whole conversation.

Finn chuckled. "Be grateful that none of us is Arthur; otherwise, we'd still be ruling."

They looked at the island they were approaching. It was beautiful, but there were huge depressions along the sand. "This is the Isle of the Invisible Riders," Cuin said softly. "None

have seen them, though we can hear them encourage each other in racing. The first key is hidden here.”

“One thing to know about the Isles here in the Otherworld, they often require you to face aspects of yourself. Each gives as well as takes. Some of the Isles can be quite intimidating. In some ways, sight often clouds the issue.” Finn’s face hardened as the sounds from the island carried to them. They could hear the riders encouraging each other as they raced around the land.

Cuin squeezed Scarlet’s hand reassuringly. “Yes, they are like this constantly. Very few times do these spirits take a break. We’re not sure why they do this, but as long as we’ve been around, it’s always like this.”

As the skiff pulled in, they heard the neighing of horses in the distance. “Hurry, we need to be across the sand to the copse of trees over there,” Finn urged, helping Scarlet out. “Otherwise, we might be trampled.”

Quickly, they made their way across the sands, lunging toward the trees as they heard the roar of hooves bearing down on them. Cuin dragged Finn closer to the trees as the first invisible horse careened near their place. “Careful, *deárthair*, I need you to help retrieve the stone. It won’t work with just one of us.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Scarlet panted as she watched the byplay of the two brothers. Their love for one another was apparent, even with the verbal sparring. Her family wasn’t close, as she was blind and different. But she was the chosen of Brigid, promised to be the head of a line of protectors of Mankind’s Treasures for when they were needed most. One day, she hoped that her family would be proud of their tainted daughter. Though the world had progressed far, her family sometimes was a throwback to the Dark Ages. Unfortunately, they also didn’t hold to the idea of the sins of the father being visited upon the children. Tamping down her jealousy, Scarlet helped Finn to stand up. “You okay?”

“I’m all right. How about you?”

“I didn’t get stepped on. I couldn’t see anything. In fact, if it hadn’t been for Cuin’s hand at my back, I would’ve stopped short. Hearing the horses is one thing, but I couldn’t judge how close or far away they were.” Her eyes scanned the distance as the sand kicked up under the invisible hooves.

“You couldn’t differentiate in the loudness?”

“Not with my blood pounding in my ears running like that,” Scarlet amended.

Cuin chuckled. “That’s called panic. We’re all prone to it. I’m against being trampled by horses on principle. Let’s go get the key and get off this island.”

Cuin took the lead, telling Scarlet what to avoid as they cut through the wooded area. “Finn and I decided that to hide the stone of Fal wouldn’t be enough. Thus, we decided that

by hiding two keys and needing three people, it would cause issues with recovering the Hallow.”

“I could see how it would. It’s not written anywhere on how to recover it, is it?”

“Two very vague mentions in a story. But that was in case anything happened to us.”

Scarlet looked at both men. “I was joking. You’re serious that there’s a story out there that tells of how to recover the stone of Fal?”

Finn nodded. “Just in case either of us was missing in action. But you have to know how to put the pieces together and know all the elements to release the binding around the Stone.”

They reached a cave that sat recessed into the hill. Unless one was close up, there was no way to have found it. Since most people never stayed long enough on the island, the shrubs covered over the dark entrance. Cuin nodded. “We’re here. I’ll shift and scout it out first.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Handing over his weapons and pack, Cuin concentrated, allowing his magick to flow over and through him. As the transformation process took over, his body shifted and reshaped him. He hoped that Scarlet wouldn’t freak out, but things were as they were. As his senses sharpened, his body was almost done shifting into his animal form, that of a wolf. Once done, he winked at Finn and headed inside the dank cave.

Scarlet stepped back until the rock pressed against her back. “He just --”

“Turned into a wolf. Yes. That’s his curse from Morrighu. I am a were-leopard.”

“I thought that lycanthropy was just a myth. We’ve never seen one in our time.”

Finn chuckled. “You sure you serve Brigid? The realm of the preternaturals crosses the world of man in many times and places. Minotaur, centaurs, werewolves, and other shifters all are part of that cosmos. It’s treated as a myth because people often don’t want to deal with reality.”

Scarlet stepped toward Finn. “In my time, they are considered fantasy, just as many other preternaturals. If there are shifters among us, I’ve not seen them or heard rumors of them, not even among the Nine.”

“But usually the Nine are able to transform while Journeying; in fact, taking one of the preternatural forms.” Finn rubbed his head. “Who is the Lady of the Lake in your time?”

“What do you mean Lady of the Lake?”

“You mean there isn’t one among the Nine who is head of the Order, the Lady of the Lake?”

Scarlet looked at him with a puzzled expression on her face. "I'm missing something, Finn. What does the Lady of the Lake have to do with the Nine? And why should she be the head of the Order?"

Finn sighed and gestured for her to sit down next to him. Somehow they were missing something between this time and hers. How could she not know about the Lady of the Lake? "The Lady of the Lake is a title given to the head of the Nine. Cymra was the original Lady of the Lake. She was called that due to her penchant for wearing various dark blue-hued clothing. Not to mention the fact that she had a tendency to appear out of lakes. The head of the Nine has always been called Lady of the Lake."

Scarlet tilted her head and thought for a moment. "Our leader is Morgana. So she'd be called Lady of the Lake as well as the Head of the Nine, right? For some reason, we've lost the titles. When the world almost collapsed due to the new Ice Age and the accidental release of genetically engineered diseases, many people died along with their knowledge. We're only now regaining much of it."

"How long has Avalon been left unprotected by the Nine?" Finn asked worriedly. The idea of Avalon being left unguarded was not a welcome one. Though Brigid said Avalon was safe, there was never a time when the Nine, or the Grail Maidens were left clueless as to the entire history of Avalon from its birth to current time. Scarlet's lack of knowledge worried him deeply, though he tried not to let it slip through in his voice or his features.

"Avalon was protected during that time by ways we're still learning about. Cymra kept herself in a protective state, keeping Avalon safe until the time came that the Nine could be revived or rebirthed. So only a period of fifty years, perhaps a century."

"Has she gone to Arawn now?" Finn asked, wondering how Cymra dealt with being only half alive and owing debt to the Celtic god of death.

"Arianrhod, Morrighu, and Brigid took her right before my Journey to meet you. They said something about honoring the first of the Nine."

Before Finn responded, Cuin lunged out of the cave, dragging a small chest with his teeth. Once he set it before the two of them, he shook his fur, sending dirt and other things flying around them. He looked Finn in the eye and spoke mentally.

*The chest was where I hid it. Since the cave was empty, I broke the spell. But the magick is going to pull at the riders. We're going to need Scarlet's help.*

*Cymra served as protector of Avalon for over one hundred years while the Nine were disbanded due to the world going to hell in a handbasket, Cuin.*

*No. That's not possible. Cymra might be the Lady of the Lake, but even she's subjected to rebirth.*

*Not if she's the only protection Arthur has. You know her better than I; would she give up her life and leave Avalon unprotected without the Nine?*

*No. She'd have sent her spirit to Avalon and rebuked any calls by Arawn to enter the cycle again. So this is what's up and coming? Do we even know who Cymra is in this lifetime?*

*None. I don't think she's been reborn yet.*

*Fuck. Okay, spot me while I shift back.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Cuin started his reversal into becoming human. As he did, he listened to Finn explain a bit regarding the splitting of spirit from the flesh. Scarlet seemed to think it inconceivable. *Too bad she doesn't realize that Cymra has never stopped serving Avalon or the goddesses. I think it might shock her. Then again, the idea of Cymra defying Arawn is not good.*

Once he was back in human form, he accepted his equipment back from Finn. As he knelt beside Scarlet, he glanced at the lock that she traced with one finger. "It's bound by a magick spell. Only one who serves of the Avalonian gods and goddesses can undo it. A protection of mine to prevent people from absconding with it too easily. Would you like to try to undo it? You can use the power of Brigid for this purpose."

Scarlet nodded and placed her hand over the ancient lock. Whispering words that sounded like corrupted Gaelic, she called forth a flame from her palm to unlock the chest with a snick. Smiling, she pushed back the chest and took out a slightly tarnished silver key. "Is this the key?"

Cuin smiled as he handed her a small cord from one of his pockets. "Yes. It's one that was fashioned quickly on Avalon when it was part of the real world. Here, put it on this cord and wear it around your neck."

Finn sniffed the air before speaking. "We better head out. Storm's coming and we have to deal with the invisible riders."

Scarlet looked up at the slightly darkening sky as Cuin packed up the chest into a special pouch that shrunk the item to palm size. "Rain? It doesn't look that bad."

"Ah, but you've never been caught in a storm while Journeying." Finn looked concerned and Cuin said nothing, knowing that if anyone knew the dangers of storms in the Otherworld, Finn was the expert.

Placing the cord around her neck, she acceded the point. "True. How are we going to make it past the riders? They're going to sense the power of the key, won't they?"

Cuin grinned. "Yup, but you have it. We're going to stand on either side of you, but slightly behind. Walk out there and listen closely."

\* \* \* \* \*

Scarlet obeyed Cuin as they took their positions. Cocking her head slightly to the right, she walked out onto the sandy terrain, waiting to be mowed down by the invisible horses and their riders. In the distance she could hear their voices shouting. Yet, there seemed to be no movement. The wind wasn't whipping around; in fact, it was as if everything had died down but the talking. Even that seemed more distant to her as she strained to listen for the riders.

Cuin cupped her elbow and moved her toward the skiff. "See, your Visuality is forcing them to come and be seen or stay away and keep invisible. You're a blessing on this isle. Otherwise, we'd have to time things too quickly and oftentimes rushing causes errors."

Finn watched for them both as Cuin ushered Scarlet into the skiff. He could feel the tensions rising within the invisible riders. It was time to leave. Pushing the skiff out into the water, he jumped in. "Let's go. They're not going to wait much longer. Plus, I want to get away from here before it rains."

All three took paddles from the bottom of the boat and began setting out toward the east. "Where is our next destination?" Scarlet asked as she tried to time her strokes to the two men.

"Sea of Mist," Finn answered in a tight voice. "Won't be easy with the coming rain, but if we can get close enough, we should be able to sail into the area."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cuin huddled closer to Scarlet while Finn shifted form. Both men talked when the woman had fallen asleep. The cold air and the rain started to tire them out, so Cuin fashioned a tent over the skiff, but it meant that Scarlet couldn't keep warm as they could. Once shifted, Finn as a leopard, pressed his body against the priestess, determined to keep her warm. Both leopard and man shared a look, protective and understanding in regards to the young woman.

Cuin looked at the titian-haired beauty and smiled. There was strength and a frailty to the young woman. She wasn't like many women he knew. Though he knew she wasn't his soulmate, he was attracted to her. Ignoring the look that Finn gave him, Cuin caressed Scarlet's soft, satiny cheek. She would make a good leader within the Nine once she accepted the ability to see even though blind.

*You can't afford to take this kind of time with her, Cuin, Finn warned.*

*What kind of time? Intimacy? I'm not sure she'd accept it, Finn. But I admire her courage and strength.*

*You would, and you'd seduce her if given the chance.*

*Cuin snorted. As if you wouldn't?*

*Actually, no. I've been having dreams of my soulmate.*

*Dreams? Why didn't you say so?*

*We got interrupted by Brigid.*

*Yeah. So, what is she like?*

The leopard grinned and Cuin chuckled softly. "I see." He smiled. "That good. We best get some sleep while we can. I can handle the boat while you nap first, Finn."

*Okay, wake me when it's my turn for watch. Once we're in the beginning of the mists, it's going to take some doing to get to where I put the key.*

*Indeed. This is just like my dream, but ... different.*

*Definitely. Oiche mhaith, dearthair.*

Oiche mhaith. *Sleep well, Finn.* Cuin curled against Scarlet, his front legs wrapped around her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something brushed against her body, awakening senses she thought long dead. Scarlet moaned softly as warm lips coaxed her mouth to open. Leaning against the hard body, she yielded to him, allowing his tongue to seek hidden depths of her mouth while his hand cupped her breast. Yearning cried out in her as her thighs trembled when she felt his other hand touch her gingerly. Aching for more, she reached for the warmth when she heard a mumbling. Her eyes fluttered opened and she realized she was becoming intimate with Cuin, who was asleep as well.

Sliding out of his grasp, Scarlet sat up, trying to straighten out her clothes when she noticed the leopard sitting at the prow of the skiff. He looked back at her and seemed to grin.

"Finn?"

The leopard moved to her side and seemed to want her to touch him. Petting his head, she felt a slight buzzing sensation. Shaking her head, she looked at him. "Finn?"

*Can you hear me now?*

"Yes. How is this possible?"

*Magick. When we're touched in this form, we can mentally communicate. If you think your thoughts, I'll hear them so you don't have to speak aloud.*

*Wow. This is so unusual. How come you're in leopard form?*

*To help keep you warm.*

*Oh. Did you ...* she trailed off.

*Yes. Don't be ashamed,* he whispered as she blushed. He snuggled against her and smiled that enigmatic animal smile. *It's okay. Cuin is attracted to you, as well. However, there is the slight problem that only one of Morrighu's own can release us from our curse. Being one of Brigid's would not do that.*

*Oh. So it wouldn't last long, whatever we shared.* Scarlet looked away from Finn, her eyes filling with tears.



*You're not used to men wanting you, are you?*

*Men do not want a woman who can't see. Or in my case, who is also not of the One God.*

*Christianity still rearing its head in your time?*

*It's no longer Christianity, but One God theology. Those of Islam, Christianity, and Jewish faiths came together, finally conquering their prejudices. They went through and systematically brought their faiths together with three separate subsections to accommodate extremists. Now the One God theology is the largest in the world.*

*That sounds scary. Are they persecuting other religions?*

*No, but they also don't recommend going outside of the faith. They sometimes choose others of like faith over those more qualified, but that's been like that since time immemorial. But when it comes to someone like me -- a blind Pagan, I'm not on the list of having many -- or any -- suitors.*

Finn purred against her arm as he tried to comfort her. *Listen to me, Daughter of Brigid. You are a beautiful and brave woman. You have powers unlike those who follow other paths. You're encouraged to use them, including your Visuality. Use it. You can see if you choose. Perhaps not like normal people, but you can see. Any man worthy would fight for you. Take time with my brother. Feel the healing touch of a Druid who cherishes the uniting of man and woman.*

*Are you saying that you want me to have sex with your brother?*

*Yes. I am pulling over to an Isle for you both while I retrieve the second key. This way, you and he can heal while I do this errand.* Finn brushed his fur against her side and casually strolled to the prow. *Wake my brother and inform him of the changes. You and he need release. It will aid us on the final portion of our joint quest, Daughter of Brigid, Scarlet of the Heart.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The leopard turned its gaze on the land approaching. It would take careful timing to get them off the skiff and onto the island so he could make the Sea of Mist with perfect timing. Taking them with him would impede on where he had to go. Glancing back, he saw Scarlet taking his words to heart. She spoke to a waking Cuin. A grin played at his lips as Cuin kissed the woman lightly on the lips.

"You're sure about doing this, Finn?" Cuin asked, his gaze on Scarlet.

*Does a bear shite in the woods?*

*Sheesh, get all pissy on me or something, brother.* Cuin grinned. *Where are you dropping us off?*

*Island of Joy.*

*What? Are you nuts? How can you be sure that we'll want to leave?*

*That's part of the difficulty we chose when we hid the Lia Fal, Cuin. It's the requirement I put in my part of recovering the second key. You must go with her to the island, do as you will, but when I come back, you two must come with me, or the key will disappear to a new, unknown location.*

*You're gonna make it hard on us both. But, we'll be here waiting for you.*

*Enjoy yourself, and heal her too, Cuin.*

*I will.* Cuin turned to Scarlet. "You ready to go? We're going to jump off as Finn gets us a bit closer to shore. We'll be here waiting for him once he retrieves the second key."

"Ready. Finn, thank you for listening to me. I appreciate it more than you can know."

Finn nodded to Scarlet, then growled a series of commands. Cuin moved to the side near Finn. "Ready when you are, brother."

On a count of four, Scarlet and Cuin jumped and splashed through the shallow water. They turned the boat around and shoved it back out to the sea as the rain dwindled to a light drizzle, then stopped. "See you when you get back here," Cuin called out.

\* \* \* \* \*

They watched as the skiff took off, the spotted leopard sitting at the prow, looking regal and determined. Cuin pulled Scarlet close, hugging her. "Thank you for understanding and not challenging us on things."

"I don't know this world or what you have done in order to protect the keys. Why would I when I'd be lost without you?"

"Some women would be hard and demand explanations on each step of the recovery of the Lia Fal. You, on the other hand, realize that sometimes it's not the right time to ask or challenge. That's a skill of a very good leader and a very desirable woman." Cuin walked with Scarlet inland a bit until he found a beautiful waterfall. He pulled her down next to him as he sat.

"Tell me what Finn said to you," he whispered as he brushed back a stray lock of hair from her face.

"He said that men who know better would want to be with me, even though I'm blind in the real world," she whispered, her dark brown eyes riveted to his amber ones.

"He's right. You're a beautiful, sexy woman, Scarlet. You deserve to love and be loved in return. The fact that you're blind shouldn't even enter into it." He stroked her cheek, caressing her jaw as he leaned in close, absorbing the heat from her body. "You should be the one choosy over men. You have the right to pick the man best suited to your heart and soul. You see beyond the norm, something to help you know when you've found the right man."

She blinked back tears as Cuin slowly kissed her. His lips brushed against hers, then his teeth tugged lightly at her bottom lip. She eased her body against his, and was sure that he felt her let go of the past rejections and let him embrace her completely. His mouth was hot, spicy, and demanding. Opening herself to him, she let him show her how passion truly could be. His hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs sliding gently over her linen shirt.

“Cuin, are you sure?” Her eyes pleaded with him and he knew, in that moment, he wouldn’t say no.

“I’m sure, Scarlet, but are you?” He pulled back slightly, his gaze seeking any sign of hesitation. “We’re on the Island of Joy. Here we can indulge in happiness where we can find it, even if it’s just for a short time. We can heal and accept the good things that come when we least expect it. Are you sure you want this?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Scarlet saw the beautiful island paradise around them. There was no one to see them in this small area near the beach. They could enjoy themselves and no one would be the wiser. For this moment the only burden Scarlet had was whether or not to have passionate sex with this druid. There was nothing more to worry about.

“Yes. I want this,” she whispered as she tugged at his cream-colored shirt. “I want you.”

“I want you,” Cuin agreed as his hand slid under her shirt, touching her unbound breasts. “I want to make love to you now.”

Quickly they stripped off their clothes, their hands exploring each other as each piece of clothing was removed. Soft met hard as Scarlet pulled Cuin down upon her. Their lips met, tongues thrashed as Cuin eased her into a lying position. She felt open, exposed to his hot gaze, but at the same time, she felt fevered as his hands roamed over her body. His long, deft fingers plucked at her nipples, sending shivers of desire coursing through her body.

As his mouth covered one of her breasts, Scarlet moaned. She ran her fingers through his blond hair as he increased the suction on her nipple. Rocking her hips against his, a moan tore from her throat as his free hand slid down her belly before resting in the curls that covered her labia.

One finger slid between the cleft, and she shuddered at the sensations flooding her body. A second finger joined the other, dipping lightly into her core before spreading the wetness up and down her slit. Scarlet rocked her body against him, knowing that she needed something but not sure what it was or how to get it. Her gaze wandered to Cuin’s as he shifted his body over hers. The hunger in his face made her excited yet wary.

His voice sounded hoarse as he whispered. “I wish I could take this slower, but there’s no time, no chance. Forgive me.”

She nodded, her breath coming out in short pants. “I know. Just please tell me it won’t hurt much.”

Cuin paused, his throbbing cock at her sheath's entrance. "You're a virgin?"

Scarlet blushed, saying nothing and everything in that moment. Cuin grinned, sliding his hand down near his cock, stroking her wet slit. The aching sensation increased with each time his cock head slid past her wet entrance. "Let me help make this more pleasant then."

His thumb lightly flicked her clit, causing her to gasp as her hands clenched his lower back. "Cuin," she moaned. "Oh gods, who knew this could feel so wonderful?" He chuckled slightly as he lowered himself between her parted thighs. She wondered if he would enter her, but then gasped as he placed open-mouthed kisses along her breasts and headed downward.

"Cuin?"

"Shh, enjoy, Scarlet. Let me make this wonderful for you." His words came out breathy, but then she couldn't hear him as his tongue flicked against her clit. She bit back a gasp as his mouth curled over it. In a moment, Scarlet couldn't hold back a deep moan as his teeth raked over the sensitive nub.

Before she could move out from beneath him, she felt his fingers slide deep within her pussy as his mouth continued suckling on her clit. Tension filled her body as did a longing for something deeper, something that would send her beyond where she'd ever taken herself before. Yet, she was also hesitant in asking what it was, afraid that if she experienced it, she wouldn't want to go back to her time.

His fingers sank deep within her pussy, then pulled almost out only to be thrust deep within her. Almost unwillingly, Scarlet moved her body in time with the rhythm Cuin set, allowing him to lead her to a point that seemed higher and further away from everything happening but totally centered within the pleasure of her body. Clenching her inner walls around his fingers, Scarlet followed by grabbing his shoulders. "Cuin, please, I don't know ... I need ... something ..."

"It's okay, Scarlet," Cuin whispered, lifting his mouth from her clit. "Let go, enjoy the sensation. Scream if you want. Let the pleasure fill you."

Scarlet gasped as Cuin slid yet another finger in her pussy and increased the tempo of his thrusts until she couldn't handle the building pleasure within her. Over and over, she shuddered but held back from that edge just beyond that beckoned her. Clenching and unclenching her fists, Scarlet writhed beneath Cuin's sensual ministrations, finally giving in as his teeth pulled lightly at her clit before pushing against it. With a scream, she fell over the edge, allowing the pleasure to thrum throughout her body as her pussy pulsated with release over his fingers. Before she could come down to reality, she felt Cuin's mouth slide up her body, until their lips met hungrily.

As she opened her eyes, their gazes locked. She smiled hesitantly as his cock slid up and down her slit. "You look so beautiful. So wonderful coming under my touch. I won't hurt you, I promise, Scarlet."

"I know. It's just ... I've never felt like this before. Not even ..."

“Not even when you pleased yourself?” Cuin nodded in understanding, the heat from his body increasing hers. “It’s rare to have the same intensity alone as you have with someone else. I can’t hold back any longer, darling.”

Guiding himself toward her core, he slid into her inch by inch. She shuddered and climaxed once again as he rocked his hips against hers. As she shattered, Cuin resisted the urge to go over with her so soon. Though he had enjoyed being with women, Scarlet was special. Her honest reaction to their lovemaking made him want to please her even more. *Make it better for her. Give her something to compare against when she goes back to her home.*

Slowly, he slid almost out of her pussy, then thrust deep inside. His gaze never wavered from hers as he began a slow yet erotic rhythm. Long thrust followed by two short. Each time, her pussy clenched tightly against his cock and he fought with all his control not to let go of his control completely and fuck her senseless.

Her fingers dug deep into his shoulders as his hips shifted in small circles, enjoying how she writhed beneath him. He brought his mouth to hers, stopping just short of her parted lips, enjoying the feel of her hot, short breaths against his mouth. A low growl escaped his throat when her fingers raked down his back until they clenched his waist. As she readjusted her legs around the lower part of his hips, Cuin held onto his control by a small thread as he increased the pace of his rhythm. They moved as one, he kissed her deeply, allowing the powerful sensations to fill them both. Before he knew it, Scarlet screamed his name as a series of orgasms racked her body. Unable to resist, Cuin followed her as his release poured out of him. His final thought at that moment was at how wonderful, how cherished the woman known as Scarlet made him feel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finn felt his brother’s shock, then pleasure, as he traveled further away from the island. The pull to go back and experience the joy Cuin had was strong, but first things first. With a mental nudge, he urged the boat to move quicker across the placid water. The mission came first -- and though he was tempted by Scarlet, she was not the type to be with two men, particularly brothers. Closing his mind to the continued pleasure both Cuin and Scarlet were experiencing, Finn prepared to face the despair and pain awaiting him to retrieve the second key.

As he shifted back into human form, Finn recalled the loss of Robin. His heart clenched in sorrow thinking of the bright young girl that he had befriended months ago. She hadn’t asked for much from this life, just a chance to live and grow to her potential. A fellow shifter, so young to have begun shifting into her second form, she only had Finn and a couple of others willing to help her learn control. Her parents had abandoned her when they discovered she was a preternatural. Only those among the cat clan around Powerscourt

adopted the young girl, showing her the love and affection her own family hadn't. But it hadn't been enough when the fight against evil touched her personally. *I failed her when she needed me the most.*

The swirls of mist curled around the edges of the boat before Finn realized he was at the edge of the Sea of Mists. Sitting up straight, he concentrated on finding his exact location, then plunged the skiff forward in a northwesterly direction. As eddies of mist surrounded him, he kept going forward, knowing that even one pause would cause him problems. The Sea of Mists represented confusion, and one needed to trust in the foundations of their knowledge and in the unseen. It was one reason that he couldn't have brought Scarlet. She would have them foundering in no time flat.

Robin would've loved the Sea of Mists. For her, the unseen wasn't anything to fear. In fact, it was the challenge of the air that called to her. Her first animal shape was that of a peregrine, the second, that of a cat. Teaching her how to control her emotions had been tough, but when she'd had to rely only on her senses, other than sight, she'd done wonderfully. Had it not been for one of Taranis' men tracking her down -- Finn broke off the thought as he found the small rocky outcrop in the middle of the mists. Allowing his mind to focus on Robin, her last words to him, he placed his hand into the water, next to the shoal outcrop. Reaching deep, he willed the chest to rise just as a peregrine floated on air thermals.

Finn continued reaching for the chest, the torc bracelet on his wrist gently rubbing against the stones. It had been welded shut over a hundred years before to remind him that one day he could be free. Now, with everything, he wasn't sure having a soulmate would be worth it. Not if it meant losing more of those he loved. His fingers brushed the top of the chest, only to miss. A screech in the air forced him to look up.

A large bird feathered in beige, dark red and black landed before him on the rock. It cawed twice at him, forcing him to sit up and notice it. He struggled to focus on the bird, though he wanted to bring his attention to the chest he needed to recover. The eyes were unusual, a dark blue in color. This wasn't a normal bird, just as this wasn't a normal place. This bird, this peregrine was someone to help him, to guide him. Gruffly, he asked, "Who are you?"

The bird shifted form into a very young woman with dark brown hair and blue eyes. Her body was thin, as if undernourished, though he knew from the time spent with her, it was natural thinness. "Who do you think I am?" She reached out and touched Finn's wrist where the bracelet resided. "Why do you hurt so?"

"I failed you, Robin." The admission hurt, but he had to tell this child why she died. How his failure ended in her death. Accept the punishment she could utter against his soul for all time, including any rebirths.

Robin shook her head, a small sigh escaping before she spoke. "Finn, you never failed me. You did all you could. I don't hold my death against you. But I need your blessing before

I can be reborn.” The young girl slid into the boat and hugged him close. “I was also at fault. I shouldn’t have been out there, *agus a mhaithar*. But what happened was for the best. There was no shifter family that would take a child who can shift before the correct time. Even among the cat clan there was division and fear at my talent. It was better for all that I was no longer their worry or their burden.”

Finn kissed her cheek, relishing holding the child once more in his arms. “I wish I was your father, little one. There should’ve been someone out there to take care of you, to accept you as you are. I know Irene and Jason tried hard to treat you as just one of the clan.”

“You did and it made all the difference, even as did the acceptance from the clan leaders. But now it’s time to let me go, Finn. Let me be reborn and come back to do what I’m meant to do. I arrived too early in a world unready to accept that some are able to access their talents very young under harsh circumstances.” Robin caressed Finn’s face with loving tenderness as only a child could comfort a parent. The pain of her loss lightened deep within his soul as she forgave him. “Make the way for others to know how to care for those like me.”

“*Mionnaigh mé*. What can I do to show you that I’ll do as you ask?”

Robin’s hand went to the silver and gold torc on his wrist, and he felt her love and forgiveness more vividly than he had when she was alive. “I want this until she comes for you.”

“Who she?”

“Your soulmate. When you find her, you’ll get this back. This I promise,” Robin whispered as she slid it off his wrist. “I know you’ve had that for a long time, *aithar*. When *maithar* comes into your life and accepts you like I do, then you’ll have it back with my blessing.”

She slipped the torc on her upper arm and it seemed to meld with her tawny skin. Kissing Finn on the cheek, she whispered a quiet wish for happiness upon him. As he went to hug her, she shifted into her peregrine form and took to the air. “Finish your quest, Father. Know that I’m in peace and I’m happy.”

“Farewell, Robin. I shall never forget you or your words.” Finn brushed away tears that filled at the corner of his eyes. The peregrine circled overhead twice, then soared away into the mist. After she left his sight, Finn leaned forward, almost tipping the boat over, and grabbed at the chest, knowing that this time he had faced his despair. Touching the handle, he tugged it out from under the outcropping, and pulled it out of the water into the skiff.

With a lightened heart and renewed dedication, Finn placed an open palm on the lock, feeding his determination and love into the lock. When he heard the snick of release within the mechanism, he knew that all things were coming together. Forgiving himself for not being there for Robin was hard, but she had not held it against him. Only if he was determined to do right could he have retrieved the chest, for it was intuitive belief and strength that would allow a person to retrieve it.

Lifting the cover, Finn retrieved the golden key, fastening it on the cord around his neck. It bumped against the bead and he smiled. It seemed fitting it would be against Robin's gift. Taking his oars, he turned the skiff to go back the way they came. If he worked it right, he'd be back to the island in less than two hours or so. He knew time finished differently for the real world and he couldn't remember offhand the conversion factor since he normally never brought his real body into the Otherworld, only his astral self.

A small breeze pushed him forward in his journey, even though he didn't have a sail up. He sent up a small thanks to the wind and to Robin, he guided the boat toward the Isle of Joy. Once there, they could head to the Isle of Four Fences, retrieve the Fal Stone and call upon Brigid from there. Then he'd take a well-deserved holiday.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cuin held Scarlet close as they relaxed in the soft grass. How many times had they made love here on the island while waiting for Finn? Did he even care? Then he remembered that this had been Scarlet's first time. "Are you okay?"

"Wow. I hadn't realized it could be so much fun."

He chuckled and kissed her brow. "There is that. You're not too sore are you?"

"Sleepy a bit and a bit stiff, but not really sore." Scarlet blushed. Her head rested on his chest. They had reluctantly dressed a few moments before. "Do you think I'll find this joy with someone else?"

He chucked her under the chin and forced her to look at him. "Listen to me, Scarlet. You will find someone who is your soulmate and being with him will blow what we shared out of the water."

Scarlet looked away, a thoughtful expression on her face. "There's no possibility that I could've gotten --"

Shaking his head, he pulled her closer against him. "No, I'm sorry, it's not possible. For some reason, the Otherworld is not known for creating life, just bringing life full circle." Cuin kissed her hair.

They sat there together for a few moments, enjoying the quiet. Neither said anything as they watched the sky brighten as white clouds flowed by. The peaceful isle was a blessing to them both. Taking joy and happiness in the moment was this isle's lesson for those willing to take that chance.

A sharp whistle caught Cuin's attention. It sounded a ways off, but loud within his mind. *Deárthaír?*

*I've just landed. I'm headed straight ahead. Where are you and Scarlet?*

*Near the waterfall. Take the left fork. We're dressed and relaxing. How are you? You sound different.*

*I'm ... okay. Better than I was before.*



*Good. See you shortly.*

“Finn retrieved the key. He should be here shortly, he’s landing the skiff at the dock below.” Cuin smiled and hugged Scarlet closer. “This journey has been good for all of us so far, I think.” They were enjoying the moment by caressing each other, until Cuin sat up, encouraging Scarlet to come up against him.

“I’ve learned a lot more than I ever bargained for, I think,” Scarlet commented as she sat up. “I have to admit, you’ve opened me up to many of the ways of the Otherworld. After our time together, I can almost sense things, like pools, swirls maybe, of power, flowing around me.”

A rustling noise distracted them as Finn came through the last of the lush bushes. “That would be the power of the Otherworld we tap into when we muster it in us.”

“I’ve never experienced it before like this.” Scarlet smiled at him, holding out her hand.

Taking it, he sat and kissed her palm. “That is because you were concentrating so much on your eyesight, you forgot to feel. Something I think that’s been corrected,” Finn teased. “Things are okay with you both?”

“Fine,” Cuin and Scarlet replied simultaneously.

Chuckling, Finn reclined back against a large rock. “I see. At least you didn’t bite my head off. Feeling *flachulach*, Cuin?”

“Me, generous? Why, boyo?” Cuin grinned.

“Well, I need a nap and we need to get to the Isle right quick.”

Cuin rolled his eyes. “What you’re saying is you want me to drive while you nod off for a while.”

“Give the lad a cookie, he’s not an idjit, after all.”

Scarlet looked from one brother to another. “What language are you speaking?”

“The common tongue,” Finn jibed. “Actually, it’s both English with Irish slang, why?”

She grinned. “I just love the rhythm of it.”

“You’d appreciate Gift Grub then. Too bad I don’t know if Radio Ireland reaches you or not in your day.”

She tilted her head in thought. “You know, I’m not sure. We do get stations from various places and I’m in the United States’ Northwest Territory. It’s possible I could get it at night. I’ll have to try.”

“You do that.” Finn looked at Cuin. They shared a moment of silence before Finn spoke again. “We leaving or abandoning the task set for us?”

Sighing, Cuin got to his feet. The others followed suit. “Let’s blow this place of peace and get us the seat of a king.”

Making their way back to the waiting skiff was easy, though they all glanced behind them at the peace they were leaving. None of them wanted to leave the Isle of Joy. The peace

it exuded was so welcoming, so inviting, but staying wasn't an option. "Coming back here will be easier for you when you do your Shadow Journeying," Cuin commented in passing to Scarlet. "In fact, it'll probably be the easiest journey as it evokes the most emotion."

"Thanks, I think." Scarlet stepped into the boat first with Cuin following. Using the oars, he helped Finn guide the skiff out into the open water.

Finn flopped over the side and yawned. "I'm beyond tired, Cuin. I'm going to sleep for a while. Wake me up when we get to our next point."

"*Oiche mhaith*, Finn," Cuin said without looking at his fallen brother.

"*Go raibh maith agat.*" With that, Finn curled up and closed his eyes, sinking almost instantly into sleep.

Scarlet covered him with a blanket while Cuin guided the boat with mental nudges and the paddle. "Nervous energy?"

"Actually, this kind of physical labor helps me to focus and think about what's coming."

"Any warning for me?"

Cuin gestured toward the dots in the distance. "We're heading for the Isle of Four Fences. They're the fences of humanity and there's one spot where they all meet."

"What do the four fences represent?" Scarlet asked, sitting next to him. "They must represent aspects of humanity, right?"

"Gold represents material desires. Silver represents artistic attainment while brass indicates strength. The crystal fence is that of spiritual attunement." Cuin said, his voice smooth and calm. "In the story of Maleduín, his crew couldn't handle the food given to them from the maidens of Crystal."

"No eating while there, then. I got it."

"Well, it's a bit more than that, Scarlet." Cuin squeezed her hand as he pulled her near, so Finn could rest more. "It's a place where you must be in balance yourself. Not think too much or too little of your worth."

They said nothing for a while as Cuin guided the boat. Scarlet knew she had much to consider. It wouldn't be easy to retrieve the Fal Stone, she feared, not even with the keys.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they approached the island, Finn awakened from his nap. "Drop me off on the silver side, Cuin. Scarlet, give your key to my brother. He's going to drop you off on the brass side. Once you're there, keep walking toward the middle of the island. You'll meet us there. Eat and drink nothing except what's on the trees."

"So I've been warned. Why are we going separately?"

“You want the Fal Stone, right?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly.

“That’s how we set it up. You’re between Cuin and me. When we meet at the corner, then we’ll walk you through the next part.” Finn grinned at her. “It won’t be bad, promise.” With that he jumped off the boat, shifted into leopard form, then loped off towards the center of the island.

Scarlet shook her head. “I’m not sure how I feel about Finn. He’s nice, then he’s nuts.”

“That’s Finn.” Cuin chuckled as he swung the boat eastward. Once he was where he wanted, Cuin helped Scarlet disembark. “Take care, and see you in about twenty minutes max.”

Scarlet nodded and started walking toward the center of the island. Cuin maneuvered the boat and finally grounded it in his area. Sighing softly, he began walking toward the center, keeping count of his steps in order to prevent total boredom. He hated walking this island because the temptations were great. Temptations, perhaps not in the traditional sense, but they encouraged him to excess of whatever point they were on this island.

Concentrating on his goal, Cuin continued walking, nodding at the men and women who offered him food and drink. “Not right now, but thank you anyway.” He brushed them off politely. T’was better to be polite while in the Otherworld.

While his eyes watched for the corner where all four fences meet, Cuin thought about the ritual on which they’d yet to embark. It wasn’t tough, nor was it hard to do, but it was everything else that led to it that determined readiness. He hated the idea of taking the Fal Stone out of hiding, but if Brigid were correct, it would be at risk here. Taranis’ minions, those trained in rituals, would be able to search and perhaps even find the Fal Stone. But at the same time, he wasn’t sure that sending it forward in time was the right answer either. Yet she seemed determined on the course and it wasn’t always wise to question any deity.

He could see Finn in the distance, still in leopard form, loping toward where the four fences met. Searching, he could barely make out Scarlet. *Good, our timing is about right. Finn took the easy way, but since he’s beyond determined to get this over, I can’t blame him. Picking up his pace, Cuin went downhill, carefully missing the flowers as the rolling hill led him forward.*

*Where’d you go?* Finn asked.

*I’m in a lovely downward area. I’ll be hitting the rise of the land in a minute. You okay?*

*Perfect. Scarlet looks a bit nervous though.*

*Think she encountered some of the people here?*

*Again, do bears shite in the woods?*

*Fuck off, dear brother, I asked a simple question. I was offered, but they kept their distance.*

*Ah. They ignored me for the most part. Finn chuckled. I'm shifting my form. The fence is about three meters from me.*

Cuin smiled at his brother's antics. Normally Finn was the slightly reserved one, but when in the Otherworld, he always knew how to keep a person aware of things including the need for humor. Climbing the slight rise of the land, he saw Scarlet and waved to her. Finn already stood where the fences met together in a shimmering mass of color and power.

Scarlet and he met Finn at the same time. She gave them both a tight smile. "The people can be quite insistent, especially when they realize you've never been here before."

Finn nodded. "Yes, but you've got strength of character to resist them. You've done extremely well, Scarlet. Cuin, you have your key?"

Cuin took out the key and slipped it into the corner of the fence where it matched. Finn did the same with the silver key. Scarlet looked at them both, then instinctively placed her hands over theirs. Shooting her a grateful smile, Cuin began.

"Within the realms of the human heart, we strive for balance."

"Within the realms of this world, we see it physically," Finn intoned.

*Say this, Scarlet -- "within the realms of man, we seek spiritual awareness,"* Cuin coached mentally.

"Within the realms of man, we seek spiritual awareness," she repeated.

"Thus, balanced in three, bring forth the hallow that shows those who lead," Finn stated with power and authority.

In the crystal area, the Fal Stone shimmered into existence. Cuin and Finn each knelt on one knee, forcing Scarlet to do the same. The Fal Stone was six feet high, carved and closely resembling a throne. The more they gazed at it, the more they felt power vibrate within the dark blue and gray stone. They all reached over the crystal fence and touched it, allowing the power to flow through them for a moment. The song of kings flowed within them and the true power of Lia Fal filled them.

"So this is the Fal Stone," Scarlet whispered as she gazed into the heart of the stone. "It's so beautiful, so powerful. It's a king maker, not just the announcer of kings. No wonder so many people have searched for this treasure."

Cuin caressed the stone and whispered to it in Gaelic. "Yes, it is. It sang when Arthur sat on it and it shall sing for the one meant to rule when it comes time."

Finn pulled his hand away from the stone first. "Let's call Brigid. I want this out of here before anything happens. We've done enough on this journey. I'm too tired to fight off any bad guys."

"Agreed."

Scarlet knelt before the stone, her hands raised to the heavens. "Brigid, mother of hearth, fire and home, hear my call. I am your daughter, chosen through blood and trial.

Within myself I travel deep, I seek respite in this place you keep. Hear my heart and soul through the lands; come and rescue me from these Otherworld sands.”

Lifting her head, Scarlet whispered the prayer to Brigid that both men knew, as well. Together, they chanted. “Fire that burns, hearth that heals, Goddess Brigid we call upon your flame.”

A burst of orange lit the area as the goddess once again manifested. The wreath was gone, but the sword in her hand gleamed with fire. “I believe you petitioned for my appearance?”

Scarlet smiled. “We’ve recovered the Fal Stone, Goddess.”

“So I see. Thank you, Brothers Maraigh. My daughter and I shall secure it safely on Avalon.”

Cuin held up a hand. “How can you be sure it’ll be safe? Taranis will find a way to get to it, even on Avalon.”

“Yes, but by the time he figures it out, there will be one able to handle the magick required to bring it home again. This I swear.” Brigid looked at Finn. “You seem much recovered, Ovate.”

“I am. The journey proved one of wisdom as well. *Go raibh maith agat*, Brigid.”

“I’m glad to have helped you. Though Morrighu cursed you and your brethren, you are also special to her. It was due to Taranis this happened and we hope by thwarting him, we can gain your freedom for you. I shall grant you each a small blessing.”

Scarlet stood beside Brigid, grinning. “Please, Goddess, may I add my own to yours?”

“Indeed you may, my daughter.”

Taking Finn’s hand, Scarlet kissed his cheek. “May your peace be found and your heart be healed. Though I can’t break a curse, I can tell you that she is coming and that when you find her, she will captivate you like none you’ve ever been with. She will be hard to convince, but at the same time, when she loves, you’ll find peace and healing.”

Moving to Cuin, Scarlet kissed him softly on the lips. “For you, Cuin, I bring hope. You have long protected and guided others, oft times without guidance for yourself. Within your heart war two sides and the one meant for you knows them both better than she knows her own. Walk softly with her. May your dreams have peace now.”

Scarlet stepped back, placing her hand upon the Fal Stone. “I swear upon my life’s blood and those who shall come from me, we shall protect the Hallows until such time it is unnecessary and our promise has been declared fulfilled.”

Brigid gestured and opened the doorway for both men. “Go, Cuin and Finn. Thank you for helping my daughter to learn her own way and power, and for helping in this sacred task. Know that today you’ve secured the future for your descendants.”

A bright orange flash surrounded both men, and once it cleared they were standing inside the living room of their home. Cuin staggered forward, then placed a hand on the couch. "We're home."

"How much time has passed?" Finn grabbed the TV remote and turned on BBC Headline News. Looking at the day and time, he swore.

"Two weeks, we've been gone over two weeks," Cuin said aloud. Sitting down, he sighed. "We need sleep. My body feels like it's been through the ringer."

"Let me call Miach. You call Shane. Once we let them know we're home, I'm showering and going to bed."

"Righto boyo!" Cuin clasped his brother's forearm. "Thank you for being there."

"Anytime, *deárthaír*. It was my pleasure to Journey with you." Finn smiled softly. "Let's rest up. You know there will be questions and ramifications to deal with later on."

Cuin jumped up and sprinted toward the bathroom. "I get the shower first!"

"You shite hawk, you!" Finn growled while grabbing the cordless phone. "Make it fucking quick or I'll haul you out of there!"

Chuckling, Cuin flipped his brother the bird. "I'll be out when I'm damn good and ready."

They both laughed as the fire of Imbolc passed them by.

## St. Patrick's Chug and Chase

*(Takes place after Call of the Wylde)*

Cadrus opened the door to Ambrosia's Tavern and sighed happily as the scents of food and drink hit him. It had been ages since he or his brothers had been to the only true nexus point in time and space. "Come on, brothers. There's still some space here."

He, Elathan, and Dylan strolled in. They waved to some of the other patrons that were old friends and looked toward the bar, where Rena had her back to them.

"Pulled pints, guys? Or do you want something different?" Rena, the proprietor and bartender, asked loudly over the talking.

"Three pulled pints and chasers. Two Bushmills and one Laphroaig. Elathan is feeling a bit Scot today," Cadrus yelled back. He ran his fingers through his short brown hair, grinning.

"Done. Take a seat and I'll bring it to you in a moment." She motioned toward the part of the U-shaped bar that was closest to the fireplace and the stage. The guys obeyed and headed that way.

Once they were around the bottom of the 'U', Dylan spotted three seats together. "There we go. Let's get them before a god or someone else claims them."

Cadrus claimed his stool next to an older looking man while Elathan and Dylan followed suit. Before they could adjust themselves in the comfortable bar stools, Rena set their drinks before them perfectly.

Elathan grabbed Rena's slender hand. "Thank you, milady. How may I please you in thanks?"

Snorting, she pulled her hand back and shook her head at him. “‘Than, you’re still hilarious. It’s been a while since I’ve seen any of your brood. Things going okay?”

Dylan piped up, shooting Rena his standard ‘come hither’ look. “Define ‘okay’. Niam is free of the curse and Finn thinks that Owain should be freed shortly.”

“You think all of you might gain your freedom?” She took some dirty glasses and put them in the sink beneath the bar, her expression neutral. It was an ongoing joke that she hadn’t slept with any of the Marauders and that she kept her honor intact.

“Not sure,” Cadrus commented before tossing his head back and chugging his shot of Bushmills Irish whiskey. “One release isn’t all of us being released.”

“Prudent thinking. What does Miach believe?”

The three Marauders snorted in laughter. Rena joined in. “I see. Never mind then. Happy St. Paddy’s day to you all.”

“Thanks, Rena. We might not be Christians, but to celebrate anything Irish is great!” Dylan toasted Rena with his Guinness as she walked away, gathering empty glasses.

Elathan sighed before sipping his single malt Scotch whiskey. “Even after all these years, that raven-haired beauty is still doable.”

“Indeed,” the other two answered.

“I still think she’s got the hots for Finn,” Elathan commented.

“No way, Miach!” Dylan countered.

Cadrus chuckled. “Kaliban, her bouncer, would kill anyone who touched her.”

All nodded their agreement. Elathan watched Rena serve another customer as he spoke. “Miach says she’s ageless, like the tavern. Something about her and the tavern as nexus points.”

“Aye, many of us have honored Rena and the tavern since Eire has been Eire,” a small, older man interjected as he stepped up to the bar next to Cadrus. He followed it with gulping down the rest of his pint like it was water.

Cadrus gave the man a grin. “You trying to outdo us Celts, sir?” His competitive nature urged him onwards. Something about this older man just begged him to start a challenge.

“Not at all, laddie,” the man replied as Rena brought him a refill of the potent stout. Adjusting his green, gold, and brown plaid vest, he grinned back at Cadrus. “Why would ye think I be? Being a fellow Irishman and all.”

“You’re from Dingle or thereabouts, aren’t you?” Elathan asked, signaling Rena for another round. “Including our Irish brethren for this round, Rena!”

“Coming up!”

“*Go raibh maith agat!*”

“Ye speak Gaeilge?” The man asked as he finished his pint. “‘Tis good to see the language making a comeback.”



Cadrus chuckled. “We were born speaking it. It wasn’t an option.”

“Ah, born in the Gaeltacht area, were ye?”

“Something like that,” Elathan replied.

“Are you up to a challenge?” Cadrus asked, the idea of competing against a fellow Irishman in full swing.

Elathan placed a hand on Cadrus’ shoulder. “No, *deárthaír*, don’t do this. Something doesn’t seem quite right.”

“I can handle a smaller, older man,” Cadrus whispered. “I’ve out drunk many people before and will after, here in Ambrosia.”

“As you wish. Just remember that people aren’t always what they seem. Something about that man just doesn’t hit me right,” Elathan countered.

Cadrus turned his attention back to the small Irishman. He was short, perhaps no taller than five two, five three. Even his clothes were a bit old fashioned -- gold, green and brown plaid vest, green shirt, brown pants. It made him fairly nondescript, much like a wallflower. *Well, he’ll learn better than to drink like that when a Marauder is up for some fun!* “Shall we see who can handle his alcohol better, sir?”

“Me name is Tralee. I’d be glad to see which of us is the better Irishman.”

“Cadrus Maraigh.”

“Glad to meet you, Cadrus. Now, a challenge like this should call for better liquor than stout or Irish whiskey. This calls for the best Ireland has to offer.” Tralee lifted his hand to get Rena’s attention. “Rena, bring us the *Meon na hEireann*, the Spirit of Ireland. We’ll be doing shots.” Tralee looked at Elathan and Dylan, who shook their heads. “Shots for two, dear bartender.”

Rena’s hand closed around a liquor bottle and turned to look at Tralee. “Are you fucking daft, Tralee? What about you, Cadrus? On *this* day you want to do this? On *this* day, when you *know* what could happen, you want to do *this*?”

“I will accept full --”

“Damn straight you will accept full responsibility. On the *entire* tavern and its occupants, Tralee. Not one will be overlooked!”

“Done.”

“What is the wager?” Rena asked as she brought out a shamrock-shaped flagon filled with a pearlized emerald fluid. “What will the loser be doing? There will not be an exchange of talents or souls. I *do* remember what happened the last time someone got that bright idea!”

Cadrus answered before Tralee. “The loser must put on those funny looking clothes that ‘leprechauns’ wear and the patrons of the bar must try to catch him. The whole ‘Capture the Leprechaun’ thing. Fair play rules engaged for the tavern’s patrons.” His grin grew wider. “Tralee will look cute in the clothes, I think.”

“I see. And this l -- man, Tralee, is agreeable to the wager?” Her eyes seemed to burn while she looked at the older gentleman.

His eyes looked everywhere but at hers. “Aye, I am.”

“Then you will be under Ambrosia rules. Than, Dylan, be careful and don’t drink any of the *Meon na hEireann*. Understand?” Her eyes bored into theirs, making Cadrus remember once more why he feared this woman above all others he knew.

He responded first. “Yes, Rena.”

“Understood.”

“Good.” She looked heavenward, then around to some of the more easily recognizable deities. “Why today? Did I do something recently to warrant this? The last bet that went wrong in here was between Thor and the Jeharra. Oy vey!”

“Hey! Thor cheated that time!” the Jeharra, Sharyn Tremayne said as she stood up from where she and her twin sat. Her twin pulled at her to sit back down. She did but only after adding, “Plus, Synthia and I *did* clean up the mess afterwards!”

“Yes, I know, but you know what I deal with. I don’t want to have another issue of that magnitude this soon.” Rena growled lowly while she wiped down the bar near them. The atmosphere of the tavern seemed to grow a lot more expectant, and at the same time, rambunctious.

“I’m ready when you are, Tralee,” Cadrus commented as he motioned toward the Irish liquor. As the energy grew, Cadrus allowed himself to feed off the emotions, careful not to pull too much from the patrons as he satisfied his vampiric thirst. It’d help him to deal with the alcoholic effects and since he planned to win, he drank in the emotions as if they were a fine wine.

Tralee’s hands cradled the flagon carefully as he unstoppered it. The smell of fresh grass, crisp air, and strains of a harp escaped in a sigh from the bottle. Carefully, he poured the fluid into the two clean shot glasses. Putting down the bottle, he handed one shot to Cadrus.

“Put the stopper back in that bottle or I’ll kick your arse, Tralee,” Rena said, her back to them. “Don’t think I can’t realize your plans. I’ll stop you dead if you don’t.”

Tralee chuckled as he stoppered the flagon. Turning his attention back to Cadrus, he spoke. “After each shot, we switch seats. The man who canna make the switch loses the bet.”

“Agreed.”

Dylan held up a hand. “What is in that stuff?”

Tralee smiled. “It’s the essence of Eire, laddie. From its founding, with a touch of the Lia Fail and the Fey within its depths. The brew is hidden in the best place on earth and only those who are favoured by the Goddesses of Eire can find it. They allow Rena to have a full flagon on hand for those who miss the taste of home.”

“Sounds potent,” Than pointed out. “Is it safe to use for a contest like this?”

“‘Tis the only way to find out for sure who is truly Irish, isn’t it?” Tralee said with a smile. “Unless your brother wishes to back out now.”

“Never. Let’s go.”

On the count of three, Tralee and Cadrus tossed back their first shot. The liquid slid down like the finest liquor, but gave a fiery kick as it hit the stomach. Sensations of Ireland in its purest form rushed through Cadrus’ body. *What a buzz! I want more of this!*

They stood, traded seats and this time Cadrus poured the shots. Back and forth they went, one ... three ... seven shots. The onlookers urged them both onward, cheering them with each success. Soon they were on the ninth shot.

Cadrus felt a bit sick to his stomach. Even with absorbing the emotions, he couldn’t clear the buzz of the alcohol from his system enough to compensate. Yet, Tralee looked as fresh as a cherry blossom, with a pink blush to his cheeks showing he was at least somewhat affected by the *meon na heireann*. *At least he’s feeling it too, even if he does look better than I’m sure I do at the moment. I will win. His small frame can’t handle much more alcohol. There’s no physical way possible.*

“Pour the next shot, Tralee,” he slurred. “Let’s do this.”

“Righto boyo.” The small gentleman poured the shots and handed Cadrus his. “Ye are up to this, right?”

“Damn straight,” Cadrus retorted.

“*Sláinte!*” They clinked shots and tossed them back as if the Essence of Ireland was nothing more than pure water.

As Cadrus tried to stand, his legs forgot where the floor was. Clutching the bar, he gasped and looked at the standing man. “I ... I can’t find me legs, Tralee.” His eyes closed as the room started spinning.

Tralee gave Cadrus a gigantic grin, showing his teeth and chuckled. “Of course not, boyo. You’re Celt, not pure Irish. I’m part of Eire herself.”

Rena stepped forward and placed a hand on Cadrus’ forehead. She closed her eyes and concentrated. “Tell them the rest, Tralee. You played your trick in my tavern. Explain it all!”

“See, the dressing up as a leprechaun isn’t hard for me to do. I am one. But for you, you bowsie, you’ll be a little more than funny looking as you’re so bollixed that you’ll be throwing shapes with your scampering!” He laughed with glee.

Dylan and Elathan stood next to Cadrus. “Unfair, you did not reveal your true nature to my brother!” Elathan growled.

“Just as he didn’t reveal his nature of a vampire to me. However, I have heard many a comment about the Marauders and knew the reputations of you all,” Tralee pointed out. “And I gave him a chance to back out. He chose his own path. I win. He gets to play keep away from me and the others while dressed in funny green clothes!”

Rena pulled her hand away from Cadrus' forehead. When his eyes opened, he glanced at the bartender. "What did you do?"

Grinning, she stepped back. "Drinking that stuff is dangerous, especially for someone who thrives on emotions. Hell, only leprechauns and the Sidhe easily handle that stuff. What I did was remove most of the effects from your system. Humans aren't quite able to handle that much potency in their bloodstream at one time. However, you're still beholden by the laws of the tavern to uphold your wager."

"I won't back down. Even if Tralee had told me he was a leprechaun, I'd still have challenged him. Give me the suit and let's get this over with."

Tralee removed a coin from his pocket and tossed it at Cadrus. The Marauder caught it and it shifted into the gaudiest green clothes that could be imagined. Sighing, Cadrus excused himself so he could change in the men's bathroom.

Once he was gone, Rena glared at Tralee. "Are you happy with yourself now?"

"Yes, immensely."

"Good. You're in my shit book for the next two centuries."

"What? Rena, you can't --"

"I can and I have. You damn well know what that stuff does. You're damn lucky I know the spell to negate a portion of the effects. I do *not* relish another fray like four hundred years ago -- Sidhe versus the leprechauns. Remember how *that one* started, Tralee? Huh?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Dylan and Elathan followed the heated conversation as Rena put point after point and Tralee tried countering it. Dylan motioned toward the bathroom and left Elathan to listen to the conversation while he went to find Cadrus.

Opening the bathroom door carefully, he listened for his brother's heartbeat. Finding it, he went to the closed stall. He knocked softly. "You okay, *deárthair?*"

The sigh on the other side made him smile. Somehow his brother had been entirely chastened by this experience, but Dylan knew -- this would only last for a short time before he was back to his exuberant, challenging self.

"I'm fine. A bit put out that I didn't stop myself, but I'm fine. I really hate this color green, you know. Remind me to never buy anything in this shade, ever. I want no memories of this day, even with any future clothes purchases."

Dylan palmed the camera in his hand. Ever since technology had gotten better, he'd been waiting for an opportune time to catch his brothers being foolish. Micheal Pdraig had his part of the Marauder network for catching the Marauders at their worst. But everyone knew that for some reason, Cadrus always managed to do his stunts out of the limelight and no one had gotten pictures of his screw ups. Today would be the day.

As Cadrus unlocked the stall door, Dylan took his position near the door. That way he could take his pictures and run like hell. He knew once he was out the door, he along with the other patrons -- gods, fey, and other -- would have a chance to catch the Cadrus Leprechaun for a treat. Foolish behavior on Cadrus' part, but then again, it'd been a while since they'd blown off steam.

Cadrus stepped out of the stall and looked at Dylan. His brother's mouth dropped open as his hand came up, snapping picture after picture. Realizing Dylan's intent of sharing the pictures with the other brothers and the O'Connors, Cadrus lunged at his brother to stop him taking pictures. "You sorry son of a --"

"Temper temper!" Dylan yelled as he dashed through the doorway. "You can't catch me, green boy!"

Cadrus chased after him, only pausing for a second in front of a mirror as he realized that the Essence of Ireland had also turned his skin a deep pearly green. "Fuck!" He continued the chase -- right until he stepped past the threshold. Then he saw everyone lined up waiting to catch the leprechaun.

"Fucking hell, this isn't going to be fun," he muttered under his breath. Then he spoke up. "How long do I have to run, Rena?"

The woman sat on the bar and swung her legs so they dangled on this side. "Two minutes. No one can use magick to capture you. Has to be physical. Whoever has you under control -- gets a gift from you. Something nice and worthwhile, Cadrus."

"All right." Cadrus felt the excitement build within him and the others. Inhaling deeply, he absorbed more of their emotions to bolster his energy. The emotions in the tavern were conducive for him to do his best yet. Being a sports enthusiast, he had done the most extreme things and it helped him to feed without draining any one person.

"Whenever you're ready, I'll start the timer," she commented, pointing to the timer that hung in the middle of the tavern. A timer he knew hadn't been there before. *Rena uses magick. I wonder if it's hers or the tavern's. No time now to think. Will ask later. Now I need to run and run smart. Go toward the men first, then the women, dash back toward the men. My brothers each took places to give me a break area. Good. I might just need it. This stuff is still knocking my senses for a loop.*

"Ready!"

"Go!"

Cadrus took off like an athlete running the fifty-meter dash. Dodging to the right, he headed toward a group of the Celtic gods that he knew would have nothing to do with him and they let him go by without touching him. "Run quick, Cadrus. Before I decide that death is now and I force Morrighu to renege," Arawn, Celtic god of the dead, mocked.

"Thanks, Arawn. Good to know you're still waiting for my soul!" Cadrus spat out as he quickly cut to the left. Heading toward the Fey, Seelie and Unseelie, he hoped that they'd be

kind and not trip him up. Some of them were the most mischievous kind. He slid his hand into his bright green vest, he pulled out some coins and jewels, tossing them toward the Fey.

“Oooh, pretties!” one of the sprites cooed. “Thank ye, Cadrus! We love the pretties!”

“You’re welcome,” Cadrus panted as he felt hands slide against his body. This chase thing sucked. How on earth did the leprechauns manage to dodge people when spotted? His mind searched for an answer as he headed toward Dylan.

His legs burned as he felt energy leave him. Inhaling deeply, Cadrus forced more emotional energy into his body, pressing for more strength to endure. He heard Rena call out, “One more minute left!” and pressed closer toward his brother.

Then two women stood in his path. One blonde, the other strawberry blonde, they grinned wickedly at him. “Jeharra, I think we should play with him together.”

“I think so too, Phoenyx. What about rotating nights?”

“I think that might work off his debt in a week.”

Both women crouched low and waited for his next move. *Oh hell, these are the Twins. Dammit, I remember the minstrel’s stories about them. Though I’d love to be their sex slave for a bit, now is definitely not the time! Fuck!*

“Sorry, ladies, no time now. Maybe another time when evil gods stop trying to take over the Earth!” He reached out and pulled the blonde’s arm toward her sister’s. At the last minute, he heard the growl. Then he was sandwiched between the two women.

Sharyn growled. “If you want our help to avoid being caught by Tralee, you’ll give into us. Rena asked us to help you.”

Synthia tugged at his arm, making it look like he was almost slipping through their grip, though all three knew he couldn’t move-- even though he tried. “Dammit, hold him, Shar!” Then she whispered, “Kirstie is a friend of mine. Please, let us help you.”

Cadrus blinked and lifted his gaze. Cat-green eyes met his dark ones. “You’re serious. Rena asked you to help?” he whispered furiously.

Shar made a cry of frustration and pretended to slip a bit. “Yes, you fool. Now either work with us or against us. But make your choice *now!*”

He felt a nudge as a feminine force pushed at his mental barriers. Then he felt a burst of flame and information. It was Phoenyx. While he changed his clothes, Rena had made her way to the Twins and asked for assistance, calling in an IOU. Then he saw them position themselves to one brother, making sure they could rush anywhere in the tavern in a second.

Cadrus inclined his head and let his weight carry him to the floor. “Dammit, ye women! Get off of me! I’m not a boy toy you can just fondle at your will!”

“Bite me!” Jeharra shouted, sliding her hands under his arms and locking her hands behind his head.

“Bend over!” Phoenix responded as she locked her legs around Cadrus’. He was pinned and there was no way in hell he could escape. Both women chuckled -- a sound that he found sensual and full of promises.

“Is he in their control?” Rena called out to the nearest people.

“Yes!” was the response.

“It’s over! Cadrus the leprechaun must pay forfeit to Sharyn and Synthia Tremayne. They may ask of him what they wish and what’s in his power to give.”

The women released Cadrus and helped him to stand up. Once they were done brushing off dust and debris, he realized that he was in between the women. They were taking their job seriously. Something about it felt not just right, but exhilarating. A poke in the mind forced him to open up.

“Yes, we do play, but it’s consensual. We won’t force it. However, we will ask for two tokens of faith, Cadrus Maraigh.”

*What tokens, Phoenix?*

*You’ll see. By the way, we’ve decided that you and your brothers are hot, very hot.*

*Thanks! And thanks for saving me.*

*Anytime.*

“We shall ask for two small tokens from Cadrus,” Sharyn claimed. “On your knees, Cadrus.”

He did as she asked. Looking up at the titian-haired beauty in black leather gave him many ideas, none of them remotely polite. Her grin told him that she picked up on his randy thoughts.

“My token is this -- that if ever my sister or I shall need passage from the Pantheonic realms to the mortal world, we may claim sanctuary from you and your family.”

“Done. Two of my brothers are here and will help spread the word.”

Synthia moved to her sister’s side and touched his shoulder. “Cadrus, I claim a token for catching you. Mine is simply that we share a kiss. This kiss will seal the bond between Ireland and Atlantis.”

A gasp rang through the crowd. He knew that Atlantis had sunk many eons before, but that some of its descendants lived in various countries. For them, Eire was the only place close to home and the only place that hadn’t made a treaty with the Atlanteans.

“Done. Let this bond be held before all gods, all realms. Eire and Atlantis are friends, never foes. Let all talks begin.”

He stood up and pulled Synthia close to him. Lowering his head, his lips met hers. Slowly, his tongue slid into her mouth. She tasted sweeter than honey, but with a hint of citrus. Never had he tasted such power within a woman before. He knew that if she allowed

him to feed from her, he wouldn't have to satisfy the vampiric hunger for years. As their tongues slid against each other, Synthia sent him emotions, hard, furious, and intense.

*I know you can process these. They are from my sister and me. Though I have emotions, Jeharra often suppresses hers. I bleed them from her when I can, but I need relief and you need to be cleansed of the Essence of Eire. Let me know if it's too much.*

*More. I want more.* The sensations were slightly overwhelming but addictive. Each sip of energy, of emotions filled his cells, filled his soul with warmth and life. He took in the emotions of life, death, and rebirth. Love, hope, anger, and desperation filled him with such intensity he felt the impurities in his body burn away before the clarity of such feelings. Such power, such depth of giving. Now he comprehended why Rena asked them to save him. They needed him as much as he needed them. Balance -- Rena's number one belief.

Finally, he slowly eased out of the kiss, nipping at her lips. "Thank you, Phoenix."

Her smile was genuinely happy and bright. "Thank you, Cadrus Maraigh. And Happy St. Patrick's Day."

"To you too, Phoenix. And to you, Jeharra."

Cadrus looked for Tralee, who was making his way out the tavern door. "Tralee!"

The leprechaun stopped in his tracks.

"Where are you going?"

"The fun's over, boyo. Time to move onward."

Cadrus strolled until he was toe to toe with the shorter man. Leaning down, he gave him a glare. "Thank ye, old man."

"Anytime, Marauder. You needed a cleansing. Next time, you'll know how to do it for yourself." With a wink, Tralee disappeared.

"Come! Let's drink! The next round is on the house!" Rena called out, shifting the attention back to the bar.

Cadrus smiled at his brothers. "I'm changing out of these clothes first. Then we can continue our celebration."

"You look ... different."

"I feel cleansed. Cleaner inside. Like the emotions of everyone were purified." Cadrus commented. "I'll explain more when I get back."

He looked for the Twins but didn't see them. Sighing, Cadrus let go the idea of seeing what exactly the girls had in mind when they were teasing him. He headed into the stall where his clothes waited. He started stripping when he heard a *snick!* Then two low laughs filled the bathroom.

"Who's there?"

"Who else? We figured you'd like to know more about us ..."



“Happy St. Patrick’s Day to me!” Cadrus chuckled as the Twins stepped out of the shadows.

“I believe that’s Happy St. Patrick’s Day to us,” Sharyn said, sliding into the stall beside him. Her fingers teased his lips before sliding down his jawline. “I think I like him in this tight space. What say you, sismine?”

Phoenix stepped forward and grinned. “Personally, I’m thinking of him tied up on the cross might make me happier. That whole helpless to my teasing thing appeals to my senses right about now. Though remember, I did clear my debt with him by the kiss we shared.”

Cadrus looked from one sister to the other. Phoenix looked amused while Jeharra, Sharyn, looked sexually predatory. “Do I get a say-so in this?”

“No!” Both sisters answered as Sharyn’s fingers flicked over one of his bare nipples. The other tugged at the ring that pierced his other nipple. “You’re our slave, even if my sister was being nice. Perhaps we should take this to another place where we won’t be interrupted.”

Phoenix snapped her fingers and a silver cord appeared in her hand. “Strip Cadrus. When you’re done, we’ll take you to our room.”

Cadrus’ mouth dropped open. “You’re not taking me out there naked are you?”

“Yes, that’s the plan,” Phoenix said plainly. “You are the slave, we are the masters. Thus, you strip and we attach the collar. Once our time is up, you’re free to be on your way. None in our harem are allowed clothing unless we wish it.”

Sharyn slid her hands under his pants, gently caressing his slightly aroused cock. “Take off your clothes, lover. We promise to make you feel so much better after.”

Cadrus shucked the rest of his clothes onto the floor of the bathroom. Phoenix tossed the collar and leash to Sharyn, then made the clothes disappear. Sharyn reluctantly released his cock and fastened the collar first, then the leash. She jerked the leash softly, whispering in his ear, “Come on, my pet. Let’s go play.”

Phoenix led the way, opening the door. Sharyn stepped out in front of Cadrus, letting him watch her ass sway with each step. His cock throbbed at the idea of having this woman and he followed, ignoring the catcalls from the crowd at his naked appearance. “You follow Sharyn, Cadrus. I’m going to reassure your brothers and I’ll be right up.”

Synthia strode towards the two men who moved towards them, stopping them with two words. As they paused, she spoke too quietly for him to hear.

“Come, Cadrus, but not in that way,” Sharyn teased, guiding him up the staircase. Once they were upstairs, she took him to a room on the end of one side of the tavern. She placed her palm upon the plate on one side, then opened the door after hearing a click. Cadrus walked in after her, feeling slightly nervous as there was no light and his senses were having a hard time adjusting to the darkness and the power that cloaked his senses.

“Just step forward, Cadrus. Once I close the door, there will be some illumination. We don’t like just anyone seeing the contents of this room.” Sharyn’s voice was low, but pitched

precisely for his acute hearing. He stepped into the room, reaching behind him, closing the door. As it clicked shut, low candlelight filled the large room.

Sharyn stood about four feet in front of him; her smile wide as he took in the room from its huge four poster bed made of a dark wood, covered with various shaped, multi-coloured pillows to the various props for sexual pleasure. Cadrus recognized many of the items, including the X that stood in one corner of the room. What intrigued him was the reclined seat that had foot rests angled at forty-five degrees. Perhaps in time, he'd be able to ask just what that one was for. A sharp tug caught his attention, bringing his gaze back to Sharyn's face.

He stepped forward, part of him wondering what exactly she had planned for him, while another more cautious part wondered what he had agreed to. "What can I do for you, Sharyn?"

"First, I think you need to help me remove my clothing," she purred while guiding him to a well cushioned chair that stood behind her. Cadrus knelt beside her, pulling off one leather boot, then the other, saying nothing. Obeying her wishes and hearing her low purrs of contentment made his heart rate increase along with his libido. Once he was finished with her boots, his hands slid up the outside of her thighs, up her sides until they reached her shoulders. With her nod of encouragement, Cadrus moved his hands over the front of Shar's bodice. He undid the lacing before easing the fabric off her shoulders and away from her chest.

"You've got a very gentle touch, Cadrus," she whispered as his fingers stroked the undersides of her breasts before continuing to remove the bodice.

"Thank you," he whispered, undoing her leather pants. As he tugged them down over her rounded hips, she lifted up so the fabric peeled off her body more easily. "You have the most magnificent skin I've seen. Evenly coloured, so few blemishes. So soft to the touch. I may touch?"

"Of course. You're not my slave, just my submissive for this evening." She smiled at him and his cock jerked in response. "But as for another night, we'll see." As she paused, she spread her legs open as he removed the last pant leg from her ankle. "I think that I might need the ministrations of your touch right here." Her hands cupped the back of his head, bringing him forward until his mouth was level with her pussy.

Not needing any more enticement, Cadrus slid between her legs until his face was flush against her damp curls. With a quick flick of his tongue, the sweet taste of Sharyn's essence filled his senses. Parting her outer labia with his fingers, he pushed his mouth forward letting his tongue press hard against her swollen clit. Her soft moan of pleasure increased his own desire for more. He worked his tongue against the raised bundle of nerves while sliding two fingers up and down the wet slit.

The creak of the door behind him caught his attention, but Shar's fingers, laced through his hair kept him from looking over his shoulder. Cadrus trusted that if there was a

danger, she'd have let go of him. His trust was rewarded when a low, female laugh filled the room followed by Synthia's voice. "Can I join in on the fun or is this one of those no share moments?"

"You can join in if you want," Shar answered slightly breathlessly as Cadrus continued with his ministrations. Slowly he slid two fingers deep in Shar's pussy, causing her to gasp. "Be warned though. Cadrus is very good with his mouth."

"Consider me warned." Two hands pressed on his shoulders, then slowly slid down his back in small circular movements. His body stiffened then relaxed under Synthia's soothing touch. Frissons of desire heated his body as the woman behind him made sure that he felt comfortable as he pleased Sharyn with his tongue and fingers. How long they continued there until Sharyn screamed her release, he wasn't sure, but all Cadrus thought upon was the pleasure shared between them as Synthia's hands wrapped around his body to caress his erect cock. With his tongue, Cadrus licked at the cream at Sharyn's pussy.

A sharp tug on his hair caused him to lift his head up. He opened his eyes to see Sharyn smiling at him. "You're damn good at pleasuring that way. How good are you with that cock of yours?"

"You mean this thick, long cock that I'm stroking?" Synthia teased as she gave Cadrus' cock a brief squeeze.

"Mmm, that would be the one." Sharyn tugged on the leash that hung loosely down Cadrus' chest. "Come, my pet. Let's see what other toys we have that might increase our fun."

Synthia's warm hands released his cock and scrotum. As he stood up, Cadrus noted his knees felt a bit stiff and weak. Then a warm hand slid to the center of his lower back followed by a burst of heat flooding his body. The stiffness faded away as a burst of affection fed his vampiric hunger. *I thought you might need a bit of feeding. You were quite busy there for a while without shifting your position.*

*Thanks, Synthia.*

*Call me Syn. We don't much stand on formalities with lovers.* The blonde woman gestured towards her sister who stood up and moved towards a long bookcase at the back of the room. *Better catch up and see what Shar has in mind for you. Don't worry about pleasuring me tonight, Cadrus. Though my sis mine and I share many things, including lovers on occasion, tonight I'm more in the mood to watch and show affection than into having a true ménage.*

## The Beltane Blues

*(Beltane Blues comes before Call of the Wylde)*

How the hell he'd got conned into doing this, he had no fucking idea. Then again, considering that he was waiting for Morrighu to pronounce her judgment, Micheal Padraig O'Connor knew that this assignment was a chance to put off that moment a bit longer. Rubbing his triqueta medallion, Micheal prayed that this mission with the Fey would move swiftly and finish before Beltane.

Whispering the words to the spell that Miach had drummed into him, Micheal Padraig waited until the portal opened between Helia and the mortal realm. Seeing it shimmer, he walked forward, hesitating only a moment. Once there, he was to find Frelin, second heir to the Seelie Court throne. They were to handle a small Druidic/Fey matter that had arisen recently due to the anticipated opening of the gateway. Though there were ways to move between the mortal realm and Helia, not many knew of them. But now with the information Miach had received, there was no choice. They had to figure out how to stop it.

Stepping through the portal, Micheal cursed as his head pounded with the distortion of walking through the worlds. *How the hell Cuin and Finn do this regularly, I've got no idea. This fucking hurts!* Suddenly the pressure and pain eased as he stepped into a world that looked like his, but different. Miach warned him that the only way he'd find his way through the maze of territories was to use his pendant, which would guide him to the Seelie Court. Squeezing his talisman, Micheal walked forward, letting the pull guide his direction in which to travel.

After walking for a couple of hours, he stood before the gate to the Seelie Court proper. After he presented his papers, Micheal Padraig waited for the suspicious guards to get confirmation from the King or his Heir, Adrastai, to allow him entrance to their realm.

Though he had never met Frelin, he was a bad boy -- or at least misunderstood if the rumours were any indication.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I do not wish to do this," Frelin stated firmly, brushing back the long white hair from his face. "Working with a human isn't in my best interest, nor any Fey's. They have killed us before, remember?"

Adrastai stared at his brother and ignored the rolling of his wife's eyes. "You will do this. There is no option. You're on probation and this is one step toward you making up for your mistake."

"Because of your Pussy Princess and her treaty?" Frelin grumped.

"Yes, because your treatment of me is not proper, you stupid block of ice," Taja retorted, her hand gripping her husband's.

"And I'm the one who's guilty of impropriety?" Frelin asked, lifting his eyes heavenwards.

"You're both guilty of name-calling, but you are also working off your punishment for trying to kill my wife, brother." Adras repeated. "So, you will help Micheal Padraig O'Connor search for information."

"What kind of information and where?"

"Ambrosia Tavern, and the information deals with who is trying to force the gateway open early and how they found where it opened. Both Miach and I think it's someone who can walk both realms."

"This is an issue why?" Frelin wasn't going to make this easy. The fact that someone wanted the gateway open early bothered him. It could hurt too many of the Sidhe.

"Because we're not ready. You sure as Hades can't protect us all, can you, my brother?" Adras growled. "Listen, this is your choice -- do this mission, or you'll initiate a treaty with the Wraith Walkers."

"Dammit. I'll do the damn mission." Resigned, he let his emotions go. He didn't like mixing with other races, but that was because he really didn't understand how they thought. Perhaps he didn't want to, but in the end, he was worried about the Seelie Court and its surviving the opening of the gateway.

"Good. Your human companion is at the main gate waiting for you," Adras noted. "Grab your gear and get moving." When Frelin turned away, his brother added, "Thanks, Frelin. I know this is hard for you, but I don't trust anyone else to do this."

"Just remember that, brother. And ... you're welcome." Storming out of the main hall, Frelin grabbed his weapons from where they were being held for him, since no weapons were allowed in the main hall anymore. Storing them in their sheaths, he strolled out the door and headed for the main gate.

Once he got there, he saw a sight that spooked him more than any threat. Kneeling beside the two guards was a dark-haired man playing *senschi*, the Fey dice game of chance. He spoke in their native tongue and nodded as one guard pointed out the positioning. *How dare this human know my language and try to play a game meant solely for the Sidhe! Does he seek to overthrow us from within?*

“What are you men doing?” Frelin demanded loudly.

The human stood up, brushing off his knees. “I’m sorry, milord, it’s my fault,” he said in perfectly accented Fey. “I asked them the difference in the three-six rule versus the three-five rule. I’m human and the concept kept me losing. But I apologize for interfering with them, Lord Frelin.”

“You know of me?”

“Why yes, milord. My *múinteoir*, teacher, has a friendship with Lord Adrastai. They speak on a semi-regular basis. Druid-Fey relations have always been kept sacred and secure. My *múinteoir* taught me to speak Elven, Fey, and other languages to be respectful. My family and I were required to learn the royalty and their positions as well, second heir to the Seelie Throne.”

“Interesting that some humans are taught manners in regards to the Fey, but not all.”

Micheal Padraig smiled sheepishly. “Well, considering that most humans don’t think you exist, you can’t blame them for not having proper manners. Then again, since the Fey don’t show respect to humans either, it’s a moot point to think it’d be reciprocated, correct?”

Frelin stared at the human, debating if killing the insolent mortal would get him into further trouble. He couldn’t say yes and he couldn’t say no. Neatly trapped and the point made within the hearing of the guards, the encounter would be spread to others by nightfall. “You make an interesting point. Perhaps we can see what can be worked out before the gateway opens under its own power.”

“Good idea. My teachers said you’d have an idea on where to start.”

“Yes, I do. What is your name, human?”

“Well, Fey lord Frelin, my name is Micheal Padraig O’Connor, descendant of Connor and Scotia.”

Frelin’s eyes flicked to the brown ones of the human. *He’s from the family that had willingly bonded with the Fey, both Seelie and Unseelie?* “Thank you, Micheal. Let’s go. Our travels are going to take us to a place many Fey only visit on rare occasions.”

“Oh? What place is this?” The man fell into step with him. They walked companionably, their strides matching.

“I don’t think you know of it. It’s called Ambrosia.”

“Ambrosia? We’re going to Ambrosia?! Oh, this is going to be interesting,” Micheal chuckled.

“How so?”

“Some of the Marauders were there recently. I wonder if that’s how your information came to you?”

“It was confirmed by two Sidhe. So, we go there to see who would want to open the gateway between our worlds early.” Frelin stopped speaking and continued walking as Micheal Padraig muttered something under this breath. It sounded a lot like, “Gods. Please don’t let it be or we’re fucked.” If that was indeed the case, yes, they would be. All of them.

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The two men walked for a few hours, alternating between silence and slightly uncomfortable talks about their peoples, expectations and more. During that time, Micheal Padraig realized a couple of things about Lord Frelin, and he’d kick Miach’s ass when he got back. The Seelie fey was completely and utterly prejudiced against humans or any kind of interaction between his people and everyone else. The Fey’s sense of humor was severely lacking and he needed a pummeling about reality. However, Micheal Padraig knew he wasn’t the one to deliver the news. Somehow he realized that Ambrosia would hold more than either of them expected. At least he learned that much about the place. *But gods above and below, don’t let me get into god trouble while there!*

“It’s up ahead,” Frelin said after being silent for a while. “See the shimmering white bricks?”

“I see the design. How unusual. In our realm, it normally looks like an old-fashioned tavern.”

“Ambrosia Tavern of all places, all times. The nexus of many worlds, it’s said,” Frelin responded drolly. “Let’s go find us a magic-user who dares to hurt our realms, Micheal.”

“Let’s.”

Pulling on the door, Micheal held it open for the Fey lord. As he waited, magick tugged and enveloped him. Somehow this didn’t reassure him, but reminded him just how much energy existed in this place. His first visit and he wasn’t here with Donal, another Marauder, or cousin. *Fuck, I hope I can stay out of the sight of gods who don’t like me or the Marauders.* He followed Frelin inside, allowing the door -- and the tavern -- to fade from view.

Inside, he heard the voices and the music first. There was a traditional minstrel singing, but accompanied by a five-piece band. Some people -- could one call gods, demigods, and mixed races, people? -- were dancing, while others were drinking, socializing and bursting out into laughter. Something about this place called to him. Oh wait, that was the bartender.

“Fancy seeing you here, Micheal Padraig of Scotia and Connor. What can I get for you?” the woman with long black hair and flashing blue eyes said with a lilt.

“You know me?”

“I know all who pass through my doors, young druid. Just as I know your companion, Frelin, Second Lord of the Seelie Court. What would quench your thirst?” As they looked at her in shock, her rich, sensual laughter filled the room. “I am the owner of Ambrosia and my name is Rena Kai. What do you wish to drink, Frelin and Micheal Padraig?”

“Guinness,” Micheal answered. “How about for you, Lord Frelin?”

The silver-haired Sidhe looked around, his lip curling slightly. “I doubt you have any, but how about some *asciensa*?”

“Do you want the pure, mixed, or the crystallized version?” Rena replied, her gaze narrowing slightly as she snorted with amusement at the Sidhe. “You are a rude Seelie, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me? Who are you, a lowly bartender, to speak about me, when you are nothing as to the great Sidhe?” Frelin’s voice was like iced over steel.

The room fell silent except for two women laughing. Their tones were gold and silver mixed with hints of sensuality. “You have no fucking clue, do you, Prince of Seelie?” the blonde asked. “Before you blow your head off, know that I’m Synthia, also known as Huntress or Phoenix.”

“And I am Sharyn, Ice Warrior or Jeharra,” the red-headed woman stated, stepping on the other side of Frelin. “Don’t even think of it. Before you blinked, we’d have you skewered on our swords or pinned magickally.”

Frelin raised his arm when the blonde touched it. “Listen, Frelin of Seelie Court, Frelin the Warrior, Frelin that childe of Alterran and Daryma, you shall not do this. Continue and I shall take you out of the picture and you’ll be nothing but a memory to your people. You will not speak in such a manner here at Ambrosia. *You are nothing here*. Learn that now. Rena rules all. She is mother to many and none and the gods, including yours, bless her. You insult her again and you shall pay with something dearer to you than your life.”

Sharyn leaned in and whispered so Micheal Padraig could just barely hear. “And we know the truth of your blood lineage, Sidhe.”

Frelin paled and pulled back. Micheal wasn’t sure how that sentence had shattered the arrogant Fey, but it did the trick. Micheal accepted his drink, grabbed Frelin’s hand, and pulled him away from the two gorgeous women known as the Twins from legend. “Come on, Frelin. Let it go. We have issues other than your vanity to worry about!”

Micheal led him to an empty booth with a scarred wooden table that proclaimed “Thor fucked Sharyn here!” in bold letters. Biting back a laugh, he pushed the crystallized drink in front of Frelin. “What the fuck are you doing, Frelin? We’re here to stop a potential problem, not to cause one!”

“Those women! That bartender!” Frelin spit out, words flying from his mouth. “They dared to --”



Micheal put his hand on Frelin's arm. "Listen to yourself. You're in Ambrosia, not Helia and definitely not the Seelie Court. Get over your fucking self and let's get to the job at hand. You're nothing here, Frelin. And I know your people have legends about the Twins. Think -- they live, what does that mean? What they're capable of doing to *you!*"

Their gazes locked and finally the dark blue-eyed Sidhe paused, giving Micheal a moment to consider how best to diffuse the tense situation. He had to get through to this stubborn, royal pain in the ass. At that moment, all the times the Maraigh brothers had spoken about his behavior, he finally saw himself through their eyes. If this was how others saw him when he acted out, no wonder why the brothers Maraigh took turns smacking the shit out of him. He held the Sidhe's gaze and never looked away.

"You are correct. But perhaps we could use these twins for our own advantage. If they are indeed the women from legend, then their powers could ease the amount of time spent looking for the guilty party." Before Micheal Padraig could do anything, Frelin spoke. "Phoenyx, Jeharra, I have need of your assistance and to beg forgiveness."

Both women looked at each other, then at the men before walking over. Each held a mug of liquid, sipping from it as they approached the table. "Yes?" asked Sharyn.

"I was out of ... line," Frelin said, his voice lowering. "You have to understand that my world --"

"Is in danger. Yeah yeah yeah," Synthia responded. "We know. That's always the case. Though your world isn't in danger, just vulnerable." She scooted into the booth, next to Micheal, while Sharyn sat next to Frelin. "So what's happening and why do you want our help?"

Micheal explained about the gateway, which the women knew about, and that someone was trying to force its opening early. As he did, the women added pieces of information. They were well aware of the gateway and its millennial appearance. Synthia seemed to be slightly distracted, to Micheal's thinking, but Sharyn kept herself focused on the information both men shared.

"They're here," Synthia said, her eyes focusing on Frelin's. "And you are a liar, Seelie Lord."

"What? How dare you?"

Synthia leaned over, grabbing the silver-white shirt. "Trust me, my lord. I know your people and the group you once worked with. Did you not realize I'd scent the magick? That I'd be able to taste your mark within the magick being used to open the gateway?"

Frelin sat back, jerking his shirt from her grip. "What lies are these?"

Sharyn's hand grabbed the Fey's, forcing it open. "It's not a lie. Are you calling the Pack Leader of Artemis a liar? Are you willing to tell Artemis that her best magick tracer is mistaken?"

Both men swallowed and Micheal opened his palm. Synthia placed her hands on theirs. "Go ahead, Sharyn. They've got to learn instantly on how to taste this magick being used."

Sharyn's dagger was sharp, swift. It bit into their hands, then into Synthia's. The blood bond transferred the taste of the magick she scented as well as allowed her to force lessons on how to do it regularly without help from her ever again. Reeling, Micheal pulled away and tried not to retch. "Great Morrighu, what the hell are you?"

"The Phoenix, Micheal Pdraig, and you have an unfulfilled action upon you from your goddess."

"Yes, I know. I fear she'll kill me for my actions."

Sharyn shook her head while Synthia kissed his palm, sealing the cut. "No, she won't. We've touched you and have given you our blessing, such as it is. We'd see you do well, not serve death with no chance of redemption. Right, Synthia?"

"True. You're not marked for death, just some hard moments where you'll just want to die but know you won't be allowed to," Synthia confirmed as she healed the quiet Fey. "Now, listen. The person you seek is armed and dangerous. Be careful."

"Will do. Thank you, Phoenix and Jeharra."

"Yes, thanks." Frelin's eyes were hooded.

Sharyn looked at him and sighed. "Listen to me, Frelin. I know what you think. But if you do what you feel is your right, you'll get yourself and your oh-so-pure people killed. Get over it. Figure out how to be real and think."

Frelin inclined his head sharply. Synthia grabbed his hand. "Dammit, Frelin. You have a future. One that can be bright and filled with the love you miss most. But get over the 'pure race sticks to its own' crap. How the hell do you think the Sidhe came into being?"

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Frelin looked at the woman called Synthia Tremayne, the Phoenix, in shock. *Did that woman just ask the origins of the Sidhe? Did she not know?* "Of course I know how they came to be. The gods created them."

"Did they? Or is that what you wanted to believe?" Synthia questioned, an emotion flitting across her pale face.

"They were created. The ancient texts say so." Frelin spoke firmly, though he knew that only by the will of the gods did he keep his temper under control. This woman deserved to be punished for her blasphemy.

"I see. And these are the original ones that were brought forth from Atlantis to the mortal world? Or the copies that were created when your people went to Helia? The ones with select pieces recreated?"

Frelin blinked. "What are you saying?"

“I’m saying that I’m one of the children who carried the sacred scrolls from that land, dipshit. I know who the Sidhe are and that they were created with magick and man. They’re no more pure than humans or anyone else. That purity lies only in your mind, which alone makes it suspect.”

Confusion flooded Frelin, as did intense anger at her words. Could she be right? The legend of the Twins was the same, even in the human myths as they were in the Fey ones. No one dared to misspeak as it was known that the Twins were reborn in any race when it was time. Phoenix was once one of the Sidhe. Her blood alone had proven that. Could he be wrong about purity and the Fey race? Could he ever release his view about purity of the Seelie Sidhe? “You’ve given me much to think on, Phoenix, daughter of the Sidhe and all races. I’m just not sure ...” he broke off, trying to control the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him, “I’m not sure if I can accept all of this right now.”

Phoenix nodded and took his hand in hers, kissing the wrist -- the sign of intimacy and trust between equals. “I know and it hurts, Frelin. I love the Sidhe very much, but even you must move forward if the Sidhe of both courts want to survive. The Sidhe, all the Seelie Court, will need your guidance, as will your soulmate.”

Frelin felt his body tremble at her words. Never did he believe that it could be possible that he would have a soulmate after all he had done. “I have one?”

Sharyn spoke up and smiled at the Sidhe for the first time. “Yes, you do, Lord Frelin of the Seelie Court. She will be like none else and you will learn to love outside yourself. Be strong. Now go and stop the magic-user who wields your scent out of turn.”

Synthia and Sharyn stood up and left the two men alone. “I guess this means it’s up to us,” Micheal said.

“Indeed. Forgive my behaviour, Micheal. I’ve wronged you.”

“Don’t worry about it, Frelin. Let’s just work together and get this done.”

They rose from their seats, using the scent that flooded their bodies and traced it around the tavern, waiting to see where it strengthened. Slowly they made their way to one corner where a bard sat as well as two Sidhe. They all wore the scent of Frelin and another, stronger, Sidhe. The witch that Adras had defeated with Taja’s help. Damn, that woman would die or else!

“What shall we do, Frelin? I’ve not fought against the Sidhe.”

“Take out the bard. He’s human and he seems to be weaker. I can handle the Sidhe. They’re not warrior trained, but do have mage training.”

“Agreed. How do you suppose we do this?” Micheal asked, his brown brow lifting.

“Like this --” Frelin shoved Micheal away. “You rotten, no good stupid human!”

“What? Me? I don’t think so, you pointy-eared bastard!” Micheal shoved back. “I am no Seelie slave. I’m your equal!”

“You’re only my equal in height, hu-man!” Frelin bared his teeth and whipped out his dagger, stumbling against the two Sidhe. “Now!”

Frelin shoved his dagger into one Sidhe’s side while whispering the magick words of binding at the other. He saw Micheal toss the human against the wall multiple times until he collapsed. Frelin slammed the bound Sidhe over a chair and sat on him while the bleeding Sidhe passed out.

“What the hell are the two of you doing in my tavern?” Rena roared as she strode from behind the bar. “Kaliban! Get them!”

Frelin put up his hands as the giant man moved swiftly. “Wait! I will explain!”

Kaliban growled as he gathered the fallen human and the two Sidhe. “You best explain fast or your asses are next.”

“I -- I --”

Rena grinned at the Sidhe. “I see you’re less sure of yourself now, Frelin. Good. Then the Twins did right by you and Micheal Padraig. What are those three guilty of?”

“They are tampering with the gateway, trying to force its opening early.”

“What?! That cannot be done!” Rena barked orders at Kaliban in a tongue none in the tavern knew. “That will be taken care of shortly. Now about you two? What shall we do?”

“Do about what?”

“You two. We need to deal with your breaking of the rules.”

Micheal and Frelin shared a glance. That sounded ominous. “I don’t know what you’d want us to do, Rena Kai, but we can pay to clean up --”

“No, I don’t think so,” Rena smiled. She nodded her head. “The cleaning is done. But I think perhaps you both need to learn something about humility, obeying the rules and self-sacrifice. Synthia, Sharyn, will you help Dina and Meri in their dealing with Frelin and Micheal?”

“Indeed, we’d be pleased to oversee it, Rena. Anything else?” Synthia asked as the two redheaded Seelies, Dina and Meri, came forward.

“No, just that the two men learn to act and to be humble.”

Micheal and Frelin swallowed. “What does that mean?” Micheal asked.

“It means you get fucked senseless, my lord Micheal Padraig. And you obey my every command,” Meri answered as she took his hand. “Come with me and you will have pleasure before pain.”

“And you, my Sidhe lord, will learn the joy of fucking a Seelie-Unseelie crossbreed,” Dina chortled, taking Frelin’s hand. “Come and learn your lessons. You might get out in a week or two. Otherwise you’ll be Synthia’s and Sharyn’s charge.”

Both men swallowed and followed the women, sure that though they’d saved the gateway, they gained and lost more. Frelin patted Micheal’s shoulder. “Thanks, my friend.”

“And thanks to you, Frelin. Think we can take these ladies on?”

“We can only but try. How are you at sex magick?”

“Don’t know, but I’m willing to pick up some tips.”

“Come, let me show you how the Seelies fuck. Perhaps we’ll get out of here in less than a week,” Frelin chuckled.

“Or about in two weeks? I wouldn’t mind.”

“Yes, I know how you think and I agree. There is something about them ...” Frelin drawled as he and Micheal watched the Twins, Sharyn and Synthia walk up the stairs together, their arms around each other’s waist. “If it wasn’t for the fact that I know they’re sisters --”

“Yeah, but they’re Atlanteans, aren’t they?”

“Let’s go find out for sure.” Frelin chuckled, tugging on his mistress’ arm. “Let’s go, my Lady Dina. Time to fuck.”

“Happy Beltane, Frelin and Micheal Padraig.” Rena called from behind the bar.

“Beltane? Oh gods!” Micheal Padraig laughed. “And a Merry Blessed Beltane to you too, Rena!”

“Blessed Beltane,” Frelin cheered. “Let’s enjoy this power night.”

## Litha Games

*(This comes after Call of the Wylde and after Imbolc Fire)*

Dylan leaned against the rail of his balcony. Inhaling the moisture-laden air, he tried to figure out what bothered him more, the fact that his family was beyond fertile or the fact that his helper, Siobhan, was deliberately trying to drive him insane. Then there was the fact that two of his brothers were free and part of him feared that Morrighu, the Celtic goddess of war and death, would take back the chance to break her curse by the time his turn came. Rubbing the palms of his hands across the heated metal balcony rail, Dylan shoved his negative thinking into a deep, dark corner, shifting his thoughts to the world beyond where he stood.

Being high up in one of the oldest buildings in Boston, Dylan was afforded the best view of the bay as well as the room to shift into his other form -- that of a large eagle. Being a were-eagle wasn't easy, but since he had to take the shape at least once a week, this was the only place that gave him freedom without causing an uproar. His acute hearing picked up the sound of someone entering his home, then shutting the door as aromatic odors tempted his nostrils. He turned away from the inviting view of Boston to see who dared intrude on his quiet night.

"Hey, Dylan, when are you going to come inside and stop the pouting?" A woman waited, carrying two small bags of food, then turned away, heading for his kitchen area. The red hair and slight Midwestern accent as well as the keys he had given her three years ago told him it was no one else but his *cuntoir*.

*Siobhan. Oh joy ... not.* When he didn't want to deal with her, she was there. When he needed her, she wasn't around. Ever since she'd been captured by the serial killer, she'd been even more obnoxious by keeping close to him, as if that alone would keep her safe from

harm. Though she never told him, Dylan knew that her kidnapper had tortured her badly. He hated seeing her dependent, though if he was honest, she drove him absolutely nuts with her see-saw behavior at times. Then there was her talk about wanting to visit the Fey so she could thank some of those who helped rescue her. It had taken the combined skills of himself and the Fey, Renthe to affect her escape. If he admitted it to himself, without Renthe, they would've never gotten close to the killer's hideout.

"I'm coming," Dylan growled, his hand running through his hair. "What are we doing on the Lester case?"

"Beyond the usual? Nothing. It's now just a waiting game. What about you?" She smiled as she opened the Chinese food cartons, putting food on two plates.

Dylan grunted. "Renthe wants us to work a case for the Fey here in Boston."

Siobhan's red brows lifted in question. "What? Fey are in Boston?"

"There's a small portal that's used infrequently and only by those authorized by one or both rulers of the Sidhe. Over time, it's been discovered that others have found out and gone visiting among the mortals, even leaving behind a reminder of their visit. Didn't 'What's-His-Nuts' tell you about it when you left work early last night?"

Siobhan snorted. "Don't tell me you're jealous of Steven."

"You're my charge, Siobhan. Don't forget it."

"I think you're bitching because you can't stand the thought that you're going to be an uncle -- times three. Who knew that Niam and Owain would be that fertile after so many years of life?"

Dylan sighed. She always knew how to get him where it counted. Though in this case, it wasn't the fact that he was going to be an uncle that bothered him. "Yes, I can believe it, though at my advanced age of over two thousand years old, it is somewhat of a shock. I just have a hard time believing that Colette is carrying twins. Then again ... knowing Owain and Colette, yes, I can."

Snickering, Siobhan patted his arm as they sat down to dinner. "Just think, it means you get to go shopping for toys. You know it's a weakness of yours."

He smiled, knowing that she was trying to get him over the idea of never having children.

"Come on, you know the one store is open late. Just think, baseball gloves, dolls, even some reading laptops. Toys ... you know you wanna play with the toys."

"You're being a brat, Siobhan." Dylan took his plate and started eating. While munching on an egg roll, he considered the thought. "You do know that if we go tonight, we'll have to get to the office early. Think it'd be wrong to send toys each month before the babies are born?"

“You remind me of that commercial with the guy getting school supplies.” Siobhan chuckled, handing him a glass of juice. “You’re so set to play,” she quipped, wiggling her brows.

“You’ve convinced me. Let’s finish eating, then go toy shopping. You’re just as bad as I am.”

“But I’ve got nephews and nieces already.”

“Yes, but I don’t.” Dylan finished his meal, considering which toys were good when you didn’t know the sex of the babies. “Think Kirstie will allow an archery set in the house? She seems a bit more reticent than Colette when it comes to weapons.”

Siobhan shook her head and said nothing.

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In the store, Dylan meandered up and down the aisles, making mental notes of toys to get over the months, including first birthday toys. He stopped to pull tickets for a couple of toys, then made sure there was at least one extra tag so the kids would have some toys at his place when they came to visit. *Luckily Siobhan can’t see me sneaking these in the basket. But they’re damn cool toys!*

Then he heard a noise he thought impossible in a toy store. Stopping dead, he allowed his eagle hearing to increase. The scratching noise that caught his attention was accompanied by cursing in a language he was just barely fluent in. *Fey? Here? But how?*

“Dylan! Where are you?” Siobhan called out, her voice a little higher than normal.

“Electronics, aisle four.”

“Aisle six, now.” Her tone had a quaver of fear. Not wasting time, Dylan pushed his cart quickly down the lane, shifted the cart, then made his way into the aisle she was in. When he stepped into the doll aisle, he saw her standing there, not moving. “Siobhan, what’s wrong?”

His eyes focused where hers stared. The fact that she wasn’t responding worried him. His eyes saw movement in one of the doll boxes where the Fairy Dolls were. *What? How the hell is that --*

“Tell me I’m not seeing what I think I’m seeing,” Siobhan breathed as she stood absolutely still. “She doesn’t look like any Fey I’ve ever met before.”

Dylan stared where Siobhan did, his eyes seeing what his brain refused to comprehend. There, among the pink and purple fairy dolls, stood a well built, black-haired, red leather-clad, thigh-high booted, Goth decked Fey. She pushed on one of the walls of the box. Seeing there were people there, she stuck out her tongue, showing the piercing there. “Get me the fuck out of here and I’ll grant you a wish!”

Dylan reached for the package, pulling at the tab. “What’s your name, Unseelie Fey? I know for a fact you can’t grant wishes.”



“How would you know, you huge mortal?”

“I’m druid trained and am friends with Renthe and Mandor from both Courts.” Freeing the package, he slid it open so the Fey could fly out. Her wings, when unfurled, were tipped with black and purple. “Tell me, do you dress like this for shock effect or what?”

The Fey floated to the floor, then slowly, her size increased until she was Siobhan’s height of five foot, four inches. “I dress like this to please myself. So you’re a druid, huh? Don’t look like any druid I know.”

“Watch your mouth, Tinkertot,” Siobhan growled as she stepped in front of Dylan. “Goth garb or not, I won’t have you speaking like that to any Maraigh.”

Watching the Fey and Siobhan face off against each other was interesting, but not at the risk of endangering other people. “Step back, both of you,” Dylan said, putting himself between the two growling women. “Siobhan, I appreciate this, *cúntóir*. Fey, this is neither the time nor place. I won’t have you endangering mortals.”

“My name is Lilea. Use it. I’m not going to hurt the precious mortals, but I won’t be spoken to as if I don’t matter. I am royalty among the Unseelie.” Her bluer-than-blue eyes glittered under the fluorescent lights.

Suddenly Renthe’s comments made sense. The help they needed was Lilea. There was a ring of certainty in his soul. *Dammit, this isn’t going to be easy. What the hell has happened?* “Would you come with us to my place? We can talk privately there.”

Sniffing, the black haired Fey took Dylan’s proffered hand. “Do we need to take the Irish Trainwreck with us?”

“Watch out, you lame excuse for a Vampyr,” Siobhan muttered.

“How *dare* you --”

“You’re here without permission and your absence is causing a ruckus among the courts!” Siobhan grabbed the Fey’s arm and pulled her forward until they were face to face. “Do you have any idea of the problems caused by your absence?”

“It’s not like I’m wanted there anyway,” the Fey pouted, her lips pouty and full. She pushed back, freeing herself from the red-headed woman. “What harm is there in my seeing this world? Soon enough the Gateway will open between our worlds.”

Dylan sighed. This wasn’t going to be fun. Who knows what magick she’d thrown about in the toy store when she got caught in the box? For all he knew, the entire aisle was booby-trapped with fairy dust that could harm humans if activated. “Yes, but magick doesn’t run without limits here. How did you get stuck in the box?”

“I wanted to see if the doll resembled us at all and what mortals really thought Fey looked like. Then somehow I got caught in the ties with my wing. I tried to get out, but ended up closing the damn box on myself.” Lilea didn’t meet Dylan or Siobhan’s gaze as her pale cheeks flushed pink. “However, I’m not going home. I’m here to find out how dangerous the mortal realm is to my people.”

“Your people. I see,” Siobhan growled, clenching the Fey’s arm until Lilea turned her attention to Siobhan. “You know you’re not in line for either throne. I know the lines and you’re like thirty-fifth in one and two hundred seventeenth in the other. So, let’s get real -- who is he and does he work here?”

Dylan turned his attention to Siobhan. He hadn’t thought on it, but she had a point. What would bring a fey to a *toy store* of all places? Worse, why would she be so determined to stay in this world, even when it meant that she’d be vulnerable to iron? “Yes, does this Romeo work here?”

“You *will not* touch him, harm him, or tell him about my true nature,” Lilea commanded, her arms crossed over her chest. “Do you understand me, Druid and companion?”

Neither of them answered her as they started walking down the long aisle. After a couple of minutes, Dylan ventured, “He has no idea that you’re fey, does he?”

“He thinks I’m a Goth. Nothing more or less,” Lilea answered.

“What is his name?”

“Jonathan Dryder.”

The name set off the warning system, but Dylan couldn’t recall the reason why. Sending a glance to Siobhan, he saw the same look of intense concentration. “The name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it,” she responded to his unspoken question.

“You know of Jon?” Lilea smiled, her eyes misting over. “He loves me. He’s told me so. Over and over again. He’d do anything for me. There he is!” She pointed to the thin, gangly man who pushed a trolley filled with boxes. “That’s my lover.”

Watching the thin man maneuver the boxes on the trolley reminded Dylan of someone else with wiry strength. Only when the profile came into view did the resemblance click. The slightly shaggy, thin blonde hair, the brown eyes and the gaunt face.

Swearing under his breath, Dylan pulled on Lilea’s arm. “Who is his father?” Silently he called upon the powers of the elements and the gods to keep the mortals away from the area while he dealt with this nasty turn of events.

“What matter does that make?” Her blue eyes watched the young man voraciously. “All that matters is that we’re in love and he’ll protect me and mine when the time comes.”

“If he and his father don’t kill you first!” Dylan forced Lilea to look at him. “His father’s name is Hal Dryder. He’s a known killer of anything and anyone magickal. Ten to one you were set up, Lilea. He wants you so he can drain you of magick and use it to force himself into Helia.”

“No! It’s not like that!” She stamped her foot, her anger apparent.

“He’s asked to go, hasn’t he?” Siobhan asked softly. Understanding showed on her face. “He’s begged you to take him to see your world.”

The Goth Fey pulled her arm from Dylan and turned away, her black hair covering part of her face. "Yes."

"So you lied by saying he didn't know who you are. He's known since day one."

"Yes."

"You put all of Helia at risk in your foolishness," Siobhan whispered. "But I do understand, Lilea. You must break it off with him."

"I cannot. He bears my token." Blue eyes looked away, accepting the censure due for such a thing.

"Fuck me." Dylan sighed. "Can things get any worse?"

Footsteps near them captured his attention. "Define worse," said Jon Dryder, a sneer on his face.

Dylan moved to stand in front of Lilea and Siobhan took the right point position. The young man stepped forward into the light and Dylan saw the ravages of magickal vampirism taking its toll upon him. Eyes sunken into the skull, the skin oily and molded tightly over the face, mouth breathing and very small nasal passages -- all symptoms of leech vampirism, the kind that lived on magick.

"You're a vampire," Dylan whispered. "A leech, as it's known among the magickal kind."

"I'm not." Jonathan shook his head, hate and denial flashing over his face. "There's no way. I'm mortal."

"Oh, you are. Take a look at you. Without magick to ease the ache in your empty soul, you're nothing. You're wasting away as your need for magick grows." Dylan flicked his wrist, releasing his dagger into the palm of his hand. Now he was ready to disable or dispatch the young man. Though Lilea might hate him, it was better for Jonathan to die than for her death to be his fault, causing war between mortals and the Fey.

"Give her to me. I need her. I love her." Jon outstretched his hand, trying to touch Lilea, who moved forward. Dylan slapped his hand away. Desperation to touch the living magick laced his whiny tone.

"No, you use her. You plan to destroy her and her kind." Dylan moved again to keep Lilea out of Jonathan's line of sight. "You can't have her. She is not yours to keep or to kill."

"With her, I'll always be safe and loved. I need her." Jonathan's voice sounded even whinier, more desperate. His hands kept clawing to touch the Fey behind Dyland.

"Give me her token, Jonathan, and we'll see about getting you help." Dylan kept his free hand before him, hoping that the young man would give in. Somehow, he doubted it, but perhaps the boy's love was heartfelt and true for Lilea. Perhaps he'd see reason and give it back.

Jonathan lunged at Dylan, forcing the Marauder to step back to lessen the impact as they both went sprawling to the ground. Blows were frantic and desperate. "You can't have her! She's mine! If you take her, then all will die! My magick, mine! Without her I'll die!"

Dylan warded off the blows, noting that Siobhan kept hold on Lilea. He didn't want to hurt the guy. Jonathan's ferocity surprised him, especially with the unnatural strength behind it. "Get her the fuck outta here, Siobhan!" He continued to protect himself from Jonathan's fists while maneuvering around on the ground. With luck, he'd get an open shot at the young man. The weight of the dagger hilt felt secure. He would use it when there was a clear throw with minimal risk.

"Yes, boss. She'll come right with me, boss. Especially since she's not got her token back, boss," Siobhan replied sarcastically as she kept the now keening Fey from the men. "Wanna try to ask me to do something easier?"

Dylan struck Jonathan across the back of the head with the hilt of the dagger, stunning the young man. Quickly, he improvised, using a jump rope to restrain the magick vampire. As he tied Jonathan up, making sure his hands were behind his back, Dylan commented, "You know, sometimes I wonder why I do this. Siobhan, stop her from keening; she'll call more attention to us."

"Because you're damn good at it? Or because the Were are friends of yours, as well as friends of the Fey?" Siobhan put a hand over the Fey's mouth, startling Lilea out of the keening revelry. Dylan noted the control Lilea possessed over the Keening magick and nodded to himself.

"Jonathan! What is happening?" Lilea cried, shoving past Siobhan, kneeling at the side of the gaunt man. "You have never looked like this before. What have you done?"

Bloodshot eyes gazed at the Fey before angrily setting on Dylan. "I love you, I need you. Why are you letting these people keep us apart? Don't you know that I'm nothing without you?" The whining was worse, to the point that it was almost a magickal cry for sustenance. Dylan steeled himself against the urge to comply with releasing the man.

Lilea stepped back, fear crossing her face as her wings furled tightly against her back. Obviously, she realized the truth. "I love you, but I don't know this part of you. Are you stealing my magick? Is that why I can't go home?"

Dylan and Siobhan shared a glance, their minds racing. Dylan commented first, tugging on the rope that bound Jonathan. "What do you mean you can't go home?"

"Ever since I gave him my token, I haven't been able to summon enough magick to create a portal to get back." Lilea sighed, her face taking back that sulky look. "I figured it was just how Earth worked on magick."

Siobhan frisked Jonathan, searching for the token. "No, it doesn't. What does the token look like, Lilea?"

“It’s a necklace with one feather from my wings in it.” Lilea shot an angry glance at Dylan, her Goth persona back again. “Gonna yell at me for being stupid?”

“Nope, you’ll beat yourself up enough without my help. However, I’d not bet on Renthe or Mandor being nice for a long time.” Dylan knew that Lilea was upset over her mistake and reminded himself to say as much to her cousins.

“I had the right to see this place and find out what possible harm could befall my people when the Gateway opens!” She stomped her foot again, and Dylan bit back a chuckle. She looked more like an indignant child than a powerful Fey.

“Yes, you do. But you should’ve come through official channels so you had a safe place to stay, and we’d have provided bodyguards for you. There are people who remember the Fey and know about our worlds, Lilea. They don’t mean to be nice to you or to anyone else with magick.”

“You and yours shall burn!” Jonathan twisted in the rope, trying to get loose.

“I don’t think so,” Dylan replied easily. “I’m a shifter. I can escape fire easily when I change.”

Jonathan growled as Siobhan slid her hand down his pants. “It’s nothing personal, dude. But I know how men like you think and personally I think it’s sick.” A small triumphant smile crossed her face as she pulled out her hand. In it dangled a gold necklace with a small clear glass bottle holding a feather. “I believe this is yours, Lilea.” Siobhan held it out to her.

“Thank you, Siobhan,” Lilea whispered, taking the necklace. Opening the bottle, she removed the feather, letting the necklace fall to the ground. Her fingers caressed the tiny purplish plume, then reverently placed it at the tip of her left wing. A hush filled the store as Lilea’s powers came together fully once more. “Yes, I can feel home,” she whispered, a single tear emerging from the outer corner of her eye. “Thank you, Dylan and Siobhan.”

Dylan nodded. “Anytime, Princess Lilea. What do you want me to do about Jonathan? He has your scent and knows the taste of your magick.”

Her gaze landed on the man who claimed to love her. Dylan knew that her emotions were in turmoil and that her anger could hurt things more than help. He was about to propose a solution, when Siobhan chimed in.

“What about cleansing his system? I can call Gar or Davyd. They can help me take care of him. That way, you and Lilea aren’t near the process and won’t be affected as much.”

“You’d do this for me, even after what I called you?” Lilea’s voice caught on the words.

“Yes. We might’ve started out on the wrong foot, Lilea, but I know what it’s like to love and to have chosen wrongly. Right now, I’m with a wonderful man who has abilities I’ll never possess, but it took a long time and a near death experience to help me realize it.” Siobhan flipped open her cell phone, punched in some numbers, then spoke quickly in Gaelic. Once she was done, she closed the phone. “Gar is on his way over. He saw the magick

plumage in the air and was on his way to tracing it. He'll contact Davyd and put the safe house in motion."

"Good. Thanks, Siobhan."

"Thanks to you both. I miss my home and want to go back. How can I thank you?" Lilea took Dylan's hand as he stood up.

"By contacting us through proper channels next time?" he teased. "Seriously, no thanks are necessary. Just call us when you want to come and visit, even if it's to go clubbing. We'd be glad to take you around and make sure you're kept safe."

"I shall. I've got your essences imprinted so I can use my portal and astral communication spells to speak with you both." Lilea looked around. "But still, there must be some way to thank you for all you've done for me and in turn, for the Courts. Hmm, you were here to buy something for your children?"

"No, my two sisters-in-law are pregnant. One is having twins; the other is having one child. I came here to buy gifts for the babies."

"Ah, a doting uncle." A bright smile filled Lilea's face as an idea came to her. "What is your home address?"

Dylan rattled it off. "That's where I live; why?" Suddenly a surge of magick surrounded the store, then a soft popping noise filled the store as the magick suddenly dissipated.

"Thank you, Dylan. You'll find your thanks at your home." Lilea turned to Jonathan. "I hope they can help you. You have the potential for so much more, if only you don't waste it." Then she placed her hand on Siobhan's arm. They faced one another, both smiling. "I want to thank you in another way, but I'm not sure now is the time. When you have need for my help or my magick, call me." Lilea pulled off a bracelet from her wrist. "This will let us talk at any time by your thinking about me. When you have need, I'll come."

"Thank you, Lilea. When you want to come out to have fun, let me know. I'd be glad to show you around."

"Thanks. Time for me to go home." With a flourish of her hand, a swooshing noise came from behind her as a green and silver portal opened up. Lilea turned toward the portal. "Fey blessings on you both and your families." Then she stepped through the portal, closing it behind her.

Dylan blinked a couple of times, and then gazed at Siobhan first. "Well, what do you know? I think we're now allies of the Fey."

"She left me! She left me! How could she? I'll die without her. Doesn't she know that she's my everything?" Jonathan whined between them.

"Hush. You don't deserve someone like her. Not how you are now. Maybe in twenty years, once you've gotten this leech thing under control or expelled from you," Dylan growled, resisting the urge to kick the young man.

"Anyone here call for a magick buster?" Gar said as he walked toward the group.

“Good to see you, cuz,” Siobhan hugged him. “This is the project at hand.”

One blond brow rose at the sight of the young man. “I see. He is quite atrocious, isn’t he?”

“You have no idea,” Siobhan answered. “Let’s get him out of here. I’ll make nice with the manager so we can get Jonathan here some help. Dylan, go on home. You’re flying out to see the family soon, right?”

“Yeah. Thanks for coming, Gar. Siobhan, take care of yourself. Finish up the Lester case and come on down for the family gathering.”

“We’ll see. I might go to Kittery for the weekend.” Siobhan chuckled. She hugged Dylan. “Go, get lost. Let me know what Lilea gifted you with, though I have my suspicions.”

Dylan nodded, grabbing a couple of items he wanted to buy for his coming niece and nephews. “Will do. ‘Til later!”

\* \* \* \* \*

### *Saturday afternoon*

“Dylan! You made it!” Kirstie threw herself into Dylan’s outstretched arms.

“Hey there. How is my favorite pregnant sister-in-law doing?”

“I thought I was your favorite?” Colette pouted, giving Dylan a kiss and a hug. “What the hell is in that sack?”

Dylan pointed to the two large bags he had put down. “These are gifts for the babies. A friend of mine helped me to shop at my local toy store. Consider these gifts from the Fey and myself for the kids.”

“Thanks, bro, you know how to really make the rest of us look bad,” Cuin quipped, coming up and hugging Dylan. “Things are doing okay. I checked in with Gar and Davyd. It’ll take time and some patience, but things are slowly doing better.”

“Good.” Dylan started toward where Owain, Miach, Elathan, and Niam were talking by the two grills. “Let’s see what’s going on.”

“Hmm, I’d say it’s a matter of who got who preppers first,” Cuin chuckled. As they got closer, Dylan heard Niam speaking to his other siblings.

“So, we can expect Kirstie to deliver first,” Niam bragged.

“Congratulations!” Miach hugged his brother and gestured to Dylan. “About time you got here. Donal won’t be here, he’s busy on a mission right now.”

“Thanks, where’s the beer?”

Owain bent down and opened the cooler, tossing a cold can to Dylan. “There you go. Glad you made it, Dylan. We’re talking about the babies. Niam and Kirstie are having a girl.”

“Yup, made the old fashioned way -- lots of hot sex!” Niam grinned.

“That would explain the increased crime rate in the area,” Elathan teased.

“Well, Colette and I are having twins, as you know. Both are boys,” Owain crowed. “Seems my sperm hits more often than my twin’s.”

“Does not.”

“Does too. Otherwise, you’d be the one having twins, right?”

“But there’s always next time!” Niam countered. The brothers all laughed.

“Happy Litha, everyone,” Colette and Kirstie called out, joining the men. “Come and see the toys that Dylan and the Fey sent us.”

“The Fey?” Miach asked, directing a look at Dylan. Dylan mouthed, *I’ll talk to you in a bit about that.*

“Yes.” Colette grabbed Owain’s hand. “Come look. There are some really cool things for the boys. Have you told them the names of the boys yet?”

“No, Col. That’s your job.”

“Ah ... then they can wait ‘til after dinner!” Colette laughed as everyone groaned. “Come on, come see the cool stuff. We have enough baseball equipment that we can play a game today.” She showed them how the mitts adjusted to the hand of the user by pressing the symbol in the middle of the mitt. Everyone looked amazed. “There are even special retrievers for the balls so we don’t have to hunt them down.”

Owain embraced Dylan. “Thanks, Dylan. This is the happiest and the calmest I’ve seen Colette since Miach warned her that the babies might be like any of us.”

“Anytime. I wanted to make sure my niece and nephews are taken care of. Happy Litha, Owain.”

“Happy Litha, Dylan. Come on, you know that if we leave Col for too long, she’ll start putting together the science kits or something, rigging them into weapons.”

“I heard that, O!” Colette yelled out.

Everyone laughed, following Colette so they could try out the toys.



## Mabon's Early Twilight

*(Takes place after Litha's Game)*

Cuin paced the long, antique decorated hall within the Marauder main home, impatience itching at his every step. He didn't want to wait, he wanted to do something about what was happening -- but he knew that whatever was truly happening, he couldn't do it alone.

"Dammit to hell, where is Elathan? I called his bloody arse over twenty minutes ago and he said he'd be here already!" He checked down the corridor where the stairs to the first floor met. Then his gaze turned toward the endcap window where nothing but sky and land appeared before him. Just before he looked away, a noise to his left caught his attention. He knew that sound -- he heard it often enough when ghosts appeared out of nowhere to scare unwary mortals. Spinning on his heels, Cuin swung out his hands while sinking into a defensive position. Grabbing at the air, he caught something that felt vaguely human. "What the --"

"You gonna keep hold of me or you gonna let me come all the way through?" Elathan popped his head through the wall as Cuin's hands wrapped tighter around his neck. "Step back, I hate walking through people."

Cuin dropped his grip, obeying Elathan's request. Off balance, he snapped at Elathan, his partially closed hand almost hitting his brother's tied back black hair. "What, you can't use the door like normal people?"

"Takes too long. Phasing is so much easier. What's going on that you'd call an emergency meeting here and now?" Elathan looked toward the doorway that was shut, noticing a ward upon the bedroom door that Cuin kept glaring at. "Magick? On Miach's

bedroom door? What the hell is happening, Cuin? Miach never puts a spell upon his door to keep people out.”

Cuin scrubbed at his hair. How the hell was he to explain something that couldn't be? “He says that he's sick.”

“Miach is never sick.” Elathan's tone was that of absolute certainty, and at one point, Cuin would've agreed with it -- until today.

“He is and worse, he's hallucinating.” Cuin stared at the door, wondering once again how to bypass the magic protection blocking their entering Miach's room. “Neither I nor any of the *cúntoír* can get past the warding. Hell, Donal even tried to phase through and he was stopped dead.”

Elathan stepped toward the door, his hands outstretched. Cuin knew he was judging the amount of power put into the spell as well as the complexity. “Have you heard from --”

“Finn will be here shortly. The others by tomorrow, though Niam and Owain are reluctant to leave our sisters-in-law alone. Can't blame them with the women pregnant.” Cuin watched as Elathan tried some countermeasures, each one rebuffed, just as his had been earlier. “But out of all of us who understands magick wards and how to handle another Wraith, you were first on my list to call. Sorry about ruining your date.”

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“It was a working one, no worries.” Elathan grunted as a flash of blue lurched at his hands, stinging them. He blew on each finger, then rubbed the tips to help the pain fade away. “Damn Miach! What the hell was he thinking by doing this?”

“He wasn't. The new voice caused both men to turn toward the stairway. Finn stood on the top step, one hand on his hip. Elathan noted Finn's anger simmering below the surface and hoped that their patience wouldn't be tested this day. “Looks to me that Miach did this in a rush, and without thinking of the consequences.”

Elathan repeated once again, “Miach is never sick.”

“Yeah, which means he's been hurt and is hiding it,” Finn acknowledged, hugging each brother. “So, we need to get in and cure whatever sickness has a hold of him.”

Cuin leaned back, resting his hand on the table that was holding a beautiful ancient cauldron. “So how do we get in there? Miach is one of the strongest among us.”

Elathan beat on the door. “Miach! Open this door before we tell you to bugger off and die!”

“GO AWAY!” Miach's voice boomed out, pain and something else lacing his tone. The three brothers shared a look and pounded on the door again.

“*Deárthair!* Let us in!” Cuin called out. “We can help you!”

Finn twisted the doorknob, seeing if it was unlocked. “Miach, I don’t know what’s going on, but this isn’t good. You know better than to lock yourself away from our help.”

“GO AWAY! You are death on swift wings!”

The brothers shared a glance, and then banged on the door again, this time making the door vibrate on its hinges. Elathan yelled out, “Why the fuck are you quoting an Egyptian saying? OPEN UP!”

A sound further down in the hallway caught their attention. As they looked, a male hand beckoned them from the hallway into the guest room next to Miach’s. Cuin motioned that he would go, that the others should keep trying to get into Miach’s room. Elathan watched cautiously while banging on the door.

As Cuin walked through the doorway, both brothers heard him yelp. “What the hell! How --”

A rumbly, accented voice spoke clearly enough for them to hear without straining. “Enough. Shut the door and keep your voice down.”

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“I thought you couldn’t make it?” Cuin hugged the man.

“Yeah well, I lied. Actually, I didn’t want ‘his asshole-ness’, our brother, to know that I was coming,” Cadrus answered. “Sometimes the strength in breaking him is for him to not know we’re here.”

“So, why the command to be quiet?” Cuin sat on the spare bed. Cadrus brushed his hair out of his eyes, then sat on one of the chairs in the room.

“Because I don’t want him to protect the wall connecting this room to his.” Cadrus gestured at the pale gray wall with two paintings on it. “There’s no warding on the wall.”

“Damn. He *is* sick.” Cuin tested the wall with his own talents and found it lacking in any kind of protection, unusual for Miach in the extreme.

“Yeah. Basic protection one-oh-one. He’s not thinking to fully protect himself. Any clue what he was doing before this happened?” They both listened as Elathan and Finn pleaded for Miach to open the door. Cadrus shook his head. “Sometimes I think they don’t ever think outside the box. If they did, they’d be a lot more dangerous than they are right now.”

“You never consider the box as being something to use,” Cuin countered with a smile. “As for Miach, he fought with a couple of Taranis’ old minions and came back injured last evening. Both escaped when they got Miach to go save an innocent instead of chasing them, but not surprising since his minions have been cowards since First Night.”

“Do you know if he was hurt badly or just a small injury that we all incur while fighting evil?”

“Not a clue, though if we accept that Miach’s sick -- I’d say badly hurt in some way that affects his Wraith healing. Hell, it takes a lot to lay one of us low, though a bullet might hurt.” Cuin faced the wall, trying to think what might’ve happened to set Miach in such a course of action. “You don’t think he’s faking to entice them to try to finish him off, do you?”

Cadrus shook his head. “Nah. Not his style, *deárthair*. He rather go out there and pretend to be Neanderthal man on the minions.”

The sudden quiet startled them both. Looking out the doorway, they discovered Finn and Elathan stopped banging on Miach’s door. Before they could attempt some other way of breaking down the door, Cuin hissed twice, then gestured to the other men to come to the bedroom.

Finn nodded and yelled out, “We’ll be back, Miach! This isn’t over!”

After a round of greeting shared between Cadrus and the others, they sat down throughout the yellow and blue decorated room. Cadrus and Finn sat on the bed, speaking quietly between themselves. Cuin sat on the edge of the recliner chair, tapping his foot nervously. Elathan sat on the floor against the wall that divided them from Miach’s room. Cuin spoke quickly, catching everyone up on new thoughts and theories while he picked at a small, hand-sewn pillow that was on the chair.

Finn’s mobile phone chimed three times, breaking the tight silence of thought. Flipping it open, Finn spoke to the person quietly for a moment, then pressed the speakerphone button so everyone could hear. “It’s Dylan. I’ve told him all we’ve learned so far.”

A rich, baritone voice spoke with a slight echo as Dylan spoke to the group. “Miach’s sick? And warding only the doorway and windows? What the hell is he thinking?”

“We’re not sure, Dylan. But it’s weird.” Elathan paused before continuing. “The question is, why would he use a warding in his bedroom when the grounds and the house have extremely strong protection spells on them?”

No one seemed to have a ready answer and Cuin felt that he had just missed an important clue. But what could it be? He pointed out that it had to be personal, but none of them could think of a reason for Miach to barricade his bedroom.

Dylan broke into Elathan and Cuin’s discussion on how to negate the ward. “I’ll be there in about twenty minutes. If you leave me a window open, I can join you directly instead of having to take the stairs.”

Cadrus went to the bay window, opening it and the screen. “Done, *deárthair*. You want to head for the oversized bay window to the left of Miach’s room.”

“Catie’s old room? Hmm, think she might be part of this? None of us have seen her since she left over two years ago.” Dylan’s thoughtful comment brought the brothers to a standstill and Cuin’s mind raced with the possibility. Of all of them, Miach would be most

likely to take Catie in without taking proper precautions before it was too late. *But would Miach jeopardize his chance with his soulmate to deal with Catie's obsession?*

"Could it be something that simple?" Finn asked. "Ever since she betrayed us and especially Miach --"

"Don't say it." Cuin growled angrily as he threw the small pillow onto the floor next to him. "After everything that's happened with her and the deaths she caused, I don't want to jump to the conclusion it's her. As it was, I thought one of the *cuntoirs* had said she had died?"

Dylan's voice cracked over the mobile phone. "No. She was spotted three weeks ago by one of my people. I told our brother, who sent Shane to deal with her. He's been missing since he went after her and Miach blames himself." Silence descended upon them all, each remembering their times with Catie -- both the good and the bad. Her betrayal still tore at the soul.

Finn spoke as the unhealthy silence filled the room. "Shane's missing? Miach didn't tell anyone but you?"

"Miach had two true visions regarding Shane, so he sent one of the O'Connors, I think Patrick, to find out what's happened. Last I heard was Patrick found a woman named Pam who has an ability to see Shane, wherever he is." Dylan sighed. "I found out through Siobhan before you called me about Miach. I'm shutting the phone so I can transform. Give me about ten minutes to get there before you do anything."

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's got to be related. Miach doesn't get visions easily and they leave him feeling shitty," Cadrus growled, his fangs lengthening in response to the idea of Catie being involved with Miach's warding. As his emotions grew stronger, almost too intense, he realized that he had begun feeding from his siblings. Excusing himself, Cadrus walked up and down the hall twice before going to the bathroom. After sitting quietly in the bathroom, Cadrus found his control returning once more and his energy level peaking. If they had to do anything, this would be the best time for him. Shutting the bathroom door behind him, he was surprised to see Cuin waiting for him.

Wordlessly they walked back into the bedroom. Cadrus entered first, calling over his shoulder, "You know, if you're providing an emotional vampire a meal like that, you've got to warn him so he doesn't overeat and get sick."

Cuin laughed softly, some of the tightness around his lips fading away for the moment. "Have we ever warned you before we've opened our emotions up fully so you can feed?"

"True, you haven't, but in this case, warning would've been nice. There was too much intensity of the negative emotion happening and I felt sick. Thus, the walk a bit." Cadrus

cleared his throat, his gaze taking each brother in turn as he sat down. "But let's get back to the topic at hand. Do you all think this is Catie's doing?"

Finn looked toward the ceiling before answering. "She knows how to get past our defenses as she's lived here with us for many years. She was *cúntoír* to Miach and all of us. Then there's the simple fact that she wants Miach one way or another and will use whatever it takes to get his attention."

A large eagle flew into the center of the room, cawing at the men before it landed to the left of the full sized bed. Slowly the giant eagle shifted its form into a weird creature of half-man/half-bird, then into more man than bird, then into their brother Dylan. He took the pack from his back, removing clothes that weren't able to be easily transformed. "I'm here. What do you think about this being the result of Catie? It is the anniversary of when she left and her birthday is tomorrow."

"That makes sense, especially since we know she's got this thing about special days to do certain things," Elathan said. "She's always said if she can't have him, then he needed to be dead. Remember the freak lightning strike last year? Had it hit Miach like it looked like it would -- she'd have gotten her wish."

Cuin laced his fingers together, then bent them outwards, popping the knuckles. He nodded his head slightly -- almost reluctantly, Cadrus thought.

"We need to get in there regardless of whether Miach is safe or in danger. Only by working together can we help him and ourselves. His hiding like this doesn't help, especially if we're right and Catie got lucky this year." Cadrus pounded his fist on the bed. "There's got to be a way past this damn ass warding of Miach's."

"Well, I've been thinking that perhaps we can try using a gateway opening spell to get into Miach's room," Elathan commented softly. "I'm not sure how effective it'll be for such a close range, but it's one option we can try."

The talk steered toward other spells and physical exertions that might be viable. Each one was discussed, modified, then discarded if all of them couldn't work the magick. They had narrowed down the choices to three of them and were discussing which to try first when Dylan swiftly lifted his head, his gaze raking across the wall where Cadrus now sat against.

"Do you all hear that?" Dylan asked, moving toward a noise only he seemed to hear.

They shot looks at each other as the noise became a bit more audible to their hearing ranges. Before they knew Miach was alive because subconsciously they heard his breathing both through the ward and through their soul links with him. But now, that reassurance, that comfort was gone. For all they knew, Miach was dying alone.

Elathan raised his hands toward the wall. "That's it. Time to get in there, come what may."

"I'm with you!" Cadrus called out, concentrating his strength into his hands, pushing against the wall. With each second, he called upon the emotions that fed him and shaped

those emotions into a battering ram that would have a physical impact as well when released properly.

Finn, Cuin and Dylan centered themselves before agreeing to chant the gateway opening spell. Just as a permanent magick portal linked Earth and the world of Helia, they could open one up between the two rooms. Shared among the three of them, none would suffer the energy loss that often happened when only one did it. As the gate opened, all of the brothers walked into the dark, dank room.

The smell of death hung in the air, nauseating Cadrus and the others. Then a rough, hoarse voice called out into the unusual darkness of the room.

“Why the hell did you come?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Miach grunted with pain as he pulled at the bindings around his ankles and wrists. Though he was glad to see his siblings, they were in danger and he had to get them out while there was still a chance. Seeing the determined look on their faces, he understood they weren't going to just leave him now that they got in. Lying back against the bed, Miach sighed heavily. “Dammit, I told you all to go away. Now she has more of us here to harm and kill.”

Cadrus shook his head at Miach as he tugged hard at the bindings. “What the hell is going on? Who is her? Catie? Last thing I knew was she was in the United States having done something with Shane.” The emotional vampire tried ripping the bindings from the bed with no success. “What the hell? How come these things aren't coming off?”

Miach shut his eyes for a moment, reaching for the calmness he was known for. He felt it almost slip away again before settling around him. Opening his eyes, he looked from Cadrus, to Elathan, Dylan and Cuin. “The bindings are sealed with a dark magick. There is no way to rip, tear, bite, or cut them open. I've tried. As for Catie being in the States --”

“Go ahead, tell them, darling,” said a high-pitched female voice as the draperies between the main bedroom and sitting room parted. Catie walked forward, gliding with an elegance she hadn't possessed before she betrayed them. “Tell them that you're mine forever and that their lives are now forfeit since they interfered.” She snapped her fingers and the candles in the sconces burst into illumination.

Miach blinked and tried not to move as pain throbbed through his body again. As his eyes adjusted to the first bright light in over ten hours, he saw the looks of surprise and shock at the torture that had been inflicted upon him. The words denying his pain and suffering stuck in his throat from lack of hydration. “Don't --” he croaked, knowing it was too late.

“You bitch!” Dylan yelled, striding toward the dark haired, pale eyed woman who stood inside a blood-red circle. “How dare you torture Miach! This man has done everything

for you and more, but because of one little thing, this is what you do to him? Have you lost your fucking mind? Look at those damn wounds you've inflicted on his body!"

Miach watched as Catie looked at him, then back to Dylan, not once leaving the small circle of protection that she had made when Cuin had first shown up outside his door. "I love him and I didn't want to hurt him. But he will agree to serve Taranis before the night is over. Only when he's learned the power of the storm god and how true my love is, can I then heal the lessons he needed to be taught." Catie intoned. The young woman muttered something in a language Miach wasn't familiar with, then strode out of the circle.

Dylan stepped backward as did the others, repulsed by whatever spell of protection now encased her. Catie stood at the side of the bed, a silver dagger stained with blood at her side. "Will you give yourself to Taranis, Miach Maraigh? Will you accept freedom and release from Morrighu by choosing the stronger god? She keeps you in this pathetic state, neither loving or being loved."

"No, I won't serve Taranis. He is not the strongest and he can't give you what you want, Catie. Even though I care for you, I know I won't ever love you in the romantic, *anamchara* way that you want of me."

The silver dagger lifted high in the air above his chest. Miach watched as Catie's breathing quickened and tears glistened in her eyes. His words upset her, but she had to accept the truth -- he wasn't her soulmate and she wasn't his. Her hand shook a little and Miach wondered if perhaps he finally had gotten through to her.

"The only freedom he will have is that with his soulmate," Finn interjected. "This is wrong, Catie, and you know it. What you've done to him isn't freeing him but enslaving him to you."

"You're wrong! I will free him from Morrighu, the treacherous goddess. Never again will she ever have a death hold on Miach. That ends *now!*"

The dagger blade arced downwards, like slow motion. His brothers didn't know that Catie had bound him in his human form, thus he could be killed. And if he died, his brothers would follow soon after since she had helpers they had no clue about. Steeling himself, Miach waited for the death strike.

The blow never came.

Instead, a shuddering of cold passed through Miach's body as Elathan phased through the bed, grabbing the dagger from Catie. Elathan's fist slammed into Catie's arm, forcing her to release the weapon. As it dropped next to his chest, Miach let out a relieved sigh. *Too close, a little too close to dying. Now I need to undo the magick bindings.*

"Catie! How dare you!" Elathan grabbed her arm, twisting it behind her back, forcing her into a submissive position. "Have you forgotten that no O'Connor can harm a Marauder



without your own clan paying the consequences? Do you really want your family to be punished for your actions?"

The woman glared at each Marauder as they encircled her. Lifting her chin, she spat at them, a piece of it hitting Finn on the cheek. "You disowned me when I questioned things. When I wanted to know, you refused. Now ... now you tell me that if I release the man I love from this bondage of Wraith form, I'll harm my clan? Prove it!"

Cadrus reached down, gripped her chin and slowly began siphoning off Catie's emotions. They needed her disconnected from her strong emotions if they ever stood a chance of getting her to understand the precipice she walked. "There are many things hidden from the *cúntoír* for good reason, Caitlin," he whispered. "The blood bond is only one of those things."

"Yet you hide this and put your lives at risk. I won't let my love go. He's mine. Taranis promised him to me!" Her voice quivered with hate, love, and desperation. "When I signed my life to him, to no longer be protector, he promised me my heart's desire -- to see Miach free."

Miach sighed, closing his eyes at the desperation he saw in Catie's eyes. He had known Catie cared for him, but this wasn't love, only obsession, and no matter how much they tried to correct her, she wouldn't stop. He blamed himself for not sending her away when he started seeing the signs of her falling for him. *If only I wasn't so damn weak from each of those tiny cuts she made over the hours.*

Out of nowhere, he felt a caress, like that of a lover cupping his cheek. A soft warmth pressed against his cheek while the caress tickled his ear as he heard, *You're not alone and neither are your brothers who stand before you. Others who are bound to you are coming to help defeat the darkness.*

Flicking his eyelids open, Miach only saw his brothers surrounding a defeated but defiant *ex-cuntoir*. "Can someone let me out of these things before the rest of the unwelcome wagon shows up? Now that she's subdued, it shouldn't be hard to reverse the magick used to restrain me."

Dark male laughter filled the room as noises of people entering through a magickal gateway caught their attention. "Too late, Marauder. Your death is ours and we shall revel in it," sneered a tall man, dressed in the old warrior leathers, tattooed from chin to waist. "You won't escape me this time, Miach."

"Eomen. I see you still live," Finn spat, removing his dagger from his waist sheath. "I thought we destroyed your sorry ass around the time of the Romans in Britain."

"If those curs couldn't do it, you sure as hell weren't able to," Eomen sneered. "But with the strongest among you trussed like a gift, you won't do anything to risk his life. Let the girl go."

“Fuck you, bastard. You helped us to be cursed and I damn sure won’t let you kill Miach,” Dylan cried out, launching himself at Eomen, shifting instantly into his eagle form.

Before the eagle reached Eomen, an arrow darted past him, embedding itself deep into the eagle’s wing. With a fury, the eagle hit the ground, screeching in pain. Finn ran forward, followed by Cuin. While Cuin dragged Dylan back, Finn stood his ground, feet shoulder width apart, dagger held in a defensive position.

“Touch us and you curse your clan, Eomen O’Connor,” Finn growled. “We aren’t planning to kill Catie, but to save her from your poisonous influence. You couldn’t obey on First Night and you were punished. You wouldn’t obey the edicts served upon you by the druids. You wouldn’t even stand at our side when we first faced Taranis’ army after being turned, instead choosing to stay in the village protecting it, rather than being at your kin’s side. No, you had to assume you knew better than everyone else. You cursed your clan into this service and until we’re free, none of them will know freedom either.”

”You lie, Miach!” Eomen spat on the ground but didn’t move closer.

Miach watched as Cadrus and Finn pushed Catie down to a sitting position as she tried to make a run for Eomen. Her voice sounded too high, too brittle as she protested. “Stop! Let me go!” Catie’s blue eyes flashed at him in confusion, then to Eomen, seeking some kind of explanation. “What do you mean, Eomen created this curse on our clan? I’m the first O’Connor to break faith with the Marauders!”

“No, you’re not,” Miach called out. “You’re only the most recent in three hundred years.”

Elathan sighed. “You know I’m the keeper of our histories, Catie. Eomen O’Connor is the father of the clan that became our *cúntoírs*. On the night of our reckoning, all in the village were told to stay away from our dwellings. We accepted our fate. Yet, Eomen, friend to us and son to the man whom we called uncle, decided that he would save us from Morrighu. And you’ve heard what Miach has said regarding further actions by Eomen. Thus, your clan is tied to ours not just by blood, but by honor debt, blood debt.”

Her dark hair flew around her face as she shook her head. “No! He can’t be as old as you! We O’Connors are mortal!” Catie cried out, her voice breaking again. “That is not possible. Who are you, Eomen?”

“I am the invincible. the unstoppable, and the bringer of death though death does not touch me -- a non-Maraigh. With Taranis’ help, I shall die knowing I’ve taken out those who’ve enslaved my clan once for all time. Tonight vindication and revenge is mine!” Without warning, Eomen charged at Finn, bearing a dagger and a sling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finn dodged as the dagger came at his face, and then felt the sting against his body. Cursing, he rolled to the side, sensing Cadrus leaping over him to knock over one of Eomen’s

flunkies. Coming up, Finn flipped a dagger at another minion, keeping his gaze trained on the movements of the first O'Connor. There were still some enemies left and they were slowly trying to entrap the Maraighs in their circle, forcing them into giving up. They had to move and get Miach out of there.

"Eomen!" Miach called out. "You say we enslaved your family, but in fact, you know you're the one responsible. You can be killed, that was assured by Morrighu when you betrayed blood and clan."

Finn shifted his position so that he was between Eomen and Miach. Somehow he knew that Eomen would attack his brother, just as he had tried so long ago.

"You lie! Just as you always have, Miach! Your lies will no longer be heard upon this earth after tonight." Eomen rushed forward, his body crouched low, shoving Finn to one side.

"No, he does not!" Finn reached out and grabbed Eomen's ankle, pulling hard. The man's forward momentum stalled and Finn tugged again. Suddenly the leg turned in his hand as a glint of steel flashed before him. Bringing his free arm up, he tried countering the blade with his own. But the tip of the blade slid down his forearm, slicing it open.

"Maraighs bleed like men and tonight they will die as men," Eomen shouted to his men as his foot slid from Finn's hand. "Having trouble holding onto things, Finn? Glad to help with that, but I need to finish with someone else first." The warrior spun away and strode forward, away from Finn.

Grimacing as he tried to use a simple healing spell to slow the bleeding, Finn crouched on the balls of his feet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cuin pushed Catie toward Cadrus, freeing himself to protect Miach when Catie rolled with the push, taking him out below the knees. Struggling to a standing position, he grabbed at Catie's shirt as she laid her hands across the arm bindings. She spoke rapidly but clearly, the invocation of power surrounding her and Miach. Cuin surged forward, trying to make sure nothing happened to Miach as her words reached his ears. "These binds I undo, these ties made untrue. Love is a funny thing, let the Marauder sing."

The bonds dissolved in a shimmer of black and red dust as a large shout from across the room caught Cuin's attention. Yet someone else was making their way through a portal. As Miach scooted out of the bed, Cuin moved closer, handing his sibling a dagger. "Good to see you free."

His eldest brother said nothing as he took out one attacker before grabbing for Catie. Cuin reached her before Miach could, hoping to save his brother from battle madness. Then a loud roaring noise flooded the room, forcing everyone to step back.

Recognizing the battle cry of the Maraighs, Cuin shifted to take in a sight he never thought he'd ever see -- Niam, Owain, Colette, and Kirstie -- battling with weapons and magick. The chanting turned to a spell as Kirstie and Colette walked directly toward the small group of Eomen and Catie's men. A poof of cool air followed by a "Shite, sorry," told him that Donal had managed to get here in time to phaze through a wall, connecting with an unsuspecting opponent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Colette and Kirstie approached Miach, both chanting a protection spell and calling upon the aid of Morrighu. Spotting three men approaching from behind a dark curtain in the corner, Colette stopped while singing, releasing three throwing daggers. Each blade buried itself deep within its target, killing each one. As the increased magick blazed around them, Colette nodded to Kirstie, who took her hand as she sang the death song of Morrighu. Colette joined in at counterpoint, reveling in the power of death, change, and the glory of honorable battle. Together, their voices filled the room in invocation to Morrighu. As the magic grew more powerful, they sang to Eomen, who seemed frozen in place by the daughters of Morrighu.

"You speak falsely; imprison the flesh that could free you.  
You deny the truth and hold forth with the falseness of lightning.  
Power you have gotten, denied Arawn his right.  
Your season has ended, Eomen, for now this night.  
Death is yours, you seek, and you gain.  
Gone now is your pain."

As they sang the last words of Eomen's death song, Morrighu appeared beside them, her violet eyes filled with appreciation and the glory of the battle. Kirstie's voice faded away first, then Colette's as both women nodded respectfully to the goddess.

"As my daughters speak, let it be done. Let the undying die, let the cycle of hate be broken. Let Taranis have no more victims from the blood of sacrifice, this day or any other! Today, Eomen, you reap what you've sown -- your death and final release from the pain you've endured for your treachery."

Eomen dropped to the ground and the Marauders encircled him, leaving only one opening -- that to Morrighu. Grasping each other's forearm, they allowed Morrighu's power to flow through them as Morrighu, Colette, and Kirstie completed the circle, though not before Catie managed to break free from Cuin once more. Colette knew she couldn't stop the young woman without breaking the power of the circle and stood her ground by squeezing Morrighu's hand tightly.

Once in the center of the circle, Catie took Eomen into her arms. Cradling the fallen, dying warrior, she rasped out, "You must let go of this, father of the clan. We have served willingly, each of us making our own private oath. Some haven't taken the test, some have. Of those who have, we can choose not to serve, but sworn to secrecy."

"Why did you never say? When you came to Taranis' temple --" Eomen coughed, blood staining his lips. "You never mentioned the oath or the choosing of O'Connors."

Catie looked at the Marauders, then to Morrighu before answering. "I fell in love with a man who can't love me. We are not soulmates, though I would've done anything to make it happen. I may serve Morrighu, but I don't bear her mark as her specially chosen daughter. Without that mark, I can only be a friend or helper to Miach, but I can't end his suffering or his curse."

"His suffering is his choice, Catie," Morrighu clarified as she stepped forward into the circle. The goddess joined the hands of two Maraighs so the circle remained complete before kneeling beside Eomen and Catie. "But now, you are Taranis' child. His mark and stench scent your body. Be gone and take yourself to any of our holy places to be cleaned. If you don't ... then you will be marked for death by those who love you."

Catie nodded, tears falling down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Morrighu. I thought if I could release him. Regardless of how --"

"I don't want release, Catie," Miach interrupted, exchanging a meaningful glance with Morrighu. "If I'm meant to be released, it'll be by one of Morrighu's daughters. If not, then I shall live my life as I can -- by serving others."

The young woman bowed her head, sobs erupting from her throat. The drops of wetness sparkled upon Eomen's face and chest as he slowly died in her arms. "I'll go as soon as I've buried Eomen. That is, if you will let me give you that honor, father of the clan?"

Eomen nodded, his eyes glazing over as death swiftly drew closer for the first of the O'Connors.

"We'll do that, Catie, dear," Cuin answered. "He'll be buried with full honors accorded to all who served us Maraighs. Without his love for his family, he wouldn't have done this stupid thing. This is why we never talked about the blood oaths that bind our families. How do you tell of a man who ended up living in agony because of his help? Though he tried to do right, he did wrong. But his love for us was genuine, which was something we were always honored to have and sorely missed when he turned his back upon us."

"As we all suffer when one of our children lashes out without accepting his own blame. But even a goddess can forgive a child who wants to come home," Morrighu whispered, her blood-red lips grazing first Eomen's forehead, then Catie's cheek. "Do you now understand

why things are set in such a way?" She nodded to Colette and Kirstie, who softly keened for a fallen comrade, releasing the power of death back into the universe.

"Yes, it was a harsh lesson, but one I won't ever forget. And one I won't share unless given permission." Catie kissed Eomen's cheek a final time. "Be free, meet Arawn and find peace within you." Letting the man go, she stood up and walked up to Miach. "I'm sorry. I wanted --"

Miach caressed her cheek and kissed it. "It's okay. You meant well, but didn't do it well in follow through. Go, cleanse yourself. Perhaps then you can come back to us, fully restored."

"Yes, come back and be part of the family." Colette smiled. "Don't make us have to go and kick your ass."

Catie nodded and brushed by Miach. Only he saw the death of something within her eyes. When he looked up, he saw Morrighu incline her head slightly, knowing that she too saw it. "Be safe, Catie."

The young woman lifted her chin up, determination shining in her eyes. "I will. I will." Then she walked out of the room.

Eomen coughed, drawing back Miach's attention. "Give me my death and be swift."

Morrighu bent down and brushed her red lips across his pale, almost colorless ones. "I remove the sting of life from you. Let Arawn collect this overdue soul."

Darkness, darker than evil, spawned in the night-filled room as the temperature dropped quickly. The ground rumbled and a tall, muscular, tattooed man stepped out of the darkness into the glimmering candlelight. Kirstie bowed to the god of death, Arawn, while she broke the circle for him.

"Thank you, daughter of Morrighu. I see that I can finally collect upon an old debt. Perhaps now he can get a chance to have another life, one where he shows he's learned the lessons of the past." The dark-eyed gaze of the god swept around the Maraigh circle, pausing at Niam, then on Owain. "Finally, two of the Maraigh are released into the natural order of life and death. Will you release the rest to me this night, Morrighu?"

"No. They must find their own freedom. As for Miach ... his fate is beyond his control, and it's not within my reach either." Morrighu handed the fallen O'Connor to Arawn. The god shifted the warrior over one of his broad, muscular shoulders. "Take him and know he is blessed."

Arawn nodded as a dark brow lifted. "After so long, you've brought home the wandering son?"

"He died doing the only thing he knew how to do. A warrior to the end. For that alone, there is honor in death," Morrighu whispered, standing up, turning away from Arawn before walking out of the circle. Just as she moved past Miach, a gateway to her realm opened up. Without another word, the goddess walked into it, causing the gateway to shut behind her.

Arawn surveyed the dead men on the floor. With a flick of his free hand, he collected the bodies and souls of the twelve fallen warriors “Dead before their time, but still, perhaps a lesson learned. Now, go do your deeds, children of Morigu. Soon, you will be at my mercy and I shall give you the freedom that is death.”

“To be renewed to life,” Colette intoned.

“Yes, what all deserve who wish to continue their journeys and learning.” Arawn smiled. “I’m to tell you, Colette, that your fallen sister wishes you peace and love.”

“Then give her my love back. Tell her --” Colette stopped, tears choking up her words. “Tell her I avenged her death and found my own love.”

“I shall. She awaits her time to return. Know that your sons are special, vampire and wraith. They shall be quite interesting during the teen years,” Arawn laughed as he moved through the gateway.

They stood together -- a family. Though they were often alone, torn apart by circumstance brought on by being alive too long and the secrets that bound them, there was a change now -- they were still family. Yet ... the secrets weren’t all gone.

Miach collapsed into a heap. “Fuck me.”

Owain reached his side first, examining him. “You’re really sick this time. Poison on the blade?”

“Probably. I just need some sleep and meds. I’ll be fine, *deárthair*.” Miach closed his eyes, feeling the pain surge as the sickness that he had held back filled him. Then a coolness washed over him, weakening him, but removing most of what tainted his body. A woman’s voice once again flooded his mind with her soft, reassuring words. “*You will get through this. I won’t let you suffer. Sleep my heart. Sleep and recover. Your family is safe once more.*”

“You okay?”

“Sleep. Just help me to the guest room and let me sleep.” Miach wondered at the voice and the cool touch. “Colette do you --”

Colette smiled as she helped Miach to his feet. “I do know how take care of a bad patient. Fill them with Demerol and let them sleep off their crankiness.”

“You weren’t supposed to come; neither was Kirstie.”

Colette smiled mysteriously. “We were told otherwise. We met the hubbies at the airport. One of our own was in trouble. We might be preppers, but we’re not without ways to help.”

“Amen for that,” Niam remarked, hugging his wife closely. “They knew exactly what to do.”

“Yes, they did.” And Miach pondered that point as sleep closed in on him.

## Blessing of Birth and Life -- Colette's birthday

*(Blessing of the Birth and Life takes place after Call of the Wylde and Mabon's Twilight)*

"What the hell will I get her this year? She's fucking pickier than Miach in two lifetimes," Owain growled as he tried to think. His long legs ate up the living room as he paced back and forth, trying to figure out what to give his wife for her birthday. It had to be special, something that she wouldn't choose for herself. The ringing of the phone broke him out of his contemplation. Grabbing the receiver, he barked, "Hello?"

"Owain? It's Grey. What's going on? You left a message for me at work."

"Yeah, I need help, man. Col's birthday is coming and I have no fucking clue what to buy her this year." Owain's fingers drummed on the mahogany table. "Any ideas?"

The pause on the other end had Owain wondering if he scared Col's friend and ex-lover. Grey cleared his throat before speaking, catching Owain's complete attention. "You're asking me for ideas?"

"Yeah. You've known her longer than I have, and you know some of her secret wishes that she's not shared with me yet. Any help is appreciated."

"Well, granted she and I were close and still are -- the question is -- are you looking for a gift-gift, or something she'd remember always?" Grey's voice sounded a bit weird to Owain, but then again, it was probably the fact that they hadn't quite figured out how to balance a friendship with them both having had sex with Colette. Personally it hadn't bothered Owain, but Grey had some issues.

"I want it to be special. Very special. What do you have in mind?"

Grey spoke quickly, quietly, as Owain adjusted his shirt, trying to ignore the fact that he was asking his wife's ex-lover for help to pick out her birthday gifts. But he had asked



everyone for ideas and nothing really had stood out in how to show Colette how much he loved her and cherished their relationship and the coming of their boys.

“Do you really think she’d like that?” Owain asked. What Grey suggested was definitely different, and would be something that he knew his wife hadn’t experienced with him. There were some erotic possibilities and Owain considered it fully. “How about the twins?”

“They won’t be harmed. She’s past the stage of worrying about that. Plus, we’re not the type to hurt her during this. Just make her squirm until she can’t take it anymore.”

“Good. Can you be here tonight, about eight? She’s over at Niam’s helping Kirstie. She’s only carrying one child, but with the past poisoning, she’s having a difficult time with early contractions. Since Colette’s an ob-gyn, she went over for a bit.”

“Yeah, I’ll catch the first flight. Make sure when you make the rest of the phone calls, you also set up so that there won’t be any interruptions to distract us from giving Col her birthday gift.”

“I’ll make sure the only interruptions are the ones we plan for her. Catch ya later, Grey.” Owain hung up the receiver, a grin spreading over his face. “She’s gonna love this.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tired, Colette parked the car and turned off the engine. Opening the door, she smiled at the house they were renting in Silver Springs. It was large enough for the family, but still small enough to be easy to keep up with. *I wonder if he remembered today is my birthday. He didn’t wish me happy birthday this morning or anything.*

When she got to the front door, she noticed a green envelope with her name on it. Opening the envelope, she saw a card with a woman being kissed on the neck. *Happy Birthday, baby. Come inside and make your way upstairs. I’ve got a surprise for you. Love, O.*

Grinning, Col opened the door and then shut it behind her once she was inside. The lights were off, but the candles on the wall sconces were lit, leading a path upstairs. She called out as her purse hit the floor, “You better have one hell of a present for me, O! You never wished me a happy birthday!”

“Because it’s not sundown. You know we celebrate sundown to sundown! Now come up here and get your present.”

She took the stairs two at a time, while holding tightly to the railing. Thankfully since her conversion to being a vampire, her stamina and skill had improved ten-fold, but she still wasn’t willing to risk anything because of the babes she carried. “I’m coming; you’d best be ready to wow me!”

At the top landing, she noticed flower petals on the carpet, leading down the hallway. Following them, she scooped a few up, feeling the silkiness in each red, purple, and peach rose petal. “These are beautiful,” she whispered as the candles flickered in the hallway. They

stopped in front of the unused guest room. Her brow lifted as she wondered why the present was in there.

Twisting the knob of the door, Colette slowly opened it, her gaze trying to adjust to the candles lit in the room. Soft music caressed her ears as she recognized one of her favourite romantic songs. "Nice music choice."

"Thanks, I thought you'd approve," said a voice that was not her husband's. Grey stepped forward, his hands outstretched and his body completely open to her view. "Happy birthday, Col."

"What are you doing here?" She eyed his naked body, remembering the times they had shared. He was a fantastic lover but he wasn't her soulmate -- though he was her heartmate. "Where's O?"

"Right here, behind you," whispered her husband against her left ear. "Tonight is a night of joy and pleasure. Tonight, Grey and I are going to pleasure you until you cry for mercy. This is your birthday gift from us -- a night of intimacy, loving, and blessing of life."

She felt his cock rub against her ass, as if her jeans weren't even there. Her breath caught in her throat. "Oh my goddess. How? Why? Who?"

Grey moved forward, his hands taking Col's and putting them at her sides. "It was a joint idea and we both agreed to it. Now, in this, you're not the master, Col. We are. You will enjoy this. You will do as we ask, until we say otherwise. Understood?" His fingers caressed her collarbone, down toward the buttons of her shirt.

"I, um, don't do orders well." Various scenarios ran through her mind, causing her pussy to contract in excitement. If they were going to pleasure her, perhaps, just perhaps she'd get a chance to fulfill her wildest dream.

"You'll have no choice, my love," Owain murmured against her hair as his arms wrapped around her waist, his fingers undoing her pants. "Remember, we have toys to make sure you don't move unless we let you."

Further protesting was out as Grey kissed her fully on the mouth, his hands quickly and competently unfastening the buttons. She loved his taste -- the taste of sea, citrus and something utterly Grey. Even now, she knew he had the power to turn her on, just as much as Owain did. The fact that tonight was her night, that her husband was gifting her this threesome, humbled her. It was something that she wouldn't have asked for, but would've have always wondered about. When Grey's lips released hers, she smiled. "Long time, no see."

"Yeah, but always for your birthday," he responded, pulling her shirt open, capturing her arms in the sleeves. He then pulled down the front of her bra, further trapping her arms at her sides. The cool air hit her nipples, making them ache to be touched and suckled on. Though she was normally sensitive to the touch, her pregnancy had amplified the sensations even more than she thought possible. "They're beautiful, and so much fuller, Col. I think these will be fun to tease first."

She bit back a moan as Grey's sensuous lips trailed across the tops of her breasts. His hands cupped them from underneath, allowing his thumbs to brush across her nipples.

Owain slid her jeans down until they pooled at her ankles. "Lift your right leg, love," Owain whispered. She did as he asked, enjoying the sensation of cool air as it hit her damp panties. Then she lifted her other foot as he divested the jeans and her shoes to the side. Just when she thought she might have to figure out how to make Grey suckle on her nipples, she felt Owain stroke the wet fabric and she gasped.

"You both are trying to kill me, right? Get me begging for more?" She rasped out the last as Grey bit her nipple and Owain's fingers teased the delicate flesh with the wet silky panties. There was a ripping sound as Owain tore the panties open and forced her feet apart. He repositioned himself behind her. Just when she thought she couldn't handle more of the teasing, Grey squeezed her free nipple with his forefinger and thumb as his mouth sucked hard on the other. Leaning her head back, Col moaned. "Goddess above, you're driving me mad."

"But Col, we've just started," Owain answered. His tongue slowly licked her wet slit, as his hands braced her against his face.

She tried to move, but squirming made it worse. Owain's tongue dipped further up and down her slit, teasing her, but never reaching where she needed. Grey's mouth slid from one breast to the other, teasing and taunting each in the same fashion. Two mouths, four hands, and she was trapped at their loving mercy. "Let go, Col. You know you want to," Grey whispered. "Once you let go, you'll enjoy this more."

Swallowing, trying to get moisture back to her mouth, Col tried moving her arms, only to feel the fabric tighten. With a sigh, she closed her eyes. "Fine. I'll let go, but you both best know what you're asking for."

"We know. We discussed it hours ago." Owain's fingers joined his mouth. "Just let us please you, babe."

"Then I'm yours to play with." *Gods, I hope I know what I'm doing.* Then Grey's mouth captured hers and she stopped thinking and enjoyed the sensations flooding her body. His mouth demanded her attention and she returned it, their tongues dancing against each other as his body pressed against hers. She felt his cock jump as it touched her mons and she wanted to feel him in her, and feel her husband in her at the same time. Both men pushing deep inside and her screaming her release -- that's what she really wanted.

Owain's mouth eased back, and she felt him stand up behind her. As one unit, the three of them walked toward the king-sized bed. Only when they were beside it, did Grey and Owain remove her shirt and bra, replacing those items with Velcro wrist restraints. "This is to make sure you don't interfere with our plans just yet, my love," Owain growled sexily. Grey took one arm and pulled it back, helping Col to slide up the bed until her hair was almost touching the headboard. She relaxed into Grey's sensual caresses while Owain attached the other restraint in the proper place. "That looks almost perfect."

“Agreed, Owain. I think that once her feet are properly restrained, she’ll be ready for more attention.” Grey grabbed one foot, kissing the instep as he attached the Velcro strap around her ankle, and tied it to the lower footboard. Owain did the same.

She watched them as they poured warm oil into the palms of their hands, and started to rub it on her skin, starting at her feet. The warmth, love, and caring filled her body, as the silky sensation made her highly aroused. Their hands caressed, soothed and massaged out the soreness in her calves, knees, and thighs. She only wished they’d extend their touch to her pussy, as she knew it needed just as much attention. Yet their fingers touched her inner thighs, her outer thighs, and her hips, but avoided the one place she needed them. “Dammit, you forgot a spot,” she whimpered, arching her hips upward.

“No, we didn’t.” Owain shot her a wicked grin, his fangs flashing. “We just think it needs very special attention -- later.”

Colette pulled at her restraints, wishing that she hadn’t agreed to this. She wanted to come now dammit! This was NOT fair. “This is so not fair. If my hands were freed --”

“That’s why you’re tied.” Grey chuckled, his fingers swirling across her belly. “You’d force us to service you and we’re not quite ready for that yet.”

Each male slowly caressed and massaged the warmed oil into a breast, careful not to tease or coat the puckered nipple. Grey’s hands were warm, slippery, and his long fingers brushed across the bottom of her breast while Owain’s thicker fingers glided over the tops, teasing the nipple as they brushed by it. Whimpering, Colette inhaled deeply, trying to force them to touch her breasts the way she wanted them to. She wanted them to tug, kiss, fondle, and bite her nipples. She wanted release and they were not cooperating at all!

“What kind of,”-- *gasp* -- “birthday present,”-- *gasp* -- “is it when a girl,”-- *moan* -- “can’t get off by two men?”

Their combined chuckling at her demands pushed her over the edge. “Dammit! You *will* fuck me and suck my breasts, or else! It’s my damn birthday!”

“Do you really want us to give into your demands; suck you, fuck you, and have it end this early in the evening?” Grey asked lightly while he plucked at one tight, excited nipple. “Or don’t you wish this to last all night long?”

“At this moment,” Colette gasped as Owain bit her other nipple, the slight pain turning into intense pleasure by his teasing tongue, “I want to be fucked hard, nonstop, and we can negotiate for the rest of the night. Come on, this is fucking sexual torture and you both know it!”

Owain sucked on her nipple, and she knew he was not just enjoying the sensual play, but feeding on her as well. His latest fascination was feeding from her breasts. As he put it, “The babies will get more tit time than I will, it just seems I should get my time in while the going is good.”

Right now, complaining wouldn't help. Her words were having no effect on making the damn vampire and elf work any quicker on slaking her desires. Then Grey's mouth covered the other nipple and thinking flew out the door as a crushing sensation of desire flooded her pussy. Trickle of cream slid down her thigh as she tried to adjust herself. "Fuck me!" she demanded. Her body arched as pleasure shot from her nipples to her drenched pussy. "My name is Colette, I'm about to die from pleasure. There will be repercussions." Over and over she muttered those words as she felt their hands slide down her belly, fingering the hair that covered her mons. "Hello!! About time!"

She felt them snigger against her breasts as Grey began stroking her clit while Owain's fingers slid past her slick, swollen folds, sinking deep inside her wet pussy. Before she could say anything, Grey's other hand joined Owain's questing fingers in her pussy, pushing deep and hard. Over and over, one set pushed in deep while the other curled, then alternated, neither set letting her breathe or concentrate. Spread out completely, she could do nothing but rock her hips in time with every thrust of the fingers, enjoying the sensation as they finger-fucked her. Only when she felt that edge of oblivion hit did she give in and moan their names, letting the sensations take her away. "Owain! Grey!"

As she caught her breath, Colette felt herself slip back into her body, pleasure filling her as the finger-fucking eased to slow, rotating motions and their mouths slowly made their way higher. "Feel good, babe?" Owain asked, a glint of mischief highlighting all the reasons she loved this man completely.

"Oh, better than good," she purred, rocking her lips as her inner muscles clenched around the fingers in her pussy. "How about you two?"

Grey smiled, his dark hair falling forward, brushing against her skin. "I think my cock needs some attention, Col. Watching you writhe in pleasure and unable to do anything has made it so hard; I think only your mouth can make it better." He moved forward, positioning himself over her, offering his long, thick cock to her mouth. "Suck on it, Col."

She lifted one brow teasingly at his attitude, but duly opened her mouth, letting the purplish tip slide past her teeth. Playfully, she nipped him, her incisors lengthening just enough for some sexual torture of her own. His groan and cock flinching egged her on. She couldn't see what Owain was doing, but she knew she'd feel him doing her soon enough. Slowly, she sucked on Grey's cock, enjoying the salty pre-cum as it slid against her tongue. "Mmmm," she murmured as Grey thrust slowly and easily into her waiting mouth.

She continued teasing the hard cock in her mouth, she felt Owain move between her legs, his fangs scraping against her labia. She arched as his tongue slid deep in her pussy, forcing Grey's cock deeper in her throat. Her moan filled the air as both men once again slid into that simultaneous rhythm of Grey going in while Owain pulled back, then Owain pushing his tongue deep, his teeth rasping her clit while Grey pulled his cock back, until only the head was in Col's mouth.

Only after she came a second time did both men stop, Grey's hard cock pulling out of her mouth. She whimpered. "I'm not done drinking yet."

"No biting until later, dear one," he whispered as he moved to the left side of the bed.

"But I wanna bite you."

"Later, babe." Owain replaced Grey. "Time for you to suck on some vamp cock now." Without further words, Owain slid his hard cock between Col's lips, demanding her to take him fully in. "You can always bite my cock and suck on it. But remember -- revenge will be mine afterwards," he moaned in warning as she scraped her teeth down the length of his dick.

Enjoying the taste of her husband, Colette played around, letting her tongue curl partially around his cock as she relaxed, allowing it to slide further in her mouth before gently pricking it with her incisors. At his gasp of pleasure/pain, she danced her tongue over where she bit him, sucking gently to take away the pain.

She felt Grey's fingers slide into her pussy, then out. She lifted her hips, thinking that he was going to finger-fuck her or eat her, but then she felt his finger slowly slide into her ass, gently teasing it open. A moan escaped her lips as Owain's cock slid forward. She heard Owain's sharp gasp as he neared his climax. Again, she felt the pressure on her ass as Grey's second finger slid in, making her open to him.

Owain pulled out of Colette's mouth, his eyes grinning, matching the smile on his face. "I love how you suck my cock, babe. But I think it's time to up the ante." He gazed over his shoulder, watching Grey, she supposed. "I see that Grey is preparing you well."

"Uh huh," she muttered, mentally making notes to take revenge on them for teasing her so much. They weren't the only ones who knew how to tease sexually and they'd be smart to remember that. She would get them back sexually, even if it took a year to do it. There was no way that these two should get away with torturing her like this and not fucking her senseless.

Owain moved down, joining Grey between her thighs. Part of her thought it was patently just wrong for them to fondle her clit and labia while only using their fingers or lips as they prepped her for their cocks, but on the other hand ... she had to admit, they were damned good at pushing her orgasm buttons.

"You have the most beautiful pussy I've ever fucked, you know that, Col?" Grey asked, sliding a third finger into her ass, working it around. When he pulled his fingers out, he wiped them on the wet facecloth that sat in a bowl of water beside the bed. "All pink, tight, and waiting to be filled with cock."

"You mean the cock that's not inside of me yet," she growled, her incisors lengthening to their full length.

Owain snickered. "Oh, but they will be, soon." His fingers slid deep inside her pussy, curling and flexing. "But there is a price you must pay for having our cocks inside you."

“Oh?” It was more of a moan than a question.

“Yes. You’re not allowed to come until we give you permission.”

“You. Have. Got. To. Be. Shitting. Me,” she gasped between thrusts, her body writhing under their constant ministrations.

“I am not joking. You come without permission, we stop and then we make you cold. Very cold,” Owain muttered, his lips pressed against her mons. “Understood?”

“Yeah. You’re fucking dead once I’m out of these restraints. This was Grey’s idea -- the no come thing, wasn’t it?”

Neither man answered her and she knew they meant business. Worse, it meant they both agreed on her not coming. They would stop touching her, pleasing her and that meant she wouldn’t have the biggest orgasm in her life if they didn’t keep fucking her. *Dammit all to the fucking Underworld!* “Fine. No coming unless I’m told to. Why do I feel it’s going to be a while?”

“Because you’ve been through, *armien’ytha?*” Grey teased as he moved to the end of the bed to release her left foot, then refastened the restraint to the chain dangling from the canopy. “Women who’ve gone through an Elven sexual experience like that often know it takes a long time before they get release.”

“I’m going to kick your asses before I’m going to make you both repay me sexually for this torture,” Colette gritted out as Owain moved, undoing the right arm, only to retie it near her left one, forcing Col onto her side.

She felt the tingle of magick as she heard Grey murmur in Elven a simple lubricating spell that would also clean their cocks each time they withdrew from her body. She was thankful for Grey being so considerate to invoke the spell for both men. It was a spell that helped enhance the sexual play time among Elves and tonight it meant that there would be more time to pleasure each other without worry. She felt Grey slide his thick, long cock between her ass cheeks. If it were possible, she’d have thought he was even bigger than she remembered and she just had him in her mouth. Then she saw her husband’s face in front of her as she opened her eyes and she kissed him. “I do love you. Thank you for this, but I’m still going to kick your ass, O.”

“Yes, my love. I know you’re going to kick my ass, if you can ever walk again,” Owain teased, his hand guiding his hot, hard cock to her clit, rubbing it up and down. “But remember, no coming until we say so, Daughter of Morrighu.”

She bit his shoulder in retribution. “Stop teasing and fuck me already, dammit!”

“As the lady wishes it,” Grey muttered against her neck.

Grey slid his cock into her ass as Owain filled her pussy as deep as both men could thrust. Desire and love filled her soul as her body opened to both lovers as pressure and pleasure mingled together with each movement and countermovement. Col screamed in

pleasure, but tried to regain what little control she possessed as Owain's voice roared over hers. "You cannot come! If you do, we'll stop, Colette!"

Pleasure filled her, pushing her closer to the edge of no return. "I need to come before I explode. So much pleasure, so intense the sensations," she panted as Grey slowly withdrew his cock almost completely from her ass. Just when she was about to say something, Grey grabbed her hips and rammed his cock deep. A shudder coursed through her body as Owain's cock slid out. Then Owain rotated his hips before thrusting his long cock back in her drenched pussy. Moaning, she tried to thrust against Grey, only to have Owain pull on her hips away from Grey. She whimpered in disappointment as Owain clucked his tongue at her playfully.

"No. You will take being fucked. You will enjoy it, and you will not come!" He kissed her as his cock rammed deep into her pussy. Her inner muscles clamped around him hard, wanting to milk him dry. He continued to withdraw and thrust into her as Grey's cock sat deep in her ass, his only movements caused by Owain's thrusts. At least they were until ...

Grey repositioned himself so he was almost on his knees, his body hovering slightly above her, his cock moving into a new, deeper position. She felt his hips thrust deep against her ass, his cock going harder and deeper as Owain's thrusts increased in tempo as well.

Just when she thought it couldn't get any more intense, their rhythms lined up, both cocks going deep within her at the same time, taking her, filling her, expanding her. The pleasure roared through her body and she could barely hold back the first flush of the orgasm. "I need --"

"No. Not yet, Col," Grey groaned, continuing to fuck her ass. "We're not quite done with you yet."

Owain lifted his head. "Come on in, she's more than ready," he called out toward the door.

The door opened, and there stood the God of the Vampires, the man who put her and Owain through Hades and back. His nakedness filled her sight, including his large, thick, aroused cock. "I see my entrance is well-timed then." Xilan stepped forward and placed himself before Colette's mouth. "Suck on the essence of your life, dear vampire."

Colette opened her mouth, eagerly waiting for a taste of Xilan. He tasted of musk, maleness, and blood divine. She barely could get her mouth around his thick head, but once she did, she felt the God of Vampires shiver in pleasure. As his hips moved in a slow, easy rhythm, both Grey and Owain started to match the god's rhythm. Colette felt her body burn with a need borne of sex, life and something more. Something she couldn't yet touch.

"You suck well, my darling vampire. I think you were made for delight, including the pleasuring of others. Such is the blessing of your birth -- you were born to bring sexual fulfillment to your partners as they sate your desires as well." The god paused as his fingers flicked her aroused, tight nipples. "Your breasts are aching to have a cock between them ... sliding in and out, slowly, then quickly, so when it releases its seed, your breasts are



completely coated. Then they will have to be licked clean, won't they?" His voice was low, melodic.

Colette's mind whirled with his suggestions and the implications. Xilan was suggesting another person for this birthday fucking of hers, wasn't he? Or was he?

"Confused a bit, are you, my dear?" Xilan whispered, slowly easing more of his meaty dick down her throat, forcing her to suckle harder on him. His fingers played with her hair while her teeth gently raked against the length of his cock. "What I mean is that this night is your ultimate fantasy, Colette Wylde-Maraigh. I know what you've craved since the day we met. I saw your dreams that night as you slept. If you wish it, it shall be. But you must not come. Not yet. You are blessed with the life within you and we are blessed by your presence in our lives."

Colette barely nodded, knowing that she couldn't hide anything from anyone in this room, not after this giving of love and trust. Xilan's power was enough that she knew he was granting both Owain and Grey to see her ultimate fantasy -- to be pleased by many men while pleasing them as well. There was a short rap at the door before it opened. Standing at the threshold was a tall, muscular, tanned man with blond hair. His sky blue eyes twinkled with delight as he stroked his thin, but long cock with one hand. "I see that she accepted the offer and the blessing that comes with it. Does that mean I get her hot luscious mouth on my cock, or can I claim the breasts while my twin helps slide into her wet cunt?"

Her eyes widened as Gariboldi and a second man, Helan, entered the room. Helan was bald, but moved with the swiftness of an eel. Gariboldi had always reminded her of the were-lions that she and Owain hung out with occasionally. Yet, here, on her birthday, two of the shifter gods stood naked before her, aroused by her body -- even though she was pregnant. They were like Xilan -- created gods due to the special natures of the preternatural world. Helan grinned at Colette, one hand reaching down to stroke her cheek. "I think I want to slide my cock in those large, luscious breasts of hers. Wouldn't you like that, Colette?"

Her gaze strayed to his cock -- long, not overly thick, but with a purplish head that called to her mouth, Power and magick sizzled from her nipples as Helan palmed her breasts to slide his cock in place and Garibaldi moved out of her view, though his lips kissed her skin. Writhing against the men, a low moan erupted from her throat. "Yesssss ..." she hissed as Xilan moved his cock back to her waiting mouth.

Looking up, Colette saw Helan smiling at her as he fucked her breasts with long, slow thrusts until the cock stopped just at her chin. He licked his lips, then groaned, "Gods, who knew that fucking these round, huge breasts could be so satisfying?"

The men chuckled in agreement as she sighed happily. Garibaldi nibbled then licked her clit before asking, "So, do I help fuck her ass or her pussy?"

Colette murmured against Xilan's cock. The shifter god smirked as his fingers flicked her taut, erect clit. "I think she wishes to speak, Xilan. Then again, perhaps she'd prefer to

have two cocks in her pussy and in her ass. I can provide that service as well since only when my cock is shifted like this can I reproduce.” Garibaldi’s hand slid past one of his twin’s hands, allowing him to tug on one nipple. “But tonight is a celebration of life and of blessings, of unions between those who would never make peace otherwise.” The shifter god whispered as one hand slid down his cock splitting it into two complete, yet thin cocks. “Tonight is one of sexual satiety and enjoyment.”

Xilan laughed. “As you please, Garibaldi. This woman is the way of the next generation. Love overflows in her, as does her desire. She’s freed a vampire and managed to arouse the feeling of hope in a clan who had lost all hope.” His stomach flexed as she suckled harder. His hand caressed her cheek as his hips rocked slightly faster. “Blessed by us gods, and those of the Elves, tonight is a night of hope and love.”

Though it was her birthday, this sounded like much more. In the olden times, she’d have called this a blessing or a joining ritual -- one that brought warring factions to an end while gifting fertility and protection to all. A new pressure slid in her ass and then in her pussy, pushing her until she felt so stuffed with cock she wasn’t sure anyone would be able to move within her body. She screamed around Xilan’s cock as someone flicked, tugged, then massaged her clit until her pussy creamed hard, though she clung against letting herself have an orgasm. As the three men in her pussy and ass began a new rhythm, the filled pain slid into the deepest, body aching pleasure she had ever experienced.

Xilan cautioned her as he slid his cock out of her mouth and offered his balls for her to suck on. “Do not come, little one. We need to play a bit more, make sure that all of us are satisfied this night in all ways.”

Multiple hands caressed her sensitive skin as six cocks slid in and out of various places on her body. Mouths kissed and loved on her as she felt herself being lifted into another realm of sensation and feeling. Xilan slid his cock back into her mouth and suddenly the tempo of the men increased with each thrust and counter. Harder and deeper, they went, each time her body clenching around them, wanting to milk them, wanting to spiral out of control, but somehow, Colette clung to the edge, not letting her orgasm go, though she knew once it did, it would be phenomenal. Her nipples sent zinging shocks of heat and desire as Helan and someone else massaged her breasts and teased her nipples to where they felt they were on fire.

She gasped as she tasted the slightly bloody-tasting precum of Xilan, engaging her vampire senses and desires to a higher level. As if reading her mind, the vampire god’s hips rocked faster as his cock slid deeper into her throat, allowing her to milk him with each inhalation. Her ass felt tender as Grey continued to fuck her hard and deep, having adjusted his position to give him the greatest penetration. Owain had positioned himself so that his cock slid into her at an angle, rubbing both her g-spot and her tender, wet, nether lips with each loving yet demanding thrust. And each time Grey or Owain’s cock slid toward her openings, Garibaldi’s double cock thrust deep and expanded into the empty space making sure that all of her pussy and her asshole found pleasure. There were times when the men

would match thrusts and all four cocks would pound her deep and hard simultaneously, causing a tingling overload of her senses. Helan's cock kept lengthening until part of the head found itself in her mouth with Xilan's. Filled, she was filled to capacity and she wasn't afraid with these men. In fact, she felt loved, cherished, safe ... and somehow, she knew that if she ever needed help, they would do all in their power to do so.

She wasn't sure how long they fucked her harder, deeper, and faster, but Colette knew that soon she'd have her release. Her body cried for release and she couldn't hold it back anymore. One more combined thrust of Grey, Owain, and Garibaldi would send her over the edge. Her one hand squeezed Owain's right nipple, signaling that she was at the point of no return.

"Good, it's time then," Xilan whispered over the sounds of bodies pounding together in mutual enjoyment. "Open wide, Colette and let our love, power, and desire complete you as you come for us." The rhythm sped up even faster until she felt all the cocks tremble at the same time. As a synchronous unit, all five men slid back, then pounded their cocks in Colette as hard and as deep as they could go -- sending them all into multiple orgasms. Colette kept swallowing the mixture of blood and come that filled her mouth as her body exploded in completeness, her inner muscles milking all the cocks buried within her as she sucked dry the others. The only thing that had meaning was the happiness, the lightness, the wave after wave of sexual satiety erupted within her and through her, enveloping her lovers and herself in one moment of perfect union. Together they floated in the universal connectedness that binds life to life and love to each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finally, Col's breathing slowed down until she felt her astral body reconnect with her body. Frissons of arousal flowed through her as the men pumped slowly, lovingly in her as their caressing touch brought her back into the here and now. What they had experienced was something that she had heard Riana speak upon, but had thought impossible. Now, now she knew it was possible -- in the hands of those you loved and trusted implicitly. All the men slid out of her at once, leaving her the sensation of being empty, yet happily sore.

The vampire god was the first to break the silence. "Beautiful Col. Such a wonderful birthday treat for all of us. Never have I experienced such completeness and pleasure before." Xilan kissed her lips, licking off the remnants of his blood from them. "You've been blessed by the vampires and the shifters. No one will ever harm you or yours. This night has begun the weave of friendship and loyalty that will become legend in time."

Garibaldi undid the right leg restraint, massaging her leg afterwards. His soft full lips caressed her inner thigh to the outer lips of her pussy before stopping. Gently he straightened her leg. "Your family is now protected, especially your children to come."

Helan undid a wrist restraint as Xilan freed the other. "Yes, indeed. But there is a price to our continued protection. One your husband says is your choice to make, not his, though he doesn't mind the price."

Colette stared into her husband's loving gaze, then to the gods. He trusted her and would agree to what she decided either way. The ultimate birthday gift from her *anamchara* -- and she loved him the more for offering it freely. "What price?"

"Every year on your birthday, you will endure this loving. All of us here tonight will return to continue the blessing each and every year until someone is unable. This means we make love to you both as a group and individually."

Colette nodded, and then stopped as something occurred to her. "Sounds reasonable, but there's only one thing -- you've not taken me individually."

All of the men grinned wickedly at her. Then her husband responded to her comment. "No, not yet we haven't."

Colette's mouth opened into a wide grin. "You mean --"

"It's still your birthday and I do believe there is a lot more fucking and loving to do until the sun goes down tomorrow night at the end of your birthday," Grey said, his semi-erect cock brushing her back as he sat next to her.

She shivered as the beginnings of arousal made her pussy tingle. She felt her cream slide down her inner thigh before someone's fingers, she wasn't sure who, wiped it away. Then the fingers gently slid from her clit down to her ass. "I want to bite Grey this time though. Not enough to turn him, but for that vampire kick. Then ... I agree to your terms for tonight and for as long as we are all able."

"I thought you might, babe." Owain laughed. He leaned forward and captured her lips in a long, lingering kiss that promised her as much erotic enjoyment as she could handle. "So is this a good enough birthday gift?"

Colette tilted her head to one side and squinted her eyes as if in thought. "I'll let you know after the next couple of hours of being fucked senseless and making men beg to fuck me," Colette teased, raising herself to a sitting position with Owain's help. "But first things first. Grey, present your cock for my special loving attention. I owe you a bite like you've never had before."

The other men cheered her on as Grey moved so he stood before her, his hands clinging to the poles of the bed. "Lock him in place. I want to get some of my own back." None of the others hesitated but did exactly as she asked. She knew that they would let her do what they did to her and she reveled in the equality of being able to fuck and be fucked in the safeness of love and trust.

Grey looked at her with his deep eyes and she smiled. There was no fear, only loving acceptance of what was to come. Her soulmate was one in a billion and these heartmates, these men who completed parts of her and made her feel so special were themselves rare and

special in her heart. Leaning forward, Colette stroked Grey's cock, watching it lengthen and thicken with each languid stroke of her hand. "Now, about my biting you ... I plan on biting you right --"

She gasped, not finishing her sentence as her knees were forced apart, three fingers were plunged in her pussy and the thickest cock she'd ever sucked on slid deep in her ass.

Xilan whispered in her ear as Garibaldi knelt between Grey's legs, allowing him to fondle her dangling nipples. "I'm going to fuck your ass while you bite him, then as he comes in your mouth and you feed, I'm going to fill your ass while Helan finger fucks your pussy."

"What about O?" She whispered as her body readied itself for more love play.

"I'm going to watch this time," her husband replied from her right side. He sat on the edge of the bed, one hand stroking his erection. "You look so sexy like that, you know. Ready to be the vampire hellion you are, taking Grey by his cock while the gods take you, branding you with protection and love. And when they're done, I'm going to have my wicked way with you as they assist me in making sure you don't disobey at anytime."

Licking her lips in anticipation, Colette whispered, "Happy Fucking Birthday to Me!" Then she smiled at Grey, showing her fully extended incisors before lowering her mouth over his thick, reddish cock head.

 THE END 

## Cynnara Tregarth

Born in Chicago, currently living in the Peninsula state, aka Florida, Cynnara loves to write, has always been writing or telling stories. Unfortunately for her, it means that her sense of direction sucks on occasion, but she can tell you all about ancient history. She always writes hot, but on occasion, delves into various other genres. Yet her first love is paranormal with various other genres tossed in for good measure.

You can find Cynnara on the Web at [www.cynnara.com](http://www.cynnara.com), or email her at [cynnara@cynnara.com](mailto:cynnara@cynnara.com).