



Books 1 and 2

The Bloodstone Chronicles
Book of Cenn
&
Sorcerer's Apprentice

yONI Books

THE BLOODSTONE CHRONICLES: BOOKS 1 AND 2

BOOK 1: THE BOOK OF CENN

BOOK 2: SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

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BOOK 1: THE BOOK OF CENN

-1-

Aideen swore lightly under her breath as she hefted the wooden auction crate from the back of her truck and onto a small hand truck. Some idiot had parked a rental car in the space behind her shop, forcing her to park at the end of the alley. Worse yet, her half-ass assistant Ricky wasn't answering the shop's phone, leaving her with a Hobson's choice of leaving the crate unattended a few feet from a busy Dublin street or lifting it onto the hand truck herself.

Oomph! God was it heavy. Her knees popped as she bent down and placed the crate on the steel lip of the dolly, the swift downward motion pushing air between the wooden slats and treating Aideen to the smell of old packing straw and even older leather.

Books. A small thrill traveled up her spine and reached around to caress her nipples. *Old books.*

The books had better be very old indeed, she told herself as she pushed the hand truck up the alley. The crate, its contents unknown, had set her back several thousand at the auction. But Aideen had arrived late, thanks to Ricky and a convoy of Sunday drivers, and all the other items being sold off from Michael Meyrick's estate were gone.

Meyrick ... A second tingle covered her, pricking her flesh and raising the soft blonde hair on her arms. The faux Wiccans that wound their way into her shop would drool over anything associated with the man and provide her a tidy return on today's investment. While alive, rumors had clung to the name Michael Meyrick. He was, according to some, an Arch druid. Most any consumer of the weekly tabloids considered him a psychic extraordinaire who had scried his way to the remains of a millionaire's missing son and, eventually, the murderer. He was, Aideen acknowledged, a first rate collector of the arcane.

Which is why, she thought as she unlocked the back door to her shop, I'm going to kick that little rat bastard in the balls for making me late!

Ricky heard the jingle of bells as Aideen entered and poked his head around the door to the storeroom. "Hey, back already?" He grinned at Aideen, the movement breaking the harsh point of his goateed chin. Like the mass of hair that hung to his shoulders, the sliver of beard was curly and dyed a perfect Goth black. He tucked a lock of hair behind his ear to reveal a silver earring.

"That's new?" Aideen's voice lost its usual melody and took on the tone of an inquisitor. *If that little punk left the shop ...*

"Christ, Aideen," Ricky complained. "How about telling me it looks good, or something?"

He flashed her one of his trademarked wicked grins and started to step into the storeroom but she held one hand up. Those pale blue eyes and tinted lips might play well with the girls at the pubs and some of the less artful customers who ventured into her shop, but Aideen was immune. "I've told you a dozen times not to leave the store. I wasn't even gone for three hours!"

Another wave of irritation flooded her as she thought of the frantic race to Meyrick's spooky little manor in Drogheda after she had been forced to cover a private viewing for clients that Ricky had agreed to show. He had sauntered in an hour late, interrupting her sales pitch and then acting the expert on a Dalyell text. Apparently, as the dangly bit of silver attested, he had already spent the commission that he anticipated Aideen would pay him. *He'll be lucky if he doesn't leave here with a slip for the job commission.*

"Don't sweat it, boss." A silvery set of chimes announced a customer at the front door and Ricky half-turned from Aideen to nod at the newcomer. "Brenna did it in the store while you were gone."

"This isn't a beauty salon," Aideen said and grabbed a crow bar from her workbench.

“It was dead quiet—like it always is.” Ricky offered the excuse as he impatiently nodded a second time at the customer before letting the door swing shut behind him and returning to the storefront.

Aideen glanced at the clock radio on the workbench. It was almost closing time. In half an hour, she could say good-bye to Ricky for the evening. *Or forever*, she thought and slapped the top of the little clock radio, music pouring from it at her touch.

As she worked the last nail from the crate’s top, Aideen wracked her brain to remember why she had hired the little shit in the first place. The efforts evoked a memory of his tight ass in equally tight black jeans and a warm flush heated her thighs, reminding her that she had not been entirely immune in the beginning. Undersexed for far too long, she had immediately dumped the résumé of an Irish history major into the trash when Ricky had turned in his application.

Pushing back the first layer of packing straw, Aideen banished the image from her mind and pulled out a large lump of moth eaten black velvet. The heaviness of the cloth washed away the small wave of disappointment that had threatened and replaced it with curiosity. Something was wrapped inside, its weight promising some small icon or stone. Slowly, she pulled back the moldy layers of velvet to uncover a dark red stone slightly smaller than her fist but as heavy as if it were lead. She held the stone up to the storeroom’s light to reveal a small glimmer of transparency. The stone was smooth but misshapen and, as her fingers closed around it, she found it perfectly fit her closed hand.

“All locked up,” Ricky said as he swaggered into the storeroom and slid one leg over the stool next to her. Her fingers curled more tightly around the stone and she brought it to her chest. “Now, about that sale this morning ...” he started.

“You mean this afternoon.” She snapped the words at him, her chin in an angled downward tilt so that she could still glare at him while she pushed through the second layer of straw, the hand holding the stone still clutched to her breast. “And if you’re thinking about asking me for a commission, you’d better bite your tongue!”

He stuck his tongue out at her, a small silver rod bouncing along its tip. “I’d rather have you bite it,” he purred as he tried to run a hand along her sleeve.

“There’ll be none of that,” Aideen reminded him. “And no commission, either.”

Ricky's lips pushed forward in a pout and he pulled at some of the packing straw that Aideen had exposed. "Well, can I at least look through this with you?"

"It isn't Christmas and I'm not Santa," she answered, her body stiffening as he reached for her closed hand.

"What's that?"

"Just go on with you," she said, pushing him toward the door. Aideen had never had the slightest hint that Ricky stole from her, but the idea of showing the stone to him panicked her.

His pout grew fuller but he allowed her to lead him to the door. "Maybe Tuesday?" he asked hopefully.

"Maybe," she offered, knowing already that she would never let him see the stone.

"Or later tonight?" The occasional hunger that lit Ricky's eyes when he looked at her was shining bright.

"Come back tonight and I promise that I'll fire you," Aideen said and pushed him out the door. In one quick sweep, she rotated the three locks on the door before crossing the storeroom and double-checking that he had properly locked the front door.

Still holding the stone in one hand, she opened the register's cash drawer, saw how little was there, and decided it wasn't worth putting her small treasure down to record the cash and checks. She would perform that task before the store opened Tuesday. Back in the storeroom, she held the stone to the light again before removing the last of the straw from the crate.

A small wrinkle of disappointment furrowed her brow. At the bottom, in a large flat square, was a single mass of bundled black velvet. The smell of leather and aged paper still greeted her, but not in the quantity she had expected as she had hauled the heavy crate, first onto her truck and then into her shop. *Still*, she thought, the stone growing warm in her hand, *it's not a total loss*.

Snapping a latex glove on one hand, Aideen leaned into the crate to remove the promised book. In a slow tease, she stripped the rotting fabric from the book, small

sections of the leather covering revealed with each bit of cloth she peeled away. At last, the cover of the book lay naked before her, black marks burned into the deep red leather. Her eyes, long familiar with the old glyphs, touched the embedded images in a slow caress as her mind raced ahead to reach a translation. *The Book of Cenn Cruach*.

Crom, she thought, pulling the god's name from her memory. A sense of foreboding pricked her scalp as she opened the book to the first page—she had either purchased a very good forgery or a priceless manuscript. A sheath of paper, of modern commercial quality and folded several times over, slipped from the book and onto the surface of the workbench. Placing the stone on the tabletop, Aideen unfolded the piece of paper. Jumbled sentences mixed with snippets of clarity were scrawled in the folded sections. Diagrams with descriptions of chemical compounds crowded the edges.

Putting the paper to one side, Aideen grabbed a black smock from a peg by the door and returned to the book, her ungloved hand absently picking the stone back up. Delicately thumbing the first page over, she began to read the second page. Expecting the book itself to be written in Latin and to begin with the long, sonorous invocation common to the priestly texts that served as the primary records of early Irish history, Aideen was surprised to see the glyphs that covered the front continue on, page after page. She let out a deep breath and turned back to the first page of text before fumbling around for a notepad and pen. It was, she told herself as she scribbled the translation to the first line of the second page, going to be a long night.

“Tonight I invoked the Bloodstone. Called to it. Demanded that it recognize me as its master and reveal its location. But another holds sway over its power. I have seen her, a sorceress, robed in black, waves of sunlight rippling over her shoulder and back. Moss green eyes she turns on me as she looks up from her magic tomes, one hand holding the sacred stone.”

Aideen's hand began to shake as she finished translating the paragraph. She was some 20 pages into the book, the first sections carefully annotated by some long dead hand with spells and ingredients. She was sure, by now, that the writer truly was long dead. The syntax of an ancient people filled the pages, the flow of the words too beautiful, the knowledge displayed too perfect, for even the most uncommon forgerer. Glancing up at the sheet of paper, she nodded once. Meyrick, too, had been convinced of the book's authenticity. His excited, if sometimes inaccurate, translations served as a testimony to his belief that he had made a great discovery.

And now, the manuscript's first mention of the Bloodstone. Aideen's gaze focused on Meyrick's sheet of notes. "The Bloodstone, sacred heart of Crom, granting power of life and death, of victory over time, to he who wields it."

Her fingers, half numb from the death grip with which she held the stone, twitched slightly as she read Meyrick's words again. Was this the stone? Did he really think, in the days leading up to his death (for the notes were dated) that he had, at last, both the stone and the book that would reveal its secrets?

Aideen returned to translating the text. The ancient writer repeated his attempts to locate the Bloodstone, the duration and danger of his rituals increasing. On the night of the full moon, he went so far as to reveal his true name, Cenn Cruach, in the invocation ceremony. Aideen raised a brow in academic appreciation of the elaborate ritual he described and at the power required to both reveal and conceal one's true name.

Aideen glanced at the clock radio, it was near midnight. She flipped to the next page, her vision blurring as she began to write.

“Again, the Bloodstone mocks my call but I understand the nature of my error. It is she who must be made to answer my call, to feel the force of my powers. I will rest until the new moon, preparing to call this witch to me, to place her and the stone at my command.”

“Rest.” The word was like a warm salve to Aideen’s cramped hands and complaining shoulders. She blinked, her dry, scratchy eyes filled with tears and she put the pen down to rub them. Tomorrow was Monday, the store’s regular non-business day. She could afford a few hours of sleep and still have the book’s contents translated before the store opened for business on Tuesday. *Hell, she thought, sliding the stool back from the table, I can have it translated and have excerpts posted on the web site as teasers before the store opens.*

A greedy thrill ran through Aideen as she carefully wrapped clean muslin around the book and Bloodstone. She pulled a torn vinyl couch from the storeroom’s only unshelved wall. A rich pattern of wood paneling lay against the wall, the individual pieces running in haphazard geometric designs. Her fingers expertly slid along the deep grooves of one panel piece until she heard the soft click of a spring lock. Aideen removed the panel to expose a cylindrical wall safe approximately a foot in diameter. She had a floor safe, as well, but it primarily served as a decoy, holding only a few thousand pounds and medium-ranged trinkets.

Packing the safe’s contents to one side, Aideen slid the book and stone into the wall safe. Sliding the panel back on and repositioning the couch, she pulled two ragged blankets from a storeroom shelf. She placed one over the couch’s shredded vinyl surface and folded the other into a pillow. Then she laid down, pulling the edges of the first blanket over her and drifting into sleep.

Even as she slept, the stone and the words that Cenn Cruach had written over a millennia ago crowded Aideen’s thoughts. She had the sense of watching over him as he performed a scrying ritual, his head, crowned in a mass of blue-black curls, bowed as he stared intently into a shallow silver bowl filled with inky black water. His robes were parted in a deep V at the neck. His chest was hairless and intricately tattooed. Her gaze traveled down the smooth skin until she reached his navel, where a thin line of blue-black hair disappeared into the thick robes.

Aideen moaned lightly in her sleep and he raised his head, granite blue eyes flecked with black staring up at where she hovered in her dream. His eyes widened in recognition and lips, flushed a deep red, opened to form a single word translated across time. *You.*

Aideen woke with a start, her hand flying to her chest, her heart pounding against the open palm. The pressure in her chest grew and she realized that she was holding her breath. Letting it out, she drew deep, calming breaths and relaxed her hand. When she was sure that she could stand, she got up and pulled the couch from the wall, once again releasing the hidden panel and pulling the stone and book from the safe. Heart still pounding, she sat down at the workbench and began to translate.

“The ritual is complete and all I have for my efforts is a tantalizing glimpse of the witch. Soft petal pink lips in a delicious part, the verdant eyes half-concealed behind lids heavy with sensual delight. Even now, I feel myself growing stiff as I think of her and the sweet torment that I would visit upon her for denying me what is mine.”

Aideen closed her eyes, the image of his intense blue stare causing the pressure that had remained lodged in her chest to reach down and squeeze at her thighs. She could feel his mouth pressing against her breasts as it formed the accusatory word of recognition. Her nipples grew hard and she ran a distracted hand over them to brush the sensation away. She thought of a second book concealed in the wall safe. Pocket-sized and covered in a cheap black vinyl, the pages filled with her father’s minute handwriting.

No. Aideen shook her head as if the violence of the motion could cast away what she was considering. Memories of childhood participation in her father’s ceremonies surfaced. His zealous devotion to the Ancient Rede, the hours spent in meditation to the goddess. The unyielding requests for blood and his cold indifference to her after she had relinquished her sacred virginity to the neighborhood rebel at the age of seventeen.

Aideen blinked, her mind, once again, filled with Cenn, his exposed chest and stomach rippled with muscles, and the thin ladder of black hair that promised a tangled garden of delight. Unaware of her movements, Aideen walked over to the wall safe and pulled out the little black book. She flipped through it until she found a description of a

scrying ceremony. She glanced at the small calendar on the wall behind the clock radio and frowned to see that the moon was in the wrong phase.

There is a rare power in you, Aideen, and you have squandered it on that boy. Her father's admonishments filled her head. She pushed them aside and grabbed a flashlight. In the showroom, she went to the display of dried herbs, from which she pulled small bags of rose, hyssop, jasmine and sea salt. She tossed the little bags into a silver bowl she had grabbed from the locked display case next to the register and returned to the storeroom, hoping none of the garda on patrol had noticed her flashlight bouncing around the store.

Her father's book called for a week-long fermentation of the ingredient. His obsessive precision irritated Aideen and she merrily dumped the ingredients into the bowl and mixed them together with the plastic spoon she had pulled from Ricky's coffee cup. Rummaging through Ricky's locker, she found the incense he burned, ostensibly for "mood," but really to hide the smell of the pot he smoked when she was away from the store.

Aideen lit the incense and several of the candles kept in the storeroom for those days when Dublin's spring storms knocked the power out. With the other lights off, she slipped the smock off and began to undress, the damp spot between her legs growing wetter as her bra came off and the cold air licked at her nipples.

Unwrapping the Bloodstone, she held it in her left hand while she coaxed the smoke from the incense to pool over the bowl. The words she had chanted as a child returned to her and spilled forth with the melody of her matured voice.

Over hyssop, rose, and jasmine,

Over the very sea, I scry.

Reveal to me, eternal eye,

The truth I seek but do not ken.

Slowly the smoke swirled into a vision of the man in her dreams. His robes were gone as he stood before the same scrying bowl that she had seen before. The tattoos that adorned his chest crawled along his back and over thickly muscled thighs. For a second

time that night, a mesmerized moan escaped Aideen's mouth as she saw Cenn's cock, stiff and straight, rising from the black mass of curls. She willed him to raise his head from the bowl. *Look at me, Cenn Cruach, I command you.*

Aideen gasped when he heard and obeyed, the blue eyes piercing her as he issued his own command. *Come to me, witch. It is I who commands you.*

Aideen collapsed against the stool, the sudden movement of her body dispelling the eddy of smoke that lay atop the bowl. With unsteady hands, she reached down and pulled the smock from the floor. She put it on and fumbled with the tie as the thickness of the air around her threatened to send her crashing to the floor.

She pinched out the candles and incense and put them on the floor, along with the bowl. The Bloodstone still in her hand, she turned the lights back on and returned to the book.

"Exhausted, I swore I would not seek the sorceress again until I had further rested, but her body calls to me. And so I dared to summon her again tonight. Ah, sweet temptation. She drives all thought of the Bloodstone from my mind although she holds it to her as she dares to command me. She stood before a silver bowl, smoke dancing against her pale white skin. Pink nipples erect and begging to be suckled. A golden triangle pointing down to paradise. My tongue grows thick at the thought of tasting the sweet nectar that flows from between the witch's legs. I swear I will have her and the stone."

A swoon threatened Aideen and she took a step back from the book. With the book in hand, she moved to the couch and tentatively turned the page.

Nothing! She flipped the remaining pages, each one revealing aged white vellum devoid of content. In desperation, she tossed the book onto the couch and grabbed Meyrick's notes from the workbench. She folded and unfolded the scrap of paper as she read Meyrick's insane babbling. In slow motion, she felt her body slide to the floor, the Bloodstone still clutched to her chest. *This cannot be the end!* Her mind screamed as she passed into darkness.

Aideen woke halfway through Monday. The clock and her stomach told her it was late afternoon. Asleep on the floor through the remainder of the night, she had never released the stone. But the constant contact with the Bloodstone had rewarded her with its eternal secrets, shown her the key to obtaining her deepest desire.

Rising from the linoleum, she walked to the couch on stiff legs. She picked the book up and put both the stone and the book inside the wall safe. After she re-secured the panel and pushed the couch back in place, she went into the shop's small bathroom and relieved the pressure that had built in her bladder as she slept on the cold floor. Finished, she splashed water on her face and patted it dry with paper towels. In the storeroom, she retrieved her clothing from the floor and dressed before leaving the store to grab a bite to eat and pick up a few supplies that she would need for the night ahead.

When Aideen returned to the store, she placed a shopping bag in the bathroom and plopped a second one on the workbench before setting an alarm and stretching out on the couch for a light nap. When the buzzer roused her at eight, she was dreaming of Cenn. She could still feel the rough caress of his hands on her breasts and the tickle of his coarse facial hair against her thighs. She cupped her breasts and gave them a gentle squeeze as the last of the delirious sensations he had aroused ebbed from her body.

The clock radio, still bleating at her, drove Aideen from the couch. She viciously switched the alarm off and grabbed the smock from its peg by the door. In the bathroom, she filled the sink with water and measured more dried herbs into it before she stripped. She dipped her long, blonde hair into the water and then whipped it back, rubbing the water that dripped from her head into her cheeks before grabbing another handful and cleaning her arms. She looked in the mirror and watched her nipples grow hard as she massaged the water onto her breasts in slow circles. Her hands traveled over her stomach, a smile curling her lips as she parted her labia and scooped another handful of water, stroking the smooth skin until it was squeaky clean and her clit was a rigid nub of live wires. With the same slow, sensual caress, she cleaned her legs and feet and then squeezed the last of the water from her hair. The floor was a jumble of wet clothes and

puddled water and she shrugged at the mess. If she was still in the shop when the sun rose tomorrow, she would deal with it then.

Concealing her naked body with the smock, she crossed the showroom floor and disappeared into the storeroom. She refreshed the water in the scrying bowl and added new dried flowers and sea salt. She removed the smock and rubbed rose oil over her breasts and thighs. The clock radio flashed 9:30 at her and she hurried to the wall safe and emptied all its contents except for the stack of cash she kept for extra special purchases. She put the safe's contents on the workbench before she strapped on a stylish velvet hip pack that she had purchased earlier in the day. She had no way of knowing whether the pack would survive the trip, but she put Cenn's book and her father's inside. She spilled the contents of a cheap velveteen pouch into her palm, a glittering of ceremonial jewels peeked at her before she scooped them back into the pouch and then into the hip pack.

Remaining on the workbench were the Bloodstone and a *scian d'scairt*, a ceremonial dagger so named from its placement into the diaphragm of the person being sacrificed before the priest would slice an opening in the victim's gut to allow the entrails to be pulled from the body and read by the priest. With the scrying bowl in the center and surrounded by incense and candles, Aideen picked the Bloodstone up with her left hand and the *scian* with her right. With the flat of the knife, she shepherded the smoke over the bowl as her chant slowly built in volume.

Cenn's naked form smoothed across the water as he summoned her in return. A slow fire lit in her stomach. Its warmth slowly coiled between her legs as she watched Cenn masturbate above his scrying bowl, his seed spilling onto the surface and forming small pearls before sinking. Aideen brought her left hand, still gripping the Bloodstone, over her bowl and raised the *scian* to her arm. Beginning at one edge of her wrist, she sliced a thin gash to the other side, her blood dyeing the water a dark crimson.

She continued to chant, the gentle stream flowing from her wrist building to a flood of red that obliterated Cenn's image and threatened to overflow the bowl. Aideen stumbled over the words as the candles blew out and she was wrapped in darkness.

“You have answered my call in the flesh, witch,” Cenn said as he pulled Aideen into a kneeling position before him. His voice was filled with a warm pleasure that rippled through her and cleared the red haze that clouded Aideen’s mind. “And brought the Bloodstone with you, I see.”

Naked, but for the hip pack, and shivering, she swayed into contact with him. Her forehead rested against the sharp angle of his hip, her blonde hair intertwined with his blue-black pubic hair. The blood on her wrist was congealing to a slow ooze and she struggled to lift her hand.

Running a hand through her hair, Cenn pulled her head back until her moss green eyes met the depthless blue of his gaze. Bending slightly, he brought her right arm up and pulled the *scian* from her hand, tossing it across the room.

“Who are you, sorceress,” Cenn demanded. His hand still forced her head back, her lips inches from his cock, which slowly bobbed to life. The tangy smell of the semen he had produced during the ritual bit into her taste buds and she groaned lightly.

“No sorceress am I,” Aideen said, offering both the Bloodstone and her body to him.

Cenn’s grip relaxed and he shifted hands, cupping her head close to him while his other hand curled around the stone. Aideen nestled her face against his stomach, his scent filling her lungs and forcing her eyes closed in sleepy satisfaction. Aroused, his cock grew rigid, its stiff mass pressing against her cheek.

Cenn tossed the Bloodstone onto a nearby pallet and gently tipped Aideen’s head back. He ran a finger over her lips and her tongue darted out, gracing the tip with a slow lick before closing around it in a kiss. A shudder passed over his body and his cock pulsed forward in search of her seductive mouth.

“What are you then, if not a sorceress?” he asked, his words slurred as he gazed into her eyes.

“Yours,” Aideen answered, her hand traveling up the inside of his leg to lightly stroke his thigh. “To do with as you will.”

Cenn dropped down to both knees and pulled Aideen to him. Fear that he would send her away twisted through her stomach and she pressed a kiss against the hollow of his throat with trembling lips. Holding her left wrist up, Cenn squeezed until the blood flowed fresh. His own wrist bore a fresh cut and he pulled at the scab then joined their wrists, which he locked between their bodies. Aideen felt the sweet press of his cock against her mound and she parted her legs, throwing her head back as he slid into her.

“Open your eyes,” Cenn commanded and she did. His gaze held hers as the long strokes of his cock pushed her mind over the edge of ecstasy. “On your word,” he said, his breath torn from him in ragged gasps as he struggled to hold himself in. “Say that you are mine.”

Aideen tried to peer past the deep blue of his eyes, past the hint of desperation and dark secrets that clouded his soul. Cenn’s blood mingled with her own and she knew that, whatever there was to discover, she would stay with him, her body and soul at his command. “Yes,” she moaned, pressing her mouth against his as her body jerked in wild release. “I am yours, forever.”

BOOK 2: SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

-1-

Cenn looked at the sleeping form of the witch. Her long frame was stretched across his mattress, a heavy woolen blanket hiding the soft curves his hands had explored a few hours before. Her long blonde hair was partially fanned across her face and he gently pushed the hair back. Taking in the heavy fringe of her eyelashes, the full, pink pout of her mouth, he felt his erection begin to return. By the gods, he wasn't sure what he had done to have this creature beside him, pledged to him for eternity, but he knew he would already do anything to keep her.

The woman stirred, turned until she was on her back. The movement pulled the blanket down far enough to expose one breast. The coarse rub of the wool over the sensitive nipple brought it to a hard, pink tip. Cenn cupped the breast, pulled the nipple taut before covering it with his mouth. She moaned in her sleep and brought her hand up to caress his cheek. Her willingness to receive him even in sleep sent another arc of need through his body. Yet his own instant readiness to possess the witch distressed him and he rose from the mattress.

Cenn's gaze caught the black velvet pouch she had worn slung around her hip and he let his hands play over it. The ends of the odd buckling material that she had called "plastic" had fused in her journey to him, so, too, had the "zipper" made from the same material. He had cut the hip pack from her body before claiming her a second time, but its contents were still unknown. Curiosity pricked his mind as he wondered what other marvels the mistress of the sacred Bloodstone had brought with her.

Memories of the witch's more evident gifts urged him to return to her sleeping form and awaken her with the gentle teasing of his swollen tip against her silken pink clit. He tried to content himself with watching her, instead. She reached along the mattress, her mouth parting in a sultry sigh as she searched for his warmth. One of her shapely arms curled around his pillow and his chest tightened as he remembered the firm grip of

her hand on his cock, the energetic pumping while she laved her tongue along the tip with her own sex pressed heatedly against his hungry mouth.

“Ah, witch,” Cenn moaned and quietly returned to the bed. “How is it that you can cast spells even as you sleep?”

Crawling onto the mattress, Cenn rested his upper body between the small valley formed by her canted hip and outstretched leg. He eased the blanket over her hips and his gazed raked the exposed flesh. Her cunt was still flushed from their earlier passion, still glistened with his seed and her own wet nectar. Cenn thumbed the spongy exterior of her vagina, slipped the honey slick pad over her rosy nub. Again, she moaned in her sleep and lifted her ass to meet his probing tongue. He massaged her clit, rolled it between thumb and forefinger as her body fully awakened to his touch.

She reached down, stroked the dark crown of hair and absently murmured his name. “Cenn.”

“Crom.” His voice was rough when he corrected her and his hands stopped the delicious rub against her labial lips.

“Crom,” she agreed, breathless in her desire for him to continue his caresses. She could see caution darkening his gaze and she turned on the mattress until they were face to face. Her lips whispered a kiss across his mouth as she voiced her apology.

“Perhaps you should tell me, witch, what you are called and how you came to know my true name.”

“I am Aideen,” she answered too quickly. Fear pricked along her skin at the mention of her name. She tried to shake the feeling, told herself it was silly to think someone could hold power over a person through a name. Still, something coiled around her, wrapped her in a cold embrace. Cenn’s eyes casually flicked over her and the sensation disappeared as immediately as it had arisen.

“And how is that you know my name?” His voice bordered on disinterest but Aideen saw the slow, rhythmic tensing at the corner of his jaw.

Her hand moved to her hip until she remembered how he had cut the hip bag from her body. An erotic thrill passed over her body as she remembered the heated look his

eyes had held as he slowly pulled the blade against the bag's belt. The motion was joined by his cock, swollen with his desire, sliding into her. Thrusting until he was fully embedded in her clenching cunt, Cenn cut the last of the belt with a rough flick of his wrist. The memory of the night just shared brought a flush to Aideen's breasts, hardened her nipples to sharp points that ached for his mouth. But, although his gaze caressed her body, his hands remained at his sides.

"My name?" he inquired again. Menace tinged his words and Aideen's breathing hitched uncertainly as she scanned the room for her pouch. When Aideen's gaze fell on the velvet hip pack, Cenn bounded from the mattress. He scooped the pouch up, his hand reaching for the *scian* that rested on a table next to him. The finesse that had marked his earlier use of the dagger was gone as he inserted the blade and ripped through the fabric.

The contents spilled onto the table and his hand immediately wrapped around the age-worn diary. His dark gaze jumped from the book to Aideen. He flipped through the pages, looked at the characters drawn by his own hand. He crossed the room to stand in front of her. He was still naked, but the erection was gone. The observation produced a wistful hunger in Aideen and she reached out to stroke his thigh. She saw the slightest contraction of the muscle along his perineum. Otherwise, she might as well have been stroking steel, he held himself so tightly in defiance of the pleasure her touch offered him.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"I bought it." The words came out in a stutter and she pulled back, only to have him grab her upper arm and force her forward.

"What thief—what spy sold this to you!" He tightened his grip on Aideen's arm. Her small squeak of alarm shamed both of them and he released her, stepped back from the bed and demanded again. "From whom did you buy it, witch? Tell me."

"From a dead man!" Her voice grew strained as she answered him and the last restraints holding her temper in check began to snap.

The dark arch of his brow rose higher. "By your hand?"

Aideen searched his tone and stance for some suggestion that the question was meant to mock her. Cenn appeared serious, terribly so, and she stumbled over her response. “I can’t imagine killing someone for a book and an unknown stone.”

At the mention of the Bloodstone, Cenn’s gaze became hooded and darted to the heavy wooden chest in which he had locked the magical stone after their first round of lovemaking. “I can.”

The words were cold enough to freeze Aideen’s blood and she edged away from him until her back pressed against an icy stone wall. A greater chill spread across her body and she wrapped the blanket around her while she watched Cenn walk to the room’s small fireplace. He pulled the screen from the hearth and began feeding the pages of his diary to the greedy flames. The crackle of the fire danced along with the sharp rip of the pages. Aideen pulled her knees to her chest and hugged her legs. When the leather covering touched the fire, she buried her nose beneath the blanket.

With the last of the diary reduced to smoke and ashes, Cenn returned to the table. The long, firm fingers that had teased her body to unimaginable heights quickly sorted through the rest of the hip pack’s contents. Pouring the ceremonial stones onto the table, he cast her a guarded look but said nothing until he picked up the small vinyl-covered memo book that contained her father’s spells and rituals.

“What is this?” he asked and held it forward for Aideen to see. “These scratches—do they have meaning?”

Aideen nodded and wrapped her arms more tightly around her legs. “My father’s notes.”

“On magic?” He eyed her again as if assessing anew the threat she presented to him.

“Yes.”

“So, you are a sorcerer’s daughter, if not a sorceress, yourself,” Cenn said and turned back to the table to sweep the gemstones into their cheap velveteen bag.

Aideen suppressed a laugh at the idea of anyone calling her father a sorcerer. She pictured Jonathan as he had been before his death—dry as the herbs that hung in his

garage. He was nothing like the smoldering, dark mage before her. Aideen's body shuddered with another chill and she wondered what Cenn had planned for her now that she had answered his summons and brought the Bloodstone with her. As if reading her thoughts, he spun around, his cock slowly bobbing to life as his long stride brought him back to the bed. His fingers curled protectively around the velveteen pouch and its semi-precious contents while he reached with his other hand to stroke her cheek.

"You are pledged to me, witch," he said, his voice low and smoky.

"Not if you continue calling me that," Aideen warned him. Her traitorous cheek flushed at the gentle caress of his finger along her jaw line but she somehow managed to keep her voice level. "My name is Aideen."

"You cannot go by that name beyond these doors," Cenn advised her softly. He caught the withdrawal in her eyes and cupped the back of her head, tilting it until she was forced to look into his eyes. "You are light and delicate, Aideen...like a butterfly floating on a warm breeze. I will call you Etain."

Aideen nodded her consent. She closed her eyes against the desire to rest her face against his flat stomach, to breathe in the strong masculine scent that hid just beyond her senses.

Cenn had no desire to rest. He raised his hand, drew her attention to the small bag. "As you are pledged to me, Etain, I will provide for you." He gave the bag a small shake and she could hear the light clink of the faceted stones. "But these...these are no longer yours."

His voice caught on the announcement and he turned quickly from her. Speechless, Aideen watched him snatch up a lightweight pair of doeskin pants from the floor and step into them. The dark fabric instantly molded itself to his lean, muscular thighs. He topped the pants with an unbleached linen shirt and a coarse, half-length woolen cloak dyed a dark crimson before pulling on leather boots that rode high on his calves.

"Get some more sleep," Cenn advised her, his gaze taking in her paled features and the dark circles under her eyes. "I will return with food and clothing."

Her body still reeling from the light caress along her cheek and the gentle cupping of her head, Aideen watched him leave. Mourning filled her as the last of him vanished from her field of vision and the door swung closed.

The unmistakable, slow turn of a key in the lock brought Aideen back to herself. With the blanket wrapped around her, she walked to the door and tried to pry it open with her fingers. She bent down and eyed the lock. The keyhole was nearly an inch wide and she looked around the room for the *scian*. The slim-bladed dagger was on the table. Her gaze moved from the table to the bed, then down to her body that still was covered by no more than the blanket.

“Fuck it,” she whispered and returned to the bed to unwillingly heed Cenn’s advice.

Cenn stood alongside the mattress where Aideen still slept. He carried with him a tray lightly loaded with meat, bread and cheese. He leaned to look at her and the plate slid forward on the tray until he had to catch the plate and its contents before they had a chance to spill on her. Despite his sharp intake of breath at the near accident, her body remained still and he wondered whether she feigned sleep.

Aideen. The word never left his lips but it was enough to make her open her eyes and look at him. A fragment of the dream he had shaken her from lingered in the air, teased its way up from the mattress to his cock. Cenn tightened his grip on the tray and forced himself to turn from her. Each footstep from the bed to the table measured an eternity. His arms ached from the light load and he dropped the tray onto the table with a small thud. He tried to calm his breathing, to count away his desire for her, but the rapid pumping of oxygen through his lungs, like the heavy throb of blood through his cock, was too much and he found himself turning back to her. *How am I to control the Bloodstone, he asked himself, if I cannot control my lust for its mistress.*

“Eat.” Cenn spit the word out. His attention was not so focused on the soft rise of her breasts that he failed to notice the quick ignition of fury in her mossy green eyes or the angry twist that turned her soft mouth into a kissable challenge. *By the gods, even her anger undoes me.*

“I don’t like being locked in a room,” Aideen said. She had moved into an upright position and her shoulders were pressed against the cold stone of the wall. One hand lightly held the blanket across her breasts. Her gaze swept over his body, saw the solid outline of his erection against the doeskin pants. “Regardless of the jailor,” she added, her tone softening at the edges.

“For your protection, I assure you,” Cenn said and moved back to the bed. The robe he had been wearing when she summoned him in the scrying glass lay on the floor next to the bed and he picked it up and offered it to her. “Now eat while I summon a bath for you.”

He saw her attention flick to the table but she didn't move from the bed.

"I said—"

"Aideen." Cenn said her name softly but the effect on her body was visible. She was pinned to the wall as if held by unseen hands. With his voice, Cenn kept her suspended. "You must learn to obey me."

Aideen's gaze grew wide and her voice shook from strain as she fought against the invisible force that held her. "Whatever put that ridiculous idea in your head?"

"Again, woman, you are pledged to me." His voice rose at the end and he pulled the blanket from her. Another swell of desire threatened his body and the mental strength he exerted in holding her to the wall lessened. "After a proper joining ceremony tomorrow, I will accept no disobedience from you," he finished, the words forced through tight lips that yearned to tease the pink nipples he had just exposed.

"Joining ceremony?" Aideen asked. Her voice grew alarmed and her whole body strained forward. "Are you insane," she bit out a laugh with her question. "Do you mean marriage? Matrimony?"

"Matrimonium." His tongue pushed forward, eager to expel the Roman's word from his mouth. "Yes, if you would call it that."

"I'm not marrying you, or joining with you, or whatever you want to call it," Aideen protested.

Cenn's gaze traveled over her flushed breasts to the small triangle of gold nestled between her legs. "You already have joined with me," he reminded her.

His cock, swelling to larger proportions, urged him to refresh her memory with more than words, to leave her shuddering in ecstasy beneath him as she had been the evening before. He knelt beside her on one knee. His hands hovered over her skin, an inch of air, thick with their heat, parted his flesh from hers.

"Aideen," he whispered and ran small circles in the air above her skin. "I know a woman of your beauty could do better in wealth and in rank than to join with me." His

thumbs pinched the air and Aideen groaned, her body jerking forward as he teased her nipples without touching them. “But not in power,” he cautioned.

His hands moved to the space above the triangle of hair. The air beneath his palms vibrated and parted the already glistening lips of her pussy. Her hips thrust forward while his mind still sought to keep her ground against the wall. The pink clit, exposed, trembled. His tongue ached to taste it and darted up to lick his own upper lip.

“God, no,” Aideen moaned. She could feel the muscles of her pussy begin to contract as his mind stroked her closer to orgasm. *Sweet Jesus*, she wondered as the tension throbbed against and inside her, *how can it be this good without his touching me?*

“Cenn. No.” The words broke from her and she clamped down on the climax that threatened to send her mindlessly wrapping her limbs around him, pledging again that she was his as long as he would not stop touching her.

With the utterance of his name, Aideen slumped from the wall. Her body shook and she weakly reached out to grab the robe he had offered her earlier. As she wrapped it around her shoulders, she raised her chin and looked directly at him. His eyes were wide, disbelieving that she had wanted to or could stop him. Still shaking, her thighs quivering in revolt, Aideen stumbled from the bed and made her way to the table, where she managed to slide onto a chair before she slid onto the floor.

Aideen heard the soft slap of his leather boots as he moved to stand behind her. His hands curled around the top of the chair in which she sat. The center of her shoulders ached with the knowledge that his cock was on the other side of the wooden chair, that the thick shaft pulsed with the need to be buried inside her. Again, she had to force down the orgasm that waited to wash over her.

“I do not need magic to make you join with me, Aideen,” he threatened softly. “I am the law here and I will enforce your pledge tomorrow evening.” He moved to her side and gently forced her chin up until their gazes were locked. “My people have had little to joy over, Aideen, and I would give them something to celebrate. Do not engage in a battle you cannot win and deprive both them and yourself.”

Aideen blinked back a tear at the pain she heard in his voice. Pretending to focus on the meal before her, she turned away from him and his depthless blue eyes that were flaked with hard obsidian. She wanted to scream at him, yell obscenities, tell him in a way that left no doubt that there was no way in hell she was going to marry him. But her mouth wouldn't shape the words. Her hands were unwilling to curl into fists and pound the table. She could not raise her foot to stamp her denial against the floor. Her whole body had betrayed her.

When, at last, a tear did slip past her defenses to slide down her cheek, Cenn put his hand on her shoulder. The tip of his finger caressed her neck and he bent to murmur his assurances to her. "Do not be so sad, little sorceress," he said. He took the lobe of her ear between his lips in a soft kiss and released it. "I will not let it be without pleasure for you if you will but open yourself to me."

Pleasure. The word sounded empty in Aideen's mind as she smoothed a misshapen bar of soap over her arm. In Dublin, standing over the workbench in the storeroom of her little eclectic antiques store and watching Cenn in her scrying bowl, pleasure at his hands was all that she had wanted.

All that I thought I wanted, she corrected herself. The soap stung her eyes as she wiped more tears away. The chill of the room corrupted the bath water and Aideen quickly finished scrubbing herself clean. A coarse towel was draped over the back of a nearby chair and she dried herself and put on Cenn's robe. Its owner had gone in search of clothing.

Aideen was pulling the chair over to the fireplace when she heard a tentative knock at the door. Irritation at the false formality stung her cheeks and she ignored the sound. When the second knock went unanswered, she heard the scrape of a key inside the door's lock followed by the brush of the wood against the stone floor.

"Still pouting, I see," Cenn said and sat at her feet. "A waste of such a pretty mouth."

Aideen glared at him and he let his gaze drop to the stack of folded clothing on his lap. He lifted them up, his hands hovering above her knees and she couldn't tell whether it was with genuine or mock reverence he made the offering. She took the pile and pulled out a long brown shift made of lightweight wool that had been dyed an earthy brown. An unbleached linen under-tunic was folded beneath it. Her father had dragged Aideen to a sufficient enough number of historical society meetings for her to know that the under-tunic should be worn with the chiton. But looking at the two garments, she wasn't sure how they should be fastened together.

"There are no women in the cashel of your rank, Aideen," Cenn began hesitantly. "There is a cloth merchant that comes by occasionally and a fair in a month if things don't..."

His voice trailed off and she looked at him. The realization that there was a certain thinness to everything around her struck Aideen for the first time. Even Cenn, with his larger-than-life physique, appeared worn. She looked at the fireplace and noted that, stacked among the small logs and branches, were bits of recycled wood.

“These are fine,” she assured him and her hand darted out to thumb his shoulder in a brief caress. “I just don’t know how they go together.”

Cenn looked at Aideen, saw that she was telling the truth and rose from the hearth, pulling her up with him as he stood. His mouth twisted into a wicked grin and he ordered her to disrobe. She hesitated and he took the chiton and tunic from her. Casually tossing the garments on the chair, he reached to remove the robe. His hands each held an inside edge of the robe in a manner that threatened to sweep the fabric back over her shoulders. She put her hands over his to stop him.

“Just tell me how they go together,” Aideen protested.

“Just where do you come from, sorceress?” he asked and tightened his grip on the robe until Aideen was standing on the tip of her toes, her body pressed against his.

“*Baile Átha Cliath*,” Aideen answered, providing the older name for the Dublin area. Her hands moved with his as he pulled the robe open to expose her breasts.

“A considerable distance for any sorcerer and you did it without a portal.” The flecks of obsidian pooled and darkened his gaze. “And you did this under your own power?”

A flurry of thoughts passed through Aideen’s mind. Her father’s words came unbidden as they always did: *There is a power within you Aideen...* She dispersed the bodiless voice with an angry twitch of her head. *Surely*, she thought, *it is the Bloodstone*.

Cenn released the robe’s collar and let his hand travel down to her breast. He teased the nipple in a protracted pinch until Aideen tipped her head back and parted her lips. His teeth grazed along the lower half of her mouth and sucked the bottom lip. His fingers released the nipple only to make her gasp a second later as he pulled the sharp peak taut. She could feel herself growing wet, the walls of her vagina coating themselves in anticipation of the long strokes she hoped he would soon be delivering.

The robe began a slow slide down her body. Cenn's mouth trailed behind the fabric and covered her with sharp kisses. His tongue played at her navel while he urged her legs further apart. "Won't you tell me," he said and paused to ease his fingers into her cunt, "how you crossed this distance on your own?"

His tongue played along her clit and Aideen twined her fingers through his hair. She pressed his mouth more firmly to her, relishing the rough brush of his facial hair against her labial lips. Cenn moved to withdraw and she gave him a short, visceral growl. "Finish it," she warned and looked down into the dark blue eyes. "There's time for your questions later."

Hunger, hot, erotic, flashed across his face and in his gaze. He pressed against her legs with his elbows until her legs were forced into a wide stance that wrapped the walls of her cunt around his probing fingers in a tight grip. His tongue laved the lobes of her pussy, pulled greedily at her clit like a wild beast that had been caged too long without food or water. He sucked, pumped and nibbled at her, her body rocking against him as the tension coiled inside her to the point that she was curled over him, riding his mouth to orgasm.

When she would have pulled away from him, he held her tighter, sent her crashing against another wave of pleasure that threatened to rob her of her sight. He stood in one swift motion, his hand staying between her lower lips to guide his cock into her with the same quick, single action. Aideen wrapped herself around him and he lifted her, impaling her with his shaft as he carried her to the mattress. He towered over her, still forcing her legs apart as he took slow strokes, teasing the exterior of her cunt with the tip before driving it into her. His nipples had hardened into dark pebbles and she trailed her nails down his chest. Cenn wedged himself into her, his hands curling under her ass and around her hips to pull her closer, to pump her in quick thrusts that had her raising her body from the bed and flinging it back down as another orgasm tore through her and left a trail of tingling flesh from her face to her toes.

"Now witch," he said. His seed erupted inside her in a hot burst and he collapsed against her. "I am finished." He panted the words against her neck, the brusqueness eased with tender kisses. "Tell me how you came to Kenmare."

“The Bloodstone,” Aideen answered. Sleep tugged at the corners of her words and she snuggled against him. Her hands traveled over his chest and curled around his neck. “It told me how to find you.”

Cenn released Aideen long enough to grab the blanket and pull it over them before returning to embrace her. “The Bloodstone is said to be capable of many things,” Cenn said before finishing with a short snort, “but no one has ever claimed that it can talk.”

“In my dreams,” Aideen explained. “At least it seemed that way,” she finished with a heavy yawn.

“But without a portal and at such a distance?” His voice remained alert, with no sign of fatigue and he was tracing slow circles along her bottom.

Distance? She tried to wrap her mind around the relevance of his question but couldn’t. The distance she had traveled paled in comparison to the other half of the journey—the chasm of more than a thousand years.

“Tired,” Aideen mumbled and burrowed further beneath the blanket.

“Fair enough, little sorceress,” Cenn said and pillowed her head against his chest. “There will be time for answers after tomorrow’s ceremony.”

Aideen woke to find Cenn hunched over the room's small table. He had a string of leather that he was weaving through a cut circle of similar hide. He was chanting quietly as he did so, but the room was heavy with his words. The language, foreign to her, cautioned silence. She let the words wander through her mind until she understood that she was listening to the fifth language, the language the druids had learned from the Celtic sorcerers that preceded them. Just as easily, she understood the spell he was pouring into the small pouch that he was making. A spell to bind and protect and yet conceal the magic of the pouch and what it was to hold—the complexity astounded her.

When she saw what the pouch was to hold, a possessive flare shot through her body. The Bloodstone sat on the table half a foot from where Cenn's hands moved rhythmically to complete the pouch. A slight shift of Cenn's body told Aideen that he was aware of her presence as he moved to block her view of the stone. She fought the urge to rise, to remind him that it was she who had brought the Bloodstone to this room, to this time and place.

Cenn stood and placed the stone in the center of the cut circle. He repeated the chant as he cinched the leather lacing tight. He tied the ends together and lifted the pouch and strings into the air.

"Come," he commanded Aideen.

Aideen pushed the blankets aside. The cold air licked at her bare flesh and made her ache for the stone's warmth and that of the man holding it before her. Cenn slipped the leather string over her neck and the pouch comfortably wedged itself between her breasts. He pressed his palm against the pouch and a hot burst of energy enveloped them. His fingertips brushed lightly against her nipples before he pulled her to him and rewarded her obedience with a slow kiss of tangled tongues and bruised lips.

"You are the Bloodstone's mistress, Aideen," he whispered against her ear. "It will have no other...nor will I."

Emotions unknown flooded her, squeezed at her chest until her knees began to buckle and Cenn was forced to lift and carry her back to the bed.

“You must learn to control your power, little sorceress,” Cenn said. His lips and tongue teased her breasts between his words, pulling her back from the confused whirlwind of her thoughts. “I cannot have my enemies learn of my two newest and best allies.”

“I told you, I am no sorceress.” Her hands stroked the thick black hair that crowned his head. Her arms stretched to maintain contact as his kisses descended to cover her stomach.

“With or without the stone, magic spills from you, Aideen,” Cenn said. He moved back up the bed to plant a kiss on each temple. “So, if, as you claim, you are not a practitioner of the arts, you should apprentice yourself to one.”

“And do you know of anyone looking for a sorcerer’s apprentice?” Aideen teasingly asked even as she began to squirm beneath the expert rub of his hands over her body.

“Think not that I would let another have you, Aideen, even as an apprentice,” he growled against her ear.

“Think not that I would take another,” she echoed.

Cenn rolled on top of her. The warm press of his erect cock pushed against her stomach and she inched further up the bed until she could wrap her legs around him and invite him to enter her. “Nay, temptress,” he said and kissed her before he left their bed. “There are preparations for the joining ceremony that I still must make.” He leaned over for an instant to cup her breast and indulge in a soft, sucking kiss of her nipple. “I will enjoy you more fully this evening—once we truly are bonded forever.”

Aideen snuggled beneath the blankets and watched him dress for the day. When he was fully clothed, he returned to the bed and caressed her cheek. “I will send breakfast and bathwater up, and a maid to dress you for the ceremony.” Worry momentarily clouded his features and he held her chin between his thumb and index finger. “Remember, you are Etain,” he cautioned. “The maid will address you as such.”

Aideen nodded her understanding and watched him go. A maid came up a short time later. She carried a tray with some cheese and bread, a small bowl of blueberries and a cup of milk.

Remembering the prior evening's meal, Aideen gave a small frown. "Not much variety, I see."

The maid didn't respond and Aideen looked at her. The girl's face was pinched and she kept her gaze focused on the floor. She held her hands behind her back but Aideen could see that the girl was worriedly wringing her hands. Clothes, too wide for her thin frame, hung from the girl's shoulders.

"Sit down," Aideen suggested and pushed the chair next to her away from the table. The girl's gaze darted to Aideen and then back to the floor.

"I would like you to sit down," Aideen repeated. She broke off a piece of bread and cheese and put them on a piece of cloth. Grabbing an empty wooden cup, she poured half the glass of milk into it. "Please."

The girl glanced nervously at the closed door before she allowed her gaze to meet Aideen's. "I can't," she said. "I ... I have to get your bathwater."

"A few minutes of sitting with me won't matter, will it?" Aideen asked and reached up to gently squeeze the girl's shoulder. The Bloodstone grew warm against the leather pouch that held it and Aideen was overwhelmed by a stabbing pain that twisted its way through her stomach. The girl was half-starved.

"Please, I know no one here beyond..." on the verge of saying Cenn's name, Aideen stopped herself. She drew a deep breath, released it, and pushed the chair a little further from the table. "I know no one here beyond Lord Crom."

The girl glanced once more at the door before sitting down in the chair. She sat as if made of stone and Aideen pushed the food and milk closer to her.

"It is not customary to eat alone where I come from," Aideen said. Immediately, Aideen wished she could swallow the words back but the girl's state of hunger overwhelmed any curiosity the girl might have about Aideen's home. After she watched

the girl swallow a few bites, Aideen risked asking her a question. “I haven’t seen the sky in days...how’s the weather?”

Confusion clouded the girl’s gaze and she stopped eating to stare at Aideen. “Why would you expect any change since your arrival, lady?”

Aideen wondered how many questions she could risk asking the girl and what small lies Aideen could tell to cover her own truth. “It’s just that I come from a distance and am not familiar with your weather this season.”

“There are no seasons in Kenmare now, lady.” A small shudder passed over the girl as she answered. “When it should be spring or summer, blackness covers the sky all but a few hours a day and the sun cannot pierce the grey fog that weighs heavy in the air regardless of the hour.”

“For how long has this gone on?” Aideen asked.

The girl shot Aideen another confused look before gulping down the last of the cheese. “I would say you come from a very great distance, indeed, lady,” the girl began, “if you do not know. But we have had no news of the other provinces, so I should not be surprised that you have had no news of us.”

“How long?” Aideen repeated her question.

“Two years?” the girl ventured. “It has become hard, indeed, to know when one day, month or season, has passed.”

“And the cause?”

Here, the girl’s expression closed in on itself and she gave an emphatic, negative shake of her head. “I must be getting your bath water, lady,” the girl said and backed quickly from the room.

Aideen did not press the girl further when she returned with the water and helped her put on a bleached silk chiton. She would, Aideen decided, ask Cenn tonight after their joining ceremony. He had his own questions that he wished to ask about the Bloodstone and it was only fair, she mused, that he answer a few of her questions.

Aideen stepped into the stone circle. Even in the fog-shrouded daylight, she knew the circle well and its familiarity wrapped her in a cold embrace. Had Cenn not told her earlier that she was in Kenmare, she would have known the location as soon as she saw the dolmen and its ring of companions. She had accompanied her father on visits to every Irish circle still distinguishable as such. Pre-pubescent, clothed in a light cotton shift, moonlight falling on her shivering flesh, she had been placed on Kenmare's center boulder, a burial capstone, as a participant in one of her father's ceremonies.

"What worries you, my lady?" Cenn whispered against her ear as he pulled her to him and led her to the center stone.

"Memories," she answered and forced a smile. "Nothing more."

Cenn hesitated to accept her answer and she forced the smile wider. His gaze continued to question her and she looked away from him to the group of people within the circle's stone boundary. Except for the maid who had led her to the ceremony, the same maid that had brought her food and dressed her, Aideen had seen none of Cenn's people. They looked at her now. Their expressions revealed nothing, but the clothing and the tired way their skin hung from them told her that Kenmare was suffering from some blight. She looked back at Cenn. Was this why he had made such a desperate search for the Bloodstone? Or was it his lust for the stone that had reduced his people to poverty?

His gaze sharpened as if she had asked him the question directly. "Just memories...my lady?" he asked.

Aideen nodded and he gently urged her closer to the center stone. A middle-aged man in white robes too close to those her father had worn joined them on the other side of the dolmen. A finely wrought chalice of gold stood empty beside a silver dagger. Watching the man's hands gesture above the cup, a hollow feeling began to build in Aideen's stomach and she leaned against Cenn for support. Her vision narrowed and the man's voice came to her as if she were listening from the bottom of a drowning pool.

The cold crept closer to her, threatened to consume her but for the Bloodstone's warm press between her breasts.

"Etain!" Cenn's voice, low and urgent, reached her and she looked at him.

Cenn motioned her hand forward and she felt a new heat as the priest's dagger sliced across her palm. Cenn's hand held hers and she saw that he, too, was bleeding, their blood joining in the cup. She had time to think that this was no simple handfasting ceremony before the cup was placed against her lips and she was required to drink. Aideen swayed wildly backward and Cenn caught her. His arm encircled her waist, steadying her with its firm presence.

The priest carried the cup, still holding Cenn and Aideen's blood, to an old woman standing in front of the circle's entry stone. He handed the cup to her, watched her take a shallow drink and then bowed to her before handing the cup to the man on her left. A decade's worth of medical warnings on contact with another's blood went squirming their way through Aideen's head as she saw the cup's journey come full circle. The priest returned to the altar and took his own mouthful of the congealing liquid.

As silently as they had watched the ceremony and taken their turn drinking from the cup, the small group bowed and faded into the fog. With the audience gone, the priest shot a sharp glance at Aideen before addressing Cenn. "No good will come of this," the man said, his gaze raking over Aideen's shivering body.

"Not now, Dhonn." Cenn's voice was reverent but tired.

"How many more days shall I wait?" the man asked. "How many more days are you to spend locked in your room, rutting with this wench you now call wife while the darkness holds sway?"

Cenn drew Aideen closer to him and answered the man, his voice etched with the threat of violence. "There have been no raids, no visits these past few days—"

"Because the darkness is gathering itself and its minions, this is but the calm before the storm!" Dhonn protested. He gestured wildly at Aideen. "Do not let this creature weaken you, Crom. I beg you!"

The wound in Aideen's hand began to throb. Its ache pulsed through her and she felt the Bloodstone drum a sympathetic beat. Dhonn's gaze darted to her chest and Aideen brought a protective hand up to cover the spot where the pouch rested against her skin.

"You should have spent these days of calm searching for the Stag's Heart," Dhonn protested. "Women are weak, their flesh too easily cut, their minds awash in illogic and too easily confused. Better you had fucked some serving girl and kicked her down the stairs the next morning. At least you would be closer to finding the sacred stone."

"Teacher, you press your privilege too far," Cenn growled in warning.

The Bloodstone's beat against her chest became violently erratic as it echoed the anger building in Aideen. Her hands clenched into small fists, the pressure forcing new blood from the wound. But Dhonn ranted on, oblivious to the triple danger he now faced.

"The Stag will be our salvation, our Savior, but how are we to find his heart if you are busy bedding this miserable cunt?"

A blow, unseen, knocked Dhonn to the ground. Aideen felt Cenn stiffen next to her in surprise. His glance darted to her then to the unconscious form sprawled at their feet. His mouth was just beginning to form a question when Dhonn moaned softly in pain.

Cenn knelt beside the priest. "Teacher, forgive me, I did not mean to harm you."

The lie flowed smoothly from Cenn's lips and Aideen had to hide her own surprise. Cenn had warned her that his enemies could not know of her power. Was Dhonn, then, Cenn's enemy? She felt another ball of anger begin to build and quashed the emotion. The priest certainly was her enemy, she thought as she looked at the angry flush that covered his face and the baleful glare he directed at her.

"No," Dhonn said and dipped his head in apology. "As you said, it was the wrong time." With Cenn's help, he rose and brushed the dirt from his robes. His gaze searched the darkening sky and he turned, motioning for Cenn and Aideen to follow him. "Come, they will be waiting in the hall and we cannot be caught out in the dark."

A fire lit one end of the hall and the solemn crowd from the ceremony lined the tables next to it, silently vying with one another for the place closest to the rare blaze. Spreading from the tables by the fire were smaller groups of lesser nobles and household servants. Dim torches added to the light from the hearth.

Cenn escorted Aideen to the head table. A heavy, otter skin cloak was draped across the back of one chair and he pulled it around her shoulders before he sat down. Dhonn, she noticed, sat at Cenn's left elbow. Cenn clapped his hands and called for music and warm mead. Two young men dressed in worn doeskin carried a harp into the center. A middle-aged woman followed behind them with a stool. As she sat the stool down and began to play, a serving girl brought food and drink to Cenn and Aideen. Aideen's stomach gave a delighted gurgle when a plate of freshly cooked meat surrounded by baby potatoes and carrots was placed in front of her. She looked around the hall to see surprise registering on the faces of the guests as similar dishes were presented to them.

"From whence these provisions?" Dhonn asked. Caution mixed with suspicion cloaked his voice and his gaze drifted between Cenn and Aideen.

"From traders." Cenn's response was brusque, warning the priest to leave off with any further questions.

"With what in trade?" Dhonn asked, either unaware of Cenn's tone or unwilling to heed it.

"My freedom," Cenn answered. A smile played at the corner of his mouth and he shot a warm glance at Aideen.

The glance didn't go unnoticed by the priest and his gaze settled on Aideen and narrowed into thin beams of hatred that pricked at her skin and made the Bloodstone grow hot once again.

"The wench's dowry could have been put to better use," Dhonn grunted even as he gnawed at a piece of rib.

“Better use than feeding the hungry?” Cenn asked. A look of incredulity settled over his features and he stared at the priest. But the man was impervious to the questioning gaze.

“Informants, spies, assistance in finding the Savior’s heart or gleaming information on the forces that are amassing beyond the fog’s veil,” Dhonn rambled on. “This will but last a few days.”

Aideen saw Cenn bite back a response. True, in her times, the ceremonial stones Cenn had taken from her were semiprecious or of a mass-market quality. Amethyst, opal, jade, emerald, sapphire, ruby: the stones could be purchased over the Internet or at a local jeweler or department store. But the stones were faceted beyond a skill level she could imagine Cenn’s artisans to be capable of and some might be rare for the times in which she now found herself. Having the stones to barter with had been her whole reason in bringing them. One stone, she would expect, might be worth a month’s rations for the cashel’s inhabitants.

Cenn could not completely hold back a response and he turned to Dhonn. His arm rested on the back of the priest’s chair and his heavy hand encircled the back of the man’s neck. “I have paid informants, sent spies,” Cenn spoke, the words tight and clipped. “And such fees brought me no closer to possessing the Bloodstone than when we first set out to find it.”

“Patience,” Dhonn clucked. “Haven’t I—”

Cenn rose from his chair, cutting Dhonn short. He offered Aideen his hand and motioned to a servant to gather up their plates. Cenn handed Aideen a cup and raised his own to the guests. “I bid you all a good meal and a good evening,” he said and took a long drink of mead. “But my wife and I retire to more fully satisfy our appetites.”

A blush heated Aideen’s cheeks and spread to flush her face and throat as a chorus of *huzzahs* erupted from the guests. Once they were clear of the hall, he swept Aideen up into his arms and bounded up the steps. The maid, plates and cups bouncing against the tray, had to run furiously behind him to keep pace. Cenn already had placed

Aideen on the mattress when the girl dropped the tray on the table and bolted from the room.

“What do you think she was afraid of seeing?” Cenn teased.

His fingers plucked at the chiton’s side ties. After he had the ties unknotted, he lifted the shift over Aideen’s head. He kissed her eyelids closed and brushed his lips across her mouth before lingering at the hollow of her neck. While Cenn nuzzled her neck, his hands worked her nipples into hard tips until her body strained against his from the need he was creating inside her. His mouth latched onto her nipple; his lips pinched the sensitive peak. His hands massaged their way down her sides, over her hips, and he clasped her ass, kneading the muscles while his thumbs traced hard circles against the entrance to her vagina. His mouth fastened on her clit, sucking, sucking while his thumbs entered her pussy to fuck her to her first climax.

“By the gods, woman,” Cenn groaned and flipped her onto her stomach. “You have a body and soul meant for loving.”

Aideen felt Cenn’s cock, blood-thickened, stretch her walls wide and plunge into her in one sharp thrust. He eased out slowly and made shallow, gyrating thrusts against the spongy entrance. His fingers slipped between her labial lips and found the hard little nub that his lips had just pleased. He pulled it, stroked it until her wild bucking buried his cock inside her. Cenn pushed her forward, his hands gripping her ass and hips, and began to ride her in long strokes. He could feel her cunt contracting around his cock as her orgasm peaked. Aideen’s body writhed along the mattress as she gave up all pretext of control and let her body and his cock take command of her mind.

Even after another climax claimed her, Cenn held his own pleasure in check. His hands roamed her body in appreciation. His lips and tongue teased her a hundred different ways but he denied his own release. Aideen twisted beneath him then forced him onto his back.

“My turn,” she said, her tongue licking the lobe of his ear.

His hands moved to stop her and she shook her head. She looked around the room, saw the robe with its sash on the floor beside the mattress. Freeing the sash from

the robe, she rolled him onto his side and tied his hands behind his back. She brought his legs up and out so that they formed a sideways diamond. Holding his feet in position with one hand, she began to stroke his cock with the other. While she stroked, her tongue ran the length of his erection, beginning below his balls at the smooth tissue of his perineum and ending with a flick at the mushrooming tip. She pressed his feet closer to his body until his heels were wedged against his ass, exerting pressure on the heavily muscled hole. She covered his cock with her mouth. Her lips, wet with saliva and the juice of her own climax, contracted against the shaft, swept up and down its length, the tip pressing against the back of her throat as Cenn surrendered, his seed rushing hot against her throat. She felt the walls of her cunt squeeze and her own climax thundered through her.

While he still trembled and jerked beneath her, Aideen's mouth released his cock. She turned, abruptly, and slid onto his shaft in one fluid motion. With deep, rocking motions, she held him inside her. His cries of pleasure joined the rhythm of the rocking. His heels were thrust against the opening to his ass and his cock was swallowed by Aideen's constricting cunt as she rode him to their mutual oblivion.

“Dhonn is your enemy?” Aideen inquired gently the next morning as they lay recuperating from a long night of lovemaking.

“He is my teacher,” Cenn corrected her. “Or was. I am apprentice no more...have not been for over ten years.”

“And yet you did not tell him that the Bloodstone is in your possession or admit the source of the power that knocked him to the ground last night?” Aideen continued.

“What logic does that make?” Cenn asked.

His words reminded her of Dhonn’s and Aideen let off lightly stroking the dark ladder of hair that ran down from Cenn’s navel to mix with the black curls that tangled against his shaft. She returned her hand to her hip. “Ah, I forgot, Dhonn was your teacher and so you have been taught that women are *awash in illogic*,” she said with no hint of play.

Cenn paused as if to consider her statement then noticed the cold anger building in Aideen. Contrition furrowed his brow and he pulled her to him. “It’s not that,” he explained. “It’s just that friend or foe can betray a secret.”

“He does not feel like a friend to me,” Aideen said. Cenn was massaging the small of her back and she brushed his hand away in irritation.

“He spent far too much time among the Romans,” Cenn said and tried to roll her onto her back but she pushed him away. “He has too great a love of their philosophers and mathematicians, their logicians, their Socrates and Aristotle, to be content with a woman’s company.”

Aideen bit back a snicker at what she thought was the true cause of Dhonn’s disenchantment with women. “So, you do think we are illogical.”

“Women are,” Cenn began, choosing his words as carefully as any newly married man could, “without instruction in such matters.”

Aideen sat up and began to scan the room for the *brandub* board she had seen earlier. She spotted it lying on the wooden chest wedged into the corner. She crossed the room naked, but for the Bloodstone and its pouch, and scooped up the board and its pieces. In the center, she put the king-piece and its four knights then she arranged her eight opposing pieces. While Cenn watched her, his dark gaze quiet, she made her opening move.

“What is your point, my lady,” Cenn asked, his voice a soft caress of reconciliation as he moved one of his knights.

“That Dhonn is wrong and that I do not merely *feel* that he is a danger to you.” Aideen moved a second piece and blocked two of his knights. She saw by the sharp knit of his brow that his attention had become split between her arguments and her board strategy.

“And you have proof, having been absent from this room no more than a few hours total?” He moved another knight forward, saw his error and winced as Aideen removed one of his pieces from the board.

“I have a set of objective observations that make the possibility more likely than not,” Aideen began, her pieces pressing in on the king. “And something that, by your own beliefs, you cannot deny.”

“Which is?” His lips were pressed into a thin line of concentration, making the question sound like a single-word statement of *witches*.

Aideen smiled and removed another of his pieces from the board. *Witches*, indeed. “The Bloodstone,” she answered simply and made his king retreat further from the center.

His interest redirected, Cenn lifted the *brandub* board from the mattress and placed it on the floor. “You’ve proven you are most capable at a game of strategy,” he agreed. Cenn reached up and trapped the pouch that rested between her breasts. He pulled the string tie over her head and removed the Bloodstone.

“And the stone speaks to you,” he added before cinching the pouch closed and returning it to her. “What then,” he asked, “do you advise?”

Aideen began to speak but a sharp knock at the door interrupted her. Cenn gave a dismissive shake of his head and waved the interruption away but the knock sounded again, harder and more urgent.

“Crom, it is unforgivable for me to intrude,” Dhonn’s voice came from the other side of the heavy wooden door. “And yet, I must...”

“Cover yourself,” Cenn said, his lips once again set into a thin line. “It will only take a few seconds to send him away.”

Cenn tossed on his robe and lifted the latch on the door. He opened the door an inch, just enough for one eye to pass over the priest in an irritated glare. Dhonn pushed impatiently at the door and Aideen hurriedly fastened the ties to her gown. Cenn’s strength was too much for Dhonn and the priest resorted to his persuasive powers.

“Do not be so quick to shut me out,” Dhonn warned. “I know why you no longer seek the Bloodstone.”

Cenn hesitated just long enough for Dhonn to give a hard shove against the door and push his way into the room. Dhonn pointed a shaking finger at Aideen, his voice trembling as he levied his accusation. “You no longer seek the stone because you have it, and it is this witch who brought it to you.”

Dhonn lunged at Aideen and Cenn jumped forward to intercept him. Both men fell to the floor as a protective burst of energy erupted from the Bloodstone. Cenn sat up, blood dripping from his nose. Dhonn crept toward the mattress, one hand still reaching out for Aideen. Cenn flung the priest back onto the floor and straddled him, his thumbs pressing against Dhonn’s Adam’s apple.

“The enemy has sent her, can’t you see?” Dhonn pleaded. “She has used the stone against you.”

“Against you,” Cenn corrected but Aideen did not miss the backward glance of suspicion he gave her. “The enemy would not give me the Bloodstone, the very weapon with which I will defeat this army of fog and darkness.”

“Ah,” Dhonn crowed. “The enemy is smarter than we can know. He has sent the greatest of gifts, our Savior, the Stag’s Heart, but wrapped it in the worst of evil—a woman. She will use the stone at this close distance to destroy you!”

“That is not true!” Cenn yelled and his thumbs pressed more persuasively against Dhonn’s throat. “You’ve gone mad, my friend.”

“Can you command the stone?” Dhonn screamed the question. Dhonn saw the confusion that filled Cenn’s second backward glance at Aideen and he pressed his point. “It is as I suspected, then. You cannot.” Foam began to fleck Dhonn’s lips as his argument grew more venomous. “Kill the woman,” he urged, “and the stone will be yours to command!”

Shock filled Cenn’s gaze and he loosened his stranglehold on Dhonn’s neck. Aideen scrambled backward off the mattress and desperately looked around the room for a weapon within her reach.

“Why do you hesitate!” Dhonn begged, his screams bringing the guards crashing through the bedroom door. “There are plenty of whores for you to bed. Kill this one, and you will have the power to be king!”

“Take him,” Cenn ordered the guards, his voice rough with emotion. “He does not leave his rooms, is that understood?”

Once Dhonn, hurling curses at them, had been dragged from the room by two guards, Cenn closed the door and looked at Aideen. Her back was pressed to the wall. Her gaze, wide and fearful, jumped around the room, measuring and then discarding the value of each object as a weapon. Mindful of the stone’s power, he approached her carefully. He held his hands in front of him, the palms open, but she still shook as he touched her.

“Shh,” he coaxed and pulled her to him. “I would never hurt you and, even if you do not believe me, the stone does.”

Aideen realized that he was right. The stone did not burn her flesh in warning as it did in Dhonn’s presence. Rather, it emitted calming waves of warmth. She relaxed

against him and brought her hand up to caress the blood smear across his cheek. “I’m sorry—” she began but he placed a fingertip against her lips and then kissed her.

“Bad aim, that is all,” he said and wrapped her more tightly in his embrace. “You sought to protect yourself from a madman...I got in the way.”

Aideen nodded and wiped a tear from her cheek. Her breathing hitched then released in a ragged sob. “What he said...” she started and then trailed off. Dhonn had said too many terrible things for her to focus on just one.

“He has gone mad,” Cenn reassured her. “We have been fighting this unseen evil for so long, none harder than Dhonn. He was the first to recognize it, the one who started me on my search for the Bloodstone. The fight has, at last, consumed him.”

A warning premonition pricked the back of Aideen’s neck and resonated across her body. She looked at Cenn, saw the fatigue that weighed him down and decided not to press her feelings about Dhonn at the moment. He had just placed his mentor under house arrest. Surely she could allow Cenn a few hours rest before she asked him to consider whether the priest had orchestrated the menace from the very beginning.

“What is it, love?” Cenn asked as he saw the doubt that still lingered in her gaze.

His body sagged against hers and Aideen guided him back onto the mattress. She smoothed a fingertip over his brow and across each eyelid. Her chest rested against his to allow the Bloodstone’s calming effect to ease the tension from his mind and body. She didn’t answer him, choosing, instead, to massage his temples until his curiosity surrendered to fatigue.

Aideen drifted off to sleep next to Cenn. Her dreams were troubled by shadowy figures that crawled and grunted at the edge of perception. Black metal encased their disfigured bodies and she saw the occasional dark flash of an unsheathed sword. Screams filled the air and she saw a path of chaos strewn with the bodies of women and children who could not outrun their doom. Instinctively, she reached out to Cenn in her sleep but found only empty air and blankets still bearing traces of his body heat. She opened her eyes to see him stepping into his leather boots.

She sat up and reached for her clothing. "What is it?" she asked.

"Raids," he answered. "More than half a dozen in the last few hours."

"Was anyone—" she began but he cut her short with an ominous look that told her she would rather not hear the answer. The heat of the Bloodstone bore against her chest like acid on sheet metal. Again, she heard screams, but this time it was the wailing of women greeting the dead and dying that Cenn's soldiers had carted from the surrounding settlements.

"I must leave you for a short time, Aideen," Cenn said as he slipped his cloak on. "A counter-attack must be coordinated, we have to flush these demons from the darkness." His gaze fell on the Bloodstone's pouch and his expression hardened. "When I get back, we must talk..." he faltered as he contemplated what he was about to ask of a woman. "I would not ask you..."

"You do not need to ask me," Aideen assured him. "I could not bear for you to go without me."

Cenn embraced Aideen and covered her mouth in a kiss that promised to remain with her for an eternity. When he finally broke from her, he swore a quick return. Aideen put the bar on the door after he left and rummaged through his clothing for pants and sturdier footwear. She could ride a horse but she had no intention of doing so in a chiton. All the pants were overlarge and trying to cinch them with a sash did no good. In frustration, she put the woolen dress back on and sat in front of the fire. Another

premonitory prickling of the scalp, this time of Cenn injured, his blood mixing with the muddy soil of the marsh, seized her and she fell to the floor.

When she recovered from her faint, Aideen grabbed a cloak and left the room. She half-expected to see a guard outside the door but no one was there. She followed the winding staircase down to where it split into two separate staircases. One would lead her toward the hall, the other, according to the maid who had escorted her to the ceremony, to the kitchens. She started down the stairs to the kitchens and was met by the maid.

“My lady,” the girl gasped as she encountered Aideen on the narrow steps. “I was coming up to see if you needed anything.”

“I do,” Aideen answered and took the girl by the elbow. “I...” she paused when she realized she did not know the girl’s name. “What is your name?”

“Niamh,” the maid said. Her answer matched the low tones with which Aideen had asked the question. “Is something the matter?”

“I need a book,” Aideen answered. Niamh provided her with a blank stare and Aideen searched her mind for an explanation. She mimicked leafing through the pages of a book. “Sheets of blank lamb skin with leather binding,” she said. The image of Cenn’s book filled her mind and she pulled Niamh closer until her lips were pressed against the girl’s ears. “But red leather.”

Something familiar gleamed in the girl’s eyes. “Is it a secret?”

“Yes,” Aideen answered and clutched at the sleeve of Niamh’s dress. “Please, do you know where I can find such a book?”

Niamh looked up and down the staircase before she nodded her head slowly. “I do, my lady, but I’m not supposed to go to that part of the cashel,” she whispered. “No one is.”

Despite the girl’s air of reluctance, Aideen knew Niamh would not refuse her. “But it is by Lord Crom’s orders?” Aideen ask. Niamh answered with a slow, affirmative shake of her head. Encouraged, Aideen pressed on. “But I am the Lord’s wife, he does not intend, I assure you, to deny me access.”

A conspiratorial smile played at the corners of Niamh's mouth and she took a step back down the staircase. Aileen hesitated but the girl motioned her to follow. As they reached the bottom of the steps, Niamh flattened her body against the staircase wall and stopped. She inched her head around the corner and made sure that the short bridge of kitchen floor between their staircase and the opposing one was not being observed.

"Run!" Niamh whispered urgently and bounded across the floor and up the other set of stairs.

Aileen dashed across the opening and silently raced up the staircase to reach Niamh. The staircase split, one branch climbing higher, the other descending into darkness. Niamh took the path to the right, leading Aileen deeper into the cashel's bowels. With the cashel's scarcity of wood, Aileen was surprised to see the occasional torches that lit their way, offering welcomed patches of light between stretches of inky black. When they reached the last of the torches, Niamh took it from its sconce and grabbed Aileen's hand.

"This way, Lady."

The passage that Niamh led Aileen down ended in a stone wall.

"What is the meaning of this Niamh?" Aileen asked. "I don't have time for tricks."

"Patience, my lady," Niamh said and handed the torch to Aileen. "A wall is not always a wall."

"No, sometimes it's a banana," Aileen nervously quipped as she watched Niamh shove against the door with all her weight. The Bloodstone's heat, already at the point of being unbearable, seemed to burn more fiercely against her skin.

Niamh responded with a confused frown and an impatient jerk of her head in the direction of the wall. "Help me push, my lady."

Aileen added her weight to Niamh's efforts and they were able to coax the wall forward a fraction less than a foot. Niamh took the torch and slid through the narrow opening first. Feeling the darkness pressing in on her, Aileen quickly followed behind

the maid. Once past the wall, she found Niamh standing in the middle of a chamber. The light from the torch coldly glittered in the girl's dark eyes.

"Niamh," she said, her voice growing alarmed. "How is it that you know about this passage?"

"I showed it to her."

The voice that answered was followed quickly by the sound of a sharp blow to the back of Aideen's head. She stumbled forward an instant before falling to the ground. There was a vicious pull against her throat as the pouch was ripped from her neck. Sidestepping Aideen's outstretched arms, her attacker took the torch from Niamh and bent down. Dhonn's face, contorted in triumph, shifted in and out of focus.

Dhonn looked up at his newest protégé and smiled. "How did you get her down here so quickly?"

"She was desperate to find some bound lamb skin," Niamh answered dully. "It was easy, really."

"You...you're supposed..." Aideen struggled to find the words but her brain seemed to be pounding against the back of her skull. Warm blood oozed through her hair and she stopped straining to look at Dhonn. She rested her head against the cool flagstone, the torch's feeble light all but gone from her dimming vision.

"I'm supposed to be in my rooms," Dhonn agreed. "Guarded night and day." He gestured in the direction of the small passage Niamh and Aideen had created. "One of many, my dear chit."

"Tell me." Aideen's words, muffled by her impending unconsciousness, were lost against the stone floor.

Dhonn bent closer to her and cocked an ear in her direction. "What was that?"

Aideen's fingers inched across the floor but he caught her intent and raised the pouch above his head.

"No, Lady," Dhonn laughed as he waved the pouch in the air. "I cannot risk your touching the Bloodstone, can I?"

Aideen pulled in a deep breath of air and forced her partial accusation past her lips. "From the beginning..."

Dhonn smiled down at Aideen. That he was supremely confident in his victory was evident in his voice when he answered her. "Yes, Etain, from the beginning. I have plotted to take first Cenn's seat of power and then to spread my glory and rule throughout the five provinces, and I have an army of demons with which to conquer. Yes, from the beginning I have planned this, and here we are, very near to the end."

"No," she said and struggled to rise.

"You sound so sure," Dhonn mused and forced her back down with a rough push against the middle of her back. "Why is that?"

"I know something you don't."

"You know several somethings that I don't," he grunted and stood. "But I intend to pull them from you one way or another."

Dhonn placed the Bloodstone's pouch around his neck and handed the torch to Niamh. From his pocket, he pulled an umbrella-shaped dagger. Aideen noticed with detached appreciation that the center blade was surrounded by three hinged blades that pointed toward the knife's hilt. To make sure she understood the dagger's purpose, Dhonn unfolded the three secondary blades and made a withdrawing motion.

"A rather pleasant toy," he said. "Provided you are on the right end of the blade."

Fear pushed aside the pain that threatened to wrap Aideen in darkness. Her pupils dilated until no trace of the mossy green irises remained. In the dim light, she tried to focus on the pouch and calculated her chances of success should she make a desperate grab at it. Dhonn backed away from her. His hand clutched at his chest and she could see smoke rising from the fabric of his overshirt. In the distance, she could hear someone calling her name. But the voice was too far. She didn't dare shift her attention from the stone.

Dhonn slapped at his chest with his free hand. His own pupils widened in fear as he heard the voice and recognized its owner. Light filled the room as men entered the hidden chamber. Aideen realized the voice that called her name belonged to Cenn. Her

gaze broke from the Bloodstone's pouch just in time to see the forward thrust of Dhonn's arm as he stabbed the vicious dagger into Cenn's chest. A spell, ancient and terrible, parted the flesh, pushed past the ribcage and buried the blade in Cenn's heart. The words were cast in reverse as he pulled his arm back, Cenn's heart trapped in the vicious dagger's claw.

"No!"

The scream that ripped from Aideen's throat carried a maelstrom of liquid fire with it. Dhonn's flesh ignited at her cry and he fell to the floor to quell the flames even as the heat peeled the skin from his face. The heat evaporated the leather pouch that hung from his neck and Aideen reached through the fire engulfing him to snatch the Bloodstone. New energy and purpose pulsed through her at the stone's touch. Her hand began to glow bright red, like when she used to hold a powerful flashlight to it as a child. The stone whispered its true name to her in a long forgotten language. It was the Stag's Heart, grantor of life and death, keeper of eternity.

With the power of the stone pounding in her hand, she turned to Cenn's fallen form. She could read his final feelings on the death mask into which his face had frozen. Determination, surprise, regret, all spoke to her in an equal voice. She knelt down, her hand delving into his parted chest. She reached the hollow where his heart should have been beating and she released the Bloodstone. Cenn's flesh grabbed at her hand as the Bloodstone began to close the wound. The stone encased itself in new tissue and tapped its steady rhythm against the broken ribs and rent muscle. Slowly, the blue pallor of death receded from him and he drew a choking breath of air into his lungs.

The men that had rushed into the room with him backed slowly from their revived leader. The word *unnatural* mingled interchangeably with *miracle* as they looked to one another for confirmation of what had just happened.

"Aideen?" The words came out in a harsh croak. One hand fluttered against his chest and he looked at her.

"Rest," she coaxed. "I'll get some men to carry you to our rooms."

“I can’t, I must prepare the soldiers,” he argued and struggled to sit up. He saw that she didn’t understand and he grabbed her by the shoulders. “Can’t you hear them?” he asked frantically. “The drums...can’t you hear them beating?”

“It’s just the Bloodstone,” she tried to assure him. “You must learn its rhythm.”

“No,” he protested with a vigorous shake of his head. “They are beating...the war drums are beating. It has begun.”

The war drums were beating. Their heavy menace pounded through the air for seven days. The noise was incessant, the drummers untiring. Search parties went out but the sound seemed to come from every quarter of the earth. The enemy's location went undiscovered and the cashel's occupants were left with the grim realization that the enemy sought first to destroy their spirit and weaken their minds before it turned its attention to their flesh.

During the week, Cenn spent most of his time in a makeshift war room planning for the cashel's defenses. When Aideen was able to coax him back to their room, he was forced to sit down at the table with a new red, leather-bound diary.

"Woman," he said, irritation oozing from every pore. "There are better things to be doing with our time alone. The drums could stop at any moment."

Aideen put her hand to his chest where the Bloodstone's rhythm had become Cenn's own heartbeat. She closed her eyes and listened with her mind. She shook her head. "Not yet. They won't stop yet and no attack will come until after there is silence," she assured him. "And you are almost to the end."

"I don't remember what comes next," he said.

As she had done several times during the week, Aideen moved behind him. Her stomach pressed against his back and her arms rested over his shoulders so that her hands covered the center of his chest. "Listen to the stone," she commanded. "It remembers everything."

Cenn blinked against the memory then began to write the closing paragraph of his diary.

"Exhausted, I swore I would not seek the sorceress again until I had further rested, but her body calls to me. And so I dared to summon her again tonight. Ah, sweet temptation. She drives all thought of the Bloodstone from my mind although she holds it to her as she dares to command me. She stood before a silver bowl, smoke dancing against

her pale white skin. Pink nipples erect and begging to be suckled. A golden triangle pointing down to paradise. My tongue grows thick at the thought of tasting the sweet nectar that flows from between the witch's legs. I swear I will have her and the stone."

"I still do not understand how you came by my diary or the condition to which it had degenerated in the space of a few days or why I must recreate it," he said, repeating the question he had asked her more than a dozen times since the drums began.

As she had on the other occasions, she hesitated while she considered how much, if anything, she could tell him. She understood the paradox of the diary that had helped bring her to Cenn having been destroyed. She knew, too, his fate and her own. Both were approaching with a dismaying speed, Cenn's slightly faster than her own. Her hand moved from his body to briefly caress her stomach. The fate of the child after she died remained unclear, but she would have nine months to plan for its care.

"You said that we are bound for eternity," she answered once again. "This will make it so."

"That is not enough of an answer, Aideen," he said and turned to her. He pulled her onto his lap and hugged her to him. "Why does the stone not speak to me as it spoke to you? Why does it only offer you mumbled half-answers?"

Aideen shrugged her shoulders and buried her face against his chest. She breathed in the intoxicating odor of wool and heather and his distinct masculinity. "Perhaps because answers will not help against the inevitable."

She felt him tense beneath her and she cupped his face, covered it with calming kisses. "Do not worry, love, the power the Bloodstone has granted you will carry the battle. Do not doubt this."

Cenn responded with a worried grin that turned suggestive. He pointed to the diary on the center of the table. "The book is complete, woman," he said and redirected his outstretched finger toward the mattress. "Now, do you not think that I deserve a reward for my efforts?"

Cenn carried Aideen to the bed. With reverent fingers, they undressed one another. Their bodies twined together in a slow, luxurious series of caresses, thrusts and kisses. No haste corrupted their love and they touched one another as if all of time extended before them. When at last they surrendered to sleep, they did so in one another's arms. And sometime in the middle of the night, as Fate—her heart flooded with regret—looked down on the lovers, the drums stopped beating.

-Epilogue-

Aideen opened her eyes to find herself in the small storeroom of her antiques shop. Images of the Bloodstone's vision still flitted before her and she flung the stone from her. *Not images*, she told herself and looked at the diary on the work table, *hallucinations. Like the mold in King Tut's tomb that killed everyone.*

Still, Aideen could not escape what she had witnessed through the night. She saw herself sitting in the cashel's hall. The sun, so long absent from Kenmare, poured brightly through the shuttered windows. The doors were thrown open and the men, instead of the fog that had so often insinuated itself in their footsteps, trailed bodies on litters behind them. She felt her heart breaking as one of the litters was placed before her. Aideen had known that the Bloodstone would abandon Cenn once victory was assured but the horror of its infidelity came crashing down on her as she saw the headless body. She put her hand on his chest and felt that the Bloodstone, too, was at rest. She looked around and observed that no bodies of the enemy had been dragged into the hall. Those soldiers who had survived the battle shuddered and jerked as they described otherworldly warriors that had vanished or self-destructed in the returning daylight.

"No, no, no, no, no," Aideen yelled in the storeroom. She crawled into one corner, closed her eyes, and pressed her hands to her ears in a futile attempt to stop sights and sounds that existed only in her mind. "A dream, just a dream, snap out of it, Aideen. Goddamn it, snap out of it!"

Slowly, the vision's intensity faded until she was able to block it completely. She looked around the storeroom and remembered the mess she had left in the bathroom the night before. She glanced at the clock and saw that the store would open in a few hours.

"Fuck," she swore and grabbed the smock. She unhooked the hip pack and stuffed the Bloodstone, diary, and jewels back into the secret safe before she dashed through the storefront to the bathroom where her clothes still waited in a semi-dry heap on the floor.

Dressed in the damp clothes, she stepped into the storefront just in time to hear someone knocking at the glass door. It was a young man, slightly older than her, his expression bathed in impatience. Her gaze lingered on him just long enough to take in the impeccable black hair and the expensive suit that covered a powerful swimmer's body—broad shouldered and thin waisted. Visions of Cenn still plagued her and the man's visual perfection barely registered.

"Half an hour, still," she yelled through the glass and pointed to the clock on the wall.

The rapping became more insistent and he mouthed the word "now."

Aideen waved him off and went back into the storeroom. She looked at the worn vinyl couch against the wall safe and smiled. Hell, she didn't need to open the store any time soon. The suit out front could knock all day. She would schedule an appointment with her insurer for an appraisal of the book this afternoon. Its sale could, quite possibly, eliminate the financial need for her to ever open the shop again.

The shop's phone, ringing from the storefront, wiped away the pound signs that were dancing lewdly in front of her. Avoiding any eye contact with the man who was still outside her store, she picked up the phone and gave a brusque greeting.

"Miss Godwin, open the door."

It was a man's voice on the other end. The words were lightly accented with a southeastern lilt and Aideen slowly turned to look at the man standing on the other side of the shop's glass door. He held a cell phone to his ear and the impatience that had colored his cheeks was tinged an angrier red.

"Why would I do that, Mister ..." She let the question fade and stepped over to the glass door. At the closer distance, she could see that his eyes were a dark grey that matched his designer clothes.

"Toland," the man answered. "You'll do it because you have stolen property in your shop."

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about Mister Toland," she said but her concern betrayed her and she glanced back at the storeroom door.

His gaze followed hers to the door and he flashed a predatory smile. “I believe you do know what I’m talking about, your purchase from the Meyrick estate.”

“As you said, I have *purchased* something from the Meyrick estate,” she said and stepped forward, lost in his dangerous smile and mysterious grey gaze. “That’s the opposite of stealing.”

“I understand your position, Miss Godwin—”

“Aideen,” she interrupted. Her hand hovered next to the deadbolt and he glanced down, a hungry anticipation flashing across his features before Aideen took a nervous step away from the door.

“Aideen,” he agreed hurriedly, his hand touching the glass in an effort to summon her back. “As I said, I understand your position, but the property you purchased was stolen from my ancestral lands nine years ago.”

“Where,” she asked and returned to the glass. The eyes, there’s something about his eyes, she thought as she searched his expression for any sign of deception.

“Kenmare,” he answered. “Please, let me in so we can discuss this privately.”

“Who are you?” she asked. His identity flitted at the periphery of understanding and she quickly jerked her head to the side in an attempt to catch a glimpse of his shadow self.

“I told you, Miss Godwin,” he said and his suave voice once again grew irritated. “My name is Toland, Kean Toland. And what you purchased from the auction was stolen from my ancestors’ graves.”

The small hairs along the back of her neck became prickled and she nervously rubbed them down. She shook her head at him and tried to turn but his presence commanded that she stay. She gave him a hard, appraising look but found no solution that would calm the vortex of questions that vied for her attention. *Kean, Ancient, Cenn...*

“Aideen, open the door.”

“No.” She half stated, half pleaded. “This is something for our solicitors to resolve.”

Kean pressed against the glass, every inch of his body ordering her to open the door. “Aideen, you have no idea of the power of those items that waits to be unleashed or the forces that seek it. Forces that will stop at nothing.”

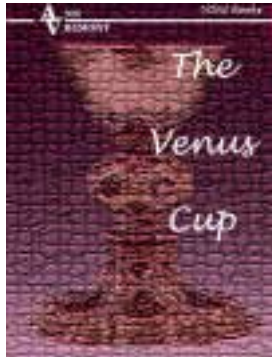
“No.” This time her voice was firm when she denied him.

“Please!” He banged his entreaty against the glass. “You’re in danger, Aideen.”

“The only danger I see, Mister Toland, is from you,” Aideen responded and turned abruptly from him. She replaced the phone on its receiver and walked on shaking legs back into the storeroom. With the storeroom door shut, she collapsed against the workbench, her body trembling. *Only a dream*, she told herself over and over. *Only a dream.*

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