

# EMBERSONG

Inspired by true events

ORAN RUADH & SARAH BERTI

## *Reviews*

“A gripping, engaging story set in beautiful Mull with amazing insight from the book of Iona and the mysteries it contains. Truly stunning work!”

– *Karen Russell Wylie. UK*

Essential Reading for our Changing Times.

“ One can feel the medicinal melody of this page-turner as it stokes the fires of untold history to reveal the living myth, magic, alchemy, and prophecy of spiritual revival.”

– *Yan Dreamfeather. UK*

A Song to Remember Oneself Home

“To read this timeless tale is to be forever changed as one embarks upon an epic journey of remembrance...one that weaves the threads of one's soul home to the original spark that blazes like a flame inside one's heart of hearts. Every word is masterfully threaded, leading one into richly textured mythic landscapes, dusted off by an invisible hand of fate. What was once regarded to be unreal becomes vividly lucid and alive, as if suddenly waking up inside a dream to at last trace that ruby and golden thread home to the central fire. Embersong is not only an epic adventure and love story... it is a richly encoded-word song that illuminates that which has long been hidden from ordinary site...delivering one to that sacred hearth where each may choose to begin again from an even greater place of awakened wonderment and awe.”

– *Inaiya Ray, Author of The Grail Rider. USA*

A Powerful Storyline

“This book will be recognized as something special. So many layers of wisdom and knowledge within an epic adventure journey. It brings up a lot of questions for me...”

– *Clive Blue Eagle. UK*

Beautifully written!

“Embersong takes you on an epic journey 500 years into Scotland's magical past when the destiny of the Clan MacLean hangs by a single thread. An exciting and

compelling adventure story combining mythology, folklore, mystery and romance while retelling a lost chapter in a strange and dangerous time.”

– ***Christine Allan. UK***

“Truly Captivating! Embersong is a beautiful unveiling of Scottish history and mythology! I especially love the mystery of the red thread and the lifeblood elements woven through the story and where they are leading to. Deeply moving!”

– ***Laurel Kitten, Keeper of the Children's Eternal Peace Flame. US***

“This remarkable story filled with vivid historical detail transports the reader into a realm where worlds collide. Realities are tested and the human spirit is set upon a path that cannot be undone. A gripping tale filled with the harsh truth of clan warfare, ancient mysteries, and magic. A truly unique work that touches on themes that inform, inspire, and bring light into the darkest of times.”

– ***Grant K McCormick. UK***

“Within the darkness is a bright and lucid thread ready to pick up and reweave destiny. Embersong is a call to re-ember. Beautifully written, I love the way it weaves the mystical and produces a beautiful tapestry like a magical carpet encoded with homecoming.”

– ***Karen Summer Walker. UK***

“This story is gripping and compelling and soon makes us familiar with ritual and witchcraft as normal and essential to awaken and maintain a healthy soulful lifestyle...”

– ***Maureen Walton O'Brien, Visual Artist. Canada***

“This wonderful book comes singing with a spiritual fire that's too hot to put down, or put out. A deep, moving, romantic story with real implications for our collective spiritual Rem-Emberance. The story picks up on events occurring in the British Isles in the late 1500s. The tentacles of control were seeking to stamp out the flames of all wisdom traditions there. Yet through the severe trials of circumstances and with everything hanging in the balance, a greater force was weaving together a more beautiful fate and destiny...A book for our transformative times. Just as the jaws of darkness are widening to consume the world into oblivion, the catalysing fire of the inedible Embers are rising to dispel the darkness. Scripted with words that heal and mend, Embersong is most dear to my Heart.”

– ***Barry 'Bruno', Visual Artist. UK***

“Embersong is both timely and timeless. When collective needs call for personal sacrifice, how does One answer the Seer’s invitation to live in Truth? How do we serve both heart and hearth, when they seem to be at odds? This opening tome, the first of what promises to be an incendiary series, navigates these eternal questions; an adventure through the paradox of free will and the collective necessity of harmonizing earth, soul, spirit, and clan. Alive with vivid characters, sensual landscapes, and spirited initiations, readers are ceremoniously plunged into the wreckage of best intentions gone awry, and led into realms where redemption may be the least desired, and the last choice of all. A fabulous first offering, *The Last Ember* is FIRE!”

– *Stacey Sophia Robyn. USA*



# Embersong

by

**O'ran Ruadh and Sarah Berti**

Embersongs - Book 1

Embersongs Press



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*I dedicate this book to my loving Mother and Father, my three Wyrđ Sisters, and my many wyrđ friends. Without your love and support, I would not have been able to complete this story. I admire and love you all.*

***O'ran Ruadh***

*I dedicate this book to all those who seek to keep the flame of love lit in these challenging times. What is needed is you.*

***Sarah Berti***

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# Cast of Characters

## CLAN MACLEAN

*Isle of Mull, Gaelic Pict-Sídhé descendants of the Taudbe d'Ann bloodline, the ancient Ouroboros Ring Guardians of the Royal Scythian Dragon court*

*Sir Lachlan Mór MacLean, Chief of Mull. Ring Guardian*

*Margaret MacLean, Lady of Mull. Wife of Sir Lachlan Mór MacLean*

## THEIR DAUGHTER AND SONS

*Beth, 23, in training to be the Ard Bandraoi, the Fire Seer*

*Hector, 16, Master of Horse, warrior, and next in line to be clan chief*

*Lachlan, 12*

*Gilleann, 10*

*Allan, 9*

## CLAN COMMANDERS AND WARRIORS

*Gregor Maclean, second in command*

*Rab MacLean, third in command, his brother*

*Brock MacLean, fourth in command, Bladebreaker*

*Eileen MacLean, Gregor's daughter, The Ravenous*

## SEPT CHIEFTAINS ALLIED WITH THE MACLEANS

*Neily Douglas McCormick, Blackskull*

*Angus MacBeatha, Whitmane*

*Douglas MacFayden*

## FOSTERED AT DUART CASTLE

### ***Neily's sons:***

*Kelly McCormick, warrior, musician, and Hector's best friend*

*Stephan McCormick, bard and apprentice Seanchaí*

*Young Neil McCormick, bodhran player and Lachlan's bodyguard*

*Grant McCormick, warrior bard sent to Perth to raise troops*

## ***Douglas' son:***

*Charlie MacFayden, a musician and albino*

## **IN THE INFIRMARY**

*Aignéis MacLean, Beth's grandmother*

*Fiona & Anna MacLean, twins, nurses and singers*

*Jacob MacBeatha, medic, Angus' brother*

*Olevar and Gilleis, his sons*

*Dougal, mute herbalist, tends apothecary*

## **IN THE KITCHENS**

*Jamie & Brigit, the cooks*

*Catriona, their 5-year-old daughter*

## **IN THE FIELDS**

*Murdo, crofter*

*Aubrey, warrior blacksmith*

*Alec and Lewis, brothers*

## **IN THE WOODS**

*Dòideag, the Ard Bandraoi, the Mór Rígan Bean-Sídhe of the Dòideagen Muileach, the Starfire Priestesses, Order of the Garter, Ring Lineage*

*Meirneal, Archdruid of clan MacLean, Ring Guardian*

## **OTHER CLANSFOLK**

*Heather, Eileen's mother and Lady Margaret's friend*

*Mary, Neily's wife*

*Connie, Angus's wife*

*Brena, Rab's wife*

*Úna, Alec's wife*

*Sheila, the village seamstress*

*Old Patrick & Old Abigail*

*Fergus MacPherson, fisherman*

*Éilis, Anna and Fiona's mother*  
*Duncan ni Teath, Horse Master before Hector*  
*Bran, Allan's friend*  
*Rosie, corn maiden*  
*Lorraine, Rosie's mother*

## **SERVANTS**

*Eanraig, Lachlan's gille*  
*Robert, a page in the castle*

## **FROM IRELAND**

*Rebecca Ruarc O'Flynn, daughter of the royal house of West Brefnie, cook and musician*  
*Liam O'Flynn, her husband, bagpiper, Gallonglass warrior*

## **THE TINKLERS**

*John and Sorcha Faw, the Gypsy leaders of the Red Thread*  
*Malcolm, the Faw's 8-year-old son*  
*Essie Stewart, John's cousin*  
*Elsbeth Stewart, her sister*  
*Clan MacDonald, Isle of Skye*  
*Gorm Mòr MacDonald, the Red Knight, 7th Chief of Sleat, Lord of Skye and Dún Scáith Castle*  
*Gillieasbaig, Gorm's brother*  
*Alasdair, Gorm's brother*  
*Murdoch, Gorm's cousin*  
*Libby Buchane, Gorm's mistress*  
*Lord Dombnall Dubh, Gorm's father, deceased*  
*Oben Pare, messenger*

## **CREW OF THE SAN JUAN DE SICILIA, FROM SPAIN**

*Don Diego Tellu¿ Enrique¿, Capitán*  
*Don Marcos Antonio Asensio, subteniente*

*Raphael Gonzales Alen, subteniente*  
*Carlito Alonso De León, subteniente*  
*José Vela, Diego's cousin*  
*Juan Carlos, guardiamarina*  
*Matias, Diego's apprentice and deckhand*  
*Caro Lantigua, gold-toothed Sargento*  
*Padre Franco Esteban Sanchez, the priest*  
*Tomas & Valero, brothers in the crew*  
*Paquito, guardiamarina*  
*Jesús, the helmsman*  
*Pedro, woodworker*  
*Basilio, explosives expert*  
*Jacobo, medic, deceased*  
*Luca Ivanov Kinkovic, deceased Capitán*

## **IN SPAIN**

*Martín Enríquez de Almanza, Viceroy of Peru, Diego's father*  
*Dianora Falcona Benjumea, Diego's mother*  
*Luciana, Diego's sister*

## **MONARCHS & OFFICIALS**

*Queen Elizabeth of England*  
*King James of Scotland*  
*John Darrel, Witch-Finder and exorcist*  
*King Philip of Spain*  
*The Duke of Medina*  
**THE SÚL OLC CLAN**  
*Abriman, Prince, Lord of the clan*  
*The Nine Archons of the Black Star, Sorcerers*

## **THE DARK SÍDHE**

*Cuélebre, the Black Dragon of Chaos*

## THEIR TECHNOLOGIES

*The Labyrinth of Mirrors*

*The Separation Code*

## CLANN TEINE

*the Fire Clan, Members include the Fire Seers across time*

*Petar Malwoulf, from Iona*

## THEIR MAGICS

*The Snakeskin Embers*

*The Book of Iona*

*The Great Ring, An Fainne Mor*

## THE POWERS

*Brìghde, Goddess of Fire and Poetry*

*Cailleach Bhéara, Earth Mother, Dark Crone of winter*

*Cernunnos, the Horned Green God*

*Jesa Crios, the Red Sun of the Virgin All-Mother*

*The Three Weaver Sisters of past, present and future*

*The Blue Boar*

*The Raven, the Mór Rígan, guardian of Elfhame and Tír na nÓg, the Otherworld*

*Melusine MacLean (Melusine de Vere), Dragon Princess of the Pict-Sídhe, Ankh Priestess, Order of the Garter*

*The Taudhe d'Ann, Light Sídhe, the gods of creation, known as the Royal Albi-gen Scythes of the Gene-Isis, the ancient Dragon bloodline which spawned the Pict-Sídhe Gentry of Scotland*

## THE ANIMALS

*Farsight, Sealladh fada, Lachlan's hawk*

*War Dog, Cu Cogaidh, Lachlan's charger*

*The Highland King, Rìgh Gaidhealach, deceased sire*

*Epona, Beth's mare*

*Púca, the castle garron*

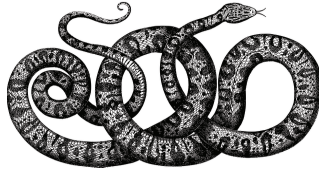
*Thunderhead, Ceann Tairneanach, Hector's grey stallion*  
*Foxtooth, Fiacail sionnach, Hector's hound*  
*Bear, Dòideag's dog*  
*Claire Gordon of the Mór Rígan, Dòideag's albino raven*  
*Tess, the sheepdog*  
*Cogadh Mara, Seamar, Neily's savage charger*  
*Seahawk, Seabhag Mara, Douglas' charger*  
*Seablood, Fuil Mara, Angus' mare*

## Note to Reader

*This is a work of fiction, and while some of it is based on true events, other elements of character and history have been modified. It is not meant to be exclusively historically accurate but rather offers a snapshot of an alternative magical history. While we wanted the overarching feel to be historically faithful to the period, we also wanted to speak to a modern reader. For example, the term Renaissance didn't come into common use until the 19th century, and certain dialogue patterns are distinctly modern. Please forgive these and occasional other anachronisms.*

PART I

# Serpentskin



She lit the questing flame in the night, she asked wild and true, but no answer came.

Beth MacLean, golden daughter of a lineage of Highlander chiefs linking all the way back to the Gaelic Kingdom of Dál Riada, stood square on the shore of her island at dawn, rage and longing cleaving her heart, glaring at the cruel crash of the unforgiving sea. Her fire was but embers in the cave behind her. Hot coals that should have brought the vision she requested. The answers.

They had not.

Beth's blood was hot too, as she stared so savagely at the dawn it was surprising it had come at all and not fled all regions of Scotland. She needed answers. Her long red-gold hair was a mess of braids and tangles. She wiped twisted locks from a freckled face now exposing the warring emotions of yearning and fury.

The night had flung the worst storm she had ever known in her twenty-three years of existence upon the island of Mull. Beth should have been home, safe in her stone chambers in Duart Castle. After her mother, Lady Margaret, brought Beth news of their detestable enemy's most gracious offer — an offer that made Beth violently ill — and insisted her daughter dispatch a convoy to Skye immediately with the definitive answer of yes, Beth slammed every castle door in a childish, terrified rage and stalked out.

"You will do it."

"Never!"

"You will do what is right to do," her mother insisted.

"It is never right to submit to a snake!"

"What is right is to take the only action that can be taken to protect your clan."

"No!"

She summoned her mare Epona from the stables and rode like lightning into the storm, rain whipping her face, woman and beast soaked by tears from the sky or Beth's eye in mere minutes. The thunder shaking sky and moor, the insane wind uprooting pines at the forest's edge, these were nothing compared to Beth's inner storm, which was apocalyptic.

She knew very well what she needed: a clear vision of answers to save her clan and herself from their enemy, the Snake, the Scourge of Scotland, otherwise known as Lord Donald Gorm MacDonald.

She refused what her mother commanded.

Never.

She would die first, and so would her clan.

Reckless through the dark and wet, for Epona, while surefooted, could easily catch a hoof across an unseen rock at this speed, they raced the heath towards the shoreline of their Scotland Island of Mull. Along the beaches they galloped west and north until they gained the secret cove and cave beneath the rock of the eagle where Beth came for her visioning, prayers, and fasts. Through a narrow tunnel in a crag, tucked into an odd fold of the coast, concealed by overtures of rocks and impossible cliffs, the private cove was well hidden in the song of the shoreline.

She called for fire; she *was* fire.

She knelt, bruising her knees blue on the rock, and with her iron and flint she lit the flame underneath the cave lip. It sparked, the embers flaring under the crottle encrusted outcropping.

“Brìghde, for the love of Jesa Crois!” she prayed, flinging her heart into seven directions, “Grant me answers! How do I defeat the Red Knight? Give me a sign to save my clan. Callieach Bhéara, tell me what to do!”

But they did not.

All night as the storm spit and spun and Beth prayed and paced and clenched her fists in the cave, Cailleach Bhéara, the Earth Mother dark and mysterious and divine and killing, and Brìghde, the Patron of Smiths and the Goddess of the Fire, gave no answer.

With numb fingers Beth cast the talismans of her sacred medicine pouch across the stone altar at the mouth of the cave. She meditated by the blue-orange snap of Brìghde’s holy flame, she asked, and asked again thrice by thrice. She even stripped arisaid and bodice and swam in the icy shallows to clean her mind — yet remained angry, the rain at least washing the taut, anxious muscles of her body. She seethed against her mother’s unjust commandment to accept the hideous offer of their hideous enemy, which Beth would never, *ever* accept, she would *die* first. She demanded a vision of answers, for her mother’s answer was unacceptable. She sang the incantation.

*Red pulse, glow in me  
Every flame, from sea to sea  
Your light is my birth —  
Ignite the song of songs  
in Ember and Earth*

Beth’s clan was in danger of annihilation, and it was her fault. She needed to know what to do to save them. Other than *that*.

All night, no answers came.

And the morning brought none either. She stalked to the beach.

“Bas no buaidh!” She warned the sky, the Gaelic for “death or victory.” Along with the noble “Virtue Mine Honour,” it was the MacLean clan’s motto. She slashed her wrist with her skean and let the blood oath drip from skin to sea.

“Mother of Fire, take this sacrifice. Burn my doubt and hesitation. I will do anything to save my clan, give me courage. I will never surrender, let us be free. Send me a sign on the script of the sea.” Beth swore this to Brighde and Jesa Crois, promised Cailleach Bhéara. But no vision came neither by blood, blaze, or sea.

Why did the Fire Goddess remain silent?

Why did the Earth Mother refuse to give word?

To compose herself Beth rode Epona towards the dawn where the pale purple heather grew in abundance on the hills overlooking the waters of Tobar Mhoire Bay. She sang in Gaelic to keep the monster in her mind at bay, the monster who wanted to marry her, the monster she refused to surrender to — and it was in that moment — heather and hillock and monster in her mind — that the life Beth had known changed.

Was what she saw the answer she prayed for?

Epona grazed untethered nearby, her tail flicking at dawn insects.

Beth first saw it as a shadow.

It brought death.

It was the twenty third of September, and the morning broke bonny and clear as if making amends after such a violent storm. The sun cresting the horizon enflamed the sky with pink and yellow, though a heavy sheen of mist chilled and dampened Beth’s skin as she moved among the dew-touched heather, plucking the plants from the root up, her fingers damp with rich, red-brown soil.

“Heather, sweet heather, you are so lovely today,” she told the plant with a small smile.

A bird sang from nearby.

“You are lovely too, little green winged Teal,” Beth assured it.

It was early. She had been taught that wild herbs plucked at first light made a far more effective poultice than those plucked midday.

“Early morning dew not only gives the plants more sap, it gives them clearer purpose,” her Grandmother Aignéis always told her. Beth observed little difference between the two when she made her own poultices. All the same, she followed her grandmother’s teachings, for Beth was still an apprentice and Grandmother after all, was Grandmother, who had been collecting moor medicines and healing broken MacLeans with them for over seventy years.

Beth loved the feel of her fingers in the dirt as she loved all of Mull:

her cove and cave, the mountains, this rise overlooking the bay where the delicate yet sturdy heather caressed the high hillock. Valued by her clan for its many uses, the plant was macerated into a liniment for treating arthritis, a hot poultice was a remedy for chilblains, and flowering shoots were a treatment for cough. Its branches were used for thatching, basketry and rope-making.

They always needed more heather, particularly in times like these.

For Beth's clan was at war with Donald Gorm MacDonald, the Lord of Dún Scaíth Castle and the Isle of Skye, the abominable Red Knight, the unholy Snake himself, and the MacLeans, their numbers sorely reduced by the two-decade long feud, had finally acceded defeat. Beth's clan was paying tribute each month in gold, foods, and medicines.

Including heather.

"Ahh, my blooms. We are harvesting you for the enemy," Beth murmured, her mood turning darker. She seized a hard brown stalk and yanked viciously, cutting her hand and drawing a lick of blood. She didn't know what to do to save her clan. She *needed* to know.

"Cailleach Bhéara, Brighde of the Fire, give me the answer!" she cried.

Why did no vision come?

Still distressed there in the moorland, framed by the mountains in the distance, Beth nonetheless found a measure of calm from the solemn beauty of the enchanted, watchful land of Mull — her beloved home she would fight for until the day she died — as she plucked at her plant ally. Only once her basket was overflowing did Beth straighten up — and found herself facing a looming shadow behind the heavy curtain of fog.

Her heart stuttered.

The shadow was a ship near the shore.

Her breath turned to ice. It was — big. Huge.

Fear jolted along her spine and Beth instructed herself to exhale the sensation. No MacLean would show fear whether they felt it or not; a MacLean worth their salt would rather die a hundred deaths by warlord or inferno or meet the maker of Hell itself. Warily, she scanned the landscape for signs of danger.

Nobody lurking at the edge of the trees.

Nobody walking the shore.

No humans by the boat.

No sound other than wind.

She waited, listening like a deer inside her mother that was Mull. There was nothing to detect. Just the enormous shadow of a ship, where no ship should be.

“Easy,” she told herself under her breath. “Address what you’re seeing, not what you think you’re seeing.”

A pirate ship?

Or had the English become murderously bored with the hot summer and peace in the Kingdom and finally come for them to assuage the great tedium of life? She needed to get closer. If her father were here, he would command her home, but Beth never managed to excel at doing what was expected of her. With exaggerated slowness she set down her basket.

Attuned to Beth’s inner emotions in some hallowed connection she could not explain other than to her brother Hector — who understood without her having to — Epona stopped grazing and raised her head, her thick tangle of mane falling across her eyes. The mare was black as a raven and swift underfoot. The shapely lines of her limbs were compact, her frame was sturdy yet elongated enough for speed.

Beth made a hand gesture.

*Yes-come-quiet*, the mare seemed to say, bobbing her nose.

Epona would follow.

Beth snaked soundlessly down the slope like a hunter. A scattering of clouds shape-shifted as though the wind was conducting a symphony and as the sun broke through, Beth got a better glimpse at the behemoth visitor. It wasn’t just her imagination playing mist-tricks, there really was a ship. Her heart thudded a hard warning to be careful. Beth felt surreal, as though she was awake in the Dream and this ship was the sign. For she had asked, and saw nothing.

Until now.

Was this a vision — an extraordinary moment upon her shores? The vision of a vessel amidst the rising sun and violet painted sky?

“Are you my answer?” she whispered.

It wasn’t merely unusual for a ship of this size to be upon their shores, it was more than that — it just didn’t happen. Never. Beth’s heart was in her throat; it must be something haunted or terrible, something sublime or wonderful coming to their little island. The most that ever came upon their shores were small fishing vessels or the detested enemy galleys from the MacDonald clan, but this? An armed force of one thousand could be inside a vessel so huge.

Tobar Mhoire bay was a gorgeous sight, the sand of the long beach almost black, with tiny crystals that sparkled in direct sunlight. Beth lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the sun. When she saw what the ship actually was, she drew a quick, soundless intake of air. This was no pirate ship and neither was it some blood-lusting English crew. It was a war-beaten Spanish Man o’ War.

“Mo thruaigh mise!” Beth stepped back, bumping against Epona’s

shoulder. “It can’t be!”

Except that it was.

A war galleon in the mist.

Yet there were no men on the prow and none rowing towards the shore. Almost silence, just the gentle lapping of waves, like the prelude to war or storm or a moment beyond reckoning.

A raven cawed above her like it was making a jest across time, then disappeared. Beth found herself smiling as a streak of fearlessness cut through her. A tiny feather fell from the sky, and as she picked it up, she looked, not at the ebony bird gift but into all directions, assessing the rising sun and the ship at east, the hill at west, and the ocean stretching north and south away. Was the crew already inland, the infantry ready to burn and rape and pillage and destroy the villages?

“Why come to Mull?”

Why was everything so quiet?

She left Epona’s shoulder and crept closer. She was afraid, but fear never mattered. Beth was in training to take over the ominous Dòideag’s place as the clan shamanka. The elder wisewoman — some said as ancient as the mountain — was the head *Ard Bandraoi* and Cailleach of the entire clan. Beth’s initiation tests would span seven years and if successful she would be the fire keeper of the sacred knowledge for her clan. While Beth had much to learn, she was taught to face what she must and took her responsibilities seriously. If Gorm MacDonald the detested Snake himself rowed up on a birlinn and attacked, Beth would snarl and square off with knife or bare hands more used to grinding healing herbs, building oracle fires, and smoothing a wounded brow.

She might fail, she might sometimes trip on her arisaid when nobody was looking, but Beth would always fight.

She flicked her wrist, motioning for Epona to wait.

The mare halted foursquare, head up, body alert, nostrils sucking and flaring as she caught some far-off scent. Beth moved closer to the ship, her bare feet leaving indentations in the sand. She moved quietly, vigilantly, muscles tense, ready for whatever the unknown would reveal, and in awe of the vast wayfaring vessel. There was no figurehead and the words *San Juan de Sicilia* were carved in the hull.

“An long mhor Spainteach,” murmured Beth. This ship had a beautiful name.

Why was it here?

Momentarily, Beth thought the worst. Her nostrils flared, like Epona’s. The crew must be already ashore and her clan murdered! Why else would Spaniards be

here other than war? Then, on the heels of the worst she thought the best — the ship was somehow — she did not know how — the answer to her prayers. Why else would it be here, in this exact dawn, after her vigil in the cave through the darkness of fear, storm and night?

A great black backed gull screeched, and Beth decided.

Yes, *this is my answer.*

Naive or not, when Beth decided something, she was more stubborn than a donkey set on being an opinionated mule. Her jaw hardened into conviction.

The mist-obscured ship bobbed in the waves.

The soft floor of the beach squished between her toes, shells rough against her soles as Beth paced up and down the shoreline, recording every last detail from every angle she could attain. The gashes and wounds in the hull. The damaged main mast. The staggering size of the thing, wounded in battle or storm. It was on her fourth trek that Beth saw it — an arm hanging between the rails. The white sleeve was wet, the protruding hand gaunt. Even from this distance, Beth could tell that it was nothing more than skin stretched over bones.

“Nèamh dearna!” Beth’s hand flew to her mouth. “A ghost ship.” She stood frozen for a moment that stretched out forever.

The hand was motionless.

Slowly the mists densified. Once more, the ship was concealed from view.

Were they all dead? Or — dying?

Beth gathered herself, resolute, then tore back to the beach. She was strong, having spent both her childhood years and her current ones tussling with her foster brothers Kelly, Neil, Stephan and Grant, as well as her blood brothers, mostly with Hector, with whom she was closest in age and friendship. Even the nine-year-old Allan and ten-year-old Gillean liked trying to surprise her with attacks from random corners in the castle, attempting to get in through her guard at the oddest moments, sometimes leaping from chandeliers or stairwells with exaggerated animal howls.

Her brothers had yet to catch her off guard and it was now a game of sorts.

One day they would win.

Perhaps.

She raced the beach, past Epona pawing the sand who settled into stride after her, up the hillock where she grabbed her basket of flora. Stalks of the finest heather fell out but she left them on the ground. She faced her horse, heart orbiting in her chest like a poem of danger.

“Quick,” said Beth, snatching up the reins. They were tied to the saddle so as not to tangle while the horse ate. Epona could easily graze as Beth used no

bit on the mare. The link between them didn't require one and Beth had trained Epona to respond to leg cues, to the mere shift of her weight in the saddle, to subtlest alteration of her mind's intention. Epona was more than happy to tend towards telepathy, or perhaps just intimate friendship with another being. Beth and her brother were both skilled with horses, and Hector, who was the Master of Horse at Duart Castle despite being only sixteen, was always impressed with the glowing, unexplainable connection between Epona and his sister.

"She can hear your mind," he liked to say. "She can hear your heart."

The mare answered with a soft snort. Her liquid brown eyes were far too knowing to belong to a simple animal. Beth knew her mare was the most intelligent horse in the stables, perhaps more so than an animal should be. The intimacy between them was otherworldly and had been increasing in intensity for many years. Beth was convinced there was a kelpie, a water horse from the legends, somewhere in Epona's ancestry.

*Yes, air-quick-running*, the mare affirmed, bright eyes. *Like wind-air-faster*.

Epona stood firm while Beth mounted. Compared to the war horses Epona was small, barely fifteen hands high, but oh, her speed defied her height; the mare was quicksilver, with a sprint rivalling any mammal and even some birds. She broke into a lean canter at the smallest shift of Beth's forward-seeking hips.

Her hooves drummed the earth: a steady song of travelling.

"Home," urged Beth with a cluck of her tongue. "Fast as you have ever raced."

*Yes*, the mare replied. She broke into a gallop and flew across the rolling lands of Mull, southeast towards the castle. The sky above their heads was clear and light and the broken ship at their back shone darkly with its promise of change, or loss, or wonder.

*H*ave you gone dog barking mad or been betided by scurry on the galley ride over from yer barren rock? “We have just paid you.” Lachlan Mor MacLean, Chief of the House of Duart, Lord of Mull, displayed a face set in stone — perhaps stone could protect him and his clan against mad hedge-born adversaries hailing from the abominable Isle of Skye.

Then again, perhaps not.

Lachlan was a huge man, muscles thick as a mountain. He sat on his war charger easily. The black stallion snorted explosively.

The sun was too bright.

The wind slapped Lachlan’s weathered, expressionless face.

He wanted to kill the man in front of him.

“Aye! And so you will pay again! How crouse, how delightful, nae? Yes again — in two weeks again, as I have just told you,” said the scar-faced, limped enemy that the MacLeans called the Snake, with his one wayward eye rolling to the seven hells. “Did you not hear with your ears what I said the first time?”

Two seagulls called in tandem.

The Snake was smiling. The Snake’s eyes were shining. The Snake blinked in mock courtesy. “I could say it again, would that assist yer comprehension on such a clement autumn day? I could say it thrice.” It was said the Snake was mad — from the tyranny that came from power — or maybe from being dropped on his abhorrent misshapen newborn head after his appalled mother saw his face for the first time. Lachlan suspected both — and more. One eye slitted and the one that always rolled in its socket, crooked teeth, scars from old burns. Yet he was finely clad in broadcloth, a red-black tartan and breeches whiter than sand. In spite of the expensive cladding, the ugly babe had grown into an ugly man, the man into a tyrant, and weren’t those always ugly?

“We just paid you tribute,” Lachlan repeated slowly, his words rock or enough rock to measure a mountain. Said it slow so it might penetrate the thick, stupid skull of his enemy, which seemed impenetrable.

Lachlan gestured courteously, snapping a bare muscled arm from his calfskin jerkin to indicate the array of materials spread out and shining in the sun across the purple field of heather. Goods his clan just delivered, goods being bundled upon the enemy’s horses, who would pack it all back to Skye. Sheep wool, blankets, ropes, Highland Gold whiskey, heather, grains and foods, medicines and tinctures.

And gold.

All paid to a warlord.

A merlin cried. Down by the water, waves collided with the shore of an island that was still Lachlan's. Lachlan set his jaw and swore: an island that would *always* be Lachlan's.

It was the year of our Lord 1588 in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Lachlan had observed his country inflamed and primed to maximum tension by the ugly spread of the Inquisition, a dark atmosphere strangely mixed with the bright, new-fashioned artistic and intellectual movements spiking like electric currents across all of Europe. The bloodthirsty witch hunts existing simultaneously with a cultural renaissance — two conflicting poles to a highly charged nation. King James of Scotland fearlessly and foolishly held these contradictions within his own person; it was said he managed to be both a critic of the dangers of tobacco smoke and a patron of the arts — as well as a fanatical witch hunter. He performed the dual tasks of keeping a violent England at bay and forcing peace among his own fractious nobles who were constantly vying for power.

But James, while being the reigning monarch with his love of peace (save for witches), was far to the east and Lachlan cared nothing for him, for this was the wilds where anything could happen. And what had happened was Gorm MacDonald attempting to claim the title of Lord of the Isles — all of them — here in the lawless islands so far from crown and civilization, and he was slowly expanding his own holdings and territory by conquering everybody else's. Lachlan's isle in particular. The feud between the MacLeans and MacDonalds had been burning for decades. Might apparently was right, here in the west of Scotland.

And Gorm possessed more of it.

Lachlan would one day pierce his favourite dirk through Gorm's gyrating eye and grin a final grin of triumph. "You will have the next tribute in one month," he said diplomatically.

"Haver not, my friend!" Gorm, known as the Scourge of Scotland, the Red Knight, or to Lachlan's clan as the Snake, waved a hand as if flicking Lachlan's tiny concern the way one would swat an annoying midge. As if two payments per month instead of the one agreed was inconsequential. He too sat a thick war charger, a dun horse with black fetlocks and a roman nose, a battle mare bred by Hector and once Lachlan's. Gorm named her *Ümblachd*, meaning tribute. Beside the horse sat a sleek bitch who was also paid in tribute that day. The proud copper-black wolfhound sat nose up, reluctant beside her new master yet so well-trained that all she could do was await the next order.

"One month," Lachlan repeated.

"I claim little interest in your timeline." Gorm had already dug a metal quail from the tribute sack and filled it with the finest whiskey known to man. He took a swig and as it spilled down his chin he smiled cheerfully through the waste of the liquid gold.

Lachlan stared. The near-magical whiskey was four times distilled and fermented with care from a secret recipe received from the Abbey of Lindores, crafted to be cherished in honour, not dribbled down an enemy's bearded chin rippled by burn scars that were, according to the story, Beth's fault.

"Ahh, *uisge beatha*, our water of life," Gorm said approvingly. "'Tis infused in herbs, aye?"

Lachlan did not answer.

"Which ones?" Gorm insisted.

"Yarrow and cleavers."

"Three times distilled?"

"Four."

"Well, good, I am pleased. Now as I was saying, yer suggested timeline is dust, and yin day will be forgotten as the age turns and mountains crumble across the strath and cities fall and civilizations are buried in the dirt. And so forth." He sketched a false bow.

"It was *your* timeline," Lachlan said evenly, as if speaking to a spoiled, idiotic child. "Once a moon: we agreed. We shall not pay more." Lachlan was outwardly tranquil but his charger *Cu Cogaidh*, War Dog, was dancing beneath him, picking up on his master's contained fury, the stallion's muscular legs striking the earth, the hindquarters bulging with reined in violence. Behind him Lachlan's warriors shifted uneasily, the men muttering, the creak of saddles and the shuffle of thick timbered target shields, hands tightening on weapons they ached to use.

"Keep the heid!" Gorm taunted, his beard wet with whiskey, that damnable one eye spinning like a vile joke. "Or not. If you wish to refuse me another tribute when I ask so kindly for one, please proceed. Entertain me on a late September morning, before the sun has even reached the zenith." He giggled and tossed the quaich to the ground beside the hound, an act designed to humiliate.

The Highland Gold spilled across the dirt.

The hound whined.

"Please refuse. I would rejoice to instead skelp your dying clan and take your fine-mouthed daughter to my bed to kneel and serve me as my golden-lipped prize. You know she is the reason for all of this."

A pause.

"You do know?"

At this, even Lachlan's perpetually stoic face betrayed black rage and his warriors muttered louder. One of the Sept chieftains carrying a crescent-bladed Lochaber axe, Neily McCormick, better known as Blackskull, shouted out an insult about Gorm's mother. Lachlan's warriors were arrayed behind him. Overlooking the ocean where at a small cove Gorm's band had docked in their galleys, flanked

by an oak grove, here the field rippled with heather under violet grey mountains rising proudly in the distance, and the sun fell cheery upon faces dark with impotence and anger. Mounts stamped, tack jingled, bits were chewed. Frustrated men gripped their sword handles in checked, white-knuckled anger.

The hound bitch bared her teeth and growled, a low, dangerous sound.

“Aye, she’s a fine pelt, is Beth MacLean,” offered Gillieasbaig, Gorm’s brother, somewhat unwisely. In contrast to Gorm’s, his face was practically an angel’s, with a handsome and shapely bearded jaw, though his lips were warped in a sneer. He sat tall and confident upon another charger that was also once Lachlan’s.

The Lord of Skye turned with deceptive calm to his brother. Everyone saw the flicker of danger and madness in the eye. “Say one more word about Beth MacLean and I will make you disappear like spit on a hot skillet,” Gorm said pleasantly. After a moment Gillieasbaig flicked his eyes downwards in submission.

Gorm’s men were arrayed behind him as well, but they were not tense. They were lazily loading the payment onto the tack of their pack horses, cinching girths tighter, yanking straps, tossing items back and forth carelessly. They were at ease, for the MacDonalds had already won, and these men knew their leader would rub it in as only Gorm could. With salted, theatrical courtesy and his signature touch of madness.

Nobody crossed the Snake.

Inside his head Lachlan smashed a stone into his enemy’s face until his enemy was still.

“Be reasonable, for we are peaceably disposed,” Lachlan said, ignoring the sickening jibe about Beth. It was either ignore it or right this moment drive a sword jagged and true through the Red Knight’s scabby mouth and spit *shut your geggie* into his fading face. Should he? He could take him now, man to man there was no doubt Lachlan was stronger. His hand moved to his sword hilt. *Do it.* “You can’t take all we have; else we will fail to make you more.”

“Mair sheep wool, mair whiskey, mair gold!” Gorm drew his sword to happily salute the sky. “If you are out of gold, next tribute we will consider the fine collection of maidenheads.”

Protests amongst the MacLeans.

Curses, not all of them under breath.

Lachlan stone-faced.

Gillieasbaig giggled. “Bonnie maidens! No gold? We take yer virgins and make their fields red instead of gold.”

“Enough!” said Lachlan, his tone set down like a hammer on a steel forge, ringing out with its curt brevity.

“Aye, enough,” Gorm echoed mockingly. “Bring forth the next tribute on

five October, and the next on twenty six October, or we will consider our peace treaty void, open war will resume, and you will die.” He paused. “Except for your women, whom we will use as we please. If they are fortunate, we shall permit them to bear our children, after.”

He dismounted gracefully and snapped his fingers, and the waiting hound with her noble gaze and sleek fur, bred and loved and trained by Lachlan’s son Hector and now having been given in tribute to their foe, obeyed flawlessly, coming to sit and then lie down near Gorm’s feet at the Lord’s directive. Gorm gently pressed the dog’s skull into the dirt, caressed it softly to calm the animal, then withdrew a hunting skean and sliced the blade across her neck in a fluid motion. The dog gurgled and struggled helplessly and to the blood-scented sound of her choking, Gorm smiled at the MacLeans as if to confer upon them a secret hidden in his strange, inscrutable expression. As the hound died, his question struck the silenced air.

“Is that clear?”

It was.

That was yesterday morning.

Today Lachlan’s men were home, the warriors and leaders alike gathered at council, hot-blooded, frustrated, the pack of them pacing and arguing in the Great Hall in Duart Castle. Trying to figure out what to do.

“What aren’t you telling?” Neily McCormick, the red-haired, hot-mouthed chieftain of the Sept clan with only one eye to his name, slammed his mug on the table, splashing ale. His passionate, stormy face was his usual expression. He glowered through his black eye-patch at his chief. He wasn’t a sea robber but his men liked to think of him as a pirate nonetheless. Neily had perfected the most fiery insults known on Mull and everyone loved him, in battle or out. They called him Blackskull.

Lachlan, stone-lipped as was his wont, merely grunted in reply.

“I saw you with Gorm yesterday. As we were riding out, he called you back. I want to know what was said,” Blackskull insisted. “Afterwards your face was like a mountain carved from hell.”

“His face is always a mountain carved from hell,” interjected Douglas sourly, another of the Sept chieftains. “He’s Big Lachlan.” It was their name for their Laird.

On late nights after wine and mead, some would jest the nickname for their chief came about *only* due to his mountainous height and a girth that took copious yards of specially woven tartan just to sufficiently cover, but despite the suggestive jokes, every clansman knew the nickname was truly due to the mountain of Lachlan’s mind, the stone of Lachlan’s body, and the quiet yet Herculean spirit that thundered from heart and soul and mouth whenever the chief of Mull deigned to speak. Which was not often. Lachlan saved his words for when he needed them

most, for this was war.

Would that they not fall to their enemy.

But that no longer seemed likely.

The Laird of them all now sat alert by the orange blaze of the hearth under the stone vaulted cathedral ceiling of the Great Hall. His hunting hawk, *Sealladb fada*, Farsight, perched on his arm, black-blue feathers folded. No need of her today, he simply liked her near.

She was uneasy, her talons restless against him.

Lachlan stared expressionless at Blackskull. The chieftain had asked a belligerent and perceptive question. There *had* been something odd to notice about the conversation with their enemy yesterday — and Neily had detected it. It was why Beth splintered into a panicked fury last night and stormed out into the lightning. It was why he and Lady Margaret were no longer speaking, the strain between them like a mammoth ice wall frozen by the combined coldness of every winter in existence.

Lachlan, a ruthlessly honest man with his people — for he exuded the clan's *Virtue Mine Honour* motto in every act of his existence (save for thrice) — for once held no intention of answering the chieftain honestly. To do so would put his daughter in jeopardy by placing her as the possible source of their salvation. And he would not do it. Lachlan would do many things, but he would not sacrifice his daughter.

Not for anything.

Never.

He swore it under God and to Cernunnos, the ancient horned God born of a Dragon.

“He threatened my daughter with words I shall not repeat. Then we spoke kindly of hunting on braw, cloud kissed days, of translucent pearls from rivers, of how MacLean honey mead warms a man's belly in shadowy October evenings.” It was an uncharacteristically long and flowery speech for Lachlan, by which he hoped to distract the one-eyed chieftain.

Neily scowled. “Is that so, my Chief? And what did he think of the MacLean mead? We have given most of it to him.” He swigged whiskey and held the quaich high. “And the whiskey. And the sheep wool. And the heather. And the hounds. And the horses. And the arisaid my grandmother knitted for my newborn niece Jeanie and —”

“Enough.”

It was the night after the worst storm in Lachlan's memory. A tree trunk had been hurled through the air by a livid, snarling wind, smashing the bay window in Lachlan's east-facing chambers just before dawn. Where he slept —

alone — after the glacial disappearance of his Lady. Alarmed, he slipped on his buskins, picked his way through the crunch of glass, and went looking for Beth. She had not returned. On edge as though the storm brought ill omen, Lachlan called for council. Not just any council, for Lachlan had decided: they were done surrendering. Done paying tribute.

This was a council of war.

The mood was dark for they knew the truth. They would lose.

Many of the warriors were pacing. Beside Lachlan sat the three chieftains of the Sept clans on northern Mull, over which Lachlan ruled. Neily was the first of the chieftains under Lachlan and though trusted, was impossibly proud, with a two handed claidheamh mòr at his hip bigger than some children and sharper than life itself. His long hair and red beard were tied in bands and braids, his one eye bold and fierce, the other gouged out by Gillieasbaig.

The undomesticated Neily never shied from asking burdensome questions, even if they were of his chief, and Lachlan liked him the more for it, feeling a surge of pride in his tenacious ally. But Lachlan was hiding something, and though he was glad Neily was astute enough to have noticed, he would avoid answering the question directly.

“We will pay two more tributes to gain time. Then no more,” Lachlan said.

“And then they will slaughter us!” Blackskull roared to his feet to pace, circling the council like a pacing wolf.

“We must be smarter, then,” Angus counselled quietly.

Beside Lachlan sat the intellectual, tall and willowy Angus MacBeatha — known as Whitemane — with his shock of white hair and shrewd expression, and beside him, the hard-edged Douglas MacFayden with his scrunched and muddy face forming its usual frown, as if he found irredeemable fault with all of Scotland and would let each citizen know of their failures at least seven times a day. Hot-tempered Neily, calculating Angus and surly Douglas were the three main chieftains of the Sept clans on Mull.

“Slaughtered,” muttered Blackskull, then he quit stalking the hall to inflict them all with a barbaric grin. “Bas no Buaidh! Death or victory!”

“Speak for yerself!” grumped Douglas, and he and Neily faced off like two dogs in the same pack, bristling for dominance. “I’ll take the victory.”

The planes of Douglas’ face were roughened by age and hardship and an attitude that could only be described as cantankerous. Nobody liked him. He carried a black cloud over his head everywhere he went. It was said his flute was carved from the shinbone of a man he killed in his youth. It was well known he liked only the pipes, the ceòl mòr and the pibroch, and it was only when he made this greater music that he smiled.

He was not smiling now.

“Stave away yer girn,” he ordered, though of course he could not order Neily at all, “and get the issue! What are we to do about the maggot Red Knight and his army of lesser maggots! We need a plan!”

“Attack!” Neily urged. “They won’t expect it, the coo-faced wandocht think they have us snivelling under their grubby Sleat smeared boots!”

“They do,” Rab MacLean, third-in-command of the MacLean clan, said dryly. His hair was completely shaven from a recent head wound and his eyes seemed to glow, reflected by the fire.

“No,” Angus interjected quickly. Of the three chieftains he was the most learned. The MacBeatha line were medics, scholars and doctors. Whitemane’s blue eyes sought and held Neily’s. “We would be butchered to a man.”

“I ken that!” Neily snorted. “At least we die free. Tell me, Whitemane, are you not sick of this bondage? Are we slave or are we sovereign?”

“A straight attack will not serve,” Angus argued delicately. “We need strategy to have a chance.”

“We have nothing!” Neily lobbed his mug in the fire and it shattered. “I will split Gorm’s skull with my axe, feed him to the crows then grind his bones into flour, how is that for fucking strategy?”

Gorm counted thousands of trained men at his disposal and controlled the Gallowglass warriors — ruthless mercenaries of Norse-Gaelic descent who retained the maniacal Berserker energy of their Viking forebears. Not only was his might larger, Gorm knew a secret. The MacLeans would pay tribute, else he would expose this secret to the King of Scotland.

If exposed, half-lie or not, they would be ruined.

“Angus is right. We need sleekit and cunning. Some trick,” Lachlan said. He watched his men pace, their thick bare legs rippling with muscle, their weathered skin carrying the wind, sea, heather, and gorse in every crack. The crags around their mouths and eyes held war stories. They would fight to the death if their Laird took them to battle. With a sudden surge of love for them he would never speak aloud, Lachlan knew he wanted more for his clan.

He must lead them to life, not death.

If only he had —

The doors of the Great Hall crashed open and closed.

Gregor MacLean, first in command of the MacLean clan after Lachlan, and the Laird’s cousin, stalked in, his body language animalistic and predatory. His grey eyes swept the war council with intensity as if trying to find and kill his quarry by gaze alone. Like most of the men, he wore a thin brogue on the foot and a short red-brown buskin on the leg, tied above the calf with a strip of garters. He slammed down a chest on the table in an unexpected cloud of fury. The gathered

men startled. Gregor was a scholar and the most even-tempered of them all. What had put him in such a rage?

“Gregor, what say you?” Lachlan inquired mildly.

“What I say is that no mind of our clan has been keeping track of the coffers!” Gregor growled.

Blackskull stopped pacing. “What?”

“We have some until spring, no?” Whitemane drummed his fingers on the table like the tick of a clock unexpectedly wound down to an ugly deadline. “Not much time, but — time.”

“We passed Grant a percentage,” Blackskull reminded him crossly. They had sent Neily’s son Grant to Perth on the mainland to raise men. Lachlan entrusted the young warrior with a purse of gold to conscript soldiers to fight for their cause.

“That gold coin will bring at best fifty men,” Angus contended.

Gregor’s face was split with emotion, enraged. He rattled the chest in their faces. “None of you are listening!”

“Speak then,” Lachlan said tersely.

Gregor glared at them and shook the chest again.

No clink of metal. No sound at all. “There is none left.”

“What?”

“Why?”

“None?”

A tangle of voices rising.

“I went to the armoury to count our weapons, not to count our gold,” Gregor said, looking around the council. “Then I did count our gold, and it did not take long. Do you ken? There was nothing.” He paused heavily. “To count.”

“None?” demanded Blackskull. “Not even one fucking coin?”

“Not even one fucking coin.”

“The mealy-mouthed hound killer will want our women then,” spat Neily. Fuming, he picked up Douglas’ goblet as he had already broken his own and viciously catapulted it into the fire, disregarding his fellow chieftain’s glare. “Who was to keep track of the gold count?”

A small silence.

Their Treasurer, Lamond, had died.

“Mine,” the shaven-headed Rab said, flicking his eyes casually towards the table. He was third-in-command and loved numbers — particularly even numbers, those were the best — and had quietly taken over the job of Treasurer. He sat by the hearth stroking one of the hounds, humming carelessly. He and Gregor were brothers and looked the same: lithe bodies, grey animal eyes, angular faces. Only Rab sang a lot and seemed unconcerned about the war, about anything. Some said he was grieving.

They had all lost so much.

“Ged tha mi bochd tha mi uasal; buidheachas do dhia is ann de chlann ‘Ill eathain mi,” Rab remarked. “Though I am poor I am noble; I am glad I am a MacLean.”

“Are ye auld gabbit? By God’s bones we have tributes to pay! Why haven’t you been counting it? How could you have forgotten?” As Gregor held the chest upside down, a lone coin fell out from where it was caught in a fold of the leather.

They all stared at it. Gregor snatched it up in disgust. “A silver half groat! Bah!”

“One coin is more than no coin, mathematically speaking,” Rab said wisely. Gregor marched over and launched the chest at his brother. Rab whipped up his hands to catch it, then with a shrug, set the chest down smoothly. “Death comes to us all, it is our prime number, our final equation.”

An incredulous pause.

“You knew and said nothing?” Gregor’s face was white with rage.

“The sum of your words is correct.”

Another silence.

Rab started humming. The hound groaned happily at the stroking and rolled over, exposing his shaggy belly.

“Are ye sick? Do you need the infirmary? Are you —” Gregor spluttered and trailed off, too angry to wield words. He flicked the silver groat towards his brother and as Rab’s hands flinched up to catch it, Gregor stepped in and punched him hard in the face. The snap of knuckles meeting flesh was a surprise to them all, both from the abruptness of the act and because it was from the normally level-headed man whom they all knew was close and affectionate with his brother, his daughter and his wife.

Rab’s head whipped back with the blow and he almost fell over, cursing as he righted himself. Gregor squared up, expecting a return blow as might have happened when they tussled as kids, but Rab made no move to retaliate.

Neily stomped over, thrilled at the interruption to the council’s black brooding. As Gregor made to strike again, Neily pulled him off. “Easy hawk-eye, easy!” He was grinning.

Bothered but unruffled, Rab put a hand to his fast-swelling eye. “What would you have done differently if you knew we were out of gold?” he asked reasonably. “Numbers of zero are not even numbers, by any good arithmetic. A mathematician will tell you —”

“Confound you and yer rotting numbers!” Gregor roared. “Yer duty would be to report our situation earlier. We could have made good with a plan. Glaikit! Now we have a fortnight until the next tribute — and no gold! You have put us all in danger.”

Rab shrugged.

Gregor gripped the lone coin, his body as tense as an animal about to attack. “Our wives, our children, our daughters!” He threw a black look at his brother. “Selfish! We have all lost those we love, not only you! It is no excuse for surrender. We have a clan to shield.”

“What plan?” Rab asked mildly. “Do you need a lesson in basic arithmetic? We have seventy warriors. Even if we call on Lachlan’s brother in Moy Castle we have — maybe — one hundred and thirty. They have thousands — and the Gallowglass. What plan do you suggest? There is none that may win against these numbers. You say plan when you mean miracle.”

Once Lachlan could raise one hundred mounted cavalry and four hundred feet from north Mull alone, and twice that in a fortnight. That was before he made

all the wrong decisions and they were reduced to this moment.

“Yes, what fucking plan?” Neily asked of nobody, of everybody.

It didn’t matter that the hearth surged with flames. They were too cold, all of them, down to a man, down to the bone.

“A trick plan,” Lachlan said, getting them back on track. “We take a risk. Gregor, leave off your brother now. It is done. What say you?” Gregor was a scholar as well as a warrior and could speak five languages. He often thought of the best, most complicated strategies and Lachlan consulted him often on military tactics. Lachlan sometimes suspected that his wife Heather, a talented spinner, was Gregor’s inspiration for his more intricate strategies, though it was never acknowledged openly.

After a moment Lachlan’s second in command nodded. “Their numbers are greater as my brother has so kindly informed us. So, the plan must involve a distraction. A diversion of their forces, and a surprise attack on each separated regiment. It will be complicated. I —”

Red-haired Eileen, Gregor’s daughter and the spitting image of her fiery mother Heather, as learned and brilliant as her parents, stood up and grinned wickedly at them all, making a little pout, her freckles shining in a mischievous, wily face.

“I will be the diversion, father.”

Eileen was the only woman at the council and was counted amongst the warriors. Lachlan trusted his kinswoman with his life. None of them doubted her bravery nor skill since the day she single-handedly saved Douglas from an actual Berserker with merely a dented dirk and the luminous armour of her courage. It had become a legend. Even Douglas lost his infamous grump that day, and after the chieftain composed and sung a song of her deed at the next ceilidh, the rest of the warriors fully accepted her into their ranks, while before she had been merely tolerated. They gave her the name: *Eileen the Ravenous*.

“No, Eileen,” Gregor responded shortly. “I will not allow —”

“Yes, let her be the diversion,” Neily interrupted with a cutting bark of delight. “A woman has bosoms so she is the perfect distraction! By Brighde’s flame, how could anyone disagree with a woman’s beauty?”

There were wolf shouts of laughter all around, men drummed the table like bodhrans in appreciation and Eileen in her tunic and men’s trews curtsied mock-pretily, still grinning. Eileen was always grinning. Even when she was in skirmish, even when she was losing, even in the darkness, Eileen smiled.

It was her way.

“Our most bonnie Eileen will fight — to skeet the enemy with blood and light,” Rab sang, teasing her.

“Aye Uncle Rab,” she said sweetly, passing him a handkerchief to mop up the bit of blood trickling from his swollen eye.

“Eileen may be good to pivot a plan around,” agreed Angus with a graceful nod, and Gregor narrowed his eyes at Whitemane and looked both mutinously protective and simultaneously thoughtful.

A flurry of voices rose in argument.

“Foolish!”

“Perfect!”

“Set the Dark Sídhé on them!” joked Rab. “It’s almost Samhain!”

“Wait till Grant returns with men!”

Lachlan listened carefully, studying his clan and taking stock of their frustrated faces. Two years ago, after a successful and ruthless attack by the MacLeans, Gorm’s retaliation was so thorough and encompassing that most of the clan’s warriors died, leaving a raging, guilty Lachlan no choice but to bend knee and agree to pay tribute. To buy time. For a clan as wild and proud as his, this submission was no small task.

“Our allies are too afraid of Gorm to fight,” jeered Blackskull contemptuously. He spat on the ground. “Such a sin is unforgivable.”

“Ach, the other clans are useless,” affirmed Douglas with a grimace. “Wyrms!”

“Bind them by oath to fight for us, my Chief,” Neily urged Lachlan.

Lachlan shook his head. “Easier thought, harder to enact in time.”

“Then they are cowards,” Neily decided loudly.

“What about a stealth mission to Dún Scáith Castle, to pick off Gorm from inside?” suggested Hector.

Lachlan set eyes on his fox-like son. At sixteen winters, Hector was barely old enough to be at council. He was not a child, certainly, for he had already led his cateran on cattle raids on the mainland with rousing victory to chore the livestock, and as was the custom his band composed braggart songs of his deeds. His hair was spiky, his eyes sly and perceptive, his body strong but yet to attain its full growth. *Fiacail sìonnach* — Foxtooth — his amber-muzzled wolfhound, as intelligent as a child, sat obediently at Hector’s feet.

Foxtooth’s sister was the hound Gorm killed.

A look passed between father and son.

There was a way they could save their clan from the Snake.

Both of them knew what it was.

Nobody else at the council did.

Yesterday before riding off, Gorm called Lachlan back to make him an offer. It was repulsive. It was unacceptable. Both Lachlan and Hector would do anything other than agree. They did not even tell the council as some would surely exert pressure to accede. Lady Margaret insisted it was the only way. After hearing of it last night she icily bid her daughter towards its fulfilment, causing Beth to explode into fire and abandon the castle for the storm.

It was true they were exhausted of options.

Before Lachlan could make an answer, the door to the Great Hall crashed open.

Beth stood framed in the archway.

Identifying her instantly, the hound pack launched itself in her direction, jumping to plant her face with tongues. Foxtooth led the pack. Like his master he loved Beth without reservation.

“Down,” Beth said clearly, and every hound obediently returned four paws to the ground. Tails wagging, they followed as Beth strode further into the room, then sat, flanking her with solemn gazes. She stopped before the war council and addressed them all breathlessly, with something shining in her gaze. It was as if the sun lived in her eye and she bestowed this light wherever she looked, with every warrior now caught in this blaze of blessing and perception.

“Father,” said Beth, “Council.” Her chest heaved from running. “We are in danger. Listen.”

Silence in the Hall. Beth and Eileen, third cousins of age and best of friends, exchanged a glance. Amongst the leaders, Beth felt Brock's gaze fall upon her. Though young, Brock was fourth in command of the clan after Lachlan, Gregor and Rab. Knight-like, he was a noble warrior and a coolheaded, righteous man. Three nights ago, he asked Beth, "May I kiss your palm?"

"Nae," Beth had said.

Now she felt his courteous eyes upon her.

Everyone else was staring at her as well.

Staring not because the war council was offended at the interruption. Rather Beth's beauty was magnetic, like a mystery that compelled one's attention. As though the flame of Brighde, the queen of Elfhame, had entered upon her birth on Imbolc, the festival on February the first, and taken up permanent residence in the subtle lodge of her body. Red-gold hair, eyes that saw the unseen cosmos, the flinty cheekbones of a warrior, a rose mouth that could bloom poetry or speak thunder. The limbs of a mythical creature and a graceful bearing as though she was a dancer in the midst of a storm. Her love for her clan was an emanation from the truest parts of her, a feeling the others always recognized.

Beth's face was shining with sweat, purple streaks on her chin.

"A 'bruidhinn air an diabhall!" Lachlan smiled. Farsight shifted on the Laird's arm and flew to Beth's shoulder, settling quietly. "Beth, my flower! Are you hale?"

"Aye," Beth replied. "I was at the ocean —" She paused to collect her breath. "On the hillocks by Tobar Mhoire bay."

"Too dangerous to be so far from Duart without guard!" Lachlan reprimanded.

"My daughter —"

"Father," she interrupted, then fell silent to survey them all.

"What is it?" Brock asked sharply.

Tension jerked through the room.

Still Beth did not speak. Farsight chittered.

Eileen's mouth twisted in a smile. "Come cousin, unspool the yarn!"

One of the hounds whined.

Farsight's talons dug into her skin as she told them. "There is a warship anchored just off the coast of Tobar Mhoire bay."

The smile vanished from Big Lachlan's face. He was instantly on his feet. Foxtooth made an odd, high-pitched noise as the energy in the room recoiled. "A ship! Has the sassanach Queen finally come to claim the —"

"No." Beth cut him off. Nobody could cut off Big Lachlan other than his daughter. She was as big in spirit as he. "Not an English ship."

"Then who?" Their quiet island of Mull had no large vessel for trade, no stocks of gold to steal, no treasure to plunder. So few resources other than the magic and mystery of Mull itself, the sacred moors and holy hillocks, the esoteric power of the divine land encoded with mystique and sentience — but these things could not be stolen.

"'Tis one of the unassailable Armada — a Spanish Man O'War."

Lachlan's fingers curled around the hilt of his sword. He was always ready. For Lachlan the blade was always there to rely on, like the seasons or the sun and moon. Beth stared into the strength shining undefeated in her father's hazel eyes, seeing foremost the way he always loved her: relentless, steady and without ever saying so. She saw new lines on his weathered face, the copper and now white in the tangled hair.

He had fought for so long. They all had.

And they always would.

Beth knew it.

"They must have fled the battle at Gravelines," Neily deduced. "No warship would be here for any reason save having the English Navy on their tails." In late summer they received news that the Spanish Armada attacked the English at the north of France.

Lachlan stood swiftly. "Our lands will not turn into a battleground. They are the Queen's enemy thus they are King James' enemy and our foe as well. We will kill these Spaniards now."

A round of accord rang out high into the cathedral ceiling. The warriors rose, adjusted broadswords and targes, checked the angle of their scabbards. As Hector moved to stand beside Beth, she caught her brother's keen gaze and remembered last night: she had been telling him about her dream — the two of them always shared their dreams.

She had dreamed of a secret clan of fire.

*Clann Teine. Fire Clan.*

And a secret clan of darkness who opposed them.

*The Síl Olc Clan.*

In the dream she knelt before the embers of a fire that coiled into a mystic red thread. The red thread unspooled from the fire and danced like a living web across the universe, uniting a hidden enclave of souls scattered across time and

space. Each member of the clan carried the sacred knowledge of the *snakeskin embers*, the fire of sap and soul and life itself, the incandescent, ancient knowledge of origins. The dragon blood. The power that would allow them to take back earth from the Súl Olc Clan's dark agenda. And return her people to the light.

Beth grew up with this story: she had always known it. The story was woven into the legends the Bards sang. A myth, a magic. But she never dreamed of it before. She had never — lived it. It was just a story.

In the embers the form of a Light Sídhé took shape and Beth shook in awe from the luminous being's otherworldly presence. The Taudhe d'Anu were the Gods and Goddesses of creation, the indescribable beings who wielded the Fire of Song, the Air of Knowledge, the Earth of Making, the Water of Dance, and the sevenfold secret of the snake-bird creation.

They held the Great Mystery within their eyes.

Their Songs created the planets.

They were said to live deep within the earth in another time and dimension, and all of them were connected to one another through a web of mind-fire.

**"You are us"** the Light Sídhé said, shining, shining. It held out its hand. Beth took the offered radiant thread — it was burning her mind but it did not hurt her palm. It shone with the codes of the sun, with the fire of the ancients. With the dragon embers. It shone with love.

A light bond between them.

"Who are you?" Beth whispered.

***"You. We are merely you — on the other side of time, on the inverse dimension of space. Re-ember. Remember"***

"Remember what?"

***"The light thread that connects those who wield Love. The red thread that unites every heart and every foot of our clan of fire."***

"How do I remember?"

***"Follow the song of the red thread. Hold the fire, rekindle the Fire Seers."***

"Are you the Fire Clan?"

***"You are. Re-light the last flame against the darkness of the Súl Olc Clan. Take the light into their stronghold of darkness. You are now commissioned."***

The Light Sídhé faded, the fire flared, the dragon embers glowed.

Starry-eyed with the marvel of the dream's potent vibration, wondering if this Light Sídhé was Brighde herself, an electrified Beth was telling Hector of this magic when her mother interrupted with Gorm's proposal and the commandment to accept it, an iron-heavy reality intruding upon the lightness of such inner

wonder.

Clann Teine.

Just last night.

It felt like a century ago.

The hound pack felt the energy in the room shift and scrambled to wait vigilant at the door, panting, ears up. Neily drew, inspected, then sheathed his claymore; Douglas cracked his knuckles and stretched his bad knee; Angus stood dispassionately, observing them all as though gathering clues to an event yet to unfold; Gregor moved to stand at Eileen's side as if to shield his daughter from what was to come; Brock watched Beth still; Lachlan called for his young gille Eanraig to strap him into his chainmail.

Beth raised her hand. "No." The directive rang out and stopped the men mid-stride.

In their pause was surprise.

They wanted to move forth but they were willing to hear her out. Beth's mystical nature was well known in the clan, ever since the time she was young and the incident with the wild fox. Wounded and dangerous, the animal attacked six-year-old Hector, ripping out his throat. Beth reached him in time and healed Hectors' mortal wound.

Instantaneously.

And then healed the fox.

Angus witnessed this miracle, otherwise it may have been dismissed as a tall tale. For who could believe such a thing? Though she could not seem to replicate this healing power at will, there were other oddities about the chief's daughter, especially around fire. There was talk in the clan: she was born under a shooting star on the Goddess' own festival, she held power over fire, she was the light of the legends they knew. Some of them did not like it, for they knew King James with his hatred of witches, also would not like it.

She stared at the council and this sibylline flame was in her eye. "We won't kill dying men." Beth spoke with an ancient potency, as if her words were fueled by an original source. "There's a dead man hanging from the rails. I think it's a ghost ship."

"Beth, you didn't board —"

"I didn't! I went close enough to see. I —"

Blackskull interrupted. "If that ship is abandoned or the crew dead, the supplies are for the taking."

"Salvage their arms," agreed Gregor quickly. "They'll be carrying gunpowder and Spanish muskets, maybe even fine pistols if we're lucky."

“And kill any alive,” added Neily, eyeing Beth to see if he had provoked her.

“Kill no Spaniard,” insisted Beth. She fixed the flame-haired chieftain with a hard stare. “I forbid it.”

Lachlan made a shrill whistle and Farsight extended the knives of her feathers, left Beth, and returned to the Laird’s arm. There was a flurry of voices which Lachlan cut through. “Wheesht. We will see,” he allowed his daughter curtly. “If they fight, we will fight.”

Beth drew herself up like a Queen, the proud jut of the jaw, a gesture she and her father shared, the sulky pout of the lower lip, leftover yet from childhood. “Perhaps mercy may be the better choice, Father.”

Lachlan grunted. “Prepare the horses.”

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Outside the castle in the glittering sun with the blue-green ocean in view, the MacLean and Sept warriors gathered on horseback amidst the fresh tang of sea salt. The horses caught the high energy of the warriors and flung their noses up and down, sidestepping and arching their necks. Hooves tattooed the dirt. It was a relief for all of them when they took off at a zipping canter away from the castle, Lachlan astride War Dog, his prodigious black charger, Hector above the quick grey Thunderhead.

War Dog, Thunderhead, and Epona shared the same storm-crossed sire, Lachlan’s legendary stallion *Rìgh Gaidhealach*, the Highland King, who died screaming like a hero in the blood of battle two years back from a MacDonald blade to the face. The lineage through the King was a proud bloodline, always producing the most intelligent war horses with the most courageous hearts, a breeding program now directed by Hector. He and his mentor, Duncan ni Teath, had been crossing light Highland ponies, heavy draft garrons, and some of the racehorses Hector raided from the mainland. King James liked his racehorses and imported Arabians, Berbers and Dutch stock. The crosses were producing results that for the MacLeans was an exemplary herd of horses.

The three chieftains were given horses of this same lineage. Douglas rode *Seabhag Mara*, Seahawk, a chestnut charger with white stockings, and Angus rode his sister, the willowy *Fuil Mara*, Seablood. Neily rode *Cogadh Mara*, Seawar, another sibling, black and enormous and savage with humour like Blackskull himself; right now, the stallion’s ears were pinned flat to his skull and the horse bore a sly look in the feral roll of the eye. The wrinkle of the muzzle suggested he would bite anything stupid or unwary enough to get close to his teeth, which Hector liked to joke were fanged. Everybody gave Seawar and Neily a wide berth.

But now over half of their magnificent herd was gone.

Given in tribute to the Snake.

The hounds sacrificed too.

What did they have left? Was it their courage?

Wind lengthened Beth's hair as they galloped. She felt strong with her father and brother beside her and their warriors behind. Led by Foxtooth, the hound pack raced alongside. The fields of heather, first nothing more than a blur of purple in the distance, like a smeared painting, sharpened in contrast as they galloped along the coast towards the northeastern tip of Mull. About an hour later they pulled up to a sweaty halt where the hillock met the shore of Tobar Mhoire bay, all of them, human and beast alike, breathing hard from the run.

Eileen reined in beside Epona and flashed her sun-shiny, irrepressible smile at Beth. "One day I'll get my fat old war charger to run as fast as your wee night-marked pony," she joked to Beth.

"Good luck," Beth replied with a wink.

Eileen rolled her eyes. "Och, maybe not."

Beth noticed Hector staring at Eileen. It wasn't the first time she had noticed the intensity of her brother's moody gaze on her kinswoman. She was sure: Hector was in love. All the warriors fell for Eileen — at least once. Brock had, but he was too much the virtuous Knight to enjoy Eileen's irreverent cheek and crude humour and transferred his affections to the more innocent Beth. After refusing him the kiss, Brock wrote Beth a poem. He courteously requested a moonlit walk. "Will you do me the honour?" A half-bow.

She refused.

Not because Brock wasn't strong or good or kind or perfect — he was the best of the clan, a grace in his bearing like animal royalty — but because Beth had always known in her blood something she could explain to nobody. She was meant for something else.

Someone else.

Dismounting, the warriors left the horses along the edge of hillock and shore. Beth stroked her mare on the cheekbone, whispered sweet Gaelic into her ear. "Bi go maith, ceann milis." Be good, sweetheart. Epona exhaled and Beth let the air from the mare's nostrils warm her fingers, let the mere fact of Epona enflame her heart and wing her courage.

*Strong-like-bear-be*, Epona cautioned.

"I will."

Near Beth, Hector stroked the sweaty, tawny head of a panting Foxtooth. "Keep the pack here," he instructed the dog. At Lachlan's command, Hector and a pack of the warriors left to gather ken-curved galley longboats from a nearby hitch. These small birlinns with twelve oars and square sails, clinker-built and

descended from the Norse *byrdingr*, the ship of boards, were scattered around the shores of Mull, a precautionary action should the clan one unforeseen day need to make a quick escape from their home for whatever cruel-tipped war-torn reason the universe could conceive of on a bad day.

The dawn mist was burned off from the sun. It was obvious now that the once great ship was a wreck. This was a graveyard.

“It’s dead in the water,” observed Rab, chewing on a piece of grass. “At least one of the Spanish Armada down, how many of the rest survived?”

“None, probably. Look at the mast, it’s a bloody stump,” retorted Gregor.

“The broken sails will be perfect for a bonfire,” observed Blackskull.

“It’s going tae sink even before we can even kill anyone,” grumped Douglas.

When the men returned with the galleys, both leaders and warriors boarded and the boats slipped soundlessly through the bay towards a warship silhouetting a still purple sky. Cannon ball and gunshot had left the hull of the ship riddled with holes and thick splinters of wood protruding from the main skeleton. A gust of wind left over from the previous night’s storm lifted the frayed flag of the Spanish Armada — proof this galleon once sailed proudly in front of the entire world as a haughty, conquering member of the imperial naval legion of Spain.

And was now this husk.

How far things can fall.

How the world can change.

Beside Beth in one of the galleys, Eileen gave a low whistle and arched an eyebrow at the corpse of the ship. “They must have sailed through hell and back.”

There was not a sound on the ship, only the voices of the elements: sky and bird, the strike of the water at the hull.

“Be careful,” Beth told her. “The anchor is lowered. Somebody was alive on this vessel, at least when they got here.” It paid to be cautious and it paid to caution Eileen, who owned naught a wary bone in her body. Beth was surprised Eileen was still alive and not yet toasting the rest of them from the Halls of the Dead; her cousin was all bold forward-motion and had not yet heard tell of the word *careful* or *maybe you shouldn’t do that*.

“Aye, silly! I always am.”

It was an outrageous lie.

With a slap of water their galleys drew up beside the warship and the men threw their hooked ropes at the ship’s rail. Lachlan was the kind of leader who always commanded from the front and he surged forward, bear-like and vast yet still able to shimmy up the rope through sheer force of will. Hector tore his gaze from Eileen and followed, as did most of the others, all disappearing over the

guardrail with a few remaining in the galleys. Beth slid her bow from her back. She would remain on the birlinn, alert with arrows ready; her father had forbade her to board the ship.

“Be careful,” she whispered again to Eileen. She sniffed the air and her stomach turned. What was that smell?

Eileen flaunted a cocky smile. “When am I not?” She spoke quietly, not willing to interrupt the mission with noise. In case.

In case of something.

One never knows what to expect.

For as the world turns, it surprises.

“Whenever you aren’t sleeping.”

“I’m wounded,” crowed Eileen, a little too loud, then leaped from the boat, and dramatically catching the rope like an acrobat in a play, crawled up to the soundless sound of Beth rolling her eyes in exasperation and delight.

A young Eileen was enraptured by tales of brave Shield Maidens and their Viking techniques. At nine years old she began showing up to the men’s training. Every day demanding to be taught and every day overlooked, until, amused at her dogged persistence after months of insults and disregard, Gregor and Rab started to teach her. Now Eileen was one of the most prized warriors of the clan. Her reputation was to throw caution to the wind in favour of getting the job done: and she always did. She was fiery-haired, impulsive, quick to laugh, quick to forgive, quick to fall in and out of love and could wield her sword with the precision of a surgeon. Full of life and cheek like her mother Heather.

Beth adored her.

When she got to the top, Eileen, unlike the others, was not silent at what she saw. “Cac! By the Goddess of death, by Cailleach Bhéara!”

“What? Eileen, what?” Beth secured her bow and grasped the rope to board the ship. It was against her father’s direct orders. She was supposed to stay, first on shore, and then after a quiet argument with her father in which Beth’s infamous stubborn mule planted its four feet in position, on the birlinn.

Beth took no heed to commands.

She shimmied up the rope and hooked a leg over the rim of the warship.

Eileen flung one arm out. “Get back, Beth!” It was too late. The horror was spread out before Beth’s eyes and the putrid smell was an assault; her stomach turned in protest. The stench of rotting flesh lay thick in the air. She clamped her mouth shut against the rising bile.

“Dear Brighde, have mercy on them,” Beth whispered. She pressed fingers to her lips and grimaced to control the nausea. Dead bodies were strewn across the deck, the aftermath of storm or battle. Torn clothing soaked by salt-water revealed their flesh was pulled tight over bone, the spongy skin sickly-white like dead bloated whales.

“These poor men and this foul smell,” remarked Eileen matter-of-factly, without much feeling. She lowered the arm she had raised as a barrier to her cousin. It was no use. Now on board, there would be no getting Beth to leave.

The others had gone below deck to see if anybody was alive. Beth walked the deck with Eileen, Stephan and Kelly, all of whom stayed above. Stephan was the clan’s apprentice Seanchaí and Bard, his soulful eyes compassionate. Beth saw him grimacing through his thick brown beard — and pocketing a Spanish pistol from the hip of one of the dead. He saw Beth watching and made a face as if to say *well he certainly doesn’t need it anymore*.

“They must have sailed through last night’s storm,” Stephan ventured.

“A stupid idea,” Kelly said. “It was murderous. Are Spaniard’s dull-witted, do you think?”

Kelly, as level-headed as his father Neily was hot-headed, was doing a headcount of the dead sailors and keeping an eye on Beth. Just one eye — the other had been sliced in battle and the scar extended vertically to his jaw. Unlike his father, he wore no eye patch. His face always startled the one apprehending it, with the striking blue tattoo of an eagle splashed like paint across the entire right side and the blind white eye on the left. This with his thorn-tangled hair made Kelly look as wild as a Pict. Some thought Kelly had lost his vision but the young warrior claimed to see life more clearly now.

“Nine, ten, eleven,” he continued.

“There’s thirteen, I already counted,” interrupted Stephan.

“One,” began Kelly again irritably.

Beth looked round for young Neil as her three foster brothers were often together, and realised he would be with her father. Young Neil had been recently promoted to the *luchd-tagh*, Lachlan’s bodyguard of which he was currently the sole member, and now for no particular reason, convinced the clan possessed a traitor, was never more than two and a quarter steps from the Laird’s side.

Beth looked away from the bodies, then forced herself to look right at them like a physician, the way a healer would look. Some were grotesque corpses, but — might any of them be still alive?

She saw it. There — the owner of the skeletal hand strung out between the railing of the forecastle. Beth knelt beside the sailor to touch the nape of his neck. No pulse. He was as dead as the rest of them.

“He’s just a boy,” Beth said softly, pushing down on his eyelids to close them.

“Unhand him,” snarled a distinctly accented voice, a voice that made Beth’s heart leap into the sky. An arm seized Beth from behind, hauling her back, crushing her against a hard chest so hot it felt like an oven. A blade followed the grip, pressing her jugular.

The metal: cold and unyielding.

The body behind her: hot — too hot — and alive.

He must have feigned death when they boarded. Beth was immobilised, with no way to reach for her concealed sgian-dubh, the hidden short blade at her armpit.

*Breathe.*

Across the deck, Eileen drew her bow and aimed it at the eye of their enemy. Sunlight glinted off the hand-crafted tip of her arrow. “Unhand her!” She repeated the Spaniard’s words almost exactly, an asymmetrical echo.

Beth’s heart pounded against the confines of her chest.

“Don’t touch him!” said the man thickly, emotion guttering from his voice, even though nobody was even near the dead sailor anymore, and his words became a demented repetition.

“Don’t touch him, don’t touch them!” His feverish grip tightened. A pained rasp to his words. A delirium in the tone. “I will slit your throat if you touch my crew, don’t touch my crew!”

*My crew.*

It was the capitán then.

A good capitán’s loyalty would be fierce. Even to men who did not need his loyalty, as their souls had clearly fled the scene. A capitán who hadn’t died with the rest of his crew; he would be ashamed, then. Men liked to pride themselves by going down with a sinking ship.

A shamed man was dangerous.

A man in the seethe of madness, even more so. Was he even in his right mind?

Any response Beth might have made was cut off by sudden high-pitched

yapping. A scrawny, ratty looking terrier came dashing up from the underbelly of the ship. It was small, barely shank high. Chunky knots of grey fur covered its emaciated frame. The dog crouched, snarling as if to defend the entire ship.

The tramp of feet.

“Don’t,” warned Beth, unsure if she was speaking to the man holding her or the starved mongrel. With a growl the terrier heaved itself at Douglas’ feet as he came up from below, sinking its teeth into the chieftain’s boot, its guttural sounds muffled by the leather.

“Quit, ye scrubby little half hound!” snarled Douglas, grabbing the dog by the scruff of the neck. Teeth tore off from boot with a rip. Douglas wasn’t fond of yapping dogs, or any animal or person or reason to smile for that matter, and he was even less fond of this mission. “Ye scabby wee beast!” In two steps he was at the edge of the quarter deck and cast the dog overboard.

Beth’s heart seized as the knife lifted, cutting her.

“Name yourself!” the man holding her demanded, his grip like iron. He made no remark for the terrier, perhaps knowing it would swim. Or simply too shocked to register it.

Too used to death.

As the rest of the Highlanders emerged from below deck, they jolted to an uncomfortable realisation of the situation. Beth threatened an awake Spaniard — the only one fully conscious. The rest of the foreign crew were below: groggy and a few half-awake, most passed out, ill, or wounded. Now on deck, every MacLean weapon was aimed at the Spaniard, who did not seem to care.

“Step away from my sister or I will kill you.” Hector slipped across the deck, quietly moving closer to his sister, murder in his eyes. Kelly and Stephan, who had grown up as Beth’s brothers in all but blood, bore focused expressions and stood stock still, their arrows nocked and aimed at the Spaniard.

Beth knew something they all did not.

She wanted this man alive.

She needed something from him — for them all.

This nebulous intuition, half-formed, nestled inside the chamber of her heart like a golden conviction. Which meant she must soothe the entire situation on both sides.

“Put down your weapons,” she commanded her kin, inflecting calm into her voice. “He is simply confused.”

There was a short silence, nobody wanting to obey her.

Hector moved closer.

“I mean it. Do not shoot him, *that’s an order.*” The arm around her neck

squeezed, and Beth shifted her energy towards soothing the man who held her hostage. “Capitán. I am Beth MacLean of clan MacLean.” The blade pressed her throat with every syllable. “You are in Mull, Scotland. This is MacLean territory.” She forced her voice to be serene, every word balanced, tone steady so as to transfer that steadiness to an unbalanced man with a knife.

Calm is contagious.

Even when one is trembling, one can be brave.

“Drop your weapons,” Beth ordered her unsettled warriors again. They fidgeted. She rarely gave a command twice. Nobody wanted to disobey, but nobody wanted to be responsible for her death — the Spaniard could kill her in seconds with an upward twist of his wrist. She heard his intake of air near her neck, and the shiver moved through all of her.

Some of her warriors lowered their weapons as she requested and some did not, though conflict pulsed through their eyes.

“Drop your knife and step away from my sister.” Hector had come around the deck and was now the closest to them. Beth caught his eye, trying to silently caution him. *Hector: no. This Spaniard must live.* She saw a spark of understanding in Hector’s eyes, but he did not lower the bow aimed at the foreigner’s face.

“Did you send for the English?” the Spaniard asked.

“No,” said Beth. “We did not. We didn’t come here to harm you, or any crew you might have left.”

“Any crew I have left?” His voice caught and faltered, and his grip around Beth’s waist loosened. “My crew is strong. We are healthy. Send me Matias, I want to talk to him right away.”

“Yes, of course,” Beth agreed smoothly. She had to quieten his energies, gain his trust, and distract him, so the knife at her throat would not kill her. “Your crew would not have made it if they were weak. You are a strong leader, to bring them this far. You have done well.” Eileen’s aim was steady, and Beth caught her kinswoman’s eyes.

*No, Eileen. Do not.*

A sudden *thwang* startled all of them and the Spaniard jolted back. Hector had shot. But not the skull. The arrow lodged in the shoulder.

The blade at her neck dropped. “Yes. My crew is strong. Send Matias to me. Send José, por favor. Send Padre Franco.”

His grip fell away and he slumped forward. Beth twisted one arm around his waist to stop his fall. She curled her other hand in the front of his button down, swinging him around to face her. The sudden revelation of who he was startled her: the breadth of his shoulders, the bird-like cut of his bones under his dark copper skin, the hollow, glowing eyes like hot coals. Handsome, even with a

badly mangled face and grey smears under his eyes like the scales of a snake. Even with a tree-like cut branching the length of his cheek and other wounds mottling his expression, the angry skin around them red with infection. Even half starved, dying and now with an arrow implanted in his shoulder, which he ignored. And he did not look entirely Spanish. Some other race also shone from his bronzed face and lineage. Moor blood?

He straightened up. Their eyes locked and for a moment the capitán was in his right mind. He gave a command that in spite of his weakened state, reverberated with power. "Save my men," he told Beth, the voice rich, accented, and inflected with Spanish music. "They must live. I have promised they shall live."

She took in the full force of his gaze.

Delirious as he was, the black eyes were an assault of recognition and Beth's body was electrified with a sensation she had never experienced in her life, a physical torment, as if she was on fire and the world was on fire, as if she were facing her first and last enemy, as if she had found what she sought the whole of her life and in every lifetime. She was frozen in shock. In wonder and light. And he said something, he said "You are my first and final love, my love, my love, hold me in the light," and Beth's heart exploded into shrapnel and octaves of reality, he whispered this as he stared at her, or no — did she just imagine it? — and then he stumbled.

Beth caught him. She was no weakling. Still, he was a big man and there was an undeniable size difference between them. It didn't matter; Beth refused to let him fall.

"*Sálvalos!*" he cried. "*Sálvalos! Sálvalos!*" He fainted.

Beth snapped at Hector, livid at him for the arrow. "Help me." Hector, Eileen and Beth lowered the now unconscious Spaniard to the deck, and Stephan and Kelly rushed to help as well.

"I knew we should have —" began Douglas.

"Stop," warned Beth, cutting him off. They glared. "It was just a dying dog, was that necessary? We're not the bloodthirsty English." She looked at her people. "We'll take them back with us and heal them in the infirmary. How many below deck live?"

"A handful more than one hundred," Lachlan said as he came up now from the galley with the rest of the men. "Lady Margaret, if I ken, will not be pleased to see us return with dying Spaniards."

Beth was still furious with her mother and waved this off impatiently. "It is our moral duty to provide sanctuary."

"Why bother? They are near dead. Let them complete their last task," Douglas argued churlishly. "What do we care for Spaniards?"

"Beth is right, father." Hector always took his sister's side. "God sees our

mercy, or our lack of it.”

“They are enemies, fools! Let them die,” Douglas insisted, his face scrunching into black clouds. It was true. In fact by King, crown and law, to save these Spaniards would be an act of war against their own monarch.

“Tis the bounds of our duty under God and the Earth Mother Cailleach Bhéara, to heal them,” Beth countered hotly, petulance rising into her tone. She hated to be denied anything. And she was *right*. How could anyone talk of letting human beings rot to death on a boat? It was inhumane.

A terse silence followed.

“Let them die,” Douglas repeated testily. “This is a time of war and they be foe. Waste resources on enemies? Bah!”

“We will take their armaments and they will take their souls to God,” agreed Blackskull, looking quite the pirate with his eye-patch and now sauntering across an enormous galleon. He shrugged offhandedly. “They’re already mostly gone.”

“Let them live,” Beth snapped. “It is our God given duty! Gather them up.” Her temper flared as she crouched by the captain, her palm around Hector’s arrow, ready to pull it out. “Do as I say. Gather them up to the birlinns, fetch more if more are needed. Now!”

A silence.

They could not overtly refuse her.

All eyes looked to Lachlan.

“We could ransom them,” Angus suggested reasonably. “After they are healed.”

Gregor nodded. “Whitemane’s right. Send word to England we have apprehended their enemy. We may gain favour and resources.”

Rab stood beside his brother, nodding too; apparently they had reconciled. “They may confer a good monetary reward,” he said. “And mathematically speaking — ”

“Yes,” agreed Lachlan, cutting off any further calculations. “We will take them as prisoners.”

“No! My Lord — ” Beth knew they were far more than that. Why could nobody ever see what she saw? In this crew she saw — the salvation of her entire clan. She saw — a sphere of gold. She saw — a glowing apple that was the centre of all things.

She looked at the capitán.

She saw *him*. What he truly was, and she trembled at it. Words could not be found.

Were they all blind?

“Enough,” Lachlan said sharply, cutting Beth off. “We will save what men we can, under God. As political prisoners. We will not put ourselves at risk against the crown of Scotland, or England besides. King James and Queen Elizabeth are far off, but we will not separate ourselves from them so casually.” Lachlan looked round and began to bark commands.

They would take the Spaniards home.

They would restore them — if they could.

Douglas’ muddy face was twisted up and he began to quietly argue with Lachlan as around them began a frenzy of motion. Many of the Spaniards had already passed, their souls slipped away to whatever heavens or hells existed. Beth moved from sailor to sailor to check for pulses. Each time awaiting the next unsteady breath.

*Save my crew*, the captain had asked.

Commanded.

Even dying, the man’s authority and vigour was a force unto itself.

“I will,” Beth promised quietly.

“Beth,” Hector called. “Look at this.” He was pointing to the captain’s socks, visible as the leg of his uniform had ridden up. “Your dream.”

The sock was black with grime and no doubt full of holes. One of the holes was mended, oddly, with a thick poppy coloured thread that might have been pulled from a rug or a blanket, and the red thread shone against the black material, shone blood and luminous and woven amidst the darkness of the world.

***“The red thread that unites every heart and every foot of our clan of fire,”*** the Light Sídhé had said.

The red thread that united the Fire Clan.

Clann Teine.

“You dreamed him,” Hector said.

“You must marry him for the good of the clan. I instruct you to the duty you should yourself choose.”

Her mother’s cold words, spoken last night with irreversible authority, replayed themselves over and over, and in her mind, Beth gave answer to this heartless attack every time:

*No! How can you ask it of me? Even for the clan? Shall I debase myself in ruin that the clan may be free? How can the clan live in honour if I live in shame? I will never! Never in a thousand times ten thousand years!*

Gorm MacDonald was a monster — nobody would argue with that.

The Snake.

What kind of mother would make her daughter marry not just an enemy, but one as perverse and vile as the Red Knight of Sleat?

He let his men pillage and rape and pretended courtesy. He stabbed from behind. It was rumoured he employed his cousins as Torturers in his castle to extract information about any uprising against him. He paid turncoats within clans to gather information and betray their own families. In twisted humour he sent rotting gifts of beheaded mice to Beth.

He was awful. And her mother was too, for she was not even asking, she was dictating. Beth fumed. She slid her hand into her medicine pouch to compose herself and cast her mother from her mind. Her fingers grazed the onyx stone Lady Margaret gave her when Beth became a woman. She sighed and squeezed it as hard as she could.

The sun flickered on the water.

“What did the captain say to you?” Kelly asked as he and the other warriors rowed the galleys south along the coast.

“Nothing,” Beth lied.

“Was it in Spanish? I heard him say something, after our favourite Horse Master shot him.” Kelly flicked eyes to Hector, but Hector was rowing and staring across the water at Eileen.

“He spoke English well,” Stephan commented. “If he doesn’t die, we can teach him Gaelic.”

“He will live.” Beth knew what they did not. She was electrified by an unspoken inner promise.

“Gid looking too, aye?” teased Kelly, but Beth wasn’t listening. A seagull landed unexpectedly on the birlinn’s rim, crying at a pitch that rang through her third eye. Beth recoiled. It tucked its white wings and met Beth’s gaze.

*Crack.*

With a splitting wrench of realities, Beth was abruptly looking through the eyes of not just this seagull but of all seagulls everywhere, as if each gull was a part — or a feather — of one vast, singular Bird Entity. Images surged rapidly, and Beth was overwhelmed by a pandemonium of information from too many eyes: sea and cliff and shadow and fish across all of Mull. It was too much.

She blinked to narrow the focus. “One at a time, please,” she said aloud.

“Eh?” Kelly asked.

The vision obeyed and contracted. Now Beth was looking through the eyes of one avian, a gull who happened to be perched on its webbed crimson feet on the fat ledge of a bay window looking into Duart Castle. Inside the window she saw her mother, and she saw inside her mother’s mind.

“Och,” Beth exclaimed in dismay.

This type of vision happened sometimes. Never by Beth’s command, always randomly, as if the codes of light were ingrained within her, as if Brighde’s crown was Beth’s by divine lineage but she had yet to bring forth the conscious skills of what her body already knew by heart.

Dòideag had taught her: “If the magic comes to the surface, use it, and increase your skill so one day it be at your command. If the magic does not come, pfffh! Who cares! Brew some heather tea and bring me a cup.”

For Beth, an animal’s eyes — usually a bird — often began this type of remote vision, but once she held the scene the creature became unnecessary. Beth *Watched*, though she did not want to. She was still furious with her mother. She wanted to smack her cold, stony-proud face and make her see reason.

The injustice of it. The utter unfairness. The *tyranny*.

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Lady Margaret, regal and stiff-backed, sat at the small desk in her chambers, writing in careful calligraphy, her face a complicated mask of pain. Another of her headaches, they had plagued her for years, and no herbs eased them. She tried to extend her inhale and exhale to relax. It was no use: racing thoughts of her daughter and this new complication of a Spanish warship caused another contraction to lance across her occipital bone.

“When Lachlan kisses you, does it help your headaches?” asked Heather, Gregor’s wife. “When they return, I’ll tell him to come to your chambers.” She was embroidering in a chair near Margaret’s desk.

Margaret put down her pen and raked slender, ringed fingers across her temples. A small smile began as she thought of Lachlan’s lips, for her Lord’s attentions indeed helped her headaches. Then she remembered their heated

argument last night and grew cold. She shook her head sternly.

“Come, tell me,” Heather insisted. “Where does he kiss you? What is his kiss like? It will take your mind off things.”

“Nothing will take my mind off things.”

“What if I kissed you?” Heather asked mischievously. She was just like her daughter Eileen: sensual, irreverent, without shame. “Would that take your mind off things?”

Margaret blushed, glad her back was to her kinswoman. Her mind was a knot of worry. There were too many conflicts: the threat of the Fire and Sword proscription, the increasing tributes leaching their clan of wealth, and now this Spanish warship on their coast. If Gorm decided to speak to the crown about witchcraft on Mull, they were doomed. King James had sparked the hysteria of the witch hunt since even before his accession. He had informed his magistrates that witchcraft was high treason not just against the king but against God.

And it was not witchcraft on *Mull*.

It was her daughter.

What magic was her own daughter. What childish, stubborn selfishness. She was a wild fae creature growing up — demanding her own way, lighting fires inadvertently with her mind even as young as four years old, vowing on her own truths as higher than everybody else’s — and was still.

Would that she become a woman.

Would that she temper the fires of passion with adulthood.

Margaret startled as Heather came up behind her to touch her neck in a massage, her fingers slipping along the muscles to her ears, pulling them up and down gently, gliding across her shoulders and upper arms.

“Just breathe, just feel. It will be well.”

Margaret sighed, relaxing into her friend’s touch. The soft fingers on her skin did indeed help. Heather alternated massaging deeply and feathering lightly, and then, dancing down from the collarbone, she trailed her fingers slowly across the tops of Margaret’s breasts. Desire thrust through Margaret, the sudden fire of every nerve.

“You like?” Heather purred.

Margaret did not respond. Her eyes were closed, her breathing accelerating.

“Tell me you like it.”

Margaret was writing a poem — *slantwise along the shore of healing, where the footprints of the fox* — it began, though she had no idea why; she had not written poems since she was pregnant with Beth. She blinked, staring down at the alien words on the page. They made no sense. Then her body flushed with surprise as

Heather dropped a hand right into the front of her bodice, cupping her breast, massaging it, playing with the nipple.

“Let me kiss your nipples.”

Her headache vanished. Her thoughts fled. She let out a little sound.

Heather’s other hand came down to her other breast and squeezed them both. Margaret was too surprised and aroused to immediately react, other than to let it happen, as if she was caught in a sudden trance. It felt good, the rush of sensation, the heat spreading to her thighs, the drop in her belly. Quickly, her formality and breeding reasserted itself and she stood up, breaking their contact.

“Heather, really. What are you even doing? This is silly.” Her heart was racing.

“Yet you like it. You want my mouth, too. My tongue. Think of it.”

Margaret would not.

The poem on the desk stared at her. The fox. The healing. Her fingers crushed the paper and she forced her mind away from the feelings Heather aroused, back to the problems with Beth. She loved her daughter like she loved the sun and the moon. Every time she looked at her, she saw her younger self. Their piercing avian eyes always cutting through to the heart of the matter, their proud faces, the unrelenting jaw like something shaped in a fierce forge.

Their inner fire, both lit and always too hot.

The two of them always clashed, butted head on head and heart on heart. Beth, refusing to do her duty in the name of *freedom*. But what was freedom without responsibility, without the clan’s future assured? It was the freedom a child had and nothing more.

Beth must submit to the Red Knight to save their clan.

When Lady Margaret commanded Beth to do what Beth should have done without the command, she saw it: the sulkiness crossed Beth’s face, the stubborn selfish jut of the jaw, the sparked insistence in her eyes on *freedom at any cost*, the childish pout, and Beth flinging down her hot-headed refusals — *Bas no Buaidh!* — then punctuating the petulance by smashing things, including Margaret’s favourite glass figurine of a child holding a swan given by her father, the Earl of Glencairn.

Beth was —

A seagull at her window volunteered a rude, indignant squawk and Margaret jumped imperceptibly. At the same time her chamber door launched open without knock or warning and she startled again, though her good breeding and perfect manners did not allow her to show it and she masked the surprise with a smooth, courteous nod as turned, and she and Heather faced their intruder.

The offender was Robert MacLean, a young page who bowed awkwardly. His plaid was askew, and the twine used to tie up his socks was falling off his

calves.

“Cousin Heather, Lady Margaret,” he said, with uncertainty in his voice, which was only fitting as he had stormed in without a word, “The warriors return by birlinn — if ye take to the window that overlooks the bay, ye will see them come. They are, they are bringing — well, you might look for yerself, my Lady.”

She didn’t bother reprimanding the young gillie for not knocking. Margaret and Heather moved to the window facing the northwest and saw the vessels approaching the docks. None of them seemed to be carrying gunpowder barrels or even what looked like supplies, though the galleys weren’t empty.

“What on earth?” Margaret leaned closer to the arched bay window frame, trying to identify the mysterious long packages of cloth. Anticipation buzzed through her, and quicksilver shifted into unease as she realised what was in the boats.

Wounded men.

Spaniards.

Her headache flared.

This was Beth’s work. She knew it.

She spun on her heel, left Heather and Robert, and descended the stairs, throwing the main doors open with a force that rippled through the entire castle and caused a newborn baby to wake up in the eastern wing and start to cry, who would not be settled until nightfall. She exited like an outgoing storm, without realising she was echoing her daughter’s exact movements the night before. Regal with contained thunder, Lady Margaret swept down towards the shore, Duart Castle looming like a dark sentinel at her back.

Behind her reared their indestructible home, the one they loved and fought for: a protective fortress of stark beauty on their mother island known as Mull. Yes, under God’s sky, Duart Castle was a daunting stone guardian rising for them all from a high hill that overlooked the timeless estuary, bordered by thick curtain walls casting long shadows. Linnet wheeled in the winds along the firth and whistled sea songs to the oystercatchers. To the south, a tangled forest branched its mythic tales thickly and a series of high-spirited rolling hillocks extended like ocean waves westward across the eternal moors, where small blackhouse hamlets and villages dotted the landscape. Blue-green freshwater and seawater lochs glimmered like vision pools across the island. The land surrounding the castle was a fertile oasis on an island often rocky and inhospitable, offering grazing for red deer, blackface sheep, cattle, and the wild ponies that ran free.

Mull was theirs. Mull was their mother, and Lady Margaret and her clan were savagely proud of it. Their island was isolated, northern, wild, alive, cunning. The rugged land possessed charms: thistles and wildflowers winked upon the haunted moorland, quiet mystic glens secreted the bottoms of hills, mysterious stone circles and misty lochs hid shyly below the solemn, purple round tips of the

mountains. It had belonged to the MacLean clan for fourteen generations.

The home they fought for.

The home they would always fight for.

Lady Margaret moved to one of the piers as the birlinns docked. The burly Douglas disembarked first, the chieftain's face blacker than his thick bristle of hair and his overcast expression even more irritable than usual. "Your daughter," he growled rudely, as he stalked off like a bad-tempered child, shouting at Robert who had followed her to retrieve his mount even though it wasn't Robert's job.

"Y-y-yes Chieftain MacFayden," Robert stammered, and fled.

Oh yes, Lady Margaret knew well that Douglas MacFayden would not have been the one to make orders of returning with wounded Spaniards, even without his storm-crossed face telling the story so plainly. His son Charlie, an albino with a careless expression, was next off the boat. The oddly-pigmented Charlie with his pale blue eyes and ghostly countenance had none of his father's anger, his face instead sporting an amused, bored expression as he made some sort of joke to Hector.

The boats slid to shore one after the other and the warriors disembarked. Eileen vaulted out with Gregor at her left side as her shield, a constant overprotection Eileen bore amiably. Rab beside them looked bored-faced, though Lady Margaret well knew his offhand attitude was his way to mask the grief of his wife Brena's death last spring. Then Neily's sons who were Lady Margaret's foster sons, emerged from an adjacent boat: soulful sylph-like Stephan as though he was dancing — always like a poem was their beautiful Bard who broke all the girl's hearts without trying — and the white-eyed, eagle-faced Kelly who was alert and always at Hector's side.

Lady Margaret drew herself up as she gained the dock, loving them all so intensely that she greeted them coldly, regally, with the formality and poise that befitted her rank and their honour. She was the daughter of William Cunningham, the sixth Earl of Glencairn, and there was no small amount of power and pride held and wielded by her gaze. She would do right by her feral, beautiful clan and their feral, beautiful land.

She always would.

They were her family.

Beth leaped out of the longboat.

A seagull flew between mother and daughter, so close the grey feathers stung soft across Margaret's cheek, and a familiar but unlikable sensation lanced across her body as she recalled the seagull at her window. Beth had been *Watching* her. Not for the first time. It made Margaret's skin crawl. Her daughter's mystical capacity unnerved her.

And placed them all in danger.

She thought of Heather's touch, the shock of it, the unexpected desire. Shame and anger flooded her: had her daughter seen that?

"I have told you not to *Watch* me," Lady Margaret stated, her words formal flames somehow coated with ice.

"I wasn't!" came the quick reply, as Beth moved with keen determination to face her mother on the dock, her eyes bright, a spark that never faded, lit by fury or passion, wonder or anger: Beth was fierce and free and alive, a storm of emotions, a child exploding with life.

It was a blessing, Lady Margaret thought.

It *was*.

Today, though, Beth's luminosity and Beth's ability to *Watch*, made Margaret furious. "Do not speak falsehoods to me. What use is there in deception?"

"You do not like seagulls, Mother?"

"I like them perfectly fine when you are not inside them."

"They are quite content to host me. They tell tales to their seagull hatchlings about my visits, and the little one's smile."

"If that is true, they have the patience of saints, or they are as simple and half-witted as fools."

"Seagulls would make good saints," Beth retorted. "And it is said that fools are wise."

"Never do it again to me. Is that clear?"

"I can't help when it happens."

"Learn."

The unnatural power that Beth seemed to claim — it was otherworldly — and frightening, if Margaret was honest. The tales the clan told about her. Healing Hector and the fox was only the most common story. Many other accounts were part of the pantheon of Beth, as though she were a divine myth, one of the Taudhe d'Anu herself. Her ability to See, as she just *Watched* her own mother. Beth's curative miracles seemed to come upon her randomly by divine will and never by her own choice or skill. There was the time Beth healed her youngest brother Charles, who at four years old contracted a mysterious illness; Beth laid hands upon him and the killing fever instantly abated. The time she touched her mother and Margaret saw another world, a Tree of Life shining in impossible colours in an instantaneous shuddering moment of beauty and lightsap and embersongs. The time wild animals came forth from the forest to surround her as if in comfort and compassion — fox, red stag, pine marten, wildcat and osprey — when she was seven and crying by the sea. The time Beth's anger at being refused something caused every lit fire in Duart Castle to flare high, crackling, and then simultaneously go out. She was thirteen.

Fires acted oddly around Beth, as if the flame of Brìghde marked her, though Beth could not control these spontaneous occurrences, or the healings which sometimes came through her like acts of God.

The myth of Beth. The wonder of her.

But it was not all good, or not good at all — it was the source of their problems, for Gorm knew a secret about Beth. Something had happened that Beth wouldn't tell. It was the reason Gorm hated them — *her*. It happened just before Gorm's fearsome injuries as a boy visiting Mull. How did he get them?

Only Beth knew, and Beth wasn't telling.

Gorm threatened to accuse Beth of Witchcraft to the crown and even if the accusation was false, it would ruin them. And terrifyingly enough — wasn't it true? Beth was not evil, but was she not — some kind of seer, some kind of witch?

The least Beth could now do was to accept the offer made by the MacDonalds. Nobody liked this outcome, nobody needed to pretend to like it, for it was detestable. What choice did they have? The world was hard as rock. One often must do what one doesn't *like*. And yet, Beth's wildness, her refusal to surrender, her demand for freedom, her very essence — made accepting the offer something that would kill her.

Lady Margaret knew this.

Lady Margaret was present when her daughter healed Charles, and was the subject of Beth's *sight* more than once, and after these miracles she found herself acceding to Beth more than she argued with her. She felt the Goddess Brìghde looking out of Beth's eyes. How could she otherwise? Denying the mystical energy that was clearly within her daughter would be simple blindness. Yet Beth was still too immature to do the right thing and until she grew up, Lady Margaret was her liege and would remind her.

"I know you think there is some other way, Beth MacLean, but you are naive. There is not. If you want to save your clan you will stop imagining answers that do not work, and enact the one that does."

Beth's face was mulish now, the jaw clenched in refusal.

"And if you *Watch* me again, I will send you to Dòideag for punishment. You abuse your gifts, if they are indeed gifts, and not the curse of our entire clan."

“You would have me marry the Snake yet not *Watch* my own mother?” Beth clutched the black onyx stone and resisted the urge to throw it.

Yes, she *Watched* her mother through the seagull’s eyes and seen Heather touching her — Beth blushed and the image vanished. She also *Watched* inside her mother’s mind and was now indignant: she was not a child. She would one day be Ard Bandraoi. She would lead her clan. They would be free.

She would never surrender.

“Do you know what he will do to —” she began hotly.

Lady Margaret cut off her daughter with a mere gesture. The two of them faced one another on the dock. The sky framed them, a pretty picture of mother and daughter, both angry, only one showing it, the water of the bay blue-green and gentle behind them.

“I am my own person; you will no longer direct me. I will not marry —”

“You are a child.”

“I am not.”

“Worse: a child that thinks themselves already grown, already wise.”

“I will become Ard Bandraoi! I am *Bean Sli*, Lady of the Way!”

“Oh, you are brazen, Beth Maclean! You are not the lady yet. If you must say it to convince me, it is not yet true.”

At this Beth fell silent. Her mother was right. She felt a hot stab of shame. Yet she was wrong about everything else. Beth sulked, now feeling exactly like the child her mother dismissed her as. A swirl of feathers: her father’s hawk cut the air and landed on her shoulder. Beth felt the nip of talons into her skin. Farsight left her father’s arm for hers at any opportunity; Lachlan never minded and promised to gift her Farsight this winter on Imbolc, her twenty-fourth birthday.

Lady Margaret’s gaze was like a cut emerald. “Firstly, what have you done? Instead of returning home with solutions in weapons, food and plunder, you have brought more problems. I know very well this was by your hand.” She gestured to the Spaniards.

“I commanded what was right to command.”

“You lack the maturity to command at all. Your father indulges you; the clan is enamoured of you. Would you learn *wisdom*? Not everything must be done your way.”

They looked up at shouting barefooted children rushing down to the shores, eager to see what was going on. “It’s true,” they cried, “the boats are full of Spaniards!” Beth’s brothers led the charge: young Lachlan was twelve and their

acknowledged ringleader, “Maybe they have cannons!” and thoughtful Gillean and bratty Allan, ten and nine, were next in the pack hierarchy.

“Beauty must be outmatched by responsibility. You must realise that as a leader it is you who must do the worst thing. The worst thing is *yours* to do,” her mother instructed.

“We will give sanctuary to these men in the infirmary,” Beth insisted, gesturing at the mostly unconscious Spaniards in the boats. “I will answer your questions later.” A harbour seal peeped its head over the dock and Beth met its liquid eyes. It sounded a squeaky, tender song, and Beth’s heart answered it.

Cold thunder in Margaret’s eyes. “I have no questions, I have orders. And the infirmary? This is why you have brought them home? To waste our dwindling resources upon the enemy?”

“We will help them!”

Farsight agitated her wings.

The seal squeaked, and another head popped up beside it, the soft grey skin shining in the sunlight.

“It is your fault we are in danger, yet again you create the conditions for further threats against our clan,” Lady Margaret observed. “England has marked Spain as the enemy.”

“Not *ours*!”

“Speak only on matters you understand.”

“They’re not *our* enemies!”

“They are England’s enemies thus they are Scotland’s enemies. We are isolated in the moors yet we cannot brazenly disregard the allegiances of our monarchs.”

Beth felt her father’s eyes gentle upon her as he stood with Gregor, Rab, and Brock on the shoreline. She avoided his gaze. Felt his hawk’s soft feathers on her cheek. Gregor walked the creaky dock to interrupt them and the seals disappeared beneath the inky water.

“My Lady Margaret, may we have your blessing to bring the wounded foreigners to the infirmary, with the understanding we shall consider them our political prisoners?”

“They’re dying,” Beth said, quieter now. “Mother, please, is it not our duty beneath God and our Ancestors? Would you really have us leave them to rot on their ship?”

“Yes.”

Beth studied Lady Margaret’s face and realised it was not cold, it was merely an iron strength. She saw compassion, too, in her eye. Lady Margaret

was hard for one reason: to protect their clan, to be their mother. Beth inhaled a moment of understanding. Her mother started to turn away and Beth, inspired by a rush of forgiveness, put a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry for Watching you," she said softly, and her mother turned back.

"Yes," Margaret repeated. "You may take them to the infirmary." She nodded to Gregor, who half bowed and called to the men, and the MacLeans began to carry the wounded up to the castle. "We will heal them by God's will, then hand them over to the Crown. Is that clear?"

"No!"

"My will is indivisible by discussion. Go tend them now, help your Grandmother Aignéis. We will discuss the marriage later."

"Very well," Beth said. "I shall attend them, now we have added a few extra heads to Grandmother's care." She glowered, the rush of love replaced by a hard knot of anger and alienation in her chest. "And there will be no marriage," she swore. She threw the onyx stone at her mother's feet.

Lady Margaret looked at it and said nothing.

Was Beth's own flesh and blood her enemy too? How could anybody understand what it would do to her, to marry Gorm? She couldn't. Worse than death. It would be damnation, the slow torture of shame, slavery and the dying of her spirit. The crush of her soul's fire under the steel boot of a man who wanted to own her. Would it not be better for her clan to die free, than for her to submit to such a thing?

"You do not have to agree with my decision. You have to obey." Without another word her mother swept away, saying nothing about the stone.

Beth stared at the straight back moving away, the dignified trail of her mother's blue gown. She swore it again, to her mother's back. Never surrender. *Bas no Buaidh*. Death or victory. It was their clan's very motto. How could anyone expect her to cast it aside? She bent and picked up the onyx stone, reluctantly returned this trapped magic to her medicine pouch.

She would never obey.

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"A *few*. A *few* extra heads. Does she truly think one hundred is a few, or does she think us fools?"

Margaret and Lachlan, facing each other in the hall outside the infirmary, had not spoken since the storm and their argument. Last night, for the first time in the twenty-five years of their marriage, they had not shared a bed.

"Not fools, my Lady," he quietly replied.

The ground floor infirmary was ordered by stone walls, simple rows of

straw-bedded cots and cabinets bursting with supplies. Grandmother Aignéis, gnarled, bent, and radiant with knowledge and a thrumming healing energy despite her advanced age, had been summoned by Lady Margaret. She now positioned herself in the centre of the infirmary, her sharp eyes observing grimly as Spaniard after Spaniard were carried into the room.

Two had already died on the journey to the infirmary.

Some might live.

Aignéis nodded crisply to Lachlan and Margaret. “We have work to do.” She shut the infirmary door on them with a decisive snap.

The Lord and Lady of Mull stood framed by the closed door. Watching his Lady’s regal, unsmiling face, Lachlan thought of five years ago when he was imprisoned in a chamber at Mulindry, house of Angus MacDonald, 8th Lord of Dunnyveg. Lachlan was sure they would execute him and he had been surprised: almost every thought in that cold stretch of nights as he awaited the firing squad, was of Margaret. The curl of her eyelash against her white skin, the graceful neck, the lips he wanted to part with his own.

His Love.

“Not fools, my Lady. She is simply opposed to death, no matter who is doing the dying.”

Margaret’s chin rose up.

“She sees beyond the borders the rest of us live in.” Lachlan sighed, relishing his Lady’s dignified face, the curve of the top of her breasts where his fingers wanted to rest. He missed her last night, and had woken with a cold soul. “Much blood has been spilt by these hands, my Lady. As long as I can hold a blade much more will be. Let me be reminded by my daughter — of why. Of what we fight for. Of gentler things. Of freedom and charity. Must we be only hard? Yes war, we are always at war, we are always hard. She may be right — perhaps we can use these Spaniards to our advantage.”

Margaret said nothing.

“You might think she needs to conduct herself in a more appropriate manner, but you have raised her heartfully.” Lachlan reached out a rough, scarred hand and enfolded it in Margaret’s soft one. Her slender hands could pen poetry, write legal letters to their Irish cousins, or touch him, sweeping erotic songs across his chest and fire across his hips.

A current of desire jagged through him. *My Love. I need you. Please.*

Margaret nodded, a slight movement towards him.

He stepped closer, tilted her head up, brushed her mouth with his. He felt her lips part, the soft exhale, he put a hand around her neck and tightened his fingers. She made a sound of pleasure, about to accede, to soften. His breath

accelerated. Abruptly she broke away, her face flushed, a strange look in her eye.

“Whatever plan Beth is conjuring up from her visions is dangerous. We are in modern times; it is no longer safe to be the Pict-Sídhe of the Taudhe. The ways of the ancestors will bring us to ruin. She must marry Gorm, Lachlan,” Margaret said tightly. “The threat of Fire and Sword is real. There is nothing for it.”

With the threat of a witchcraft claim against them, Gorm was well-positioned to instigate an act sanctioned by the Lords of the Privy council at the Tolbooth Edinburgh and be granted a legal commission to pursue the MacLean clan with the Fire and Sword proscription. It wouldn’t merely strip Lachlan of his lands and titles, it would punish his heirs as well, corrupting the blood of every MacLean descendent. A punishment in perpetuity. Worse than death for a proud clan whose ancient name was woven with family, honour and prestige. If Gorm followed through with the threat, the official accusation would mean their end, for their clan could be legally murdered or chased from Mull forever.

Lachlan stiffened too. He withdrew his hand from her throat when instead he wanted to squeeze it. Not with cruelty — with passion and violence. He wanted to lose himself in the act of loving her with his whole body, taking her, giving her, making her soft again.

Margaret took another step back.

Framed by the infirmary door, a rift of darkness between them.

“She must. It is her duty. We have no more gold. It is the only way to save the clan from that fate. We cannot allow that for our people, Lachlan.”

It was true.

“I will not permit it. It would condemn her to a slow death. Torture. He is a beast, Margaret, he is truly — the Snake. He would...” he trailed off, for what Gorm would do to their daughter was unspeakable. Lachlan knew what men could do, he knew what this man could do, in warfare, or worse, to a woman. “He is vile and she is free. It would be the worst thing we could do to her. Better I shot her in the face and she died free. She would ask me to, instead.”

It too was true.

“If she does not accept his offer, you are condemning our entire clan not just to die, but to die — badly.”

“There is another way,” Lachlan said darkly. *There must be.*

“What is it?”

He was silent. They were silent. Silence and darkness between them.

“Tell me what it is.”

He could not. For Lachlan Mor MacLean, fourteenth Laird of Mull, did not know.

The Spaniards were dying, but Beth needed them to live. She would *make* them. She passed by his bed many times, and each time a shiver overtook her and she felt both terrified and certain. He must be deep in layers of dreams. Was she inside them? Once, cleaning his face wound, she found herself caught in a vision as if she had tapped into his dream. She was defending a child from a black-scaled leviathan the size of a universe, its reptile eye unblinking. Beth realised in this dream, the child was him.

For the last three nights this leviathan haunted her own dreaming, sometimes taking the shape of Gorm's face, a face impelling Beth to remember something from her past (she would not), sometimes taking the face of a hooded man invisible but for his ancient eyes, sometimes looking like the yellow-eyed Wyrm it was. And Beth knew: she and the captain shared a common foe.

Even though by law and politics the Spaniard was her enemy, Beth knew that was wrong.

He was her ally, her saviour.

She imposed upon him this mantle.

Only if he lived.

In another dream they were under stars by the quiet shore of the sea, the scent of promise in the air between them, his hot skinned hand about to touch hers, and he turned to look at her. "I breathe for you," he said. In another dream, Beth was the horned goddess in a green glade and he was the Knight. He knelt at her feet and gave her his word.

"I will fight for you and your clan, my Lady. I will defeat the Serpent. I will always fight for you. In every lifetime, my sword is yours."

The promise rang out true, no dream.

From that night onward, this conviction lodged deep within her: this Spaniard and his crew were here to save them. They would battle for the MacLean clan. Together they would defeat the Snake. Conviction took no time at all; Beth knew.

She would not have to marry the leviathan.

Her clan would be free.

And so, through the days when her cloth moved over his wounds, or she packed another poultice on his bruised and cut skin that shone like sienna or copper or joy in the light of the lamps, her hands moved gently, like she was tending a long-forgotten flame, one that existed before she did, in some ancient future.

Would he die? She feared he would.

She prayed he would live.

For Beth wanted to give him something she had never wanted to give anyone before, and the feeling shocked her. To surrender something, she had never surrendered nor named. What was it? She touched the red thread on his sock every time she passed his bed. But every time Grandmother Aignéis checked him, she shook her head grimly and Beth saw it in her eyes: the captain was dying.

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She didn't know that whenever she sat near him, the dying captain dreamed of kneeling before a glowing goddess with antlers in a glade cast with light. The Goddess, who was one of the shining Taudhe d'Anu, asked him a question — an invocation of his service. She pointed to the black snake threatening her people, that snake that was one arm of the devil himself, the head of the Súl Olc Clan.

*Yes, or No?* The Goddess asked, her gaze an incandescent arrow that pierced him, pinning him down to truth, and earth, and light.

Every time he would say *yes*, and though he wondered exactly what he was agreeing to (perhaps everything), he was sure it was right, for it was the only answer that aligned with the red veins of the universe. For once in his life, he was submerged in this deepest dream, he was utterly present with this tributary that connected the luminous clans, as though it was a red thread uniting his origins with his destiny, bonding him to a family of light that lived across time and space.

So, he said yes. He gave his Word to a Goddess of Fire, he Promised.

For her, he would face the black Serpent.

For her, anything. Everything.

He dreamed, he slept, he tumbled towards death or life. As he did so, his ancient enemy coiled, hissed, and wove a different story: preparing the lies that would claim him instead.

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“Llévame a casa,” the sailor begged.

“I am here,” Beth responded. “I am here.”

“It means *take me home*,” Jacob called from a few beds away.

“Llévame a casa,” Fiona, one of the nurses, repeated carefully. She was trying to learn Spanish so she could help the Spaniards better, particularly one of them.

Beth held the Spaniard's hand. His face was green-white, his lips bloody and wracked with cough, bones gleaming white through the destruction of his

wounded, putrid chest. He made one last gesture, half-rising as if to go back to his ship or Spain or walk under God's sky once more, then he fell back to his cot and made a low sound, almost a hum. His eyes flickered, they fell on Beth, he opened his mouth again.

"Llévame a casa," he pleaded.

She could not. Beth held his warm hand, stayed with him as he closed his eyes for the last time.

Seven had already died.

Beth was frantic.

She railed against death every time as if battling the Grim Reaper singlehandedly. She checked poultices obsessively, administered laudanum, helped her grandmother and Jacob with the surgeries, whispered prayers to Cailleach Bhéara and Brighde, and wished that the healing miracles she could sometimes perform would arrive whenever she willed them and not as random, spontaneous acts of God beyond her control. She refused to let even one more die. *Not one.* They *must* heal. For every one life she saved, she saved two.

For these men would fight for the MacLeans.

She dreamed so, and so it would be.

Beth held complete faith in her visions. So, she must heal them all. She became demanding with the others, snapping when Fiona forgot a bandage, frowning at Anna when the ratio of the poppy and white willow tincture was off, demanding they stay longer in the infirmary, arguing even with Grandmother Aignéis.

"Por favor!" Another died, choking from a crushed lung, the dry lips unable to process air. Another died from infection, the toxic, stinking attack worming through the digestive organs.

Another died.

Beth worked even harder, ignoring her grandmother's prescriptions to sleep, possessed by the need to restore every soul. In the first two days almost a quarter of the Spaniards they carried from the ship died, succumbing to infection or typhus or complications from their wounds. Beth paced, baring her teeth in frustration, overwhelm and sleeplessness. They were failing. She pounded herbs. She muttered darkly. She looked through old medical textbooks, she consulted Aignéis, who just shook her head.

"What else can we do? What are we doing wrong? Tell me, Grandmother!"

"Quit yer stalking and grousing, och, you're making me dizzy," Grandmother Aignéis chided. "We are doing everything we can."

"They are dying!" Beth protested.

"Look at how many are living, my granddaughter," Aignéis countered.

It was the second day of the Spaniard's care, and the raven-haired twins Anna and Fiona were mixing herbal preparations, using a pestle and mortar to break up the dried root of white willow to ease pain. Anna and Fiona had been chosen to train with Grandmother Aignéis for two years, learning botanical medicines and herbalism. The twins: one pure, innocent and shy, the other flirtatious, looked exactly alike, and were utterly inseparable. Beth grew up learning to identify flora with them both. The twins, as close as twins could be, always wore a white lace kerchief tied around their necks or wrists. They both hoped to be chosen to be the clan's Caretaker of the Bees, to walk the path of pollen and make the medicinal honey mead for Dòideag and the clan.

"There's a dearth of white willow, Grandmother Aignéis," Fiona began, when they were all surprised by a herd of grass-stained, wild-haired children tumbling into the infirmary, including three of Beth's younger brothers, all of them goggling at the sick smell of the dying foreigners.

"Get those wee bairns out of here," growled Grandmother Aignéis.

"Go to the fields to help harvest the kale," Anna admonished them kindly, as she washed some instruments in the basin. She was hazel-eyed and sweet and innocent — always was. "It will be fun."

"Kiss a girl in the hay barn," added Fiona wickedly, winking and twirling her lustrous black hair as she looked up from cutting bandages. Anna's twin was hazel-eyed and mischievous and seductive — always was. "*More* fun."

The pack was led by Beth's rebellious little brother Allan, and he put on a crafty face. "Grandmother, we simply want to pursue our studies about world events! Would you deny us, in our own infirmary, an opportunity to —"

Aignéis merely held up a hand and Allan trailed off. Everyone did what Grandmother said, even the Laird of all Mull.

"Yes, Grandmother," said Gillean solemnly as he straightened himself up, the more mature of the two brothers. "Anna's right. We can build the pig sty."

"No, Fiona's right," said Allan. "I'm going to kiss Rosie in the hay barn!"

At this Rosie tugged at the tail of her hair, which was clasped in a maiden's snood, and drew herself up proud-comically in her sleeveless tartan smock and blue coloured blouse. She exchanged amused glances with Beth, and the children raced off.

"If I was Rosie, I'd kiss him right back," said Fiona with a naughty expression. "What about you?" she asked the rest of them. Anna just blushed, Beth was distracted and staring at the captain's dark skin, and Aignéis merely snorted.

As they were too few hands, Aignéis called for the medic Jacob MacBeatha, brother of Chieftain Angus MacBeatha, and his sons Oleva and Gilleis, who joined their fight in the infirmary. The MacBeatha line were members of the Beaton Medical Kindred, a group of physicians who served Scotland's Kings for

decades, practising medicine in the traditional style of Aristotle and Galen.

“Greetings, cousins,” Jacob said formally to Anna and Fiona as they entered the hospital on the first day. “I trust you are hale and all is well?” Jacob was dressed formally, his white hair almost as long and wild as his brother Whitemane’s.

“Nobody is *well*,” Beth snapped, “until we get these men back to health and salt.”

Jacob began to unpack his instruments on the side table. Olevar, who looked exactly like his father save for a cunning, playful expression while his fathers were stern, kissed Fiona’s cheek with lingering lips and a wink, as she hugged him; the two cousins had always been close. Some wondered how close indeed.

“My cousin, you are as beautiful as the moon,” Olevar flirted with a bow. “How dare these men die with you shining above them in their sky?”

Fiona beamed as she added rosemary, thyme, clove, lemon, and cinnamon to the wood fire in the stove, a potent antiviral combination that cleansed the air of disease. Anna smudged the room with the incense smouldering in its crescent copper pot. Aignéis, wrinkled and tired but hiding it, filled the MacBeathas in. “Deaths already from typhus, food poisoning, and septicæmia. Most are infected.”

“Kidney failure, cousin Jacob,” added Anna.

“Swelling of the liver and spleen, cousin Olevar,” added Fiona.

“Internal bleeding,” added Beth.

Jacob nodded, barely looking at them, scrawling on a small notepad as Aignéis took him round the infirmary to discuss the charts of individuals she would be handing over to him, and the unsmiling medic instructed Olevar and Gilleis on protocols for the patients who would be under their care.

“This is poorly bandaged,” Jacob said matter-of-factly, deftly fixing the wrap around a Spaniard’s knee. “This patient needs more water,” he gestured, and Olevar quickly brought some, poking Fiona mischievously as he passed her, then quickly schooling his expression at a frown from his father.

“The infection here needs to be burned off,” Jacob instructed. “This one, leave the wound undressed for the day.” He looked to Beth. “I will show you the proper protocols,” he told her “Bandage correctly, no matter the haste.”

“We have too few hands!” she protested. “One is dying while I tend the other. I was —”

“It doesn’t matter,” he interrupted. “Work faster. You do everything right; you make the time. Prepare this one for amputation, we must do it now, though it is likely he will die anyway.”

Beth bristled, feeling scolded like a child, but she too was worried about the leg, so she set about preparing the unconscious Spaniard for the surgery.

“We will help if I become the director of care,” Jacob announced abruptly,

surveying the infirmary and settling into this sudden ultimatum with a crossed-arm resolution.

Beth's mouth opened in surprise. "What?"

"We don't have much time. I will waste another of these Spaniard's precious minutes by repeating myself. Hopefully nobody dies in the interim. Agree that I am in charge of this infirmary and my sons and I will help."

Beth stared at the bones of Jacob's angular, proud face. Her own expression was a mirror to his: as obstinate as rock, as arrogant as a Sovereign. About to childishly evict him from the hospital for such a rude and daring demand, Beth felt her grandmother's cold hand seize her wrist and the quiet words in her ear.

"Hud yer Wheesht child. Yer terrible at this thing lesser mortals call humility, so learn it now, aye. It disnae matter who's in charge: we heal them the same either way. He's a man, they like to command, let him have what he wants."

They needed the help. Should she order him to treat the Spaniards? The MacBeathas were a proud lineage and while owing allegiance to her father, they were still their own clan; Beth couldn't afford a conflict if he refused. With an act of will that would impress every watching spirit in Scotland, Beth bit her lip to keep back the flare of accusatory words, called on the humility of her ally the Red Deer, and nodded assertively at Jacob, who was clearly the most selfish person in Mull.

"You are in charge," she ordered, though she said it as though her surrender was itself just another way to command. "Now hurry! Tell me what to do. You will save them."

"Of course, I will."

As Jacob began to reorganise the treatments, Aignéis healing as she always had, Beth looked at the bandaged Spaniards groaning under the flicker of the oil lamps. The warm light flickered its benediction across beard and bone and black eyes suffering from the light and dark of life, and her anger dissipated like a fire stamped out. Grandmother was right: it didn't matter. They were in pain and they needed to live.

What was the price of humility when lives were at stake?

"I'll show you how to wrap a bandage properly."

Beth sighed. "Very well."

For the next three days and nights they toiled sleeplessly over their patients. They reset broken bones, re-stitched old wounds, and Beth brewed herbal remedies to counteract the dehydration that set in over the days lost at sea. They treated the Spaniard's distended stomachs which were contaminated from both starvation and food poisoning after ingesting badly preserved pork. The crew muttered in Spanish as they cycled awake and fell unconscious again. Of those awakened, some knew English.

Death continued to claim others.

After consulting with the mute yet facially expressive Dougal, the elderly alchemist from the apothecary who insisted in hand gestures that his remedies

must be accompanied by *jokes*, Fiona concocted a potent blend of poppy, lettuce oil, mulberry juice and ivy to soothe pain and reduce inflammation. She often sat by the young and handsome officer who sleepily identified himself as Juan Carlos, who began to murmur poetry to her, half-asleep. Beth saw Fiona gently kiss his forehead when she thought nobody was looking.

Fiona always knew the best forest nooks for fennel, yarrow and burdock. Grandmother Aignéis, also noting the black-haired girl's infatuation with the officer, sent her out regularly to forage for more raw materials. As much as she was besotted, Fiona adored the forest and was always keen for the task, riding out on the stout grey castle garron, Púca, to gather the medicinals and mastermind good jokes as Dougal prescribed, but all she could think of were riddles, and they were awful.

"What is full of water and then not full of water and now you are?"

Nobody knew.

"What is the name of thunder?"

The healers worked tirelessly, Beth still pacing with frustration and fury at every death, Jacob completely dispassionate, brusque, yet equally as focused. Fiona's bad riddles and Olevar's sincere laughter at each were the only lightheartedness in the infirmary, except for Anna's quiet morning songs which seemed to infuse the hospital with hope. Beth was resolute and commissioned: she refused to leave the infirmary. Even past midnight when the stars were high and the candles low, she went from bed to bed, tending patients and urging them to keep fighting, to wake, to live, to one day walk with wild hearts once more.

Some did.

Many did not.

Would they be enough to defeat Gorm when the time came?

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The dying capitán dreamed. Of white ravens, of dark glens and standing stones where he hunted for the far-off light, following the radiant trail of an antlered creature, never catching it, the beacon of its cloven-hoofed radiance always ahead, tantalising and leading him on. Something changed within him as he slept and healed, or as he moved towards death. Some great gift he did not want was bestowed. It began to crack him open and his skin began to fall off.

*A snake must shed its old skin, or die.*

He would either die or wake reborn. What happened was neither. For on the ship the dark adversary, the Lord of the Súl Olc Clan, had claimed him. The devil had crawled inside.

He tried to shed the snake. He failed.

*Listen, the Serpent hissed, flicking its plated tale. Your life is mine. God is no longer your way. I have won you.*

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Exhausted, having not slept in four days, Beth was finally banished from the infirmary by Jacob. “Only come back after at least eight hours of rest,” he instructed.

Cross with the dismissal, knowing he was right, Beth paced irritably towards the funeral grounds. She wanted to say prayers over the graves of the Spaniards.

She wanted to ask forgiveness for failing them.

She exhaled as she came upon the gnarled oak that guarded her deceased ancestral line. With its inexplicable essence of protective energy, the tree was the reason the clan often felt so calm here, despite their grief for lost loved ones. Thousands of ancestral names were carved in the weather-worn bark of the oak, which bore the cuts with temperance. Red and purple ribbons fluttered from lower hanging branches. The oak kept the clan’s dead safe and like a nature Guardian, watched over their traditional rites, including the upcoming Samhain ceremony which would be performed in the tree’s cosmic shelter and planetary embrace.

Samhain was approaching, and Beth sensed the nostalgic descent of fall in the air’s chill. The strangeness of the Spaniards here. The unfolding of a story so deep she could feel it in the way her blood ran like rivers of myth through her veins. She continued past the oak with a grim foreboding as if something bad was about to happen. A quick rustle in the grass at the edge of the moor, a snaking movement, the sinuous slither. Beth leaped back, heart pounding, and the black adder froze too. Beth possessed a horror of snakes since the time one bit her, its venom getting into the bloodstream, creating a shuddering nightmare she never forgot — as real as breathing — wherein she saw the yellow reptilian eyes of a fallen angel.

A fallen angel that knew her name, a demon hunting her across space and time.

She almost died of the poison.

Beth’s heart raced, but the snake just lowered its head and disappeared into the underbrush. In spite of Dòideag’s teachings that the snake was her ally, Beth could only summon a visceral, crawling hatred for the creature. And since nearly dying of the bite, she had seen the hooded fallen angel with the sulphur-yellow eyes many more times.

As if she was being watched by some unnamed ancient enemy.

As if he was lying in wait for her in the future or past, creating a trap that one day she would unwittingly spring.

Though they would not share their sacred burial grounds with foreigners, Lachlan agreed to bury the dead Spaniards by the edge of the forest. Beth would perform the funeral rites. She would speak blessings into the air.

May the blessing of the rain be on you — the soft sweet rain.

May it fall upon your spirit with care —

so, flowers may spring up

and shed their sweetness to the air.

They would sing a Gaelic chant called a *fuinn*. Beth was preparing all this in her mind as she approached the new cemetery through a path of whispering birch, when a branch cracked and she jumped back. The adder unsettled her more than she cared to admit.

No snake. Instead, a tall gangly shadow stepped in front of her, blocking the way.

The jolt of white hair.

“Angus,” Beth cried. “You startled me!”

“My apologies, Lady Beth,” the chieftain said, nodding graciously. His eyes were mindful upon her as they assessed and calculated, filing information away in the event it would be needed as a resource. Angus was much like his brother Jacob, both of them exuding a complex and haughty intelligence in the pale blue eyes.

A skylark trilled.

“We are all startled lately,” Whitemane added tactfully. “The world is heavy, the clan weary. The day at least is braw and we might be thankful for such small things. Pray tell how goes the fight in the hospital?”

Beth’s eyes filled with angry tears. “So many have died!” She gestured towards the cemetery ahead. “Would that I could save everyone! For themselves, and for —” She broke off, bit her lip so hard it drew blood.

Angus was looking at her carefully. “For?”

“Nothing, I —”

“You hope they will fight for us, in thanks for their lives?”

Beth stared at the ground. She hated being so transparent. Angus was always discerning and he knew her well. When eleven-year-old Beth spontaneously healed his wife Connie after a traumatic labour and a stillbirth, Connie came to adore the young, still learning yet admittedly dazzling Beth. Angus took her under his wing, improving her archery, lending an ear, offering wise counsel, teaching the types of war strategy that could be enacted from courtrooms and castles and by the subtle persuasion of a calculating mind.

The chieftain was a trusted mentor.

"I know they will." She looked Angus straight in the eye. There was no sense hiding the truth.

He nodded, neither agreeing or disagreeing. "Beth, your mother told me of our enemy's offer, and I must counsel you to refuse it." Whitemane's eyes were glittering. Something seemed off, but Beth couldn't put her finger on what.

Her mouth worked; no sound came out. Heat filled her face.

The wind disturbed the branches of the trees.

Her hand reached for her medicine pouch. Inside her fingers closed on the rabbit's foot.

*Listen*, it counselled.

"You must refuse it."

Was the marriage proposal common knowledge? If so, Beth knew there would be pressure on her to accept. She was livid her mother had told Angus.

"I will *never*," Beth finally said with vehemence, finding the fire of words and lighting them all at once.

"Of course, of course." The blue eyes blinked.

Beth set her jaw stubbornly. Her hand in her medicine bag left the rabbit paw and her fingers closed on the wolf fang. Startled, she jerked her hand away. The fang always told her when someone was manipulating her.

She was just tired. Angus was trusted.

And she *had* been holding the rabbit's paw.

A small silence and then Angus added gently, in a tone Beth could not identify, "A wise choice. For you must choose, you see."

Beth noted a strange energy in his words, a strange look in the eye, a strange fidget. She worried into it. "What do you mean?"

"You know we are out of gold?"

"I know."

"You know our numbers?"

She thought of the Spaniards, added them to the sum. "Yes."

"You know their numbers?"

"I said I know. The calculation is not hard."

"Then weigh the sums and make your choice."

Beth's heart skipped a beat as she stared into Angus' self-controlled face. "What are you saying, cousin?"

"That if you choose to *never*, then your clan shall die. Is that your choice?"

Beth stared at him. The wolf fang cut into her fingers.

“If such is your choice I stand by you, Lady Beth.”

“I do not choose for the clan to die!”

Angus brushed back his mushroom of white hair. “We both understand consequences. If you choose to refuse the proposal, that is also what you choose. It is simple logic. Mathematics is logic. Number, Geometry, Music, Cosmology: to study the Quadrivium is to know the weapons of Kings and Queens, Beth. And Lairds and Ladies.”

Beth stared at him. “No, it is —”

“Yes,” Angus interrupted smoothly. “Logic can’t be argued with, Beth, do not trick yourself into pretending otherwise.”

“There are other ways,” Beth began hotly. “Where arithmetic will not be the only factor.”

“What are they?”

A small silence. “The Spaniards, for one.”

“Who are currently dying. You are heading to their cemetery. Beth, your mother is right, marrying Gorm may be the only feasible solution. Fear not, I stand with you and support your refusal. Most of us do. Just —” he paused.

“What?”

“Choose to refuse, knowing you are choosing your freedom, which may be temporary, over the clan’s safety. Make it a worthy choice taken in full awareness. Don’t be blind to what you are doing. You must choose it knowing we will most likely die at the hands of the inquisition.”

The Spaniards began to wake up. First Juan Carlos. “¿D-Dónde estoy?” he asked, rubbing his eyes, trying to fully open them.

Fiona rushed to his side. His cheekbones were sharp, his skin pale, his elegance obvious, particularly to the women: long lashes, deep brown eyes, perfectly shaped lips, his looks are that of a creature designed to make hearts flutter. His hand lifted as if to inquire, Fiona caught it as if to answer.

“Can you speak English?” Beth asked.

Glassy eyes turned to her. “No,” he said, with a small smile in jest.

Jacob missed the playful tone of Juan Carlos’ ironic reply and came over. “Señor, usted Está en Escocia. ¿Habla usted Inglés?”

Juan Carlos looked happily at them all. “Yes, I can, though poorly,” he said in perfect English.

Jacob nodded. “You are in Duart Castle. On the island of Mull. Mull is part of Scotland. Do you understand?”

“Agua?”

“Aye,” Fiona answered. They all knew that word — many of the sailors had taught it to them already. Fiona fetched a clean cloth so he wouldn’t take too much and carefully wrung the water into his mouth. He drank it greedily through chapped lips.

“I am Juan Carlos,” he began, then trailed off. “I have told you that before, si?”

They nodded.

His gaze lingered on Fiona, a half-smile upon his lips, then the eyes shut. “Una isla escocesa.” Unconsciousness took him again, though the pain creasing his face lightened.

Fiona’s face was as radiant as seven suns. “Grandmother Aignéis, will he be well?”

Grandmother Aignéis let out a low, rasping laugh. “If that keek he just sent yer breasts is anything to go by, I think he’ll do just fine.”

Fiona blushed all the way to the roots of her hair. “Och!”

“Fiona, my girl. It was the sight of you that made him thankful to God for being on Scottish land.” Fiona blushed again and retreated hastily to make more poultices, grinning and shining bigger than a mischievous crescent moon with a sly purpose.

Aignéis turned to Beth. “I want you to get some rest.”

“I will,” Beth lied. Instead, she sat by the captain and held his hand, whispered him poems tied in red thread and offered up prayers of healing embersongs from a primordial place in her heart.

Not enemy, but ally. The people of the red thread. The Fire Clan.

The Pict-Sídhe of the Taudhe d’Anu.

She was certain.

She knew him from the ancient past, from the future that was swiftly arriving.

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The captain’s name was Don Diego Telluz Enriquez and he was dreaming of a goddess carrying a Flame. He was promising her something.

He was saying *yes*.

While he was dreaming, Beth was tending his wounds. His fever grew hotter, a cathedral of flames, as the goddess held his hand. She had bright gold hair, green eyes and radiant skin. She was a hundred feet tall. Everything that existed was inside her. Everything that existed was because of her. Everything that existed was to celebrate her beauty, and he wanted to claim her as his own.

The blaze of a dragon-like serpent, a scale, the weight, the reptile slamming into his mind, and suddenly, the *yes* turned to *no*. For there was a different dream, told by the fallen angels of the Súl Olc Clan. Told by the shadows who curled around the earth.

A nightmare.

In it the black Serpent wrapped Diego in layers of scales like armour. On board the *San Juan de Sicilia* the Serpent had claimed him, and as Diego tossed and turned in his fever, trying to heal, the layer of reptilian skin cracked and shifted, trying to shed.

It grew in his mind, his chest, it crawled across his skin.

The serpent did not shed.

It took hold.

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“I am Subteniente Carlito Alonso De León of the *San Juan de Sicilia*, and I would negotiate with your King for my release.” The big man woke, stood, and declared this ultimatum abruptly, startling Anna and Beth who were tending the sailor beside him. Carlito glowered. “Immediately!” It was a sudden, shrill sound in the normally quiet infirmary.

Anna took a wary step back.

The declaration woke the man beside him. “Por favor. Debajo de Dios, ¿Dónde estoy?” Shivering, the Spaniard reached out, then sat up wide eyed as he realised something that would be a shock to anyone. He was missing an arm.

They had amputated it below the shoulder.

It had been an argument. Beth knew it needed to be done. Jacob said no. She disobeyed him with Fiona and Olevar while Jacob slept. The medic was furious and refused to speak to any of them for days. Olevar was sure he was going to be disowned.

Anna bent over the waking Spaniard. “You are well, you are safe,” she soothed him, offering him a cup of water. “What is your name?”

Beth nodded to the big man. “Please sit down, Officer Carlito. I will bring you some tea for your pain.” The subteniente just glared mutinously.

“Rezaré por ti,” cried the other Spaniard. His one hand shot out frantically, accidentally smashing the cup from Anna’s hand. It fell to the floor and shattered, spilling water everywhere.

“What is he saying?” Anna stepped back in surprise and her boots crunched on the broken cup.

“He says he will pray for you,” Carlito said flatly. “He’s Padre Franco Esteban Sanchez, our priest.”

“Why for us?” Beth wondered.

Carlito and Franco conversed in Spanish, the priest’s face flushed, the words coming up with frothing specks of spittle, then Carlito translated the verdict. “Because you will all burn in hell if you do not convert to the true religion, which is Catholicism.”

Beth’s mouth fell open.

Anna took another step back, then another, the broken pieces scattering beneath her disturbed retreat.

“You are pagans,” Carlito translated, as Padre Franco continued feverishly in Spanish. “Your prayers to Brighde and Cailleach are prayers to devils and demons.”

“Arrepentíos!” Franco shouted. His eyes were wide. Each eye was a different colour — one blue and one brown. He convulsed into coughing.

“Repent,” Carlito translated.

A silence as the Padre stared at his stump in horror.

Anna brushed away tears of compassion.

“Oh, and,” — here Carlito smiled though it was not funny — “He wants his arm back, you barbarians.”

“That will be quite enough of that,” Grandmother Aignéis snapped. As she coaxed Carlito back to bed, who looked about to faint, Beth administered laudanum to the raving priest, who was flushed with anger and confusion that the MacLeans had stolen his arm. Soon his mumbles ceased as he sank back to sleep. Carlito’s eyes finally closed as well and the sick bay was quiet once more.

The women all looked at one another. They had almost forgotten the Spaniards left Spain with one purpose: the holy goal of conquest to bring the Catholic religion back to Europe. But the Highlanders were not Catholic.

And they did not wish to be converted.

Anna made a sympathetic face, Fiona shrugged and swept up the shattered cup, Beth prayed to Brìghde, Aignéis, practical as always, harrumphed and set to stripping more bandages from old linen, trying unsuccessfully to puzzle out Fiona’s riddles in Gaelic under her breath.

“What is fuller when you empty it?”

“Your mind,” Grandmother Aignéis muttered.

Within the span of the next five days, the majority of the Spaniards awoke and were discharged from the infirmary. Most of them said nothing about being Catholic, or not being Catholic: they were simply thankful to be alive, religion notwithstanding. Sargento Caro Lantigua, a short, muscular man with a gold tooth, a gap tooth, and a kind innocent gaze, kneeled to thank Beth and God the Father with tears in his eyes. Juan Carlos requested permission to return each day for tonics and asked a blushing Fiona if she might deign to administer them upon his aching body. Carlito flung a black scowl upon his saviour’s lives and uttered not another word other than to announce his rank — again — in perfect English. Raphael Gonzales Alen, the other sub-lieutenant, beamed a wide smile and offered sincere assistance should they require the moon or sun or stars. He also proffered a sly inquiry as to whether they might have pork to feed a Spaniard come back from the dead, namely, him.

They were given tents to sleep outside the castle walls, where they enjoyed the cleansing salt-tinged air and the therapeutic view of the hills tumbling down to the coast. It was during this time, organised by the light-hearted yet food-obsessed Raphael, that the recovered Spaniards began to offer their help to the Highlanders in odd, simple jobs. If there was wood to be fetched, they gathered it. If thatched roofs in the village or fences were in need of repair, they took up hammer and nails and started rebuilding. In this way they slowly built up their strength, and they also were able to show their gratitude, for most of them knew that without the charity of the MacLean clan, they would be dead.

One day, as Fiona administered white willow to Juan Carlos, who had returned to kiss her hand, his lips lingering up her wrist, their gazes locked in the irreversibility of young love, another of the Spaniards awoke.

“I am fine now, sin problema, I am ready for battle, where is my sword?”

The man sat up and yawned theatrically, provoking a laugh from Beth who was nearby grinding herbs. His name was Don Marcos Antonio Asensio and he was one of the three surviving sub-lieutenants, having come through from a typhus attack. He was strikingly good looking with what Beth thought of as traditional Spanish features: dusky skin, full-lidded eyes and a bold nose. Anna and Beth would giggle at his fun and antics.

“In battle,” he joked, “I have a fearsome reputation. They call me, *nubes de polvo!*”

“What does that mean?” Anna asked.

“Is it a good thing?” wondered Beth.

“Should we be terrified?” called Fiona.

“It means when we go into battle, I am always there first. I lead the men,” lied Marcos, eyes alight with humour. “When I move, I am *El Toro Loco*, eh — the mad bull — raising up dust in my fatal charge! The enemy cannot see me for the dust, so I strike them down!”

“With all that dust, wouldn’t you be blinded too?” teased Fiona, looking over but still holding Juan Carlos’ hand.

Marcos snorted. “Yes, yes, you see, I am a hopeless fighter. Maybe I actually run away in the dust. Come to think of it, I always run away in the dust!”

Earlier Anna found a small plaque in the pocket of his uniform. Boldly engraved was the Asensio coat of arms, his elite origins. Yet he did not speak of being a gentleman, instead he spent his time flirting and making fun of himself, and giving strength to those left recovering. His high energy was a blessing to the sick room.

“Pedro, stop whining, you are doing well!” he would tell the little woodworker with the broken arm. “Jesús, wake up or I’ll steal your rations,” to the helmsman. He winked when he jibed them. “Paquito, your feet stink. I can’t think. Please for the women’s sake, go outside.”

Franco, Tomas, Valero — he would always call them by name, as if jesting with their name had the power to bring them back, and all in the infirmary were encouraged by his humour. Beth loved how he bantered so easily with his comrades and how the crew took heart from it. She also loved his tales of Spain and his talk about their capitán.

Don Diego Tellez Enriquez.

The name, when he first spoke it, struck a chord in Beth’s inner symphony.

As if the name was a song, as if it was the song she wanted to dance to.

Diego.

Her ally. Fire Clan.

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He was not her ally.

He was a capitán of an Armada that was the long arm of the Spanish Inquisition. The devil claimed him, for he had gone through hell on this ship — and had yet to emerge. The deep dreams of goddesses were over. Now he dreamed of being on the ship. He did not want to relive it.

He relived it.

On the command deck of their pursued ship in the North Sea, Don Diego Telluz Enriquez stood tall, framed by a sky fractured by lightning. The rain was a torrent — had forever and three million days been a torrent, and would for eight million more, plus a fortnight. His uniform had been soaked since longer than he could remember, his skin raw and tacky from the detested, constant moisture, and he was sure he was at least thirty percent beluga at this point, or at least ten percent crayfish. His face bore infected cuts from an explosion fatal to many other of his crewmen, including his own capitán.

Now he was the capitán.

They were all going to die.

He bared his teeth in a ferocious animal grin and prayed to God, for God was the only thing left to them. *Father in Heaven, keep us safe.*

He would see his men through. By God's Word, he would save them.

He stood on the deck in spite of the gale that descended, having ordered most of the crew to retreat to the relative safety of the galley. Diego though, was vastly uninterested in another meal of boring hardtack and more boring cold beans; he had all week been secretly slipping his rations to Juan Carlos without the young guardiamarina noticing.

Somehow Diego would do without.

He must take action or they would die. He tapped the metal rim of his spyglass twice against his leg to shake off the droplets. Even without lifting it to check there was no doubt: the English sails were yet trailing them, relentless, single-minded like a dog at a bone, probably lethal. Their ship, the *San Juan de Sicilia*, currently sailed at the tail end of a dying procession of fleeing Spanish war galleons.

They were too heavy, too slow: the English were gaining.

He turned to Sargento Caro, Padre Franco, José Vela, and Matias Campore. The four of them refused to leave his side and they too paced the rails like a pack of useless, restless wolves. Padre Franco's one blue eye and one brown eye regarded the capitán. He offered a reassuring smile. "God is with us."

Diego nodded. Yes. The Padre believed it and so could he.

Matias, the young deckhand Diego apprenticed, was pale-faced with worry. "God will not feed us," he ventured. "Nor give us wings. We shall die!"

Diego clamped a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Fear not, younger brother. Whatever happens, let us meet it. We will prevail, or we must meet Death with lion hearts, a weapon in our hand, and a shanty song so intolerable Death must use two hands to shut its ears."

A lick of light winked through the boy's eyes as Diego's courage transferred to him. "Hear me?" Diego insisted.

Matias nodded solemnly.

Then Diego gave them an insane mandate. The world was now insane, so it was fitting. The crew wouldn't like it. What was there to like?

But Diego would see them through.

"Dump the cannons and the wine," he instructed, flashing his famous savage grin, one so unsettling the crew were never sure it was a sign of a deranged mind. With genius and legendary strength sometimes came madness, and it was for good reason Diego was known in the Armada as the *Bear*.

"And the food," he added, staring at his cousin, knowing José would not like that one bit.

“Capitán?” Sargento Caro’s thick face was puzzled.

Matias gaped, horrified, never sure when Diego was joking.

They must have misheard.

“We tried having him committed to the insane asylum when he was fifteen,” José said with a straight face. “Sadly, madness runs in the family.” One of his arms was in a sling across his chest. “On his father’s side.” At this he ducked Diego’s dirty glare.

“By God’s grace he is quite serious,” Franco observed, holding his rosary, examining his capitán with awe. Diego regarded them with a war-torn expression of fierce resolve, and perhaps José was right and a hint of madness or tenacity or comedy glimmered in the fixed light of the eye.

It was past time to act. Across the span of wet, intolerable weeks, Diego watched their speed slowly decrease and the English flotilla, in equal measure, advance towards their stern. Within hours the foreign fleet would bear down upon them, predator to prey.

And they would die.

“We are here, mi amigos,” Diego said. “This is all we’ve got. And tell me now: which of you has a better idea?”

José grunted, and the cruel sea offered its own absurd response: the roar of raging, white-capped waters.

*Give in, the deathly water taunted, give in and return.*

A tempting offer.

“Capitán, how will we fight without the cannons?” Matias protested; the brief peace gone from his too young face. He scrubbed his hand across his beardless cheek and endured Diego’s unforgiving, terrible stare. His capitán was not afraid. Moody and obstinate, contrary and often ill-mannered, his friends might say. With a black, questionable humour.

Yet fearless.

“What will we eat and drink?”

“He’s finally gone mad,” José explained to the boy kindly. “I think he’s tired of sea life and wishes us to eat his flesh and use his hollow bird bones to shore up the ship.”

“Food is not my concern, speed is,” Diego barked, although he was joking about dumping the rations — that part was just to rile José. Still, the cannons and wine must go: to shake the English tail, they needed to be *faster*.

So, Diego would lighten the load.

Before their stuttering flight across God's magnificently rendered ocean there were over one hundred Spanish warships equipped with the finest artillery in existence, each bearing nearly a thousand perfectly outfitted soldiers. Brave men called forth to be missionaries of war, to bring Catholicism back to the world, to be heralds of the true religion. To the world they were known as the Invincible Armada, the unassailable naval legion of King Philip II of Spain.

Diego originally joined the Armada as a junior officer — despite growing up hated for his Moor ancestry he was still nobility, and his Enriquez name secured him an officer's employment from which to rise through rank. Though his half Berber bloodline brought him insult and discrimination from the Madrid elite, his Spanish father Martín Enriquez de Almanza was the Viceroy of Peru and of blue blood, the *sangre azul*, and in his infinite arrogance to do whatever he pleased whenever he might please to do it, had got away with a marriage to Dianora Falcona Benjumea, a celebrated, much gossiped about beauty who could trace her dark-skinned Muslim lineage straight back to the Caliph Yazid III ibn al-Walid of Ummayad nobility.

Because of his father's rank, Diego was tolerated by the aristocracy, but he — and his proud mother, though she never showed it — knew what it was like to be despised.

"At least we are beautiful," his mother would always joke to him. "At least we are brave, my little soportar." He would beam, and lean into her softness. "At least I will always love you."

Diego was noble and persecuted: his divided bloodline marking him as both a man born to power and yet one who endured subtle and overt contempt, slur, and attacks, from his own father who hated him as well as from a ruling class who loathed the very people Diego called ancestors.

Since losing his mother and sister, Diego had not a family until now.

On board a ship that was doomed.

"Remember what I told you," the Padre said mock-seriously to Matias. "We can always eat José."

José smirked, Matias grabbed José's good arm and pretended to gnaw it, Caro added a dash of salt with a dramatic flourish, smiling and revealing a gold tooth and beside it, a gap of no teeth at all.

Diego laughed out loud.

Yes, his family. Franco, José, Matias and Caro. Marcos too. And now the others under his authority were his to guide, and he would not fail them. Suddenly dizzy, he crouched to the deck. All this talk of food and he was already starving. Nausea snaked through his gut, and the spyglass slipped from his bandaged hands to clatter against the blood-stained deck. Caro bent his hulking beast of a body to

pick up the spyglass, carefully returning it to Diego's keeping. The Sargento took it upon himself to look after his capitán at every opportunity.

"Yes." Diego stood and forced a smile for them. "We will eat my cousin though his flesh may taste like a cow so ancient it has seen the birth of the world." He caught Matias' eye. The boy had taken to anxiously chewing his lips and they were a ruined chapped mess of flesh.

"What would I taste like?" Matias asked.

"Youth," joked Caro.

The Armada's original purpose was simple: conquer England and bring the Protestant Isle back into the folds of Rome and the true religion. Which was of course, Catholicism. A mildly problematic feat given the Protestant Queen Elizabeth who ruled England with a man's iron fist, had no plans to bow under the Catholic Pope's power. The redoubtable Tudor monarch was a formidable opponent to the Spanish Rey. King Philip II refused to be defeated by either a woman, or a Protestant.

Yet here they were, defeated and in desperate flight, in spite of their monarch's plan.

Their invincible Armada had set upon the coast of Calais, a major port in northern France where they attacked the English Protestants, expecting an easy victory. But there was no easy victory — there was no victory at all. They were brutally repelled. And were now fleeing, ready to die, across the unforgiving waters. Struggling, bedraggled, dying, the Spanish warships reeled drunkenly up the east coast of Britain. Damaged sails and unusable rigging left them moving sluggishly and the line the once proud Armada formed across the horizon lay thin and jagged.

Half the crew died in the battle.

Had God abandoned them?

Did God no longer care about their holy mission? Had He ever cared? Or was the earth merely a malevolent theatre for smaller gods to jeer, and point, and laugh?

"God is with us," the Padre continued to tell Diego every day, every hour. "Pray," he encouraged. Diego would pray, thankful for the steadfast priest at his side, his always guide, his forever friend.

*Our Father, who art in heaven! Hallowed be thy name! Thy Kingdom come!*

*Please God, save us fucking idiots from death and our own stupidity.*

Lightning bisected the skies and illuminated the five of them. Their wolfish, terrified, adamant faces in the storm. Always storms. The weather balked at clearing. "Lloviendo a cántaros," José always remarked — it was raining to pitches. The pounding of thunder was as familiar as a heartbeat to them all.

The world was surreal, like a dream.

A nightmare.

The stressed deck of the ship groaned in protest or sonnet against everything she endured.

"You would taste delicious," José told Matias with a wink. "I? Not so much."

"Well," said Caro, "whether you taste like ancient beef or old rabbit or terribly aged pig, we shall be fed."

The Padre nodded. "God will see us through."

They all still believed in God. Well, most of them.

Their mission was *marked*.

José, though, had enough of this food nonsense and his attitude turned gloomy. "Will God though? Where are we even headed, *mi Capitán*? Nowhere! There's no safe harbour, the men are dying, you are no good. At least bloody eat while there is still food."

Diego's lips formed a thin line. "I have eaten," he replied. "Just not this meal."

"Or the meal before it," pressed José. He had apparently noticed Diego giving his rations away. Cousins close in age, José and Diego grew up together, brothers in arms since the time their swords were sticks off the ground. They swore, dramatically as children do, to fight together until their blades were torn from their cold dead hands.

The naive, courageous promises of children.

Their unstained hearts.

"We can't dump the cannons," José continued darkly. "You're not thinking straight, have you drunk all the wine? We need you *thinking*."

"Then shut up and let me think!" snarled Diego. Between the cold and the searing pain that brewed behind his eyes like a second storm, his patience was gone. "I *have* been thinking. There is no end to this game of cat and mouse. Except..." he paused, eyes glimmering as he thought of something Caro had said: rabbit.

José's eyes lit up. "You have an idea?"

Caro beamed, unsurprised. His faith in Diego was like having faith the sun would rise: unquestionable. Impulsively Caro took off his cross and handed it to Diego. "It will keep you safe."

"Sí," answered Diego. He grimaced ruefully at his friends and gave a short bark of laughter. "It's not much." He put Caro's cross around his neck. Then, Diego told them how the ship would become a rabbit.

Matias squeaked.

“No,” said José bluntly. “A foolish idea.”

“Yes,” said Caro in delight, “of course!”

“I will pray,” said the Padre. He knelt on the deck and did just that.

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Tell me of your capitán’s wounds,” Beth said one day to Marcos, gesturing to the red scales and angry welts twisting across Diego’s face.

“Sí, Senorita,” said Marcos. “A cannonball exploded on the deck killing many men, including Capitán Luca Ivanov Kinkovic. Right beside him, somehow Diego did not die. He was impaled with splinters of the deck, and splinters of the man. Our medic extracted Kinkovic’s tooth and bone from Diego’s face.”

“Oh my,” Beth said softly.

Marcos closed his eyes. “I know we are prisoners here. If you let us go, Diego will want to sail back to battle.”

“He sounds — brave.”

“We would be dead but for him.”

“Will you follow him back to battle?”

Marcos laughed. “I brag of being a good soldier. It’s quite the lie. My talent is in taverns with wine, flamenco dance, song,” he paused slyly, eyeing Beth, “and women.”

Beth raised an eyebrow.

“It’s tradition in my family to join the Navy but I would fare better as a courtier. I would test my talents in the art of winning a woman’s favour.”

Eileen walked into the infirmary, her red hair swept back in a knot, her eyes shining, wearing a dirty fighting tunic over a plaid petticoat.

Marcos’ mouth dropped open. “Yes, winning a woman’s favour.” He whistled, staring. “Lady Beth, listen to me! No more talk of battle, other than the battle for this woman’s hand in marriage! I have never seen any sight more beautiful in my entire life. Would I see nobody in my lifetime but her!”

Eileen kissed Beth’s cheek. “Just came to see how things fare,” she said to Beth, ignoring Marcos. “And to ask if you have any clubmoss.”

Beth glared at Eileen, who shrugged. Lycopodium selago was for birth control or sometimes — abortions. As Beth rummaged through the herb dispensaries, Marcos staggered up, and surprising them both he awkwardly knelt at Eileen’s feet. “I will win your favour this day, sweet maiden, or die trying this night. For soy un ave nocturna.”

There was a short silence.

“Not married?” challenged Eileen dryly.

“I was,” said Marcos. “Then my wife found me in the arms of another woman.” His voice dropped to a mock-whisper. “To my surprise, mistress and wife took a liking to each other, became lovers, and together quit Spain for the colonies!”

Eileen threw her head back and laughed, her coldness dissolving into delight.

“Serves you right,” Beth said sternly, handing a package of clubmoss to Eileen. “Get off your knees and back to bed.”

“Yes, I suppose it does,” Marcos agreed devilishly, dropping back against his cot with a roguish grin. “Glad am I, for now I may woo the most beautiful maiden in all of Scotland and in all of Spain. May I know her name?”

“Explain becoming a rabbit,” José said, raising an eyebrow. “Because I’m wondering if I should mutiny and be the one making the plans.”

Diego laughed wildly and couldn’t stop. He wiped tears from his eyes. “Go ahead, my cousin! You want command of a ship sailing through hell?”

A silence.

José grumbled. “No.”

Matias grinned, trying to be brave. “Let me, Capitán.”

Diego grinned back. “Capitán Matias Campore, what is your ruling?”

“Turn the ship into a rabbit!” Matias ordered. “Now.”

Diego stared at his friends as lightning cracked again, and a flush of gratitude rose in his heart. Caro who never judged him a day in his life, the Sargento who was always there with his missing-toothed grin and total loyalty. José, his smart-mouthed cousin, always ready to challenge. Matias, young enough that in another kinder life, he might still be told bedtime stories by a loving mother. Padre Franco with his bizarre dual-coloured eyes, whose divine counsel and steadfast support was instrumental.

So that Diego could keep believing.

Diego believed in *them*. He must keep them safe.

José eyed Matias and Diego mockingly. “Well?” he prodded. “We’re going to be a wine-less and cannon-less rabbit?”

“Sí.”

His mad plan: they would dump the wine and cannons to lighten their load — well, most of them, they could keep a few including El Ojáncanu, *the cyclops*. Then they would zig and zag the way a rabbit ran from its prey, trick by trick to catch the winds and confuse the enemy as to their actual course. It would require feisty, precise navigation, wind power and luck.

They might live.

What happened in the next three days resembled the stuff of legend. Looking back, no one could say exactly how the tacking, unpredictable rabbit-like course managed to outwit the English pursuers, but it did. The crew agreed, even Carlito who hated him, that their survival was entirely due to Diego commanding the *San Juan de Sicilia* with the force of a bull in his blood and a bear in his heart.

*El Oso*, they called him, they had always called him.

The Bear.

For Diego won. The English gave up the chase.

They sailed free.

While some of the crew took heart at the falling off of pursuit, the old salts looked upon the unfamiliar waters surrounding their haggard ship and their dwindling food stores and knew in their bones that death awaited them.

If the chase game was nerve wracking, the months that followed were nothing less than a feverish nightmare. Disease struck, wounds from the battle refused to heal, and they began to starve. Every day, rations were cut shorter. In a poor twist of fate, when the wine barrels had earlier been discarded through a cannon hole in the side of the ship, similar looking food barrels were accidentally dumped too, the men responsible threatened with the lash by Carlito, the surly, smash-nosed subteniente.

They were wineless. They were starving. It was too stormy to fish. Their medic Jacobo died. Rodigal the midshipman died. All the corporals died. The cook died. The ship's tiny terrier dog, Pueblo, grew emaciated and some talked of eating him. Luckily the emotional comfort he provided protected him, as did the psychological need to remain human. Diego fretted and prayed, the Padre beside him like his rock, his holy font, his church. Caro with a strengthening arm. Matias underfoot kept him positive — for Diego could force himself to be courageous for others. But something began to happen as disease, starvation and death became their reality, and no safe harbour could be found.

Diego began to doubt God.

It began slowly, a crack in the armour of his faith, until day by day the hull of Diego began to fracture, and soon the Sovereign vessel of his self sprung a true leak and the waters of death, doubt and fear entered his world.

The conviction of the Bear had passed.

Padre Franco blessed every sailor who died, speaking the Catholic funeral rituals, singing hymns. They gave them sailor's deaths, wrapping the bodies in shrouds and dropping them over the railings into a cold blue grave. Padre Franco's face had become thin and hidden by his beard, yet he buoyed up the men, strengthened them with song, prayer and companionship. He walked beside Diego, encouraging his capitán to remain true to his faith.

“God will save us.”

Diego had believed.

He *had*.

Now — most of his crew fell prey to dysentery. The scourge of typhus rippled through them. Diego could not save them and with every death he died a little too. The rip in his hull grew larger and God leaked out. When his cousin José Vela died and they relinquished him to the sea, Diego's heart turned to stone and his brain closed up. Numb at the loss and his own guilt, he could not even grieve. He walked into a nightmare. Reality became a fever.

Days later when he woke up, José was there and Diego's relief was like a drug — he must have dreamed of his cousin's passing from a brain delirious from starvation and fear.

He wept with relief. He paced the deck. What to do.

The Padre prayed.

José muttered.

Marcos coughed up blood.

They were all dying, it was just a matter of time.

Months passed. They lived in hell.

On September 20th, 1588, the few dozen ships left of the Armada rounded Cape Wrath at the northernmost crest of Scotland, hitting the current of the Gulf stream.

And were met by a monster.

The sky screamed murder and the hurricane that gathered took no time at all to descend like another level of hell, as if greater, unseen forces were using the last of the Armada for their sick, malevolent amusement. Mad winds howled like ghosts and tore at sails and rigging, an onslaught of angry invisible hands.

It was the storm that would sink the once proud Spanish Armada.

"All hands on deck!" bellowed Diego, his voice whipped away by the winds. "Hold fast, *mis hombres!*"

Across what was left of the fleet, the remaining capitáns of the Armada stared with dread into the mortal gale. They weren't to know it was to be one of the worst storms in history to terrorize the North Sea. Nor did they realise how dangerous the Scottish coastline was, a stretch of coast jagged with hostile reef. Even sailing in sun-drenched and tranquil waters, they would have required deft manoeuvring when pitted against the submerged teeth of those shores.

No sunshine today.

A tempest: sudden, black, and inhuman.

As always on the *San Juan de Sicilia*, Diego betrayed no fear. He went still as he faced the storm, listening. Everything was quiet and loud all at once, and the sky told him. It said *death*.

It was telling the truth.

To save them required drastic action. "Strike the Royals!" he shouted. Matias and Pedro scurried to lower the uppermost sails of the mast. It was too little to make a difference. The storm was too big.

"Strike the gallant!" Diego felt José watching him, his cousin's expression appalled. One didn't just strike the gallant.

The brothers Tomas and Valero, two of the younger mariners, rushed to obey. Diego hoped that by striking the sails along the mast, the ship's balance would stabilise, but still they rocked and bucked. Men flew overboard. Around him the other ill-fated ships of the Armada were meeting their cold and watery ends. The death rattle of splintering wood, the clap of thunder, the unending crash of waves, the graveyard of sea and storm. The reef beds were ravenous and greedily devoured the Armada, ship after ship.

Rage beyond description filled Diego.

"Reef the mainsail!" he told Matias, then turned wildly to the helmsman. "Abandon course! Full point towards the wind!" It was too dangerous to sail directly into the waves. Instead, if they pointed into the wind, they might make it. Jesús, the bronze-skinned helmsman, eyes dark with death and desperation, spun the wheel furiously and the heavy roll of the deck sent Matias flying over the edge of the tattered bulwarks.

"Not today, Matias!" Diego moved as quick as the strike of a cobra, grabbing the scruff of the young sailor's tunic to pull him back, angry not at the boy but at nature's inhumanity, at God's cruelty, at the impossible hell they lived. A sheet of lightning illuminated the frantic crew, and Diego's grim black eyes locked with Matias' terrified ones.

"Younger brother, never, ever fear," Diego said violently. "Undaunted — or death."

Beside them smoke spiralled up from a ship struck by lightning. Diego smelled darkness and burning and rain and the stench of disease. He smelled the terror of his crew.

*My God, Diego prayed, still gripping Matias. Do not let this hell be our end. Let us live. I swear, let us live this storm, and I will bring them home to Spain.*

Rain pelted his eyes.

Matias' face was white with fear. "What do we do? Mi Capitán, what do we do?"

"Strike the mainsail," Diego told him. "Go."

It was a last-ditch effort. Without any sail they would have no momentum and would lose all steering potential from the ship's wheel. Diego shouted it louder. "Strike the mainsail!"

And they did though the command was unheard of, terrifying. Diego caught the furious eye of Carlito. "Folly!" cried the subteniente, his face twisted in anger, while the wind stole the words. Nobody, least of all Diego, was listening.

The ship kicked and everyone scrambled to hold on. Something smashed across Diego's skull and he fell back, disoriented, his face wet with blood, his ears ringing, his vision blurred. Crew fell overboard. The top of the main mast broke and shattered to the deck like a mountain falling. Matias again fell backwards, and

Diego did something he would regret for the rest of his life.

He held on.

Instead of saving his friend.

Dizziness flooded him, blood in his face, red-view, Diego clutched the railing. His feet flew up. His hold kept him ship-bound. Matais flew past him, skidded against the bulwarks, and disappeared overboard.

Matias.

Matias.

He left.

And as he left Diego, so too did God.

In that moment something in Diego died. A spark went out. It was Matias, leaving him. A hole bloomed, God left, everything left. Into that emptiness crawled a black beast. Its tongue was Satan's. He retched.

Matias.

His crew.

*Hello, said a voice. I am here now.*

Diego crawled across the heaving deck.

Tomas and Valero tugged at the mainsail and it flapped down and closed, the two brothers struggling to strap the material to the broken mast so no wind could seize hold. With no sails, Jesús at the helm used the pressure of the wind on the ship itself, and the rudder, to steer.

Diego staggered up, spitting blood. "Hold, Jesús, hold!"

They held.

Across the deck lay the Padre, the fallen spar tip upon him. Diego seized his arm and pulled him free, Marcos and José beside him helping. The Padre's other arm was a bloody mess, his eyes cloudy in pain.

"We're fucking doomed," Marcos declared, pale and panting, already looking like a corpse. "Sí, sí, see you in Heaven, Diego."

"God in Heaven, hear our prayer," the Padre whispered, blood from his mouth. "Save them."

And God did.

With a lightning strike of luck or divine providence or the good consequences of Diego's risky, brutal choice, the heavily damaged *San Juan de Sicilia* managed to do something that no other ship in the fleet could: remain intact. Spurred on by fever-fuelled desperation — despite their ribboned sails, half a mast, a partial rudder and her gaping hull — Diego stood up heartsick and guided his ship. Through the shark-toothed reefs, past his dying countrymen. Guided her

through the rains and dark. Guided her into the relative safety of the inner Scottish islands. To a sight that finally after hours of the storm, nearly killed them — with relief.

There was never a sight so sweet as that stretch of sand in the fading dark.

“Land ho!” someone cried.

“Weigh anchor! We moor here. Sleep. In the morning —” he broke off. Dizzy, Diego sought out Matias. Where had he gone? Had he not saved him?

Saved? No — killed.

*You chose your own life*, came the slithering voice. *This is good. It is good to choose yourself.*

Diego stared at the dead bodies across the deck. The anchor plunged into the water; the ship jerked. The *San Juan de Sicilia* was secured. Raphael, carrying the Padre, and Carlito helping a wounded Basilio, guided the men below.

It was raining. Most of them were dead.

And yet.

*Yet there is yet hope*, Diego tried to believe.

*Perhaps*, the sea responded.

“God?”

*No*, said the voice within. *Not any longer.*

Diego collapsed to the deck. Through blurred eyes he was staring at a pair of familiar boots. José stood beside him; laces undone. He knelt beside Diego and in a low voice that mirrored the movements of the sea, he sang. The words were indistinct. The commander couldn’t make them out, but they provoked hazy images: golden fields, open skies, red flowers, birdsong.

Home.

Diego could see home. Then the image of Matias’ disappearing hand clawed into his mind, and the Serpent came. The Serpent curled into his soul, and Diego’s mind turned dark.

“Eileen MacLean is my name and you will show me how good you are with a sword against the enemy of my choosing.” The taunt was mild and all the more challenging for its indifferent tone.

“I will show you anything you want, sí, sí,” Marcos swore, hand over his chest, eyes glimmering with awe, lust and shock.

“You might want to rethink that. She’s known as *The Ravenous*,” warned Beth.

“Ravenous in bed, no doubt?” Marcos quipped.

Eileen smiled slyly. “While that may or may not be, I am named so for the Raven.”

“Que?” Marcos asked.

“From raven comes the word *ravenous*,” Beth explained.

Eileen narrowed her eyes. “Ravenous is the blood frenzy of the Mór Rígan, the raven women of the battlefield from whom I am descended. In the theatre of war, we deliver release from this world for the unlucky. In a ceremony of blood, we are the Leannan Sídh, the warrior faerie.”

Marcos grinned. “And in the theatre of the bedroom?”

“Oh, and we haunt the dreams of our warrior lovers and drink their blood,” Eileen said airily, waving a hand.

For a moment Marcos was stumped into silence. His face went from amused to startled, then slowly settled into an expression he would wear for months afterward: adoration.

Eileen eyed him for a moment then flounced carelessly out of the infirmary.

Marcos’s pretty eyes were dazed. He turned to Beth, about to spout love poetry. She shook her head to dissuade him. “Everyone loves Eileen and Eileen loves anyone she wants,” she cautioned. “You mustn’t —”

“I don’t care. She is one of the Mór Rígan, one of the raven women of the battlefield? She is perfect. I will kiss that woman, no matter if she kills me for it.” He sighed dreamily and lay back on his bed.

“She may do just that,” Beth said, but her tone was light and a little smile crooked the corners of her lips.

Marcos stretched. “To answer your earlier question, Lady Beth, if Diego wants me on his ship, I will follow. I will always follow Diego. The sun lives inside him. He is a Bear. He is the strength of the cosmos, he is as moody as the sea, he is the bravest, most fierce leader I have ever —”

“I want you.”

The voice surprised her. It was clear like an ancient future memory, rippling like music from an orchestra Beth had heard in some forgotten time or place. Maybe a dream. Yes, that was it. A song from a dream.

Beth spun around on her stool.

Don Diego Telluz Enriquez was on his feet, dark-eyed and gaunt, wearing only a half pair of breeches. Scars rippled down from his ear, encircled his neck, curled around his wide shoulders and crossed the span of a chest thin with malnourishment, yet hard with muscle and life. Dark shadows beneath his eyes, his expression like a ghost. He took a few strides away from his cot and almost fell. Catching himself, he knocked over some of Beth’s precious healing salves and her favourite clay cups, which smashed across the floor.

Beth lurched to her feet, startled by both the crash of her cups, and the crash of something inside her. “Sir!” she said, stepping into his path. “You should not be up yet. Please, go back to your cot.”

Their eyes locked. A silence coalesced between them like a storm, as if waiting for them to remember some dream they both dreamed, one deeper than life itself.

The storm paused, waited, opened.

They did not.

They had forgotten.

Instead, a mutinous, scaled expression crossed the capitán’s bronze face. His dreams of goddesses were forgotten. He was no longer dreaming. He was in the world and the world hurt; it always did, it always had. “Where are my men?” It was a demand.

“To your cot!”

“Go to your own cot, little nurse,” spat Diego.

“How dare you!”

Diego snorted rudely; black eyes opaque. “I am done resting, enfermera, I will dare what I will, and you have no say in the matter. In what Godforsaken land are we cursed to have landed?” The question was directed to Marcos.

Beth bristled. “This is Duart Castle, in Mull, Scotland, and if there is anything forsaken by God, it is not our land. We are Clan MacLean, and —”

“My men!” interrupted Diego. “Where are my men?”

“Your men are out on the castle grounds, helping my clan with simple tasks. They have been nursed back to health from death by my colleagues and I,” Beth snapped, trying to school her anger. “We have buried your dead. You are detained until further assessment, for England is at war with Spain and Scotland is

allied with Queen Elizabeth.”

“We are prisoners and you are enemies!” Diego said hotly.

“We are friends,” Beth said. “We hold you no ill will, and we have taken care of your bodies. Now rest, you are not cleared yet for release from this hospital! You have nearly died!”

They both stood unmoving as if in the eye of the storm, each taking the measure of the other. The silence elongated dangerously and, in the end, neither gave in.

Marcos broke the stalemate.

He coughed loudly, faking it, though a glowering Beth was oblivious he was attempting to interrupt the strange tension settled like a feud between herself and the capitán. “Lady Beth! Could I have a dollop of your fancy concoction —” Marcos trailed off, exaggerating his cough.

Beth broke out of Diego’s glare and was at once at his side, completely focused on his care. “Show me where it hurts, is it the left ribs?” She pressed gently. “Would you like water?”

“If you would, my Lady.” Marcos made a great show of wheezing. Beth sweetened some water with honey and served it in a clay cup and he drank gratefully.

“You are the Lady of these lands?” In the interim, the captain had dressed in his uniform and boots, both folded under his bed and mended by Sheila, the village seamstress. His lips curled in discourteous dismissal. “That means naught to me. Where is your leader? I will speak with him now to negotiate our immediate release.”

“Yes, I am the Lady of these lands.” If he was going to act without manners, she would become so polite it hurt. “Do you not remember me, Capitán Enriquez? I don’t know whether that should reflect poorly on myself, or on you. Is it so often you take a Lady at knifepoint?”

Finally, Diego’s expression changed. The cold aggression faltered, and recognition entered his eyes as he seemed to remember the haze of the surreal reality on the boat before he passed out. For a moment it seemed as though his attitude would shift, but his eyes just hardened and he speared Marcos with an icy glance.

“You look comfortable here, Subteniente Arsensio, please carry on relaxing. I will go and organise the men for departure.” He seized one of the crutches leaning against the herbal dispensary and limped out of the infirmary in a temper.

Beth snatched a damp cloth and flung it on the floor. “An ainm an àigh! The nerve! Organise the men for departure? You are prisoners and with a shattered vessel! Demand an immediate release? Is he always so arrogant?”

“Yes, my Lady.” Marcos’ cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, but he didn’t defend his commander’s lack of manners. “My apologies,” he said sincerely. “I’ll be needing to head out after him.” Marcos painfully pushed himself up to don his boots and jacket.

“You too?” Beth said irritably. “If you injure yourselves further, do not come back to this infirmary expecting treatment! We will not tend sick men twice, just because they let stubbornness overrule common sense.”

Marcos lingered in the doorway, his usually joking eyes conflicted. In the end though, he shook his head. “He seems confused. He is still sick, sí? We have been through so much, my Lady. Let me help him. My place is at his side.” He courteously waited for her approval; head bowed in respect.

A pause, then Beth nodded reluctantly. “Very well, Marcos. Help him if you can.”

Marcos winked and went out. The last of the Spaniards had left the infirmary, and Beth was left with an intermix of fury, pride and distress. That — *that* was the captain, whom she healed, whose dreams she shared, who said (had he said it? No, it must have been a dream) he loved her, who was here to save her clan? To save *her*?

He had kneeled and swore, he held her hand by the summer sea, he *promised*.

What manner of beast was he?

Beth’s heart was a storm.

Had she been dreadfully wrong?

Diego felt the Serpent coiling within him and he knew he would need to kill it. How? He did not know.

When? Not yet.

It was currently — stronger.

The capitán and the Serpent in his mind walked away from the infirmary. He wandered the corridors of Duart Castle, rudely comparing it to the palaces in Spain — where craftsmen, artists, intellectuals and royalty gathered in luxurious spaces bordered by arabesque and Islamic calligraphy or under stilted arches and muqarnas — and with disdain, Diego found Duart Castle ugly and wanting.

He trudged along cold stone walls turned dark corners, thinking fondly of the Court of the Lions in the Alhambra, the regal marble fountain with its perpetually flowing water born on the backs of the snarling sculptures of the big cats. Here the walls weren't supported by ornate carved pillars. Instead, the curtain walls were thick. Twenty-three feet thick, in some areas, which seemed absurd. The emphasis on defence was blatant.

Not decorative or elegant — functional and practical.

Still, the massively fat walls of Duart Castle were not entirely barren. Lion Flags and tartans adorned the grey stone, as well as tapestries depicting battle scenes and one with a dragon eating its own tail. Framed oil paintings displayed chieftains and stags as well as a multitude of ladies and children. In one, a vicious otherworldly blue boar gorged on apples in an orchard, in another, a unicorn being hunted, and other paintings brimmed with stags, swans, knights and golden cups. In the hall adjacent to the infirmary hung a portrait of a young woman shining with a stern, mysterious gaze. The placard read *Aignéis MacLean*. Beside her, a mermaid-like creature with a scaly tail winding amongst roses and lilies held forth a mirror and two stones in her outstretched hands. Diego felt as though she was watching him, and he tore his gaze away. This placard read *Melusine MacLean*.

"What in God's name?" Diego shuddered and crossed himself, disturbed to imagine that the MacLeans were descended from some kind of demonic mermaid.

The gloomy corridor ended and Diego exited the castle to a hostile grey day besieged with rain and a keep surrounded by high castle walls, stiffly enclosing a wrap-around courtyard with plain stone buildings discrete from the castle proper. The multi-coloured stone of every structure was cemented securely, giving the impression of indestructibility. Diego blinked the rain away. Instead of colourful peacocks delicately roaming the grounds as in Spain, ugly black birds screamed from wet branches of pine trees. Instead of haughty big cats grooming their toes with rough tongues, here ranged mud-spattered wolfhounds.

An armoury and smithy, kitchens, stables, housing and training grounds were all encompassed safely in the castle walls — utilitarian, the stone architecture unpleasing to an eye seeking beauty. MacLean guards on high alert bearing broadswords and pistols patrolled the battlements. The gate was closed, the black bars framing a pale, haunted sky. Shocked as the realisation hit him that he was indeed a prisoner in a foreign land, sunless, fog-caught, and possessed by a grim haze of ill-mannered rain, a shaking Diego leaned against the castle wall to catch his breath.

He should be still in his cot. He was worried about his men. He felt he had been metamorphosing for a million years. Did he awake as something other than himself?

Footsteps behind him. “We are the last to rise,” Diego accused, turning to the approaching Marcos with a scowl. What crew had lived?

And died?

“Sí, sí” said Marcos, trying to hug him but getting waved off. “Everyone has been to death and back.”

Diego wiped what could only be rain from his eyes.

“You are *alive*.” Marcos hit his chest with his fist, a sheen of liquid emotion in his eyes. “I was sure you were going to give up the ghost but you are as stubborn and stupid as a donkey. Death got sick of trying.” They shared a look, one that contained the whole journey: the attack at Gravelines, the hell upon the ship, the long-fevered awakening in the infirmary.

Diego scanned the yard, looking for clues to his captor’s strengths and weaknesses. On the swell of green lawn, tough, barefooted children shrieked and tumbled, playing with a small herd of horned goats with free reign. One of the yellow-eyed billies turned to Diego, flattening its ears and taunting him with a sinister bleat. “Bring me some fucking hay,” it said, and Diego shuddered and turned away.

His brain must still be dreaming.

“Do not trust these Highlanders,” he warned Marcos as he studied the MacLean warriors, noting the long barrelled matchlock firearms at their shoulders, battle axe or sword strapped to their backs, all of the guards in short hose or bare-legged in plaid kilts despite the weather. The men seemed both savage yet contained with a prideful grace as they paced like alert animals. Diego’s blood ran hot as he observed a few of them with pistols. The weapons were of Spanish make. His chest tightened. Their ship had been pillaged.

“Protestant! And ruled by the English. They are the enemy —”

“They’ve served us,” Marcos interrupted. “They’ve spent resources and time — much time, in our case — returning us to health.”

Diego clenched his teeth. He was possessed with an ominous feeling that

fought with other more ominous feelings. A presence writhed within him, the ancient wyrm whispering warnings. His body felt as though it had been through a war.

It had.

And this washed-out rain-spat land was yet the battleground.

“Come,” said Diego tersely, finding a second wind sourced by anger. He wanted meat. He wanted to see the wreck of his ship to assess if she could be salvaged. He wanted to demand their immediate release. He wanted to kill the Serpent. He wanted to return to battle, avenge their dead and realise King Philip’s dream of a Catholic Europe. He wanted to keep the promise he made the last night on the ship. Awake now, the flood of conflicting desires attached to living pumped through him, agitating his being.

He and Marcos began to walk the keep, Diego examining everything through a filter of suspicion. A big, busty woman in a yellow cap and rolled up sleeves came out of the kitchens to toss compost to a flurry of squawking chickens. Seeing the two of them, she invited them over for barley soup.

“I’m Brigit, now sit yerselves. There’s enough left for you both!”

After they ate the hot broth of turnip, carrot and garlic, both felt stronger. They continued, passing the sweet hay smell of the stables and an apothecary cluttered with bottles and skulls, pausing in the heat of the smithy forge where a large man with an auburn beard braided into a vicious tip was smashing hammer to steel with a ringing scream of metal. Aubrey MacLean ni Teneth paused and levelled his gaze onto a staring Diego. He did not speak or look for long. He had work to do and again the hammer came down.

Diego hissed. “He’s one of the men they’re forcing about!”

“What?”

“Watching us! Those men up top, like the smith. Can’t you feel their stares?”

Marcos hummed and made a non-committal sound.

“I mean it. They’re keeping us weak. They have a plan to alert England to our presence, and —” Diego’s vision blacked out completely. He was in the void. It was dark. He saw nothing.

Then, a mist.

A forest.

A glint of antlers, gold and burning.

A white crow, freakish and screaming.

The clouds parted and flocks of light-birds crashed through the sky and exploded through his heart, exiting via his chest and scattering. With the bizarre

movement of the shining avians, Diego felt an utterly strange sensation.

Of peace and love.

Of trust in the wide world, in God, and in the sense of everything in its rightful place, performing its rightful function throughout the universe. The feeling waved through him like an ocean and the feeling of dread that was the Serpent — for a moment — was gone.

Giddy, he crouched, scratching his hands in the dirt to regain reality. Bordered by a nimbus of violet light, Marcus was asking if he was hale and had repeated it myriad times. Diego looked up, forced himself to act normal, to nod, to say *sí, sí*, even though he was not. He did not want his friend to realise the extent of it. Better for him to think Diego was just light-headed instead of —

Instead of what?

Nothing. A minor faintness. Still weak, yet healing. He blinked: the birds he had seen, no, *imagined*, were gone. The violet light gone. The ocean of peace was gone too.

*Hisssssss.*

What kind of witchcraft was this?

“They’re watching you because they know you’re our capitán,” Marcos said, exasperated, pulling Diego up. “You’re weak because you almost died. You can’t even stand up! Their chief has been waiting to speak with you, of course they’re staring. Stop being so suspicious. These people helped us — more than that. *We would have died.* We owe them our lives.”

Diego wasn’t listening. A familiar tune caught his ear.

“What’s that song?” Diego’s stomach was in knots after the soup. He didn’t wait for Marcos’ reply but stalked stiffly up the nearest battlement stairs to be stopped halfway by Charlie MacLean. The young guard’s albino face spooked Diego, reminding him of the white bird in his hallucination.

Charlie raised his eyebrows. Diego blinked.

They stared at one another for a long moment.

“Stay in the courtyard,” Charlie finally said, his blue-white eyes turning bored. His pale face seemed to disappear in the pale sky. “The rest o’ yer crew are at the training grounds.” He motioned towards the other side of the courtyard.

Diego glared. “Return my pistol at once!”

Charlie frowned. “What?”

“Our weapons!” Diego reached for the Spanish pistol at Charlie’s belt.

“Back down Captain,” Charlie warned, retreating a few stairs higher than Diego. “Go play the flutes with your crew or take a nap out of my sight.”

Diego could indeed hear the music from across the courtyard; he shook off the gentle strains. “Are you thieves, then?”

Charlie just shrugged. “You are prisoners, ken? Back down.”

“What were you just singing?”

“What?”

“The tune!”

“A traditional Scottish love song. I made up the words.” Charlie blinked, then looked interested, his eyes lighting up. “Did you like it?”

Diego had heard it before. How, where? Vertigo rushed him and when he came to, Marcos was guiding him down the stairs, away from the albino guard bearing his pistol. On the far side of the courtyard, he saw his crew: some on the training grounds putting on a mock battle with the Highlander youth and some whittling and surrounded by a pack of dirty Mull children eagerly listening to their tales. What were his men doing? This was enemy territory.

“We have been cursed to land in this cursed land.” He swore. He reached for the cross Caro had given him. *Dear God*, he began. The cross was gone.

Diego went still.

Was Caro dead?

Was God?

“Cursed? For the love of God, Diego! We would have died on that ship without the charity of this clan. Our men are not only being healed of their battle injuries, but for childhood ailments too!” Marcos lowered his voice earnestly. “They give a poultice of mint and wormwood. Headaches too, using sweet smelling lavender and rose! Insomnia, pain, stomach ache — even Raphael’s foul breath is gone!”

Diego gritted his teeth. His own breath felt foul, as though he could kill someone dead with merely one hinge of his jaw like a sulphur-spewing assassin dragon. He did not care about bad breath or lavender. He would defend his crew and to do so he needed an enemy.

The world. The world was his enemy.

“Our ship?” he asked testily.

“Come Diego, let us find the library. Beth said we are allowed there and it is a sight. It will be good for you to be quiet amongst the books, sí, sí.”

Yet Diego, who loved to read and missed it on the ship, would not be distracted.

“They’re Protestants! The English Crown will pay the MacLeans a pretty penny for our heads. Their kindness in getting us well is because there’s more reward for a higher headcount.”

Marcos frowned. "I won't put money on that bet. They seem to have their own sovereignty here, I —"

He broke off at a series of shouts from near the training court. They rounded the corner of the smithy and across the yard Diego saw Carlito arguing with a big flame-haired Highlander sitting a big black charger who was half-rearing, its ears pinned flat to its skull, hooves ringing on the cobblestones. When the rider dismounted, Carlito immediately lunged, shoving him. The warrior was Neily, who knocked Carlito's arm away as Seawar screamed angrily. Carlito swung again, Neily deflected and with a twist of hips and a feint he punched the subteniente cleanly, his fist connecting to Carlito's face with a crack.

A muffled grunt.

Instantly a crowd made up of both MacLean guards and the Spanish crew surrounded the two men. Most of the Spaniards were afraid to touch Carlito as he was their superior and known to give the whip. Raphael Gonzalez Alen, he with the no-longer-bad-breath, had no such qualms. He seized Carlito.

"Don't try to give *me* orders, you half-blind Protestant heathen!" Carlito shouted at Neily as he struggled in Raphael's meaty palms.

"Crine back, bodach! You are prisoners, you brain rotted idiot," snarled Blackskull. "What a waste of resources for our clans, healing your revolting shit-tongued Spanish maw from the brink of death. I should have run you through with my claymore while you lay whimpering and dying on your deformed failure of a ship, you ungrateful Catholic barbarian."

As Carlito sneered, murderous thoughts poisoned Diego. His subteniente was a big man with a heavy, jowled face always twisted with ill-humour. A nose once broken and never set properly was a brutal sight in the middle of his face. It was currently dripping blood.

Diego hoped it choked him.

“But you didn’t and now we’re alive. We’re no prisoners of —” Carlito jerked free of Raphael and advanced, circling Blackskull.

“Prisoners are exactly what you are,” Neily returned scornfully.

Carlito shifted his weight.

Diego was hard pressed to know who he wanted to win since each man was his enemy. He actually thought he preferred this one-eyed chieftain. Still, this must end.

“Quit!” Diego’s authoritative tone rippled through the clustered men as he and Marcos strode through, cutting the scene in half. Everyone went momentarily silent to see him arisen from his deathbed, then they raised a cheer, for in truth they thought he was set for the grave.

“El oso!” Tomas cried.

“The Bear!” cheered Valero.

“Capitán!” shouted Pedro.

Diego’s command muscles returned easily. “Sub-Lieutenant, stand down unless you want to be court marshalled.” He said it in English so Neily would understand.

There was a bristling pause that vibrated the air with danger and Diego thought Carlito about to challenge. Finally, he scrunched his face, spat in the dirt, and took three exaggerated steps backwards.

Diego coolly regarded Blackskull. “I am Capitán Enriquez of the —”

“I ken who you are. I am Neily McCormick, first Chieftain of the Sept clans allied here and do I have a task for you, good *capitán* so far from your country.”

Diego raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Aye. If you want to go home, that is so.”

Neily slapped his fist on his hip, Seawar swung round, and he mounted. “I’m hours behind to join my chief in a military negotiation, so it will have to wait. We return in two days, and will dictate the terms of your release. I suspect you will be most pleased. In the meantime — keep your rabid animal controlled. There are muzzles in the stables for dogs like him.” He pointed to Carlito.

A rare pleasure darted through Diego. “Did you hear that, De León?” The sky instantly seemed lighter. Carlito went wisely mute though his eyes spat insults. “I’m sure they have a gaol for your pleasure.”

“One of Scotland’s finest.” Neily gestured to the Highlander who had joined them during the fight. Brock MacLean, the fourth-in-command of the clan, looked like what a lion would look like if it became human. Regal, courteous bearing, tawny mane, the grace of felines, packing enough weapons to single-handedly kill an entire army and with enough left-over for Sunday.

“Brock will find him the best cell. You all may want to reflect on the fact we haven’t — yet — alerted the English to your presence. We understand that doing so could make things...difficult for you.”

A wave of consideration swept across the gathered crew at this pronouncement. Neily paused as it sank in, then nodded in farewell and shot away on Seawar. The keep gate was raised, and soon the clatter of the horse’s hooves faded. The MacLean guards surrounding the fight retreated, still observing the Spaniards warily from a distance, who all began to gather around Diego, talking excitedly.

“Capitán!” Juan Carlos practically sang. “You are alive! Let us commend you! A celebration tonight!”

“How are the crew?” Diego asked him, forced to shake the younger man’s hand as it was thrust in his face, feeling dazed from the press of too many bodies.

“Mi Capitán, the land of Mull is beautiful indeed! Magic shores, with a clan more kind than summer shade.” Juan Carlos was wearing a tattered uniform, though he was looking fresh-faced, and his dark hair was combed smoothly. A purple flower bloomed behind his ear. He was beaming.

“The crew?” Diego repeated, suddenly feeling the need to lie down and die.

“And the food has been plentiful,” Juan continued eagerly.

“I said *the crew!*” He was terrified to learn who was dead. Where was José? The Padre? Matias? He scanned the crowd.

“Sir!” Juan Carlos drew to attention. “The old medicine woman — Aignéis — and the Lady Beth proved able medics for our men.”

“And?”

“Anna and her twin Fiona —” here Juan Carlos seemed to blush, and his hand went unconsciously to the flower, “and Jacob and his sons — we owe them our lives.” A pink tinge of health coloured the officer’s cheeks and there was a light in his eye that Diego knew had nothing to do with how well his lungs, legs or brain were working. Diego flashed back to a dying Juan Carlos splayed out on the *San Juan de Sicilia*’s prow, skin and bones, praying to God to grant him mercy.

*Kill me in my sleep, he begged. Please God.*

Diego felt a sudden, strange anger at the young man's recovery and was struck by a bizarre thought. As though all of them were supposed to have died.

Who *had* died?

"I am pleased for those who are recovered," Diego managed, wanting to hit the young officer across his shining face. Emotions crawled through his chest like beasts.

"Lady Beth sang beside your bed many nights, you know, long past the time when the others left," said Juan happily. "And she spoke in such low tones I couldn't hear her words. No doubt she was soothing you with kind stories."

Diego's head whipped up.

A knowing, half-smile on Juan's lips. "I think she likes you."

The belated recognition zipped through Diego.

Her voice, her soft touch, her songs. He had thought them dreams. During the fever his eyes opened on occasion to be graced by the sight of a woman with freckles and red-golden hair, a scent he could not name, secrets hidden in the light of her eyes, the memory of something shimmering and tuneful, like a song of heart or the heart of a song.

It was Lady Beth MacLean, the one he had just been so rude to, who sat with him?

"I think she kissed your forehead once, when she thought nobody was looking," Juan said quietly.

At this Diego's heart ached open, gaping and grave, a crack in the cosmos of all that he knew. Why place so much care into healing a foreigner? If the Highlanders *were* going to ransom them, the loving touch he now remembered with vivid force, would have been unnecessary. His heart thudded with conflict. She whispered healing words?

*No, whispered the Serpent, correcting him. She did not. She is a red-haired witch, a deadly siren. Not healing words — a spell to entrap you. Her song lured your ship to her shores. This is her land and it is cursed by her witchery. She has cursed you too.*

Juan's eyes were shining. Diego wanted to smear the dreamy expression off the guardiamarina's face with a reality slap. The boy was *in love*. He wanted to hurl something, smash a world, ruin the cage he lived in.

So, she sang to him: so what?

*Casting spells. A siren.*

So, he dreamed: so what?

*Bewitching him. A witch.*

So, she held his hand. He had been dying. He had come a long way back from the door of death — of course he dreamed. *An antlered goddess, a forest, a luminous question.*

Yes, he had promised her, *yes*.

*No*. In sudden concert with the Serpent, Diego armoured himself against the expansive feeling and the eerie, wild emotion of ache and longing died.

"I am grateful to God," he lied stiffly to Juan, "but that does not change the fact these people are the enemy."

"No —" began Juan.

Diego cut him off and turned to Marcos, eyes cold. "Gather the rest of the men." There were more pressing matters than wondering about the softness of women and dreams. Then wondering about their tender touch and —

His vision shifted. For a moment he was overwhelmed with light and darkness: the world was different. The colours of things subverted backwards. He felt a presence through the trees, something enormous, winged, alive and fanged with love. It spread across his mind. It hovered around his men as though he could see their light-bodies, the shining souls surrounding them.

His heart raced. What was wrong with him? What was wrong with this place?

*Hsssss. The devil's land. Witchcraft.*

He rubbed his eyes furiously to dispel the hallucination and thankfully it once again vanished.

"List the issues," Diego barked, short-tempered now as the others began to convene.

"None, sir!" said Juan. "Other than just now. The Highlanders have been generous. They've offered food and aid. To not be in their debt, we've been helping them — Paquito and Raphael mended broken beams in one of the houses, Caro has been keeping the young children occupied with Bible stories, Tomas and Valero have been teaching their youth our style of sword-fighting."

Diego's face darkened. It was madness to mend broken beams in the enemy's house. "Have you yet to realise whose home we take shelter in?"

"The MacLean clan of the island of Mull, Scotland. Surely, they told you?"

Raphael Gonzalez Alen, the joke loving subteniente, stepped forward. Instead of his regimentals he wore an ugly clump of plaid material that must have been some dress custom of the Highlanders. He saluted Diego lightly. "Good to see you alive, Capitán, to eat lunch and dinner another day!" He beamed, starting to make a jest about breakfast too, but Diego cut him off mid-egg before he could get to the *tostada*. They were trapped in a cursed land — why were they all *smiling*?

Diego pointed to the plaid thing on Raphael's shoulders and opened his

mouth.

“It’s a féileadh-mór!” Raphael cut in. “Warm as the sun in Spain. Can be used as a cloak, or a hood, or —”

“Take. It. Off.”

Raphael shrugged, unfazed by Diego’s black mood, and unfurled it cheerfully from his neck. As the crew settled in a half-circle around him, most of them looking relaxed and hale, Diego immediately began whipping questions without so much as a *bello we made it through hell, glad you didn’t die*.

“How many survived and what became of those who didn’t?”

“We are ninety-eight strong, Capitán, healthy and ready to eat!” Raphael answered. “Delivered from evil. Our dead buried beside the forest. The MacLeans offered our comrades a proper resting place, funereal rites performed by Lady Beth, and Catholic crosses.”

Diego’s face contorted. “Did anyone check if the arms in the ship are intact? Why are they wearing our pistols? Give me a full report on the situation. What do we have? What are we lacking?” A haze was forming over his mind. His legs went weak. He had gotten up too soon. “Immediately,” he ordered. “Where is Matias? Who is still alive? Where is Sargento Caro?”

Caro stepped forward, his smile showcasing his missing teeth and the gold one beside the empty space. Without preamble he clasped Diego into a bear hug. Diego went giddy with relief, almost falling over, and brushed something wet from his eye. Just a bug or a piece of hay.

*Thank God. Thank God. Thank God.*

*God is no longer with you,* said the Serpent. *I am.*

The Sargento pressed something into Diego’s hand. “They took it off in the infirmary because of the rash on your neck. I kept it safe.” It was the cross. Wordlessly Diego put it on, the metal cold and the wood warm against his hollow, empty chest. Caro was alive, but where was José?

“I am here, Capitán. Matias is lost.” Caro somberly gave an accounting of those who had passed. Quickly Diego’s brain shut off, unable to face it. He looked into the gathered crew and saw him. The boy’s pale face was drawn, the black eyes sunken, the skin translucent as though he were a ghost.

*You killed me,* Matias said. *But please, do carry on.*

Diego jerked back, accidentally hitting Marcos in the ribs with his elbow, who began coughing up blood. “What ails you?” Diego asked gruffly.

“My life,” jested Marcos to the laughter of the crew.

Caro passed Marcos a handkerchief.

Raphael snorted.

Marcos winked. “Someone take me back to the infirmary where the women are! Sweet Anna! Lady Beth, maravillosa! I want to tarry longer to fall under her spell —”

The crew erupted into laughter.

“Quit,” Diego rasped.

“Too true!” the little woodworker Pedro shouted out with a whistle. “She’s a gem! *Una Belleza!*”

“Fiona!” exclaimed Juan, his face turning sly, blushing and possessive all at once.

“Eileen,” sighed Marcos, putting a hand on his heart dramatically and pretending to faint.

Many of the crew whooped out agreements about the beautiful Highlander women. Diego’s chest was tight, his mind in fog, the serpent licking his ear and flickering into his mouth. They were in danger here and he must protect them. The English would come. The Scots would turn them over. They were thousands of miles from home or safety.

“You have been enchanted by a siren,” Diego interrupted viciously. “Can’t you see she has lured our ship here to possess us? These Scots will betray us to England. We are here to convert them or kill them! Have you all gone mad?” His glare was an attack on the crew. “They are Protestants and worse, they are pagans! Have you seen their portraits? Descended from snake-tailed mermaids and dragons! They are the enemy! Now shut your mouths about the women or I will throw the lot of you to the sea.”

Diego's threat hit home and the men of the *San Juan de Sicilia* fell silent. They had been feeling good, they were fed and healed by beautiful Highlander women, their capitán lived, and while their situation was dire, the fact they were alive was a miracle.

Diego was their sudden black cloud.

Across the courtyard a cow uttered a long, drawn-out mooing. The rain ceased and clouds rapidly parted, the sun casting a warm golden glow. Diego was not warmed. His fingers were ice. His heart frozen. He wondered at the bleak world, how it had abandoned them in the devil's land after long battles, after dying one by one across demon-pitching oceans, after monstrous nightmares of devils and light, and how after all of that he and his crew now stood alive in enemy territory.

How the sun shone or it rained, yet how the battle never ended.

"With respect, Capitán," Juan finally said, "the MacLeans have shown us only honour. They gave us bedding and féileadh-mór for warmth" — the Gaelic rolled smoothly off his tongue, and Diego wondered if his sweetheart taught him — "and fed us delicious milk and honey. Medicines upon medicines. We owe them our lives!" He was the first to speak for a number of the crew having a hard time understanding the capitán's mistrust. "We feel restored. Strangers who nursed us from death's door would not feed us to the wolves."

"They *are* the wolves," Diego snarled. "To them we are mere pigs they are fattening for slaughter. You haven't discussed strategy? We are *prisoners*."

A black bird circled above them, flinging a jarring croak into their waiting eardrums.

Streaks of clouds cut up the sky into pieces.

"Where is our ship? Do any of you even know our location on this island? Have you scouted for escape routes?"

"No," Raphael answered cheerfully. "We've been healing and helping the MacLeans. And eating like pigs." A pause and then he frowned, no doubt thinking of Diego's comment.

"No," Carlito sneered. "But you weren't here to lead us, *Capitán*."

Diego did not look at Carlito De León lest he burn the man to cinders with the mere glance of his eyes. "Has anyone at least assessed whether the ship can be repaired?"

Caro saluted, gold tooth shining. "That water they call the Sound of Mull."

Diego motioned for him to continue.

“Went down to the piers. Was told the ship is an hour ride northwest at Tobar Mhoire bay where we anchored. Seaworthy at least. The masts and sails, the top of the hull — they say it’s a ghost ship.” He scrunched his face doubtfully.

“If she hasn’t sunk, it’s possible,” said Pedro.

“Then we will make it possible. It will be our goal: repair the ship and leave.”

“If they let us,” interjected Carlito ominously. “If they don’t —”

“Capitán,” Juan interrupted, “the kindness was real. Lady Beth reminded me of my Madre, gentle and firm.” He went on, heedless of Diego’s storm-crossed face. “Her words never harsh though she didn’t put up with anyone’s attitude. She’s one of the clan’s leaders as well as a healer.” His fingers played with the purple flower behind his ear.

“She sings better than Tomas,” added Valero dryly.

“If I die, I want her to say my last rites,” added Tomas with a joking leer.

“You must all repent!” said Padre Franco passionately, pushing through the crew, stepping up beside Diego, waving an oratory arm as though at the pulpit. “My sons, they are heathens, infected with false religion. Diego is right, their ancestors are water dragons, their women are sirens possessing you with a sorcerous song! We must begone from these evil lands lest we fall under their spell. Do you forget why we left Spain?”

Relief flooded Diego to see Franco, so intense he staggered and almost fell to his knees.

But something was wrong.

His old friend was waving an arm at the crew — only one. The other was gone. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face utterly changed. His expression once kindly, a father to them all, a haven of support by God, yet when he turned and met Diego’s eyes, true fear and horror jolted through the capitán’s heart and he stepped back. The Padre’s face was harrowed, haunted and blank. As if Franco was gone. As if the body was possessed by an entirely different man.

Who?

What was wrong with him?

Diego felt bile seep along the edges of his mouth, his world shook in its sockets, panic zipped through him. “Padre —” he began, then broke off.

Franco’s multi-coloured eyes had always been odd. Now one of them was half-yellow and shot with veins as if it boiled in hell. He rubbed his index finger with his thumb then did it again and again as if his fingers were intolerably itchy. He squinted up at Diego as if seeing him, yet not quite seeing him at all.

“Yes, my son. I am here.”

Hsssss.

"The Capitán's right," interrupted Carlito, smoothing his ill-treated uniform and affecting a condescending tone. "We left Spain to go to war. We're still at war."

"Hear, hear!" said Basilio, the ship's explosive expert. He was crane-like and lanky, with a shock of thick frizzy hair as though he had once been exploded. A few of the other crew members voiced their agreement too. They were Catholics: the true religion. This land was not. A dark cloud passed over the men and even without moving the crew seemed to shift into two factions, discernible only by the looks on their faces and the allegiances in their hearts.

Juan's face crossed into outrage. His voice became ardent, a light in his eye shining. "Women like Anna and Fiona and Lady Beth would never turn us over to the English to die! *Never*. Spend a few conscious days under their care, Capitán, and you'll understand why we must not cast suspicion on their character, rather bless them with praise! Our situation is more complicated than just a matter of being Protestant or Catholic!"

A round of agreements sprang into the air.

"They sang to us."

"We were given tents and beds and food."

"I felt kind hands on my brow."

"Medicines that took the pain."

"They staked Catholic crosses at each burial mound."

"I will take confessions all night from the lot of you!"

"We are prisoners!"

"Yet they treat us like guests!"

"Quiet!" Diego cried. "You have been seduced by witchcraft in that infirmary! Answer me two questions. First —"

He was interrupted by one of the Highlanders, a tall man with white hair, composed blue eyes, and a battle axe across his back, who politely introduced himself as Chieftain Angus MacBeatha and the young man with him as Hector MacLean, son of the Laird. The moment Diego looked at Angus, a hallucination seized him. A snake sat on Angus' shoulder, flicking its tongue in Angus' ear.

"Hello," the Snake said. "How is your day?"

"What do you want?" Diego demanded, overwhelmed by his crew, by the stupid devil's land, by witches or enchantment, by snake visions, by the terrifying transformation of his beloved Padre, by being goddamned alive. The world shook. Was he going to faint? He wanted to kill life itself. Could he stab it in the heart?

"Nil folaireamh tugtha againn do na Sasanaigh," Angus told him.

Did Diego mishear or did the chieftain speak in Gaelic? He blinked. The snake leered.

“The sun is out and shining,” said the Snake. “The rain has passed. A pleasant day to attack a chieftain, yes?”

Hector stepped forward, unsmiling, his fox-like face a mess of freckles. As Diego stared at him he remembered Hector aiming his arrow on the ship. Now the boy’s eyes were bright as a storm and he pointed his angry fingers in Diego’s face. “There are no witches here. Show some respect to my clan who saved your lives. Say one more thing about my sister and I will hurt you.”

“Try, boy,” snarled Diego.

“I will shoot you through your tiny Spanish brain this time.”

“Your aim is pathetic,” Diego spat.

“Eist, captaen,” Angus said.

“Is bandia i mo dheirfiur ni a,” Hector growled.

“I have brought you gifts,” said the Snake. “So many gifts for you to unpack!”

“What?” Diego cried. “What?”

“If you agree we will not,” Angus was saying.

“Agree to what?”

Why could Diego not understand them? Why speak in Gaelic? Why was he hearing and seeing a Snake? Was he going insane?

Crazed, he advanced furiously on Angus. Hector stepped into his path while Brock and a group of MacLean guards swiftly surrounded him from all sides. The MacLeans were protective of the MacBeathas, the medics whose fine hands were needed to knit their battle wounds, even though Angus rarely worked with his brother Jacob in the infirmary. The Spanish crew bristled, weaponless other than Tomas and Valero, who were leaning carelessly on wooden practice swords.

“Troid ar son,” said Hector.

“Did you want me to translate?” asked the Snake. “It is not a problem. I speak every language, you know.”

“Agree to fight for us —” began Angus. He could get no further. The hallucination seized Diego completely. The snake on Angus’ shoulder morphed: Angus became the Snake, the very Lord of the Súl Olc Clan, whatever *that* was, and flames were rising from his mouth as his reptilian neck grew. Thousands of dead people shrieked accusations in Diego’s ears: all the men he had killed on the ship, Matias, even the Padre waving his arms.

His arm.

The snake leered and hissed, rearing for its strike.  
Delirious, with only his bare hands, Diego attacked.

Brock and four others threw him in the cell of Duart Castle's dungeon. One whole night he paced, innerly violent, trying to grieve the loss of his ship and crew but feeling only intense rage. Where was José? Where was Matias? His head pounded with a headache from hell and when he was too exhausted to pace, he lay on the cot and passed out. The next day he ravenously ate the thick bread and vegetable soup they sent. *Acostarse con las gallinas*, he thought wearily. He had been up all night when all he wanted was to go to bed with the hens.

Near day's end the cell door clanged open so loud his head split into septenary screaming universes. Brock MacLean, the commander with the tawny mane and at least two knives strapped to every single limb and five in his hip belt, courteously escorted Diego back to his men. Diego was tired and moody. A sick fury seemed to move his limbs. When Marcos asked, Brock gave permission for the Spaniards to go out to their gravesite.

And so, the crew went.

That night they sang.

All of them except for Diego.

By forest's edge under a sky dark with loss, heads lowered at Catholic crosses silhouetted in the dying sun, the men of the *San Juan de Sicilia* accepted Padre Franco's liturgy of farewell. They prayed. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. They remembered their Capitán Luca Ivanov Kinkovic and their fallen comrades, prayed for the return of their souls to the Godhead, lifted their rough voices in song.

Diego's mouth would not open. He was shaking. Suddenly, across the crowd of men he saw José and relief flooded his body like a drug. Thank God, thank God. His cousin was alive. He could breathe now; he could finally breathe. José nodded and Diego nodded back. Thank God. He had not killed his cousin.

Diego now tried to sing, for his cousin was alive, but his throat was still too tight. Too many others dead.

And Matias —

No song. His heart was wrapped in scales. His throat was wrapped in a snake. The melodies from the chests of his crew rounded up into the dome of the night sky, to find the souls of the stars.

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After the funeral ceremony the Spaniards gathered outside the castle walls on a swell of hillock overlooking the sheep pastures. The Highlanders provided tents and designated the high ground for the crew's camping area. On cooking

fires, Juan, Tomas, and Valero were roasting game donated by Brock — they called him Bladebreaker — who hunted a buck for them in the western woods. The Spaniards now sat round the fires, cooking and repairing equipment and uniforms the MacLeans returned. They had not yet returned their weapons.

Brock padded over and Raphael called out thanks for the meat.

“Of course. Plenty of game in the woods,” Bladebreaker returned kindly. “Tomorrow I’ll send Kelly to show you the best hunting spots. We can share some food but feeding all of you takes quite the resources, so if you can hunt...”

Raphael perked up. “Of course, we can. Any wild boar?”

“Rare.”

“That’s how I like it.”

“Just don’t hunt the deer,” Brock said firmly. He didn’t explain. “And you’ll have to return the hunting weapons afterwards.” He nodded politely at Diego. Bladebreaker’s long hair was tied in bands as many of the Scots here wore their unruly tresses. Though young, the warrior was fourth-in-command after Lachlan. Diego already intuited the rightness of this from Brock’s quiet and doughty demeanour. Though Brock wasn’t fiery and extravagant like Blackskull, Diego felt little doubt he was just as deadly in battle. He exuded the sense of being both a gentleman and a fighter.

“Lady Beth MacLean of Mull invites you to parlay, Capitán Enriquez,” he said formally, with a smooth half-bow.

Diego barely looked up. “I will speak with the chief of Duart Castle.” Dismissal complete, he went back to the tinderbox he was cleaning.

Brock coughed. “He has yet to return from his trip to his brother’s castle. Lady Beth, however, is ready to see you.”

Diego’s grip upon the tinderbox turned white-knuckled. Was Brock insulting him? He looked up into the man’s placid eyes. “I will speak with the chieftains,” he acceded, standing up.

Brock was unfazed. “No.”

“You then.”

“I do not have the authority to negotiate with you before my Lady Beth.”

“Lady Margaret.” Still a woman, but better than a —

Witch. Siren.

“Alas, Lady Margaret is besieged with head pain.” Brock’s tone turned stern. “If you would be so kind as to —” he paused dramatically — “not make our Lady wait.” He walked off, lithe and without sound like the big cat he resembled. Diego found himself angrily following. He was led into the cold air of the castle proper and down a series of stark hallways, narrow and bare. The Highlander

finally stopped and knocked at a dark door lit on either side by two torches.

“Enter,” came a woman’s voice, clear as a bell.

Bladebreaker opened the door and remained outside, signaling for Diego to proceed. Inside, torches and candles hungrily jabbed their light across empty stone walls, illuminating three chairs of equal measure. Lady Beth sat in the middle chair as though it were a throne, spine straight.

A table between them.

More than that.

Worlds between them.

A witch and a Capitán of the Spanish Inquisition.

How could this go well?

“Capitán Enriquez, it is a blessing to see you doing well. We prayed for your recovery. Please take a seat.” Beth motioned to the opposite side of the table.

Why was her body shining?

Diego remained stiffly standing, squared off in confrontation. Far from being struck by appreciation for the care she and her people showed him, something else, black and bitter, descended upon him. The Serpent in his mind hissed.

“Prayed to whom? Your pagan gods? Or to the true Father in Heaven?”

She eyed him, no doubt noting the hostile tone and his refusal to sit, the hard stare, the posture both aggressive and defensive with arms folded across the chest, perhaps filing away these observations as acts of character revelation. As if her scrutiny gave her information sets about the coiled secrets of his soul and the mysteries of his mind — secrets he kept locked away.

Her eyes cut through him, saw beneath his serpent skin.

Diego shivered. He did not like the sensation of her gaze. It was unpleasant to be known. What did she see?

“I prayed as I am wont to pray. Are you not pleased with our reception of you, Capitán?” A stray curl fell in front of her eyes. She made no move to brush it aside. All her motion was stillness.

“As a matter of fact,” said Diego coldly, “I was.”

Her voice took on a chill. “You were? And now are no longer pleased? What pray tell dampened your opinions of our hospitality and our clan? Did we fail to return you to pure and perfect health? Perhaps you might have stayed in the hospital until you fully recovered?”

Diego stood as straight as a lance, trying to control an irrational, mounting rage at this woman, unsure exactly of its source. A vision erupted across his eyes:

an antlered goddess, a tender touch on his forehead.

Witch, the Serpent hissed.

“I requested an audience with the chief.” He paused, allowing the space between his sentences to turn the statement rude. “Not his daughter — not a woman. Not with a —” He broke off before the ugly accusation.

A fire crossed Beth’s face and all the candles in the room seemed to flare. “Do I need to remind you that your crew is here, not as the Spanish Inquisition, but as our prisoners?”

Diego hesitated.

“Are the women in your country unable to think, such that they are unable to parlay?”

“Women are not —”

“Is your hostility because you are negotiating with a woman, or is it because you are afraid, Capitán Enriquez, of our intentions towards your crew? Afraid we will turn you over to the Crown of England as would be within our capacity and legal right? In either case I am disappointed. I heard grand things about you from your crew, and not one of them was your fear and narrow-mindedness.” She paused, her eyes like bullets striking the space between them and boring into his mind’s flesh, causing blood to well.

Her words stoked Diego’s anger. If they were in Spain, her insolence and pretense to power would not go unpunished. Was she ashamed to be so bold, to pretend to command here? Chiefs and kings and lords negotiated. Not —

“In Spain you would be reprimanded at your pretense to rule,” he told her, the words slow, selected to wound.

Her eyes like fire.

He was blinded.

A goddess.

A luminous promise.

Witch, said the Snake. Siren. She has dragon blood.

She besieged his head. She was the reason for these visions he was having. Something in the medicines she had given him. The auras he saw around people, the hallucinations of birds, the flickering of light around the Lady Beth he saw even now. “In Spain you would be returned to your quarters and chastised,” he continued, using the word one would use to scold a child.

Her eyes ablaze.

“In Spain you would not pretend to speak for a clan, you would obey your husband. And you would be Catholic.” A shimmer of a dream, her shining antlers. But Goddesses did not have antlers: the forked bone was the devil’s sign. There

were no goddesses. Only God. A rush of vertigo, and Diego struggled to avoid falling to his knees before her. “In Spain you would be —”

The torches in the room flared again and a whole row of candles on the table went completely out.

“It appears,” Beth said, her cold words wrapped in flames, “that I am speaking with a spoiled child who was never taught to offer courtesy and respect when he is adrift and helpless in a land far from his own. Courtesy to someone to whom he owes his life. Courtesy to one who is providing food and shelter. Courtesy to another of rank. As for negotiating the conditions of your release, or in the event of —”

“I refuse to negotiate with a woman.”

They stared at one another, the strain between them revealed by the tautness of their bodies as well as invisibly: an energetic current charging the air. Beth’s face changed as if someone struck her. The storm of emotions brewing behind her eyes radiated anger — then disappeared as she schooled it away. As she stood up, skirts as dark as the ocean at night swept around her legs like waves and revealed she was barefooted.

How uncivilised, Diego thought angrily. Perhaps sirens descended from scaled mermaids or dragons didn’t need shoes.

The Lady pointed at the door with a single, ringless finger. “Then farewell, Capitán.”

The air was not cold. It was glacial.

“You are without a ship in enemy territory.” She barked a laugh that seemed to say she was amazed he could be antagonistic when he clearly did not have the upper hand. “You are prisoners. It may behoove you to change your attitude and find some gratitude for your life, which was returned to you by my colleagues and I, and by Brìghde, Cailleach Bhéara, and God. You will be informed of the conditions of your release when my father returns. Leave us. You are dismissed.”

Diego wanted to do something he could not do. He clenched his fists.

He could not do it.

What was it?

Instead, he turned, shaking with rage. He left her. He stalked out in jerky strides and Bladebreaker at the door swung into unconcerned formation behind him, herding him out of the castle. A doomed sense of unease suffused Diego as he ran from her, ran from something, ran from who knew what, ran from that which tried to claim his blood, a desire he could not name. He needed food and water, he wanted to lie down and sleep and never wake up.

The crew were waiting for Diego’s return. “Well?” Marcos eyed Diego’s flushed face. “Did you kiss her?”

The others threw more questions until he turned on them viciously. “The MacLeans,” he spat, but could not finish. I detest her. I am afraid I am going mad. I am become a nightmare. What do we do? Help me, mi amigos.

Eager faces waited to hear how the negotiations had gone, what their plan would be. Diego saw lights around his men where no lights should be and once again the sky filled with birds made of stars and dead people. He closed his eyes.

“Will they let us repair our ship?”

“Will they allow us to leave?”

“Will they alert England?”

“What is our plan?” Carlito stared aggressively at a leader who seemed to be failing in his role.

Diego shook his head. There were no answers. He did not tell his men that no negotiation occurred, or that Lady Beth had enchanted them all. Them with devotion and him with —

Witchcraft.

Here on the isle of Mull.

He remained silent. He shook his head, bewildered, hungry, nauseous, alone and very far from home. He felt the stars above, so foreign. The cold night. He wondered what his younger sister was doing. Luciana would be engaged by now, perhaps the wedding date announced. Perhaps she was eating peaches in the sunshine with their mother. Dancing. No, that was wrong. Luciana was gone. Luciana would always be gone.

Caro stared.

Marcos frowned.

José glared.

Carlito muttered.

Instead of telling them anything or sharing his fears, or seeking council or confessing he was seeing things like a madman and needed help (he didn’t), Diego stalked away under Mull’s cold night to stare at the alien heavens and count to infinity twice, star by star, to let his heart break without reason at all under the poem of the sky.

“Will you allow us to leave in peace, Chief Lachlan?” Diego asked directly, as politely as he could muster.

“Tell us of your ship,” was Lachlan’s only answer.

There were choruses of agreement from the other Highlanders at the table, all of whom were curious about the ill-fated Armada.

“And her journey,” Beth added.

The chief had returned from military discussions with his brother. As thanks for the Spaniard’s wholehearted help the last three days with their harvest, the crew was invited to dine in the Great Hall. Used to the heat of Spain and finding the cold nights in their tents uncomfortable, the crew was delighted to be warming up near a roaring fire searing a number of delectable looking spit roasts. Rolled and tied joints were basted with their own fat and covered in dredge, a spicy breadcrumb and oatmeal crust that crisply coated the ox meat.

“If this is prisoner life, I’m all for it,” joked Raphael aside to Marcos, eyeing the food with big eyes.

In total they numbered ninety-eight Spaniards and over one hundred and eighty Highlanders, all arranged around long tables in the Great Hall, the largest feast Duart Castle had seen in many a year.

“Of course,” Diego replied stiffly.

Lachlan eyed him carefully and Diego bore the scrutiny. He studied the chief in turn, looking for signs of weakness. Lachlan boasted a burly body, legs thick as branches and a chest like a tree trunk. Descended from the Kings and Queens of the Ancient Province of Dál Riada, the MacLeans were the sacred gentry known as Pict-Sidhe, a bloodline direct from the royal throne of the gods, the Taudhe d’Anu. Fae blood. Dragon blood. Lachlan’s authority was obvious in the way he sat with his shoulders back and his eyes calm and canny as though preparing to set down shadows into rows and speak them into submission.

“Without your hospitality and medical aid, we would have perished upon our boat,” managed Diego. Marcos and Raphael schooled him sternly before the dinner. Be humble. Be accommodating. Be polite.

He was trying.

He would rather sail a bearskin back to Spain.

Diego needed the chief to free them and the clan’s help to fix their ship. In the last two days helping their rescuers with harvest tasks, a cautious goodwill settled between the two peoples, though not for all of them.

“As my daughter taught me, we could do no less under the eyes of God,”

Lady Margaret said sincerely. She and Diego both bowed their heads to one another.

“Tell us. For we have heard the Armada was invincible,” Lachlan continued. The chief’s head was crowned with feathered bonnet, his fretting hunting tartan clasped with the brooch of a stag’s head. Rabbit fur lined his calf-skin sporran and his belt hosted a pair of steel pistols with finely engraved butts. Lady Margaret was also formally dressed. Fine silver threads embroidered her heavy cloth gown and low-hanging delicate sleeves trailed with every graceful movement. Her red-gold curls were artfully arranged, her eyes watchful.

“First, please accept our thanks as we are grateful for your invitation to dine.” Diego forced the pleasantries from his lips.

“Your crew has done much to help us. Tonight, you are guests in our hall.” Lachlan paused and Diego heard the silence for now. “However, we must decide what to do with you. England does not like you. You, Captain, do not like us. I have a proposition.”

“What is it?” Carlito interjected. “Did you tell the English we were —”

“First, pray, tell us of your ship and journey,” Lady Margaret interrupted smoothly. “And enjoy the feast.”

“The *San Juan de Sicilia* was fully-rigged, sound and strong,” Diego answered before Carlito could say anything else. “A fine hunter in her prime weatherly.”

“Lovely lines,” Marcos added, “like a woman. Swift as a falcon when handled properly and oh! She held great might in firepower!”

“She was our madre,” mused Caro.

“A Lady of finest breeding!” Juan Carlos winked, to whistles of agreement.

“Like a warrior!” exclaimed Beth, enchanted.

Diego found himself staring at her shining face, something he was trying to avoid. She was seated almost directly across from him. They had not spoken since their unpleasant meeting a few days ago. Diego liked it that way. He wanted no conversations with witches. Every night he confessed to the Padre, “I have done wrong, I have sinned in my mind,” and every night Padre Franco told him: “Listen not to witches, sirens and Satan. Cleave to the strength of God. Five Hail Mary’s.” But the harder he tried to shun Lady Beth the harder it was to stop thinking of her.

Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Tonight, Beth was clad in a simple green gown with a plaid hood. No jewelry adorned the pale skin of her ears or neck. He forced himself to look away and fixed his gaze on the cooks Jamie and Brigit who had begun to carve the meat, and at the fish platters — carp stuffed with anchovy, bread and spices — which now arrived on the tables.

“Like a beast,” swore Carlito, flexing then pounding a meaty fist on the table. The duck roast jumped.

“Like a coffin,” joked Tomas, smirking at his brother. Valero mimed choking to death with goggling eyes.

To Lady Beth’s left was Eileen, to whom Marcos had been giving outrageous compliment after compliment. Eileen was a beauty, with eyes cut like emeralds and a killing smile. The second in command, Gregor, sat beside his daughter, piling her plate high with food and refilling her wine glass whenever it was too low. He did the same for his wife Heather on his other side, who was the dazzling image of her daughter.

“Kept us well under way,” admitted Caro, flashing his gold tooth with a shy smile. “She had such high sides to discourage boarders!”

“Has,” corrected Diego crossly.

“Do girls like it when you kiss them with gold in your mouth?” Eileen asked, winking at a blushing Caro.

“I would think they might,” agreed Heather with a flirtatious smile.

Gregor sighed.

“Our ship is consecrated to our Catholic God,” began the Padre loudly, about to intone scripture or rant. At a nod from Diego, Caro quickly distracted the priest by offering him a dish of leek and potatoes. Of all the Spaniards Padre Franco was the least recovered. Something had broken in his mind and when he wasn’t falling into religious orations, he would rub his missing limb. “Where are my fingers?” he would ask in alarm, as if having lost one limb he was now doomed to slowly lose the other. He tried to reach for the potato dish with his missing hand, and when the stump failed to span the distance a cloud of frustration darkened his face.

Many of the other sailors raised their glasses, chiming in with toasts of appreciation to the honour of the ship who cradled them through hell. All of them were excited — the food was a treat. While Diego had heard talk of a bad harvest, it was not evident from the delectable spread. The aroma of roasted meat and hot oily seafood tempted them and vegetables, cheeses, fruit and nuts were arranged on the tables in rows. He was particularly enjoying a dish of giant roasted puffball mushrooms filled with walnuts and topped with a wild garlic herb sauce of hazelnut and cranberry.

“We loved our ship!” managed Raphael between bull-sized mouthfuls.

“We knew her every breath,” added Juan Carlos.

“And groan,” added Marcos, suggestively eyeing Eileen. “And moan. And —”

—” Raphael saluted cheerfully. “The *San Juan de Sicilia* was eight hundred tons

"Is eight hundred," Diego interrupted. "A unit of the Squadron of Levant, originally commanded by Don Martin de Bertendona. We left Spain with two hundred seventy-nine soldiers and sixty-three mariners."

Marcos waved his wine glass. "A brilliant cargo space, Senorita Eileen! Ordnance stores of one thousand three hundred round shot, sixty-nine quintals of gunpowder and eighteen of match!" He thrust his heather ale high with each addition of artillery to the narrative. "Two siege guns!"

"Twenty-six cannons," added Caro, then his face fell.

"Before the sea claimed them," added Raphael.

"A barry vessel!" Eileen admitted.

"Mighty," Beth agreed.

Diego was still trying hard not to notice Beth. Over the past two days as the crew helped with the harvest, Diego did his best to ignore her whether she was collecting herbs at the edge of the sheep field, galloping out on her black mare, tussling with her younger brothers Lachlan, Allan and Gillean, or consulting with Dougal at the Apothecary. He tried and failed. It was hard to avoid noticing someone who — shone — in an otherwise dark land.

She is a witch of the worst kind, the Serpent said.

Diego's hallucinations and sense of unreality were getting worse. Whatever spell she had cast on him in the infirmary was intensifying. Yet something else was happening he didn't want to admit, for the constant visions weren't all disorienting. Sometimes he could see into things.

See what was really there.

As though he could see the hidden order of things and not the masks that covered them up. The essences not the exteriors. Could see the soul of a person instead of merely the body that housed it. And he knew things. Before dinner Carlito spoke; Diego saw a squirm of smoke rise from the subteniente's mouth and understood at once what it meant.

A lie.

"How then," Lady Margaret asked, "did the English manage to overcome the most powerful military fleet ever assembled? Especially with such a cargo of artillery aboard?"

Diego scowled. "I'll tell you how: the Duke of Medina, the aristocratic fool. He should never have been commanding. He wanted a direct engagement." Anger fuelled his words, sent them crackling outwards with electricity. "Our second in command, De Recalde knew better. He proposed a covert attack on the English Navy when they lay tide-bound in Plymouth harbour. Medina overruled. He ordered us to stand down."

"Why did the Duke refuse to attack?" Lady Margaret asked.

“He was told to follow King Philip’s plan,” Diego answered. As he looked across the table to nod at Lady Margaret, he accidentally made eye contact with Beth and with an abrupt, screaming glister, a vision of night and luminescence consumed him. The entire room of people froze as though they were a secondary dimension, a mere shadow-world, and he could see instead a light-encoded reality superimposed upon the room. And this reality sang.

Sang!

A raven swooped through the Great Hall with knife-like feathers. As if it was the guardian of this — musical Otherworld. The bird at first shone black as ebony, then morphed and became white, albino, strange.

Claire Gordon, Diego thought, irrationally knowing its name. The bird cawed agreeably. ***I am one of three. I am the Mór Rígan.*** Everything glimmered. The light was a chorus of love.

All he could see was the raven. All he could hear was the light-song of the Otherworld. It was the most beautiful thing he ever heard. The raven’s stare terrified him, as though it knew him very well. The expression was testing, joking, somehow both cruel and compassionate, the eye was holding open a door to this — dimension. Whatever this place was that Diego kept seeing. Some secret the world kept for him his whole life.

Kept from him.

His heart shuddered. He did not want this. It was wrong, not of God.

Hsssssss, came the Serpent’s voice. With a thunderous clap like a door shutting, the vision ceased and blackness took over. Blind, Diego felt for and picked up the knife at his place setting. He closed his palm around the point to draw blood and when the pain shattered the abyss and brought him back to the reality he was familiar with, he realised he was still locked in Beth’s gaze.

No time had passed, other than an eternity.

Are you well? She seemed to say in his mind, gently.

He was not.

The Serpent reclaimed him. The vision was diabolical: of the dark, not the light. She had done this. Witchcraft! it hissed.

With effort so great it cost him seven years of his life, Diego tore his eyes from Beth's eyes and turned back to Lachlan and Margaret. He clenched his jaw so hard his head ached like a war. The chief was watching him intently. Did he notice Diego's lapse into the surreal?

Did anybody notice Beth casting a spell?

"The Duke was ordered to follow Philip's plans?" Lachlan prompted, repeating the last thing Diego had said.

"Yes," Diego said, trying to re-locate himself in the conversation. Nobody realised he had parted the folds of reality to reveal an Otherworld guarded by a raven called Claire Gordon or the Mór Rígan, that he had been spelled by a witch — how could they? Should he stand up and accuse Beth? He saw Padre Franco across the table, the wild-eyed stare, his friend obsessively rubbing his index finger with his thumb. Despair streaked through Diego.

"Yes, plans made while sitting on his powdered ass in Madrid," Diego went on angrily, forcing himself to act normal. "You can't lead an army from a throne room overlooking a city thousands of miles away."

"Our precious Duke of Medina," Marcos mocked, "had never commanded a fleet at sea. The landlubber!" He laughed uproariously. "He was sick as a dog every time he got in a rowboat."

Raphael was deep in the pork. In Spain his nickname was Los Spiton, the spit roast, as he often roasted entire pigs for his family. He looked up, smiling after swallowing a whole hog and thirteen of its offspring. "After the first battle we retreated. But at midnight the English set fire to the ghost ships and let them drift towards us. They used them for cover and sailed right into the heart of our Armada — we were unprepared for the attack. We scattered."

"We lost the battle, but we could have re-grouped!" Carlito exclaimed.

"We could have defeated Elizabeth!" Padre Franco dropped his fork and stood up. "King Philip could have realised his dreams of a Catholic Europe!" A small silence, and then a collective shudder ran through the MacLeans as they were reminded: these Spaniards were the Catholic Inquisition.

And they?

Were not.

"You are of the wrong faith," the Padre explained, suddenly patient. "We have come to show you."

The feeling in the room changed as the clan watched the Catholic priest, alone on his feet, a fever in his eyes, one-armed, fingers twitching, the apparent

mouthpiece of God.

“Do not waste your time trying to convert us,” Lachlan announced mildly. “We honour God the Father, and our clan’s ancestral beings as well. We remember the mother of the druids. We remember Jesa Crois and those who worship the red sun within. We follow the ancient ways and Gods, and you —”

“Infidels!” Padre Franco cried, changing from patient to deranged in an eye blink. “You will burn in hell!”

“Please, enough, Padre,” Raphael directed kindly yet firmly. “Sit down.”

“Yes, enough. You would do well to remember you are, at best, guests in a strange land without provisions, ship, or Armada.” Lachlan looked at the Padre. “We hope you like the feast harvested from our small crop though God knows we have but little to share, and prepared for you by infidels. And at worst? You are by law our enemy and we are obliged to hand you over to England.”

“God in heaven will protect us,” Padre Franco said, standing up again, “He will —”

“Sit down!” Diego and Carlito snapped in unison.

The Padre sat down, rubbing his fingers, his eyes hollow. “I have only three left,” he said, holding up his fingers, twitching them. There were five. Diego looked away, ignoring a strange sensation of ice and heat cracking and conflicting like a storm across his chest.

“Will you allow us to leave, Chief Lachlan?” Diego asked bluntly. “Or will you be handing us over to your liege’s liege as you keep threatening?”

“Allow us to send word to Holland,” Marcos interrupted, “alerting our General we have landed in Mull. They could send a ship to collect us.”

“It will take too long,” Carlito countered. “Winter is coming.”

“We should just repair our ship and sail home,” said Raphael.

“Home?” Diego fixed Raphael with a stare. “We will sail to the Netherlands to fight again, not return to Spain like wounded, cowardly dogs!”

Raphael rolled his eyes at the ceiling. “Home or fight — either way we need a vessel. You are the son of the Viceroy of Peru,” he said, exasperated. “Send word and ask for a ship from your father.”

There was a short silence at the table.

Diego’s face closed up. “We will obtain everything we require from the Navy,” he said icily. The subject was closed.

He would ask his father, Martín Enríquez de Almanza, the Viceroy of Peru, for nothing. Not ever. As much as he lusted for her, Martín hated Diego’s mother Dianora even more, and mother, son, and sister Luciana grew up the subjects of his inventive, often sadistic cruelty. At fifteen when Diego learned of the atrocities

the Viceroy served upon the country of Peru — sins against humanity — there arose one brutally violent argument that ended in blood and then banishment: Diego was denied access to Dianora and Luciana, whom the Viceroy effectively imprisoned in the south wing of their Madrid manor.

Diego was five in his first memory of his father's cruelty, when on a trip to the country he became lost in the woods for days. When they finally found him, he was with a bear. El Oso, they called Diego afterwards, and the name stuck. The mother ursine took care of him and Diego was warm, comforted and loved.

"Can we take her home, padre?" he asked, too young to understand bears could not live in cities and bears did not take care of human boys. Too young to understand the oddity.

Diego's father shot the bear in front of him. "What loves you will die," the Viceroy explained to the boy.

Diego broke free of the memory as Lachlan gave a pointed nod. "Your ship is in shambles," the Chief said. He moved his plate aside as Brigit and Jamie served cherry and blackberry pie. Silverware clattered against porcelain. "Yet her hull is sound, she floats yet."

"Will you help us repair her?"

Every Spaniard at the table leaned forward, awaiting the answer. Lachlan grunted in reply. "We may. We may not. That depends on you."

"It would be a great prize indeed, to hand over a Man O' War and nearly one hundred men from Spain to your King," continued Diego flatly. "As far as we know, Elizabeth's soldiers have already been alerted and are on their way to collect us."

The tension at the table was like electricity.

"Yes, maybe they are," Lachlan said evenly.

Lady Margaret nodded. "The English would indeed reward us."

"What do you want from us?" Diego demanded.

"We could have let you die and claimed your ship's weapons," Lachlan said.

"Yet you didn't," said Marcos, trying to smooth and pacify everyone. Even drunk, he couldn't miss the volatile energy at the table.

"No, they didn't," said Raphael, staring hard at Diego.

"No," agreed Lachlan. He took a bite of blackberry pie. "We didn't. On Mull we have always been our own Sovereigns." He lifted his chin in pride. "We are Clan's folk. We are MacLean and Sept. We bow to none. We worship the Old Gods, and Protestant Gods, and Cailleach Bhéara the Mother of all. Her son Jesa Crois of the Red Sun, her daughter Brighde of the Eternal Flame, the spirit Bride of St John's Revelation. These Gods watch over our clan. We make our own choices

when those choices are right to make.”

At these words, the Padre’s face went white with shock.

Diego’s jaw tightened. “And what is your choice?”

Lachlan looked at his daughter and nodded.

“Before you leave, agree to fight for us,” said Beth simply. “Our enemies are greater in number and we need warriors for a battle. If you do this, we will help you repair your ship. We will not alert England.”

Beth wore an assured expression, and Diego realised something that abruptly infuriated him beyond any reasonable measure. He could see it plain on her face. She knew he would say yes. Seeing the glow of this absolute conviction, a stubborn, hateful resistance exploded inside him, and he directed an immediate refusal to her father.

“No,” he said impassively. “Not a chance as if seven hells were guarded by seven devils with seven swords of brimstone preventing the possibility.”

The men at the table went quiet.

“No?” Lachlan said after a few uncomfortable moments as they all assimilated an answer none of them expected. “And what of your lives? We gave them back to you.”

“We will not fight for you. The matter is closed.”

Silence in the hall. Even the clink of cutlery paused.

“You refuse one battle to repay your own lives?” Beth asked, her face and tone incredulous. “You would be dead, save for us!”

“You have been nursed back to health from death’s door,” Lady Margaret said frostily. She stood up from the table, her skirts rustling. “I will not eat or treat with such thanklessness. Would you had learned manners and gratitude in Spain!” Without another word she swept in her trailing blue gown out of the Great Hall. Nobody remarked when her kinswoman Heather followed.

Hearing the refusal, Neily stalked over from a different table to sneer down at Diego. “Do I hear correctly? That Spaniards are cowards?”

Diego stood up so fast his chair clattered to the floor. “What do you know of cowards?”

“You owe us a battle!” Blackskull’s teeth flashed like fangs. “Anything less and you are cowards.”

“We do not owe you our lives,” Diego returned savagely. “Can you return to a man his life then claim it for your own? Then you healed not from charity but to exploit us. Heal men then expect them to die for you? That is slavery, and we are free.”

“Ha! The arrogance! The blind stupidity of yellow tail whipped dogs! You

are bloody mistaken. You are not free. You are prisoners!”

“Free under God!” insisted Padre Franco, standing again. “The true God, the —”

“Sit down!” said Marcos, Carlito, and Juan Carlos.

“What kind of beast would not repay a debt of life?” Beth said incredulously. “One that was promised?”

“I have promised nothing,” Diego said viciously, setting his eyes upon the witch’s eyes. Dizziness electrified him, visions rushed him, the world exploded. He was ready to vomit or kill or explode or scream poems about death to the sky. Disoriented, he stepped back, stumbled across his fallen chair. When Neily who had been glaring only moments before instinctively held out a hand to help him regain balance, Diego thought he saw the moving glint of steel or threat and he raised his own tiny dinner knife to parry the blow. No blow came. Holding out this stupid blade, alone in the room, all eyes upon him, Diego felt shame and horror flood him, as though he answered wrongly.

A luminous goddess. A promise.

The white bird in his skull hurt his mind. The Serpent in his ear hurt his heart. The light he shouldn’t be seeing hurt his eyes. The life he was living hurt his soul.

He must not go crazy, or break. He must not care for these people; they did not matter. He would be hard; he was armoured in the skin of the Serpent. Diego would protect his crew and keep his promise to bring them home. Only this mattered.

“We will not fight for you. Send for the English if you must,” he spat.

The next day Beth trotted a restless Epona through the sheep fields, her mind in knots. She watched as Eileen led a group of Spaniards and Highlanders towards the forest, the procession tailed by Hector and a team of golden draft horses. What were they doing? The fresh light of morning crested across the brooding hills, and a musical mist rolling in from the sea obscured the figures in a crystalline haze of silvery-grey.

Through the mist she saw the glide of Diego's cloak.

Beastly, insufferable, selfish man. Beth's legs clamped unnecessarily on her mare. Epona took her mistress' anger in stride as she paced fluently along the border of the wood in the opposite direction, and at Beth's impatient hip shift, unfolded into a drumming canter. They needed more bog myrtle and burdock. She sent Fiona out to collect birch and wild garlic, and Beth also wanted bloodroot. Bloodroot grew in shady dales and fairy groves and as well as cleansing the blood, it blended with devil's claw to protect the soul from evil and sorcery.

The Spanish Padre needed it.

Epona cantered northwest through the forest, with the sea on their right. As Beth rode, she thought of last night's dream, one she often had. Melusine MacLean, her ancestor, had come for her again. Holding out the mirror of Azoth that Beth must look into. Holding out two stones for Beth to take. But Beth did what she always did in these dreams — she had turned away in fear. Melusine's dragon-like form had always frightened her. Too much like the snake.

The rhythm of Epona's stride brought her back to the present. After a number of curves and a few gallops to let off steam, they slowed to stop at one of the crossroads. A hawkfinch called. To the northeast the path led down to the coast. Southeast turned back to the castle. East to where the best herbs grew. She waited for a moment, feeling a rhythm in her heart, a rhythm of drums.

No — hooves.

Along the road to the coast, the rhythmic beat of horses approached.

Four horses. She listened more carefully. Six.

Her heart sped up. It could be a scouting party returning, it could be Fiona and some friends from the herb patch. No, the sound was from the path that led to the pebbled bay where the MacDonald warriors docked when they came to collect tributes —

She turned Epona directly towards the sound. "Be ready."

Quick-I-am, Epona assured her.

A cantering group of riders rounded the bend, the smell of the sea upon

them. There were seven — she was one off her guess. Beth was paused in the middle of the crossroads, and they pulled up in front of her, the horses tossing their heads and champing their bits.

The forest stretched away to both sides, and for this, Beth's heart must stretch. For indeed, her heart missed a beat at the sight of Lord Donald Gorm MacDonald himself on her father's horse at the head of the group. The Snake — the ugliest man she knew, the one narrow eye lusting and the other rolling, the warp of a mouth that spilled ugly words pretending courtesy. How had he once been her friend, for a few months one summer while he fostered with them in a time of peace between their clans? It seemed impossible. And the wounds familiar to Beth: his twisted leg, the fiery scars across his face and though she could not see them now, his chest.

Only she knew how he received them.

Why was he on Mull? They had just paid the tribute.

If the MacDonalds had docked their galleys at the cove where they usually alighted on Mull, they may not have seen the *San Juan de Sicilia* floating in Tobar Mhoire Bay. She prayed they had not seen it. It remained the MacLean's small, secret advantage.

They must not find out. Not yet.

"Ah, God must have ordained our paths to cross today, my dearest Lady Beth," said Gorm in utter delight. His horse danced beneath him, an animal drum on loam and leave. "It has been too long!"

"Would that it was longer," Beth replied coldly. Epona stood square and still, her head high. Beth felt the mare's limbs quiver. Danger, Epona thought.

"Just imagine, my Lady Beth! Imagine when we are together under God's eyes! We will be Lord and Lady of the whole of the Isles! What magic that I have met you today on God's path in God's forest, to sing your beauty from lips that long to kiss yours one day."

Beth blanched.

"Have you forgotten our childhood training? We were once friends under the sunshine, you and I. You showed me something bright and painful near a cave. Something that changed me forever. I wonder if I returned to that cliff on the mountain, would I find it?"

"Why come you here? We have paid you tribute, now go from our shores. We own this island."

"Yes, you showed me. It was evil, set against the Lord God in Heaven. It was by this that I knew you were evil, too," Gorm said pleasantly. "But I can forgive and help you return to righteousness. So please, my Lady, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?" His eyes changed, became abruptly gentle, as if he was another person entirely, and his tone and countenance changed utterly.

The fake politeness was gone and in an actually authentic voice he said, in a low tone, "Please Beth, come to me. I have loved you forever. You know I have."

A silence, into which the wind cast a swirl of fall leaves.

Though Beth noticed Gorm's shift, she could not soften towards him. "You have been paid! As agreed, you leave us be. A man who does not keep his end of a deal is the most despicable in the eyes of God."

"Oh, but what of a woman who does not keep her end of a deal?" His tenderness was gone.

Epona shifted. Danger.

A tremor in Beth, a memory. She brushed it aside.

"And tell me," Gorm went on, "what God is this? What would God think of your secret book, hidden because it kills and maims and disfigures when wielded by witches?" He patted the scars on his cheeks.

"You —"

"Would God not condemn your book as the mark of the witch, spell book of Satan, the very —"

"It is not!"

"A remarkable evil," continued Gorm, "and hidden on your own land of Mull." He jerked his arm southwest.

"Begone from our island! Leave us in peace!"

"Is that how you would speak to your future husband? Did your father not pass on word of my proposal? I would gladly leave your MacLean clan in peace, Lady Beth, if you would do me the honour of accepting my hand in holy matrimony. I have come today to collect your agreement. You have had a few weeks to consider it, by the light of the moon and the joy of the sun, and I trust you have concluded it is only wise."

"I will never."

Gorm raised an eyebrow and looked at the horseman beside him. "She will never."

The horseman shrugged.

"It is my only goal in life, is it not, my fellows?" The guard nodded and Gorm shrugged too, mimicking his man, and turned mock-inquisitively back to Beth. "Is my beard not to your liking?"

"Nae, your life!"

"Is my...sword not big enough?" He smirked.

"Nae, your brain."

"Are my battle skills not sung highly by the poets?"

“I will never submit to you!” Beth sizzled. “Lies ooze from your mouth like drool from a dog. The bards will frame you up as the tyrant you are!”

His voice dropped, an octave of ugly. “Listen then. I will tell you what goes important, Beth MacLean. For you will. You will.”

They were interrupted by the sound of hooves from the other path. They all turned and unexpectedly Fiona was in their midst, at first beaming happily, her cheeks flushed, expression dreamy as though she had just been kissed, then surprised, eyes widening to see them. She was riding a grey garron with a black mane and tail that Beth’s younger brothers favoured. Allan named the pony Púca after the bad spirits because she was so dreadfully mischievous, even evil-minded, and young Lachlan endured constant bite marks from her quick teeth. Púca’s ears flattened to her skull. Fiona’s baskets bulged with arnica, sage, garlic and other wild medicinal plants.

Beth noticed Fiona’s tunic was buttoned wrong and the white lace kerchief she and Anna always wore was flapping at her wrist loosely. She must have been with Juan Carlos. On a walk to clear her mind after yesterday’s feast or fiasco, Beth accidentally came upon them by the cemetery. She saw a kneeling Fiona’s mouth around Juan Carlos, whose hand clutched her hair, his groans and her whimper, words of love spilling from impassioned lips, his gasp, Fiona rising with wet lips. He reached for the spill of her breasts, my love, he said. They did not see her. Unnerved, the innocent Beth who had never even been kissed retreated, her face hot, belly hard, body flushed with emotions she could not name.

“Good day. Harvesting medicine for your wounded, hen?” Gorm asked Fiona politely.

“Yes, sir,” she said, voice wavering, eyes flicking to Beth.

Beth made her face hard and wondered if Anna’s twin had the sense to keep quiet about the Spaniards. She caught Fiona’s eye and though she saw fear, bravery shone too. Fiona was smart and plucky like Anna. She would say nothing.

“I was just telling your most beauteous Lady Beth that your clan would be saved, if she might merely deign to accept my humble hand in marriage.”

Fiona’s eyes widened.

“I see she has not told you?” Gorm shook his head sadly. “There have not been celebrations every night in Duart Castle? Alas the Lady does seem to be a degree or two tending towards reluctant, though I am at my wit’s end to understand why. I am rich with gold and I make forth with a castle, servants and warriors at my ready disposal for any needs that may be voiced or even thought of! I hold sway over seven times the lands and men. While your own lands produce,” he paused, “sheep wool and tallow fat and seem of late to be rather...dirt poor, in both gold and sadly, men.”

Fiona’s face had gone white with fear.

“To be sure, your father’s whiskey gold was quite to my liking,” amended Gorm politely. “I hear you have a secret recipe for making it. I trust its disclosure shall be part of the next tribute! And your horses, ah, wonders, and other than King James’ racing stable with his Arabian and Berber stock, finer breeding I have not seen in Scotland.” He slapped the neck of his dun charger, who flung up his nose and snorted violently. “Why ally yourself with a land growing poorer in warriors and gold by the month?” He looked pointedly at Beth. “We have our differences but surely, we are united in our desires. When will you choose to be on the winning side?”

Beth’s legs tightened around Epona, who gave a flat stamp of her front hooves. “Leave us,” she commanded. “We brought you tribute. And will bring the next. Begone from me and my kinswoman and allow us peace.”

“Yes, of course Lady Beth, you must not work yourself into a panic,” Gorm agreed. “I am leaving for sunnier climes now, fear not. I came all the way here to ask your hand in marriage. I see you are not quite ready. Fear not, for I am a patient man, and kind, you will come to see. I shall wait two weeks more for your answer. I shall go now, just taking one little thing with me.”

Beth’s heart began to race.

Gorm’s face was smiling but she observed a different emotion entirely in the hard lines of his body. She had seen it before. When they were children, she did a dreadful thing: she showed him the Book of Iona. Scripted by unknown Irish and Scottish Culldean monks who blended Christianity with the Celtic wisdom of Druids and Bards, mixing the divine wonders of both Christian mysticism and pagan secrets across its illuminated pages, nobody other than Dòideag knew this manuscript of sacred knowledge was hidden in the cave beneath the sacred blue mountain, Beinn Mhòr. Beth, marked to learn its secrets, was entrusted with its location and instructed to keep quiet about it.

She had not, and a tragedy occurred.

An accident.

Or no — was it Beth’s fault?

The memory pushed, trying to come back, to reconcile into her understanding, so that she could know her enemy —

Beth shoved it away.

The Snake looked at Fiona with a calm smile on his face.

“You will take nothing,” said Beth, allowing the hate to suffuse her once more. “Leave!”

“Yes,” he hushed her. “I am leaving.” He signaled to his men.

Beth’s heart dropped with relief as the other riders rotated, the men adjusting themselves in their saddles, turning their backs, the horses’ hindquarters

bulging as if to canter away. Anna's twin was grim, lips pressed tightly. Gorm stared at Fiona's flushed face and the heave of her chest in a way that made Beth's skin crawl.

No.

Gorm winked. "We are leaving, and we are taking — that — with us." He gestured to Fiona the way one would to a sack of gold or a cache of meat or a barn animal. "Just a wee hen for our hunger."

"Pert little doxy," drawled one of the men. He cocked his pistol and aimed it at her heart.

Fiona froze. Beth felt a sick rush of emotion. Adrenaline pounded through her brain, her gut, her limbs. Dizzy with fear, the world swam in her vision. She reined Epona in front of Fiona and Púca. "Stop. Leave our lands immediately."

"Agree to marry and she will be fine." He made a gesture to one of his men who had drifted apart from the group, and before Fiona or Beth could react, the man dismounted, darted behind Epona, and seized Púca's rein.

Beth's heart tattooed out a sickening message in her body. "Let go!" She drew her bow, nocked an arrow and aimed, but as the man was shielded behind Fiona and the pony, no clear shot presented itself.

"No?" Gorm inquired.

Beth's veins pumped in fury and fear. She couldn't submit to him. She saw Fiona's face. Anna's twin was terrified, her eyes beginning to well with tears. Epona shifted as Beth sought again for a clear shot at the man who held her. Púca squealed.

"No?"

Beth could say nothing. Her arm muscles burned from holding the drawn bow steady. She had no clear shot. She couldn't shoot, and neither could she say yes to Gorm.

"You would relegate your own kinswoman to a fate you would not accept? A worse fate, pray tell, since none of us are offering to marry her, only use her?"

Bile rose at the sides of Beth's mouth. Finally, she found words. "You will not take her." Instead of trying for the man who held Púca, she wheeled and aimed at Gorm's head. "Command your man to release my kinswoman or I will shoot!" She had nocked the arrow on the right side and held three other arrows in her right hand, ready for further shots. Ready to be quick. "Leave now, or I will shoot!" Where to send the first arrow? Could she shoot a Lord? Could she kill him?

Do it.

Beth hesitated.

"I already said I was leaving," he agreed, still frightfully calm. His dun stallion, Tribute, exhaled loudly with an explosive burst of air.

Then everything happened very quickly. At a hand command from their Lord, the rest of Gorm's men began to circle behind Beth to get to Fiona. Beth whirled as they did and released her bow string at the closest. The thwang! startled her, the zip parting the air. The arrow lodged in the man's neck; he flopped and fell from his horse.

"Ride!" Beth screamed at Fiona.

It was too late. The war chargers surrounded little Púca, who let out a beastly scream as well when one of them slapped the garron's face with the flat of his blade. Gorm's other man seized Fiona. She fought him, but he was three times her size. He dragged her up on his mount.

Beth nocked another arrow, shot him in the mouth.

He choked and gurgled as the arrow pierced his throat and Fiona slipped down, reaching for the infuriated, black eyed Púca. Another man was already there, snatching at her again, and as Beth released the last arrow in her hand to kill him, something cracked into her head from behind. Everything went dark.

PART II

# Dark Threads



Beth woke hours later to a velvet muzzle against her cheek. “What, what —?” Epona’s face peered down at her. The fractal of leaves above. The sunlight slanting through the trees said late afternoon. It had been morning. She sat up dizzy, leaned into the dirt, and vomited.

She was still at the crossroads. Epona stamped nervously beside her, wake, wake. Púca, the little grey terror, was gone. The men she had killed were gone. The horses were gone. The Snake was gone.

Fiona.

Beth threw up again. The head wound was bad, but the thought of Fiona being taken to Skye, where she would be — no. The thought was too unbearable to complete. Beth staggered up, pressed her nose into Epona’s withers, and was flooded with guilt and despair. The emotional tide ravaged through her. It was her fault but there was no time to indulge in feeling.

She must help her kinswoman.

The lace kerchief caught her eye. Fiona’s. Abandoned, flagging her absence, laying there in the dirt at the centre of the crossroads. Beth limped over and closed her fingers around the white cloth, claiming it.

She tapped her mare’s withers and Epona half knelt as though she was bowing, making it easier to mount. The queasiness in her stomach swelled as she settled into the saddle. She fought the nausea and failed, leaning over and once more vomiting until her stomach was empty and she was just retching.

Hurry.

She wheeled Epona northwest.

They galloped the path, Beth’s head pounding. She knew she was too late. They sped along the wooded trail across the day’s last slant of light, breaking through the trees to the pebbled cove, the late afternoon sun shining across the water in a golden shimmer. She saw lines in the sand where the MacDonalds had docked their galley.

Their boat was gone.

She imagined Fiona’s face, the last she had seen of her, pale and sick with fear. She imagined Gorm’s men riding her to Dún Scáith and past the gates of the castle. Here Beth could not imagine any more, not because she lacked the imagination, but because beyond the point of the castle gates any further thought was torture.

Bile again in her mouth.

Her fault.

She circled Epona and raced the other way. She would rally troops. They would go to parlay. They would bring Fiona back. She would sail to Skye herself. Hector would help her. Whitemane would help — Fiona was his niece. Brock would do anything for her — she knew it. The Spaniards would agree to —

Epona raced, the distance flew away under her hooves, and soon they were nearing the fields surrounding the castle. At the forest's edge they nearly collided with Púca, who had wandered home and was grazing, reins trailing the ground, dried blood matted on her face where she had been hit. Epona swerved abruptly, nearly throwing Beth.

“Miserable, miserable little pony!” Beth accused her angrily, as if the garron should have prevented it. As Epona galloped across the gold spattered field, Beth noticed the same group she had seen this morning now returning, the draft horses shiny with sweat.

What had they been doing?

Eileen, Marcos, and Diego were slightly ahead of the rest of the group. Beth flew to them, desperately told Eileen what happened, and dispatched her cousin to call a war council. Hurry cousin, hurry! As Eileen sprinted to the castle, she faced the captain. He must help. He would. What kind of beast could refuse now? Fiona was captured. He had said no, but now he would fulfil her vision like he was supposed to.

He would say yes.

“Capitán Enriquez,” she said, ignoring the blood dripping from the top of her head and the pounding from the skull fracture. “Fight for us.”

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Diego was pleased they had found a mast for their ship, though less pleased the Highlanders had to enact some pagan ritual of Gaelic song before cutting it down.

At dawn, the air moist and prismatic in the sunlight, a bright-eyed Eileen strode into the Spanish campground bringing word straight from Lachlan: the clan would help repair their ship in exchange for Spanish weapons, and any gesture of harvest assistance would also be noted. Diego quickly agreed to the terms, though he wasn't stupid: he suspected the chief wanted the ship in working order for reasons other than carrying the Spaniards away.

He would deal with that later.

Less than half the hour and Eileen was leading a procession of Highlanders and Spaniards through a winding forest path, their aim a nearby pine grove with tall, thick trunks. Eileen moved like an animal through the misty woods, often halting with a cocked head as if listening to something nobody else could hear.

“What are you doing?” Diego asked after the third time Eileen pulled up short. “Searching for the markings of dangerous forest beasts?”

Eileen raised an eyebrow. “Afraid, Capitán? Don’t worry, there are few beasts here.”

“Then what are you looking for?”

“Listening,” Eileen corrected.

“What?”

“Listening for, not looking for. Everybody knows light is illusion but sound tells the truth.”

“I see,” Diego said rudely after a short pause. “So, what are you listening for?”

“I heard flute music.”

“Flute?”

“That’s what I said.”

“A flute.”

“A flute,” she confirmed gaily.

Another pause. “Who would be out here in the damnable frigid morning cold playing a flute?”

“The Teine Sídhé,” Eileen replied matter-of-factly. She broke off a branch from a dead tree and snapped the fractals from it as she walked, tossing each twig carelessly to the right and left, then proceeded to use the main shaft as a walking stick. “Lochran soluis na sídhé, the Light Sídhé.”

“The ones who carry lanterns of light to guide us to Elfhame,” Anna said.

Diego frowned as he ducked around a birch tree. Spirits, she meant. More of the Highlander’s superstitious, pagan nonsense. He had already overheard talk of fairies and banshees, Púcas and sprites.

“And what, do tell, are the Teine Sídhé?” he asked scornfully.

“They are the Taudhe d’Anu, the Ring Guardians. The Gods of Light, the people of the faery mounds, guardians of fountains and forest rivers, brooks and meres. They are important to us, for if the land loses its elves, the land dies,” answered Eileen. She slipped around a tree and a sapling whipped back and stung Diego’s cheek. “They are the ancestors of the earth. Sometimes the door to their world is found at the root of an oak, or where a blackthorn and a whitethorn meet. Or in the lost feather of a raven.”

“Go on,” he ordered irritably.

Eileen stopped unexpectedly and he crashed into her back, stumbled over a root, lost his balance, and awkwardly fell. She acted surprised to see him on the

forest floor. “My word,” she said, glancing at him with exaggerated politeness. “Capitán Enriquez, you must really be more careful.”

Marcos caught up with them and smirked. “Sí, sí, beautifully done, my Lady,” he said, half-bowing to Eileen.

Diego scowled and scrambled up. Had the damnable woman done that on purpose? She had. What was wrong with these Scottish females? Something cursed in the water?

Eileen continued walking. “The inner realm of the Taudhe d’Anu is the golden land of eternal youth, music and light. It is the Otherworld where the Great Tree always blooms, where the Shining Ones are the Guardians of the Rings that create light from sound, An Fainne Mor. Our Irish cousins call this land Tír na nÓg, we call it Elfhame, the world beyond the north wind that is the source of the embersongs.”

Anna came up beside them. She was picking medicinal plants and storing them in her lambskin pouch. “The Taudhe d’Anu are light-beings beyond our ken,” she added. “They live in tribes of fire, in clans of light, and they create the world through song. They are the source of the ancient fires. They connect all that is by a glowing red thread that’s fankled around and around.”

“What are these guardians to you, other than nonsense stories?” scoffed Diego.

“There are Dark Sídh too,” Eileen warned cheerfully.

“The Taudhe d’Anu are our ancient Scythian bloodline,” Anna explained. “They are our ancestors; they spawned the Gentry of Scotland. Our clan is the Pict-Sídh.”

Diego grimaced. Was this the world he was seeing in his hallucinations? Was it hell? This Elfhame, this Tír na nÓg? “Lands of eternal youth?” he derided. “Sounds like a tall tale to me. How do you make time for this nonsense? Has science and reason yet failed to arrive in your little backwater?”

“Captain Enriquez, do your lands not have such ancient guardians or creatures of fire and song?” Anna asked, offering him her waterskin.

“I remember the Cuélebre,” Diego admitted, refusing the water with a curt hand. “Far more fearsome than your forest fairies. A giant winged snake-dragon with a poison tongue to paralyse his prey’s mind and make them do his bidding.” As he said this, Diego felt sick.

Hisssssss.

Was the Cuélebre in his mind?

Anna shuddered sympathetically. “Frightening,” she admitted.

“Stories,” insisted Diego harshly.

“I’m terrified,” mocked Eileen, rolling her eyes.

“So, what is this An Fainne Mor?” Diego pressed, curious despite himself, garbling the pronunciation.

Eileen tapped her hip, drawing Marcos’ interested gaze. “An Fainne Mor is the great Ring of Power that makes light from song. All things are contained within this Ring of Rings. It is the First Sound that comes from the First Light. Some of us wear the garter on our thigh to remember this ring.” She let her hand play upon her thigh as if to suggest she was indeed wearing it at this very moment. Marcos’ face changed, no doubt thinking of exactly what Eileen wanted him to.

“Besaré su muslo,” Marcos said under his breath to Diego. I will kiss her thigh. Eileen winked and Marcos grinned boldly. Eileen was perfect. He would worship her.

Abruptly, Eileen beckoned for them to follow and stalked off. “Now hurry up! The lot of you are slower than new born babies.”

Resuming the trek, they were startled as a mounted Juan Carlos joined the company on horseback, his horse breathing hard. He must have followed the trail of the draft horses Hector was leading at the end of their procession to catch up to them.

“Excuse me, Capitán.” His face was flushed, his expression full of stars. Before Diego could reply or ask him where he got the horse, Anna cried out and doubled over, one hand on her belly, one hand reaching for the trunk of a tree, her black hair sweeping across her cheeks. She pressed her face into the trunk and made a strange sound, a cross between a sob and a groan.

“Anna, what is it?” Eileen was instantly behind her, holding Anna’s hair back as Anna retched onto the forest floor.

At first Anna didn’t answer. After a few moments she straightened up, her face white and hollow. “It was — it’s just —” She took a moment to compose herself. “I just had a bad feeling about Fiona, it shocked me. Sometimes we can feel each other, and —” she trailed off at Diego’s glare.

“Do you want to go back to make sure she’s hale?” Eileen asked. “You can collect herbs another day.”

Juan Carlos was watching Anna intently. “You think she’s in danger?”

Anna hesitated, then shook her head. “It’s gone now, I don’t feel anything else. It’s probably fine. Maybe she just stubbed her toe, honestly, sometimes it’s something as silly as that. Grandmother Aignéis really wants me to find some dragonbane and wormwood, our stores are completely empty.” She smiled weakly. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Juan Carlos hesitated. He seemed about to say something, then adjusted his grip on his horse’s reins and the group continued to the grove of looming Scots Pines.

Pedro, the ship’s woodworker, was pointing to the chestnut-gold bark of

the trunk of a magnificent tree. “There she be,” he said admiringly, looking up. They didn’t bother to search the pine thicket, it was obvious the shining specimen would be a perfect ship’s main mast: it was tall and straight and practically cried out, I want to sail!

The cutting was tough work and took most of the day. When they had felled it and two other trees, Pedro helped Hector lash the sectioned trunks to the team of heavy horse, and after a brief snack of dried salmon, and sloe berries Anna had collected, the group set off towards the shore where they would leave the masts, to later float them up to Tobar Mhoire bay. As they returned across the fields bordering the castle, storm clouds rolled in to joust with the sun and the moor flickered from shadow to light.

Diego thought he heard a flute.

No — hooves.

“Call a war council!”

It was Beth, racing towards them on Epona. “Anna, Anna, where is Anna?” she cried.

She pulled up in front of them in a fury, blood on her face, her quiver of arrows empty, expression of shock, informing Eileen of Fiona’s abduction. Eileen took off at a run to the castle to alert the chief while Diego eyed the Lady of Duart, suddenly struck by Beth’s beauty, a kind inextricable from her surroundings, as though she belonged here on this land. The sun shot from a cloud and haloed her, giving her the sense of wings, and her hair shone like gold, as though she were the bright angel or guardian of the dark, brooding moor.

Diego thought of Anna earlier, bent over and ill. Her twin.

A small white bird circled above them.

As an emotional Beth called on him to fight for her clan, her eyes were luminous storms, both scared and brave, like white light before the prism.

“We’ve secured a main mast for our ship,” he gestured to the draft horses. “It may take two — mmm — maybe three weeks until we’re fit to sail. We will be gone soon, never to trouble you again.”

The shock on her face deepened, her mouth formed an oh. “You have secured a main mast because we helped you.”

“We only want to leave.”

The white bird circled closer to Beth.

“We saved your lives! Fiona saved your lives!” cried Beth.

“Fiona what?” asked Anna urgently, as the rest of the group came closer. “Fiona what?”

Juan Carlos’ face went white.

The bird landed on Beth's shoulder.

"We won't fight for you."

Epona pivoted. Beth and Diego broke eye contact momentarily, before the mare rotated in a full circle and they faced one another again.

"After all we have given, you will not return us one favour? While a woman who saved your lives, whom one of your crew has fallen in love with is taken, is —" she choked off.

"What, what, what?" Anna cried, panicked. Her white face. Her black tresses in the wind as she hurried closer. "Beth, what happened?"

A sudden silence descended from the sky. Beth looked sick with fear and rage.

"We are giving your clan weapons," Diego said. "Chief Lachlan and I have made a trade agreement. He will allow us to leave and will help us refit our ship, and we shall supply your clan with the finest armaments." Beth blinked and Diego realised she hadn't known about the weapons agreement. "Enough weapons and gunpowder to use in your war. They will give you the advantage."

"But we need skilled men to use the weapons! Provide us with men."

"No."

"Fiona is —" Angry unshed tears brimmed in Beth's eyes.

"She is your clan, not ours."

"Tell me this instant what has happened to my sister," Anna screamed, already crying, for she already knew. "Now!"

"Have you no sense of gratitude?" The white bird at Beth's shoulder fluttered a wing. Blood trickled down her face. "Are you a wyrm? Are you a black serpent inside, with armour like scales round your heart?"

A twisted flame of anger rose in Diego. How could she know about the Cuélebre? She was a witch! She was descended from a sea creature, from a dragon! He seized Epona's bridle. The mare jerked her head back and the bird on Beth's shoulder took to the sky in a flurry of feathers.

"Fiona is taken," Beth said to Anna, finally answering her kinswoman directly. "Gorm has taken her to Skye."

Anna fell to her knees, mouth open, no sound. Her shoulders heaved. Marcos now joined them, and he helped her up. She sank down again. Juan Carlos seemed about to be sick. He crouched in the grass and put his hands over his neck, head down on the earth.

"Battle alongside us!"

"No," Diego said. "We cannot repay you in the way you want."

“It’s not that you cannot. You will not!”

“Your fight is not our fight.” He did not look at Anna bent in half, weeping with no sound at all. A strange fury washed through him and he knew the truth: they owed the MacLean clan more than just weapons. They owed them their lives.

Anna on her knees in a golden field.

Fiona in a castle that was not hers.

Juan Carlos who had kissed her, and been kissed.

Beth, an inconceivable being of light with an impossible request.

But Diego had sworn to get his men home, and if they fought for this clan, his men would die. He knew it. He knew of the numbers and might of the MacLean’s enemy. They were an alien people; what did it matter they too were dying in the harshness of the world? Everyone was dying in the harshness of the world. There was nothing any of them might do to make it kinder.

He must get his men home.

Beth, a storm of yes.

Diego, a snake of no.

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Shocked and bleeding, Beth flashed back to the vision.

She had been about to blow out the beeswax candle at her bedside last night when she saw the future in the flame. Colours rippled, a streak of gold and green, a guttural shout, the wind on her face. Beth saw the Spaniards and Highlanders together in the midst of battle, the red blood like a star in her memory. Marcos and Raphael and Caro, Juan Carlos and Pedro, the funny faced little woodworker.

They fought for the MacLeans. Swords rising and falling.

The dream was true. She marked its memory into the raven feather she found the day she encountered the ship. She withdrew the feather now from her medicine bag, clutching it too hard. A true dream. So why was he saying no to what would happen?

To what she needed to happen?

“We saved you all!”

She dismounted to stand in front of him, Epona’s rein clutched in her hand. Fiona pounded at her brain; she felt her own hot blood across her face. A terrible pause stretched out between Beth and Diego. Seconds expanded into minutes, minutes turned on a decade and became a million years of glare and stare and refusal. Locked in a staring match neither could break or win or surrender: the snake in Diego pitted against the bird in Beth.