

**Genre:** Original/Fantasy

Sequel to “The Matchmaking Festival”

**Rated:** R

**Disclaimer:** Still, no disclaimers are required. The characters and this story are mine, though they may remind you of someone...

**Sexual Content/Violence:** Contains some fighting and the mention of violence and abuse.  
Sex? Yes.

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In case you want to let me know how and if you liked my story, please write to [filfil67@yahoo.de](mailto:filfil67@yahoo.de) and/or visit my website at [www.filfil.de](http://www.filfil.de)

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Come fairies, take me out of this dull world,  
For I would ride with you upon the wind  
And dance upon the mountains like a flame.  
W. B. Yeats

## In Sync

### Part 1

Oh, God! I could hardly bear these mind-shattering feelings! Every one of my toes was being licked by a warm tickling tongue, and the intensity of the sensations made me moan out loud again and again. The tingle running under my skin centered into a throbbing between my legs that quickly built to a peak. It felt like every one of my nerve endings was on fire. I was so close, so very close... her licking became even more intense, and just when I thought it was too much to bear and I couldn't hold back any longer, she...

“Ouch!”

Startled from my delicious dream by a spark of pain and not yet fully awake, my first reaction was to jump out of bed, but I was held firmly in place by a strong arm around my waist. Recognizing the chuckle coming from behind me, I knew whose arm it was — Eileen O'Shane, mistress of O'Shane Manor, chieftain of her clan and ruler of those seeking refuge in her domain, as well as one of Ireland's *dearg-du's*, living in a world that I hadn't know anything about before I was rescued by her some time ago. Because of the strange fate that had brought us together, she was my fiancée as well.

I pulled my thoughts back to the present. Although I was still dazed, I realized that if Eileen was up *here* and not down *there*, she couldn't be the one who had just bitten my toe and jolted me out of my dream. That meant she couldn't be the one who...

Before my sleep-fogged brain was able to create a clearer thought, her deep voice purred in my ear, “Stay put, lass. Relax and tell me if I should be jealous of Tóraí.”

I was still very much confused, but looking down towards the foot of the bed I noticed a big, dark hairy thing which looked a lot like a gene-altered kind of cat to me. Showing the aloofness that was so typical of felines, Tóraí gave me a bored stare and yawned, showing a startlingly pink tongue and what appeared to be a hundred sharp white teeth. It began to dawn on me that this hairy cat-thing sitting near my feet could well be the cause of the erotic sensations I had experienced in my dream.

*Oh, God.*

I was completely mortified. From Eileen's comment, it seemed I had not only been moaning passionately in my dream, but doing it out loud as well. Trying to bury myself under the duvet, I felt my face grow hot. *Shit! Shit! Shit! So much for dignity.*

Eileen showed no mercy, lifting the duvet away from my flaming face. "Well, tell me, lass... would you rather share a bed with my cat? 'Cause she sure seemed to have your number and be able to make you a very happy human if I'm interpreting your moans aright."

I'm not really a morning person. Not so much because I'm a late riser, but because I like to wake up slowly, gently drifting to full consciousness.. I need time to adjust to the thought of the new challenges ahead of me, and I feel especially vulnerable in the mornings. Used to waking up alone, it's typically a while before I have to encounter anyone else. This was a luxury that had become a habit after getting out of a bad relationship and being single for several years. However, now I was with Eileen and nothing had gone as I'd hoped.

On the first morning of my new life, after going to sleep in Eileen's arms the night before, I wished for it to have been more romantic, to maybe just be able to lay together for a while and discuss what needed to be done today, and perhaps talk about the previous evening, which had been a special one for both of us. But here I was instead, wishing the earth would swallow me whole, totally embarrassed about my very vocal erotic dream caused by a cat. To add insult to injury, I was the victim of Eileen's good-natured teasing.

I can't remember a time when I wasn't a target for bullies who picked on me — my fellow students at school; my parents; my former girlfriend Jennifer, who was not only a master of physical pain but also of painful words. My reaction from past experience would have been

to be afraid, to either run away or endure Eileen's teasing, hiding the hurt it caused me. But now there was a little piece of my heart that prevented me from having either of those well-learned reactions, a new-found trust whose foundation had been laid yesterday evening that made me aware of just *who* was teasing me. It wasn't one of my former tormentors, and it sure wasn't Jennifer's bed I was sharing, it was Eileen's. She was the woman who rescued me; she was my fiancée, my love, and that made all the difference, allowing me to feel the vast difference between my past, my present and my possible future.

Our relatively short relationship became more intimate after last night at Sheedy's, when I took a major step and decided to stay with Eileen in Ireland rather than return to Germany with my friend, Monika. Despite everything I had learned about Eileen and everything I had been told about the upcoming war between the different *sidhe* and their kin — a war I would have no possibility of avoiding — I was determined to remain with her. Eileen was my soul mate, my *anam cara*, and she felt the same way about me. That knowledge gave me the courage to abandon my old patterns of behavior and find a new path to share with my love.

My heart brimming with affection once my decision was made, I turned around in the bed and started looking for the most ticklish spot on Eileen's body, hoping that *dearg-du's* were as vulnerable as humans in that regard. Soon we were giggling and engaged in a mock battle that caused the cat to jump off the end of the bed with a loud disgusted grunt. The tickle-fight also left us both tangled in the bed sheets. Neither Eileen nor myself was willing to surrender, and I was happy since that gave me a good opportunity to cop a feel from Eileen that went further than the simple hugs we had already shared. I eagerly used the excuse to explore her body with touches while at the same time trying to avoid her long fast fingers. Even as I twisted this way and that, I managed to slide my hands over Eileen, registered the fascinating feminine form that was hard with muscle in some places, with an intriguing softness in others. *Nice...*

My palm brushed over her breast and caused Eileen to yelp out loud. She did her best to scoot away, apparently not realizing how tangled her legs were in the sheets. The four-poster bed was not that big, either. She slid over the edge and disappeared in a flurry of dark hair and flailing limbs. I heard a loud thump and a muffled curse.

Carefully moving to the other side of the bed, I glanced down at Eileen, who was sitting on the floor, trying to fend off the cat, who showed a concentrated determination to lick Eileen's

face or any other bare skin she could find. I wasn't able to suppress my laughter and thought this was the perfect time for revenge. I batted my eyelashes and asked in the most seductive voice I was capable of mustering, "Well, my big, tall, dark and proud vampire — is that the way you like it? Tell me, because I'm open minded and really want to learn what pleases you, even though I'm not sure if my tongue is as skilled as..."

That earned me a deadly glare from Eileen, who interrupted, "Don't call me vampire. I told you already, I am no vampire. And get off me, Tóraí! Damn it!"

I could not stop laughing as she spluttered, trying to push the cat away.

She finally convinced the animal to let go of her. I was giggling so hard, I was hardly able to keep from falling out of bed. What a way to start a new day... and what a difference to the times when I was still with Jennifer, always afraid of what fresh horror the day would bring and what new ways she might find to make me feel worthless and stupid. My spirit had never felt as light as it did at the moment, even though I had no idea what I had done to deserve a chance with this beautiful, clever, funny, sensitive and stubborn woman lying on the floor. *If this is a dream, don't you dare wake me up!* I thought, appealing to the universe.

My stomach aching from laughing so much, I untangled myself from the sheets and carefully cast a glance towards Eileen. Her face suddenly appeared just inches away from mine, sharp fangs hanging over her lower lip. She growled at me and my heart skipped a beat.

Had I judged the situation wrong and gone too far? For a moment, I was not sure if teasing her had been such a good idea since I knew that she had a short temper sometimes. She was so much stronger than me, too. If she got truly angry, I would be utterly helpless to defend myself. I was starting to feel sick when I heard her growl, "If you ever, ever again insult me by calling me a vampire, I will make sure that Tóraí has its way with your feet while you are bound to the bedposts, unable to move. Is that clear, lass?"

The familiar warm twinkle in her eyes was irrefutable evidence that everything was indeed all right and she was not too upset. I'd learned by now that her eyes really were the windows to her soul, and the easiest way to gauge her mood, at least for me, was to check her expression. Right now, I could tell she was teasing me again, that cheeky brat!

My momentary fear eased, I lifted a hand and tipped her chin up with my index finger. “And that would be bad for me in what way? You just told me your cat sure has my number.”

Quick as a wink, she heaved me down from the bed and I found myself in her lap, my face still mere inches away from her delicately chiseled features. I caught my breath. She murmured, “Do you imply that you prefer my cat’s touch to mine?”

That voice, so dark and rich and sexy, if only I could find a way to bottle it... but no, I’d rather not share. Goosebumps rippled all over my skin. I was alarmingly aware that our bodies were touching in the way of lovers. Our play battle was over, and my body seemed to think it was time for more mature pursuits. Eileen’s red lips were slightly parted, so very tempting and so very close. I looked into her hooded eyes and was stunned by the desire I could see reflected in the brilliant sapphire depths. *This is for me*, I thought. *She wants me and she’s mine*. I simply didn’t have the strength to resist any longer.

Although I still wasn’t used to Eileen’s fangs — those gleaming canines were a reminder that she was far from human — I brought our lips together, enjoying the feel of her mouth on mine. Her lips were very soft, yielding to my touch and I grew bolder, running my tongue over her fangs. The smooth surfaces felt strange to me, but I took my time, covering every inch of the fangs in a slow exploration with my tongue, including the razor-sharp points. They seemed to be extra sensitive since Eileen rumbled a deep growl when I continued carefully licking the points, wanting to give her pleasure but wary of cutting myself as I had no idea how she might react to the taste of my blood. The choked sounds she made drove me nearly insane with arousal. A rush of pleasure dampened the flesh between my legs. I bit back my own growl, not ready yet to let go totally and lose too much control.

A part of me was shocked by my strong reaction to Eileen, but before I could even think of withdrawing, she met my tongue with hers and my hesitation was shattered by pure desire. Her tongue in my mouth was the most incredible and intimate experience I had ever felt and her callused hands running lightly over my throat and finding my pulse point amplified these feelings even more. It wasn’t much longer before we were breathless and forced to gradually break the kiss off, gentling into nuzzles and caresses, neither of us really wanting to let go of the other.

My senses were spinning. I couldn't remember if I ever had been so aroused in my life, but I was pretty sure the answer to that was a clear 'no.' I felt comfortable and safe with her, but at the same time, incredibly vulnerable. My cautious side wanted to be careful and go slow, but that part got smaller with each moment that I stared into her eyes. Another part of me, the one that wanted Eileen so badly it was a physical ache, wanted nothing more than to get Eileen out of her nightshirt, to touch her flesh wherever I could and make slow and passionate love to her. I was a bit surprised by the amount of desire I felt igniting a fire in my belly. Did I really want to take it that slow? Delay suddenly seemed crazy—it was just my fear speaking and wouldn't it be better to just jump into this adventure with Eileen? My heart beat faster as I struggled with the decision, being pulled two ways at once.

An angry “meow” broke the dangerous moment and saved me from doing something I might have regretted later. I knew that I wanted to build a stable relationship with Eileen, a deeper friendship before consummating our bond. At the moment, though, I regretted my rationality and wished I owned the courage to take what she was offering, to hell with the consequences!

As if sensing my turmoil, Eileen gave me one of those slow, cocky smiles of hers, before letting her fangs vanish. Licking her kiss-bruised lips, she brought up a hand to caress my cheek. “Well, lass, I think the cat wants to tell us that she is ready to eat, though I have to admit that I prefer your kisses to Lena's breakfast every time.”

I felt absolutely loved and cherished. Could life get any better? I wondered.

“You never told me that you're such a talented kisser, Julia,” Eileen went on. “You nearly killed me... but it would have been a good death, indeed.”

My chest ached and I had to blink away tears. Nobody had ever told me something like that. I was more used to hearing the opposite of statements like that one, such as my former girlfriend's assertions that I was worthless and unworthy of the least bit of affection, let alone love. Gathering my newly discovered boldness and encouraged by Eileen's sincerity, I kissed her palm. “You can have those kisses whenever you like,” I whispered. “Just make sure to let me know and I'll be more than happy to be at your service, mistress.”

Her grin got even wider, and the glint in her beautiful blue eyes grew brighter before she gave me a gentle kiss on the tip of my nose. God, she really knew how to make me feel special.

Slowly turning her head, she looked at the cat, who was watching us. Eileen said, “Thanks for disturbing us. I owe you; having pets is something I have to remember to recommend to all couples freshly in love. Who needs chaperones when there is a cat like you around?”

Eileen’s words didn’t seem to impress the tall cat very much. She began to clean herself with stoic aloofness, letting us know that she didn’t care at all about what was happening around her. She was definitely a big cat. Looking at her a bit more closely, I noticed for the first time that she didn’t have a tail, which I found curious. Her black fur was rather short and her big almond-shaped eyes were dark yellow, giving the impression of glowing amber. I couldn’t remember seeing a breed that resembled her. Before I could ask about the cat’s origins, I was carefully lifted back into bed by Eileen. She walked across the room and pulled aside the heavy window curtains to let in a wash of brilliant morning sunlight.

Finally Eileen got back into bed, drew me close and cuddled up against me from behind, placing soft kisses on my neck.

“You know that I find it hard to concentrate if you do stuff like that?” I gasped, my mouth going dry.

“Why would you want to concentrate, lass?”

Yes, why indeed? Rationality returned as I remembered what I had wanted to ask her. I squirmed until I was facing Eileen. “Are you busy today?”

She frowned in puzzlement. “Why?”

“Well, I don’t know what your normal daily routine is or if there are any special things you have to do today.”

“Ah.” She hesitated for a moment. “I will have to meet up with Carrick, my second in command, later on and get an update about the current situation. Most probably there will be

something I have to attend to. I've neglected my duties over these past days and there is a lot to catch up on. I am sorry. ”

Though that was not how I had wished to spend the day, I understood her point. We couldn't play the happy couple on a honeymoon with so much at stake; Eileen had responsibilities and I wanted to help and support her, even if I wasn't sure how much help I could realistically be. Nevertheless, I desperately craved spending time with her, getting to know her more, seeing her in her normal routine, her life...

I brushed my lips over her mouth without deepening the contact. “I would love to see some more of my new home; maybe I could accompany you? I don't want to be in the way...”

She gave me a happy smile and interrupted, “Aye, I'd like that very much; having you by my side. My kin should get used to the idea of you sharing my life, though I guess that rumors have already spread. Do you know how to ride, lass?”

I stared at her. Ride? As in a horse? Was she serious? “No, I can't, but I know that you have a perfectly functioning car in the garage.”

She laughed out loud. “Do I guess right that riding isn't one of your favorite activities?”

I pulled a face. “I never tried, but these animals are way too big for me to ever want to give it a try. I saw yours yesterday evening and you won't be able to get me on a giant like this.”

“You are serious?”

I nodded.

“Well, yes, I have a car, but only for those times when I have to go to places like, let's say Dublin, where riding a horse in the middle of a town or even using a carriage nowadays is something you can't do without attracting too much attention.”

“Oh.” That were bad news for me. I couldn't imagine trying to ride one of those huge hay-burners. The thought alone was enough to give me the shivers.

“Yes, *oh*.” Eileen ruffled my hair. “I am sorry, Julia, but you can’t possibly use a car to reach the places where my kin lives. While the minority live in cottages and could be visited with a car, most of them live either in lakes, in mounds, deep in the forest and so on. So if you like to see more than just the surface of my property, you will have to walk or ride double with me.”

My sigh was rather melodramatic, I’ll admit. It wasn’t the most pleasant notion, but I guessed I would have to learn how to ride. Still, the idea of sitting on such a high, moving thing with its own mind — and platter-sized hooves — did nothing to ease my concern.

“Julia?” Eileen asked.

“I’m sorry.” I kissed her forehead. “This is just all so new for me.”

She gently brushed my cheek with her knuckles. “I know, lass. It’s different than what you’ve known in the past, and that’s frightening. I understand. And I *am* sorry, but you will have to get used to a lot of things that are weird for you as I would if I would choose to live in your world. But I’ll be at your side, me or Lena, and we’ll not leave you to muddle through on your own. Trust me.”

I could hear the insecurity in her voice. Realization crashed over me like a wave — she was as afraid that I wouldn’t stay with her if she asked too much of me, as I was afraid that I wouldn’t fit into her world. If I concentrated, I could even sense the feelings coming from her through the empathy we shared. The magical bond between us was already strong, but I knew that we needed it to become even stronger to have a chance at making such a strange relationship work between a half-*sidhe* and a human. I touched the ring I wore, then touched hers reverently, trying to make the simple gesture an unspoken promise. At the same time, I tried to project my own feelings through the bond, hoping she would pick up on how much I loved her. That fact, at least, was not in doubt. The only remaining question was if love would be enough to keep us together; something only time could tell.

A smile stole over her face. “We’ll just take one little step at a time, lass.”

I smiled back at her, knowing that there was still a long and sometimes bumpy road ahead of us, but also certain that I wanted to do everything in my power to make our relationship work. I thought of a way to bring us back to a less intimidating subject — the cat.

“Eileen, tell me a bit about Tóraí,” I said. “I am not sure if I ever saw a breed like that before.” I rolled over to get a better look at the cat, who was lying beside the bed with its paws folded under its chest, staring back at me with half-closed amber eyes.

Eileen’s breath tickled my ear. “Have you ever heard of Manx cats?”

I nestled against her warm body and gave the question some thought, but I honestly couldn’t recall hearing this name before and said so.

After another press of her lips to my neck, Eileen went on, “Well, Manx cats are a species known to your kind as being a breed from the Isle of Man. One of your legends states that their ancestors were faerie cats, which is not far from the truth. Tóraí herself is a direct descendant of the original Manx cats and has the personality of those pure-breeds.”

*Really?* I took my time to study Tóraí some more. She was certainly bigger than any cat I had ever seen, she had no tail, and I most certainly had seen more physically attractive kitties in the past. But I didn’t notice anything about Tóraí that could be measured as outstanding.

“What’s so special about her, Eileen?” I asked.

She kissed my neck a third time before answering, “Well, Tóraí is highly intelligent, and you can add to that a very playful side and some behaviors which are unusual for any feline. Let me show you.” Eileen took a handkerchief from beneath her pillow. She scrunched it up in a little fabric ball and waved her hand to get the cat’s attention. “Tóraí!” she called.

The cat was immediately attentive, following the movements of Eileen’s hand with narrowed eyes. Tóraí’s whole body was tense, the muscles under her black fur clenching and unclenching in a smooth rhythm while she followed Eileen’s movements closely. She reminded me of one of those hunting lionesses that were shown in documentaries, waiting for the exact right moment to pounce on their hapless prey.

Eileen threw the hanky without further warning and Tóraí jumped, catching it while it was still in flight. “Tóraí, bring it,” Eileen said.

To my astonishment, that was just what the cat did, jumping on the bed and dropping the handkerchief in front of me. I was absolutely stunned. Catching it, okay, but retrieving it like that was very unusual for the kind of cats I’d known.

Eileen just smiled, leaned over me and scratched Tóraí under her chin, causing the cat to purr like a little engine. “Tóraí is Gaelic and means ‘hunter,’” Eileen said. “She is exceptional good at hunting and we’ve never been in need of a spell to keep mice or rats away from the manor since she’s been with us, for she’s well feared by those annoying rodents.”

Tóraí lay down on her back and stretched out, giving Eileen the opportunity to scratch her furry belly as well. Eileen went on to me, “To get her to obey you like that only works if you have her respect, Julia — she is still very much a cat, very independent and proud, and doesn’t have the simple pack mentality of a dog. But her breed is very social and when they take to someone, they become very attached to that person.”

I tentatively stuck my hand out to Tóraí, letting her sniff my fingers, though she already had experience with my toes — the memory made me shudder a bit — and should be used to my scent. As if reading my mind, she began to lick my fingers, covering every inch while I almost giggled at the rough sandpaper texture of her long pink tongue.

Eileen laughed softly. “And she sure likes you, lass, but it’s me that will soon lose her respect if I don’t feed her breakfast without more delay, so let’s get dressed and go downstairs. We can take a bath later on if you like.”

She wagged her eyebrows, making me chuckle. Nevertheless, I wasn’t sure how serious she was about the offer to bathe together. As much as I had been ready to throw my principles overboard earlier in the morning, I was afraid to let Eileen see me fully naked yet, now that my brain was functioning again. Thinking about her touching me while being together in a tub... all that bare slippery skin, not to mention the intimacy... it felt as if I was on an

emotional overload, not sure if I would be able to handle what a bath together would probably mean.

I opted for honesty, feeling absolutely stupid, but I took Eileen at her word that she wanted me to speak openly about my feelings and fears and so I said: “Eileen, I... I’m sorry, I know that I was the one initiating the kissing and... but I don’t think...”

Her warm finger against my lips stopped my babbling. “Shush, lass. I stand by my word. We go as slow as you need it, no pressure at all. We have all the time in the world. To be honest, I’m not sure how much more my heart could take today after those kisses of yours anyway.”

“Thank you. I am sorry...”

Again, her fingertips stopped my mouth before I could say something that would embarrass us both. “No buts, no need to be sorry. Thank you for the wonderful morning.” She replaced her finger with her lips in a gentle, tender kiss that lacked the urgency of the ones we shared earlier. Where had she been hiding all these years, I thought, and why hadn’t we met before I got with Jennifer? The longer I spent in Eileen’s presence, the more I felt my old wounds beginning to mend. Oh, God, I’m so in love with the woman and I’d only known her a week!

“Eileen?” I murmured.

“Yes, Julia?”

I felt a bit shy but gathered my courage and said, “If you’d like, you could wash my back.”

Eileen smiled indulgently and tapped my nose with her finger. “You’re insane. How much torture do you think I can stand, seeing you naked and only being allowed to wash your back? Are you crazy? I’m not made of stone.”

She got out of bed and mumbled something about a cold bath and slave duties while walking over to her wardrobe. I decided that this was the right time to use the huge en suite bathroom for the purpose of dressing myself, not only for my own modesty but for hers as well. Kissing and making out was one thing, but considering my lack of self control earlier in the morning,

her nakedness might prove a temptation impossible to resist. I have to admit that I was definitely nervous about her seeing me buck naked, too, as there was still a part of me that couldn't imagine why she would like what she saw. Some of those doubts had vanished in the course of the morning, but enough remained to make me wary of exposing myself.

I unpacked my little duffel bag and took some clothes into the bathroom with me, thankful that I didn't have to wear yesterday's dress a second day. Most of my stuff was still at the Hydro hotel. One of the items on my list of 'things to do' either today or tomorrow was getting my baggage to the manor. I also had to talk with my friend Monika about what to do with my meager belongings back in Germany. There wasn't much I owned and less that I wanted to keep apart from a few books and some photos, but I had to decide what to do — whether to store them, ship them over to Ireland, donate them or whatever.

Thinking about it made me aware of the fact that Monika's holiday in Ireland was coming to an end. She would have to go home to Germany rather soon, and she'd be returning without me. There was no question that I wanted to remain with Eileen, but it still felt weird that I would be staying behind in a world I had known nothing about just a short time ago.

Pulling on a pair of socks, I cast a glance at the huge sunken tub that dominated the room. It was big enough for two people who wouldn't need to touch each other if they moved around a lot. I started thinking, maybe it would be fun and another step to making myself feel more comfortable if I shared a bath with Eileen in the tub. Some candles, a bottle of wine, lots of scented foam to hide under ... sure, a strictly platonic kind of bath between friends, and here I was, a woman without second thoughts. Oh, damn. I couldn't even sell that to myself.

Eileen's voice brought me out of my sweet self-torture as she called through the closed door, "Come on, lass, the cat is ready to eat me alive. Better hurry or there'll be nothing left of me!"

I put my sweater and jeans on, quickly brushed my teeth, splashed some water on my face, and went back into the bedroom only to see Tórái wrestling with Eileen for the handkerchief. I enjoyed seeing this playful side of Eileen. There were so many things I didn't know about her and I was sure that there were a lot of surprises left for me to discovery. As if reading my mind, Eileen looked up at me with a bright smile on her face.

I smiled back at her. “Are there more pets like this one I should know about, Eileen? Just in case I need to protect other parts of my body when leaving this room?”

“No, not really, there are only the dogs, the horses... let me think. Ah, right. Did you ever hear about the special connection of my kind with birds and butterflies?”

I stifled a groan. “Thanks. I see I will have to get used to be licked, nibbled and whatever.”

I didn't even see her move but her arms were around me, and her voice was suddenly very close to my ear, causing me to shiver and weakening my knees even more. “Can I lick and nibble on you as well?” she asked in a low purr.

My face grew hot. “Stop that,” I said, batting at her hands where they were curved possessively around my hips.

She laughed, kissed one of my flushed cheeks and wrapped an arm around my shoulder before guiding me out of the bedroom and down the long corridor.

It was the first time I'd had a chance to look around on this floor since I hadn't had eyes for anything else other than Eileen yesterday evening. I regarded the décor in the corridor with curiosity, trying not to stumble over Tóraí, who was running constantly between our feet as we walked along. Maybe 'run' isn't the right word; the way the cat moved reminded me more of a bunny, a sort of hopping glide that seemed to have little to do with the elegant, sinuous movements of a feline. I did my best to suppress the impulse to laugh, sure that neither the cat owner nor the cat would appreciate my thoughts very much.

I noticed that this particular corridor was rather empty except for a few chairs and a chest of drawers that was as expensive-looking as the furniture I had seen downstairs. It was very grand, but also cool, sterile and uninspiring. Only the kitchen had made a different, more favorable impression on me, but that was Lena's domain, and I was sure that she was the sole reason for the warm atmosphere there.

As Eileen and I continued our way, I began to wonder about the torches that were supposed to provide illumination. I found it weird and not safe at all to have torches like that inside the house, especially after hearing that the original manor had burnt down a long time ago.

I halted and voiced my thoughts to Eileen, who listened patiently to me before responding, “I guess you’ve noticed by now that we don’t have the house wired for electricity?”

What I had noticed when recuperating from my injuries in the guestroom seemed to be true for the whole manor so far. I hadn’t seen a hint of electricity anywhere. Eileen took one of the torches out of the clamp which was securing it to the wall and said, “There are two reasons for the lack of electricity on my property. One is based on the dislike most of my guests feel when it comes to modern inventions. Though hospitality is one of the highest rules with my kin, I’m free to make my own decisions, but I have to admit that being around electricity makes me uncomfortable. I can feel the flow of power and have a hard time relaxing. Therefore, the decision to continue living without electricity in the manor was one easily made for me. And the other reason for the lack of mundane power is that we simply don’t need it.”

She waved her hand and mumbled something which I didn’t quite catch, a sibilant language that rushed out of her in a breath. Within a moment, the torch burst into flame and started burning brightly. Another wave and some more words from Eileen, and the torch went out.

“Wow!” I exclaimed, not knowing what else to say. She was practicing what had to be pure magic, and the demonstration thrilled me.

Eileen grinned and put the torch back into the clamp. “The advantage of using the torches like this is that it’s absolutely safe. Nobody really notices it isn’t real fire. They neither smell as strong as oil or petroleum, nor do they turn the manor into a smokehouse. The only open fires I allow inside are the ones in the fireplaces as they’re safe and wood-burning, and create a different atmosphere compared to everything else, even magic I might say. The danger of a fire caused by one of the open fireplaces is nearly nil.”

“Wow,” I repeated. “Could you make those torches produce a smell when they burn?”

Eileen looked amused but confirmed that she could, if that was her will.

I left her standing and continued walking towards the stairs while considering the implications. Wouldn't it be great to leave the bedroom in the mornings and be greeted by the smell of freshly brewed coffee when entering the corridor, or leave the room for dinner and be greeted by the wonderful bouquet of a fine red wine? If Eileen was able to conjure a scent from thin air... well, there was a lot potential in the idea.

Eileen caught up with me when I reached the stairs. She cast me a suspicious glance, but we continued our way downstairs in silence. I knew she was curious about my question and what I had been thinking about, but since she didn't ask, I decided to keep the idea to myself for the moment and reveal it at a later point.

Tóraí bounced along a lot faster as soon as we reached the bottom of the stairs, and went enthusiastically in the direction of the kitchen. Rich aromatic smells made my mouth water, and caused me to pick up speed and my stomach to let out a loud rumble.

Eileen stopped and bent down to take a closer look at my growling belly, before poking me with a fingertip. "And what kind of beast lives in there?" she asked, her eyes twinkling.

I wagged a finger at her. "Do not touch before it's fed!"

Eileen stood straight and hunched away, pretending to be afraid. When I swatted at her head, she grinned and dropped the pose. "Well lass, first I have to feed the cat in the kitchen, but that won't take long and then we can feed you. I forgot to ask if you would prefer to have breakfast served in the dining room or in the library?"

I expected us to eat in the kitchen, my favorite room so far (although the library came a close second), and told Eileen, "Well, the kitchen would be my choice. I really like it and I would like to spend some time with Monika and Lena while we eat. Would that be okay?"

Eileen frowned as if she was not sure that my request was serious. "Sure," she said after a pause. "If you prefer the kitchen, no problem."

Sitting in front of the kitchen door, Tóraí complained loudly about our laziness. The plaintive yowl made me laugh; she sure knew how to make her wishes known. After glancing at each other, still giggling, Eileen and I picked up speed for the last few steps and entered the kitchen with the cat following closely on our heels, finding Monika already sitting comfortably in front of the remains of a huge breakfast spread over the table.

Lena, who was standing at the oven, greeted us with a warm hello, but Monika was her usual self, meaning not subtle at all. I was certain that she could hardly wait to tease us about showing our faces at such a late hour of the morning, and I was right.

“Look at this,” Monika said; raising her eyebrows in pretend surprise, “the two lovebirds make an appearance. We didn’t expect you to join us this morning — right, Lena?”

I was saved from making a sharp retort when the cat suddenly ran into the far corner of the kitchen and began to chase something, zooming here and there as if she lost her mind. I was only able to glimpse that the ‘something’ she was after seemed as green as a piece of grass, and it was running like a whirlwind trying to escape Tóraí’s claws with some complicated maneuvers. *What is that?* I wondered, trying to bring the scurrying prey into better focus.

Lena was the first to react. She ran after Tóraí, trying to catch the racing cat. “Let him go. Let Tom be, you stupid cat!” she squalled.

*Tom?* Monika and I stared at each other. She looked as baffled as I felt.

Tóraí finally obeyed after a short command from Eileen and abandoned the chase, going to sit next to an empty bowl. The cat was still hissing, but the sound was a bit garbled as it was chewing at the same time. Lena walked over and bent down grumbling, holding her hand under Tóraí’s mouth. The cat gave her a slit-eyed glare but finally spit out whatever it was she was chewing. The small green ‘something’ I had seen climbed fast into Lena’s hand, ranting the whole time in a piping voice and shaking a little fist in the cat’s direction, which did her best to look as bored as possible.

“What or who is that?” I asked, amazed.

Eileen replied in a low voice, “That’s Tom. He’s one of the *cluricauns* living here, helping out in the kitchen as is the way of all *cluricauns*. Under normal circumstances, Tom’s people only do this in human houses as the likes of the *sidhe* are not very much in need of their kind of assistance, but he ran into trouble some time ago and had to leave the place that had been his home for several human generations. He found his way to us. Simply put, he is another refugee who asked to stay and I gave my consent.”

Tom still seemed to be upset. Tóraí did her best to ignore the *cluricaun*’s constant chatter while meowing in front of her empty bowl, eyeing Eileen expectantly. But Eileen ignored the cat and continued, “Usually you hardly notice Tom around — *cluricaun*’s are soft-footed when they choose to be —but not too long ago, Tóraí caught him eating food out of her bowl and well, let’s say it will take a lot for them to become friends again. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him in the kitchen during the day.” Her steady gaze narrowed. “Most probably he used Lena’s absence yesterday evening and found himself some wine. That’s a *cluricaun*’s biggest vice. They’ll drink themselves silly every chance they get, but they tend to wait until after they’ve done their chores before going on a drunken spree.”

*A cluricaun...* I took a few slow steps in Lena’s direction, careful not to move too quickly and startle the tiny man standing on the palm of her hand. His aggravation appeared scarcely abated. Even though I wasn’t able to understand what he was shouting, I was fairly sure that he was using a lot of words that I would have deemed inappropriate for such a little guy. I took my time studying his appearance. Tom had long golden hair, white skin and red cheeks; he looked like a very small version of a human or perhaps a bigger version of a child’s toy. His clothes were green, the same grassy color as the little wet hat crumpled in his right hand — the hat which Tóraí had been chewing on before it was rescued. Despite his pique, the little *cluricaun* looked adorable.

Suddenly his high-pitched babbling stopped and he turned his gaze toward me. I stopped breathing for a second, not sure what to expect. He tilted his head a bit more, obviously checking me out as thoroughly as I had been studying him. All of a sudden a bright smile lit up his face and he nodded, his cheeks turning even redder, before he shyly lowered his head.

Lena chuckled and ruffled his hair before she went to the open fireplace to set him down on the hearth. In the next second he was gone, leaving not a trace behind. Lena turned around,

shaking her head. “He sure wasn’t in such a shape for a long time. Drunk as an earl, he is! Partly my fault, really. I forgot to lock the door of the wine cellar yesterday evening. I am sorry, mistress. I will have a look later to see what we need to stock up again.”

It was Monika who regained the ability to speak first, although she still looked stunned. “I will never get used to this,” she said. “One second, it seems like everything is normal and I’m enjoying this delicious breakfast, and the next second something like *that* happens. I wouldn’t be surprised if I started seeing pink elephants next.”

Eileen and Lena stared at her as if she lost her mind. Eileen finally asked in obvious confusion, “Why would we have pink elephants?”

Monika waved her hand dismissively and took another bite of toast, while I shook my head and sat down next to her. I totally understood what she meant. “I know, buddy,” I said to Monika. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve wandered onto a movie set, and I’m not sure if I am an actor in it, or if this is a crazy dream and ... a whatever.”

I leaned my elbows on the table and put my head in my hands, suddenly feeling a bit overwhelmed from everything that had happened in the course of this morning. A few seconds later, a shining blue mug was put in front of me and the most amazing fragrance drifted to my nose. Freshly brewed coffee... one of *my* biggest vices, especially since these amazing coffee shops had begun to spread all over our town. It wasn’t often that I allowed myself to indulge in the pleasure of one of those over-priced fancy drinks, but sometimes I just wasn’t able to resist the temptation or simply had to reward myself. A good cup of coffee was nearly as perfect for the soul as good chocolate as far as I was concerned. Carefully I took the mug in both hands, enjoying the warmth, and took another sniff. Ah, pure bliss!

I looked up into Lena’s smiling eyes. She said, “Well, little one, I was told that *if* you would come down this morning, you would most probably kill for good coffee, and since it seems a bit too early for the first slaughter of the day I thought I’d better be prepared.”

The truth was not too far away from that statement. Fortunately, I had no time for my usually morning grouchiness. I smiled back at her. “You are my hero, Lena! Thanks.”

I put some milk into my cup, stirred with a spoon, and took a careful sip of the brew, not really sure what to expect since the coffee I'd drunk so far during our holiday had not been a positive experience for my taste buds. But oh, my goodness! I closed my eyes and took another sip, enjoying the way the rich complex taste rolled over my tongue and developed in my mouth. "Lena, this is simply delicious! Thank you," I said again. For such a cup of coffee, she deserved a million thanks and maybe a medal.

Lena winked at me before turning back to her stove to finish preparing our belated breakfast while Eileen finally fed the demanding cat. I gazed around, really loving the atmosphere of this room. The wooden table was made of solid oak, darkened by generations of use, and fitted well with the tone floor and the whitewashed walls. Clusters of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling added to the cozy atmosphere, as did the variety of colorful china arrayed on the Welsh dresser, and copper pots on hooks by the fireplace. It was a room where one could literally taste and smell life. I knew that this would be one of my favorite places to spend my time. I could even imagine preferring to read a book while sitting in one of the chairs in front of this fireplace instead of in the library. I liked the library but the kitchen seemed to be the heart of the manor and indeed, it proved to be so during the rest of the morning that was spent in playful banter between the four of us until Lena forced us to leave her realm.

Eileen had to meet with Carrick, her second in command, to get an update on the current situation with Madeleine while Monika and I decided to use our free time for a view of the big garden. We wanted to enjoy the brilliant weather until it was time for me to meet Eileen and begin the first horse ride of my entire life.

## Part 2

The first signs of autumn could be seen all around, one of them being the wind which was playing tricks with some colorful yet dead leaves, whirling them around in front of one of the open stable doors, close to where I sat on a bench waiting for Eileen. It was a nice day. Maybe a bit windy but much warmer than I had expected after having being subjected to what the Irish called *focíth fearthainne*, an occasional rain shower, during my exploration of the manor's garden with my friend, Monika.

Eileen had asked me to meet her at this bench. All my whining and arguing didn't help as she insisted that we would be riding today when visiting the *Aorí Tuaithe*.<sup>1</sup> As much as I had insisted on going with her, I still hoped there would be another way to reach the village that wouldn't involve a saddle, but even my last desperate attempt to persuade her that both of us would be way too heavy for one horse was only met with laughter and a little lesson about the warhorse's strong, solid build.

And so it was that I sat here waiting for my very first ride on a horse while Monika stayed behind with Lena. Lucky woman! I had to admit to being nervous as hell as I had a strong dislike of horses. My childhood awe about a knight in shining armor on an impressive and preferably white horse had changed through the years into a more than healthy respect when it came to horses of whatever color. I was not very tall and I remembered Eileen's horse was a particularly big brute with hooves that seemed to be the size of dinner plates.

A rather nice surprise earlier that day had been a pair of dark brown trousers and a green hooded cloak that Lena had given me, lecturing me that jeans and a simple jacket were absolutely not the right attire for riding in a country where rain could be expected every minute of the day no matter what the weather looked like. The material that made up both the trousers and the cloak was unknown to me, but Lena said the weaving of the fabric had a long tradition with her kin and was made specifically for the Irish weather, being rainproof and light to wear. Eileen had handed me black riding boots that completed the picture, making me feel a bit butch when I saw myself in the mirror wearing my riding garb.

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<sup>1</sup> Shepherds of the land

It had taken me quite a struggle and some compliments from both Lena and Monika to feel comfortable in my new outfit, which fit my body more snugly than I liked. Despite my friends' compliments, the lecherous expression on Eileen's face and the passionate emotions I felt coming from her via our bond convinced me that she most definitely liked what she saw, and that convinced me more than any words she could have spoken.

Sitting on the bench, I still couldn't get over my snugly fitting attire and I couldn't suppress a chuckle at the thought of Jennifer, my former girlfriend, seeing me like that. I had changed since the days when I had been that woman's punching bag. Being with Eileen, desiring and feeling desirable, had given me a lot more confidence.

A soft whickering brought me out of my musings. Seeing no one around, I stood up and began to walk around the stable yard, trying to get rid of some of my nervous energy. Pacing a few steps but not wandering very far away from the bench, I finally heard more noises, closer this time. Turning around, I was stunned by what I saw and felt as if I had just stepped out of a time machine, back into Ireland's past.

Eileen was riding ahead of a group of six ancient-looking warriors, all rather stocky in build. The men's hair was as long as the women's and their faces were partially hidden by full but well trimmed beards that were even longer than their hair. They looked weather-beaten in a way that told me they enjoyed spending more time outdoors than indoors, and they seemed very capable of appreciating a good fight. Every one of them had a longsword in a scabbard hanging at their side, and the two women were holding a spear each, which didn't seem to affect their riding skills at all. Every warrior was dressed in breeches and a homespun tunic. Over the tunic they each wore a dark brown or black leather cuirass. They rode dun colored horses, and round shields were hanging on the side of the warrior's saddles.

God, the four guys were the personalization of untamed masculinity and for a moment I thought I could detect a wave of testosterone in the air. Monika would have turned into a puddle right on the spot if she could have seen them; strong muscular men always got her estrogen sky-rocketing.

The two female warriors in the group came close to my imagined vision of Amazons. Wild untamed grace and self-confidence didn't only come with the masculine ideal. I would be lying if I tried to pretend that the women didn't stir my hormones.

In front of this astonishing horde rode Eileen with her long flowing mane of black hair and deep blue piercing eyes, a true vision to behold. She had always been stunning to me but now, on her horse, riding in front of those warriors, dressed in her black trousers and boots, *geez...* she emanated grace and raw power, a combination that made my knees go weak and my brain turn to mush.

Earlier today, when I had seen her coming down the stairs with her sword at her side, it gave me a hard time. In a flash of memory, I remembered all too clearly the evening she saved me from Madeleine, their bloody fight for dominance and for me. That particular scene still gave me nightmares. Seeing Eileen dressed like a warrior with her sword and her bullwhip wasn't easy at first, but after getting over my initial reaction, I was more than able to savor the sight of her. Thinking of riding double didn't seem like such a bad idea any more as it would give me a good excuse to feel her body under my hands. It was only the fact that I would be sitting on this really big horse while pressing myself against her that kept me nervous.

Eileen caught my eye. The cocky grin that appeared on her face showed me that she knew why I had been leering at her a few moments ago. I could feel my face growing hot again when she brought her horse to a halt a few steps in front of me and slid out of the saddle. The others didn't stop but continued passing by, only acknowledging my presence with a short nod before disappearing out of sight around the corner of the stable. For a moment I stared confused after them, not understanding why they didn't stop as well, but Eileen drew my attention back to her, leaving me no time to ponder about the warriors' curious behavior..

"We will meet up with them later on," she said. "Julia, I want you to meet Cinnia, the beauty of my stables and the best four-legged companion one could wish for." She softly patted the horse's throat before leaning closer and whispering in its ear, loud enough for me to overhear, "Cinnia, meet Julia, the new lady of the manor and of my heart and a beauty herself. I want you to treat her with the respect she deserves." That earned her a snort from the horse.

I carefully took a step closer to the animal, which was definitely a beauty — a mare with golden coat and a flaxen mane and tail, and big brown eyes that had a coolly assessing look as if to let me know that I was unworthy of mounting her. I could only concur and felt my nervousness increasing. However, Eileen didn't waver; she re-mounted and offered me her arm, expecting me to accept it and allow myself to be lifted up onto the saddle pad behind her.

I stared up at her. “You must be joking, Eileen! You don't really expect me to let me lift up like this and tear my arm out in the process, right?”

She lifted a dark and very elegant eyebrow. “Well, do you see a mounting block somewhere?”

*A what?* I glanced around, having no idea what a mounting block looked like. I searched for a big box or rock or something-or-other that I could use to could climb up behind Eileen, feeling totally out of my depth. What had I been thinking when I'd asked to accompany her? The problems had begun already, with me having no idea how to vault the horse that was giving me scornful looks.

“Kirwyn!” Eileen's shout startled me but soon after the echo died a boy came out of the stables, grinning all over his face. Definitely a little Mr. Sunshine, I thought, and another witness to my humiliation — just what I needed!

“Good morning, mistress!” he said happily before turning his attention to me. “Milady, may I be of assistance?”

Guessing that ‘milady’ would be me, I nodded, expecting him to show me this mounting block, but the only thing he did was to go over to the horse and stand there with clasped hands and an encouraging expression. Call me stupid, because that was exactly how I felt, staring at him and then up at Eileen, who frowned down at me and shook her head.

“Julia, you have two possibilities,” she said. “Either you take my hand and I get you up behind me or you place your left foot in Kirwyn's hands and he vaults you up. What shall it be?”

I dropped my head and resigned with a sigh. Feeling slightly sick to my stomach, I placed my left foot in the boy's strong hands and faster than I was able to say 'whoosh,' I had to swing my leg over the horse's back and found myself sitting behind Eileen. I desperately grabbed her waist to avoid sliding off, while closing my eyes and trying to take deep even breaths. *I can do this, I can do this*, was my new mantra.

Eileen dismissed the boy, who walked back into the stables whistling a jolly tune.

"Hey, are you okay back there?" she asked me.

I stifled a groan. No, I wasn't okay, but I didn't want to appear to be a total wimp. I said with more boldness than I felt, "Yeah, I guess so. Is it imperative to open my eyes during the ride?"

Her stomach muscles contracted when she laughed, an interesting feeling. "You will sure be able to see more with open eyes, lass," she said. "Now, leave your arms around my waist and don't let go. No need to be afraid, we will start this slowly and see how it goes. I won't let you fall. Trust me."

*Trust me...* trust was something I was not particularly good at, though trusting Eileen had already proven to be a different experience for me. The bond between us made the whole thing easier, since being able to sense the feelings behind her words helped me a lot. Nevertheless, trust remained a decision that needed to be made without waiting for a fuzzy feeling to accompany it, so I decided to face my fears once more and to 'simply' trust her.

I felt one of her warm callused hands covering my cold and sweaty ones. She turned her head and looked at me over her shoulder. In a very gentle tone she said, "Julia, did I mention how lovely you look today? The new cloak compliments your green eyes and these trousers... well, this sight sure makes my old heart beat faster. Thank you for giving me the pleasure of your company." She twisted around a bit further, giving me an awkward but gentle kiss on my lips before she turned around again.

I let my head fall against the back of her shoulder, feeling a bit like jelly. If she wanted to distract me, hell, it worked. Whispering a thank you, I reveled in her warmth. It was surprising how much a few words coming from her could do for my confidence and how

much her touch alone anchored me. My fears seemed to ease in her presence, as if something deep inside of me had begun to realize that I was not alone anymore in this adventure called life, though a small doubt about the ability to stay happy remained. Trusting her didn't mean I would be trusting life any time soon. Life would have to prove itself to me in the future.

There was not much more time to revel in deep thoughts since all of my concentration and effort had to be put into feeling the horse's motions. Absolutely unaccustomed to riding, I tried my best to move with the horse as Eileen told me, trying to stay in the same rhythm with her instead of working against it. All of that was much easier in theory than in practice. I was sure that Eileen had been sitting on a horse since she was in diapers, but I didn't even dare think about how my body would feel after our little sight-seeing trip, since I was not used to exercise apart from that one self-defense course I had taken a long, long time ago.

*Oh, gosh! Am I going to be sore later!*

### Part 3

It took a while before I got comfortable enough to cast more than a glance at our surroundings, noting that we had already left the road that led to the manor and the shadows of the forest that surrounded it like a natural barrier. Eileen was keeping the horse at a slow trot while I kept a tight hold on her waist.

I enjoyed seeing more of the stunning landscape without biting my fingernails because I had been kidnapped or I was unsure if Eileen ever wanted to see me again, as had happened in the past. True, I was sitting on a horse and the ground seemed a long way away, but I was also holding onto the one person I had begun to trust and love like I never thought I'd be capable of doing. As we continued, I began to forget about my fears and take in the elevated view.

The sights around us were absolutely incredible and the various shades of the brilliant green pastures made it clear why Ireland was called the Emerald Isle. The surroundings were vastly different from the locales a city-bred girl like me was used to calling home. Surprisingly, I felt absolutely at ease and free, enjoying the vastness around us and the yearning it stirred inside of my soul — a soul that finally found the place and better yet the person that was meant to be 'home.' I realized that this was one of those very rare perfect moments, feeling a sense of belonging that made me beyond happy; being at the right place, at the right time, with the right person was a wonderful feeling that I wanted to get used to.

Never letting go of Eileen, I listened to her comments about the various places we were passing and the variety of faeries that lived in her domain. There seemed to be no place without them; they lived in the lakes, in the grassy mounds, in the forest and under the earth. There were beings with no shape and no form at all, while others were so similar to us that I might take them for humans at first or maybe even at second sight. Some of them were friendly by nature, and some were evil; some full of hatred for humans, while others sought our presence and enjoyed our company. Some liked to stay alone and sought solitude even from their kin, while others enjoyed and deliberately chose the company of their own kind.

Many of the places Eileen showed me were sacred to her kin; it seemed to me as if Ireland was one big gathering of everything that was old and mystic, like sacred wells with thorn bushes, ring forts, cairns and so on. The list seemed endless. Listening to her stories about the

history of places that seemed trivial to us humans (and particularly to tourists) caused a wave of awe to rise in my chest. Sure, there were stories, called lore as I knew, pointing out that these wells and stones were more than simple sites. And yes, there were even some people today who knew about the stories behind them, but to hear the tales from Eileen, who had heard them from Lena or her parents, and to know that these people actually lived when some things took place or knew *sidhe* who did so, was something entirely different. Suddenly lore became history, something that had really taken place and would be part of my own family history rather soon. *Unbelievable!*

After a while of riding, we stopped at the top of a hill which presented us with the most amazing view. There were smaller hills and ridges in front of us covered with pasture that spread like a green dotted blanket over the greater part of the countryside. I never knew that so many different shades of green existed before coming to Ireland. It seemed to me as if whoever created this land hadn't been able to decide which kind of green would fit the island best and therefore chose to use every shades available. The white parts in the otherwise green blanket were caused by the fluffy heads of bog cotton, which enforced the impression of a huge patchwork laying in front of us. It was simply breathtaking.

Eileen brought the horse closer to a big rock that was surrounded by mountain ash trees. "Come on, lass. We'll have a break here. This is a good place to wait for the message I am expecting and maybe it will do you some good to move your legs a bit."

"Aren't we in a bit of a hurry?" I asked.

She shook her head: "We have time enough for a short break and like I said, I am expecting a message. Carrick promised to send an envoy to let us know if the way is safe. I don't want any unpleasant surprises today."

Despite my best intentions of not worrying too much, I felt my stomach lurch. Remembering the fateful night when we had met all too clearly, I swallowed hard and clung to Eileen, asking, "Do you expect an assault?"

She patted one of my hands in an attempt to calm me down. "No, it is not likely, especially not during broad daylight. But one can never be sure with Madeleine, especially after her

attack on my own land. I don't want you in unnecessary danger and took some precautions. That's all."

I still felt unsettled but decided to trust her judgment, though more than a hint of nervousness remained. Nevertheless, I was happy for an opportunity to stretch my legs, being unused to sitting astride a horse. Having the rock as a kind of mounting- and-dismounting block nearby wasn't a bad idea as well, because the distance from where I was sitting in the saddle to the ground was way out of my comfort zone.

I was slowly sliding down Cinnia's back when I heard Eileen giving me some belated advice, "Be careful, lass. Your legs are not used to riding."

And boy, was she right! When I finally touched ground, my knees were extremely wobbly and I was not so sure if I would ever be able to straighten them out again. I couldn't even stand on my own and involuntarily collapsed on the rock, feeling like a toddler who was not used to walking on two feet.

Eileen dismounted gracefully and left Cinnia to graze, giving the horse an affectionate pat on the withers before coming over to my rock. She sat down next to me, bumping my shoulder with hers. "Funny legs, eh?" she asked.

I groaned while trying to massage my knotted thigh muscles. *Damn big hay burner! Damn sidhe!* I thought. Couldn't they live where they could be reached easily with a car or any other advanced means of transportation?

"Let me help, lass." Eileen had a small smile on her face, as if she was amused. Before I was able to respond, she knelt down on the grass in front of me and worked magic with her fingers, rubbing my legs and causing me to lean back on my elbows. I groaned from sheer pleasure. *God! That was so good.* Another groan escaped my throat.

Looking down through half-closed eyes, I saw Eileen was observing me closely. "Well," she said in a voice as smooth as silk, "that sure is a sound I would like to hear more often. I trust that you like what I do?"

I tried the most menacing face expression I was capable of mustering, trying to ignore the clenching in my gut that meant I was already responding to her sultry voice. “Well, let me put it like this: I kill you if you stop!” I blurted.

She snorted softly, obviously not taking my comment seriously, but continued her massage and in my book, that was what really counted. I felt my muscles loosening up and beginning to relax. Every one of my nerve endings enjoyed the way her touch made me feel, sending shivers down my spine. I closed my eyes and sighed.

Her seductive voice broke into my blessed-out state. “You know, lass, you will most definitely need a good hot bath tonight. It will do wonders for your muscles.”

I could only agree. A hot bath, yes, that would certainly be good for my muscles. Solely for therapeutic reasons, a massage from Eileen given in the bathtub would add to the positive effect of the hot and steamy water... *bad girl! Down!*

I shook my head slightly to clear my thoughts, trying to give them a different direction, trying to think of... cold showers... being alone... but opening my eyes, I saw that Eileen’s condition wasn’t much different from mine. Her passionate expression and the way she looked at me, her blue eyes alight with desire... for a second time that day, I was close to throwing my good intentions over board, but I knew that this wasn’t the time or place to lose control. Prudence was rather frustrating, I have to say!

Suddenly, Eileen stopped her ministrations. She was looking around the forest as if searching for something. I did the same and was irritated by a dancing ball of light next to a nearby tree. Without warning, brilliant illumination burst on the spot and I had to shut my eyes to protect them from the searing blast. When I cautiously opened my eyes again, a young boy with flaming red hair and alabaster skin stood buck-naked in the spot where the light had been. The mysterious youngster bubbled over with laughter while I tried to scramble away and get some distance between us. *Was he friend or foe? Where did he come from? Where there others?*

I looked helplessly at Eileen, ready to run or fight or whatever she deemed necessary, but she just shook her head and set her arms akimbo, wiping the grin of his face with an infuriated yell, “Turlough!”

“Sorry, mistress.” He looked rather guilty all of a sudden.

In the meantime, my heart was still trying to beat its way out of my ears. *Who was this, for goodness’ sake!*

When she spoke, Eileen’s tone reminded me of my mother’s whenever she caught me doing something stupid. “Turlough, I promise you, if you ever pull a stunt like that again, I’ll have your hide! And the only commission you’ll get from me in the future will have to do with a lot of dung and horses.”

He looked bashful and said with uncertainty in his voice, as if testing new waters, “I came to deliver a message from Carrick, mistress. Honestly.”

Eileen didn’t seem impressed. “Then don’t babble and let hear what your master said.”

“Yes, mistress.” Turlough bowed his head. “He asked me to tell you that the way is free and that he expects you and the lady.”

“Good. Off you go before I forget myself and skin you alive for your tricks.” She took a step in his direction as if wanting to prove that she was keen on putting her words into action.

With another flash of light that came as unexpectedly as the first, there was suddenly a fox in his place. The animal ran off into the bushes, quickly disappearing from sight. I opened my mouth to say something when Eileen turned around and beat me to it.

“I am sorry, Julia,” she said. “He is in his adolescence and gets on our nerves to an astonishing degree, but he is one of the best messengers and we are in sore need his service right now.”

“Is being naked a necessity of being a good messenger?” I was confused and still felt ready to bolt the next second, not sure if more unexpected visitors would appear out of nowhere.

“Well, no,” she said without a trace of humor, “the last time he changed into the form of a trout that was just served for dinner at the manor. Even we were surprised to have our meal speaking to us! He has an absolutely weird sense of humor, thinking of himself as a talented jester, and I’ll wager he thought it was hysterically funny to shock you like that. I will have a serious conversation with him tomorrow, but there is no one whom Carrick trusts more when delivering urgent messages. He is as sharp as a new pin, the damn boy.” She sighed.

I sat down on the rock, feeling somewhat calmer; wanting to believe there was no reason to be afraid. “He scared me shitless for a moment. I didn’t know if we were going to be attacked from naked enemies the next second. Where did he come from?”

“He is a shape-shifter, a very useful thing for a messenger.”

Good God! What else would that day bring? First the cat, then the *clurricaun* in the kitchen, riding on a horse for the first time and now a naked boy delivering messages. *I can’t wait to see what is going to happen in the village*, I thought.

Eileen joined me on the rock and took my hands into hers, brushing her thumbs across my knuckles in a soothing motion. “Would you prefer riding back to the manor?” she asked. “I would totally understand. We can visit the village tomorrow if it’s too much for you. I sometimes forget that things that are a part of my everyday life are totally new and maybe frightening for you. I am really sorry about Turlough’s behavior.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay, really, it just feels like such a rollercoaster ride today. Well, at least it was easy to determine his gender.”

We looked each other in the eye and simultaneously burst into laughter. She touched my face, stroking my cheek with the backs of her fingers. “You are one of a kind, Julia. One minute you seem scared to death, afraid, helpless and the next moment your curiosity or humor wins over. I just love that,” she said, her voice softening, “I love you.” And then she leaned closer and captured my lips in a lingering, tender kiss that made me forget everything else.

I rested my head on Eileen's shoulder after ending the kiss. "If you wanted to distract me, well... it worked." I smiled and shifted, allowing her to get up. Grasping her extended hand, I let her help me to my feet and lead me away from the rock.

She was not totally convinced as it seemed and asked again, "Are you really sure you are up for more surprises, 'cause if not...."

I laid a finger over her lips, silencing her. "Hush. You have to show presence. It is your responsibility and I do understand. I want to be at your side when you do. I don't feel pressured to come with you, it is my free decision!"

After a moment of hesitation, she seemed to accept my sincerity and gave a short whistle. Cinnia trotted over, still munching on a mouthful of something green, regarding us with an impatient expression as if wondering whether we could continue our ride at last.

Eileen mounted first and this time I took her offered hand. Surprised anew at her strength, I found myself back in the saddle behind her without much effort on my part. The sun wasn't producing as much warmth any longer as it was already well into the afternoon, but Eileen created enough body heat to make me feel very comfortable as we continued our ride. This closeness to her was a precious gift that I cherished.

Not long after we continued on our way, she stopped on a small hill and twisted around, observing me with a twinkle in her eyes. "Are you ready, lass?" she asked. "It will take us some more minutes and then we will be there." I glanced around and saw her pointing into the direction of a gathering of small houses down in the valley directly in front of us.

Although my stomach fluttered, I was looking forward to our time in the village, wondering what kind of surprises would be waiting for me there. I said a bit more cheerfully than I felt, "Yes, let's go."

Eileen urged Cinnia on, and we rode down the hill towards the village of the *Aorí Tuaithe*, the shepherds of the lands.

I hung on tight, excited and nervous and glad to be here with the woman I loved.

## Part 4

The grazing cattle that we passed on our way down the hill was part of the manor's meat resources, although the herd was owned by the *Aorí Thuaithe*, whose village was our destination. They took care of Eileen's land, living on it in sync with the seasons, in return the land gave them what they needed to survive. For example, the small bogs that were within walking distance from the village: the villagers dug up blocks of the sodden turf every summer, dried them in little stacks and used the peat for fuel at home the way it had always been, a tradition that worked well.

Eileen sounded frustrated when she told me about the changes modern times had wrought on the island. "Nowadays there are these huge yellow machines scraping away the surface of Ireland's bog, eating into the ground like wild animals whose only concern is to destroy," she said. "There are ancient tree trunks preserved in the bogs and the *sidhe draoi* would have my hide if I didn't do my best to preserve and honor those who live in my domain."

While the *Aorí Thuaithe* paid her "rent" in the form of food like fresh meat and fish, and in taking care of the land surrounding them, she allowed them in return to live in peace and tranquility, Eileen explained. However, ever since Madeleine had decided in an apparent blind fury to take revenge on those more easily reachable than Eileen, peace and tranquility was not something the villagers were enjoying much these days.

Over the past decades, the small village had grown considerably larger because of the dozens of refugees who came to Eileen's domain seeking sanctuary. As soon as *any* of Eileen's kin set feet on her domain, asking for and receiving her binding promise of welcome, neither Madeleine nor anyone else had a hold over them; they were under Eileen's sole sovereignty. This was based on an old clan law that was greatly respected, if somewhat inconvenient. Eileen stuck to the rule even though many of the high lords and ladies of the other domains were not happy about her for not putting a stop on the constant flow of refugees to her land. Now one of those poor families had been slaughtered by Madeleine's men, a family who had been her subjects before their escape.

Eileen's determination to do what she thought was right, no matter the consequences for herself, was a personality trait that I admired a lot. She had been telling me how the refugees had been treated by Madeleine, being forced to surrender their sons and daughters into her army to be trained as foot soldiers when all these peaceful people wanted was to tend the land and their cattle, not kill others in a war that was not of their making.

Some of those who were able to escape from Madeleine told stories about those unfortunate souls that had been either tortured themselves or had been forced to watch their women being raped and their children being beaten to a pulp as a result of opposing Madeleine's commands. If there had been any anticipation from my side about living happily ever after from now on, it sure had died when hearing from Eileen that nobody cared much about what happened to those poor people. Everyone was afraid to intervene or even protest about the way Madeleine handled her affairs. Self-interest hadn't been invented in modern times but it seemed to me the *sidhe* were taking it to an extreme.

Eileen was determined to take her responsibility seriously, no matter the consequences. I wondered if she was compensating for something as her determination seemed to be the kind of thing born out of a bad conscience or a blow of fate. Today's visit was meant to show her support to the villagers, letting them know that they were not alone in this awful situation. It was also necessary for her to see what could be done to secure the village against possible future attacks.

I was more than curious to see my first village full of *sidhe* and at the same time nervous, because I felt partly responsible for what had happened there. When I had mentioned this sting of remorse to Eileen, she fiercely denied any responsibility on my part.

"Lass, how could it have been your fault?" she asked. "Because you bought my portrait, not knowing what you did and how this would change your life? Madeleine is the one who killed in cold blood and if anyone beside her is guilty, it's me."

Now that was something I wouldn't accept. "Why should you be guilty?" I asked. "You said you never expected for anyone to buy the portrait, especially not a human." For a fleeting moment I thought there was a flicker of something dark in her eyes, but it was gone so fast that I wasn't sure if it was a figment of my imagination or not.

Eileen wasn't very forthcoming and closed the subject by saying, "I was married to her, Julia. I should have known what Madeleine was capable of doing."

I can honestly say that I didn't understand why that should make her feel responsible for Madeleine's current actions, but the simple truth was that I hardly knew anything about Eileen's past except some meager facts Lena had told me. Maybe I should have been more persistent, urging Eileen to talk to me, to explain why she thought she was guilty, but I was still unsure about the stability of our relationship. A single week together didn't make me a specialist in knowing how much to push when she made it clear that she didn't want to pursue a subject any longer. Even our bond didn't help very much when she did her best to suppress any emotions I might have picked up on. I made a mental note to probe some more at another time, sensing that it was a topic that would need a lot of time and patience from my side. I wanted to be there for her as much as she was there for me whenever I needed her.

I had always dreamed about being partners on equal terms if there ever would be another love in my life and that was what I wanted with Eileen. This would be hard since it was obvious to me that she needed to be in charge and was always ready to defend or conquer; she had kept her heart guarded for a very long time and it was clear this wasn't going to change in a heartbeat. Lena had told me earlier how surprised she had been about Eileen's open display of affection towards me, but she attributed it to the bond we shared. Perhaps time and growing trust would help Eileen tell me more of her past and reveal the source of the guilt she was carrying. No matter how hard she tried, there was no hiding how much past events had left their mark on her; whatever had happened still influenced her actions and reactions today.

I was brought out of my thoughts when we passed the first of the small stone cottages, which looked no different from other Irish countryside villages I had seen. There were beautiful little gardens full of blossoming flowers and herbs, half-hidden behind wooden fences or stone walls that granted the inhabitants some privacy. There were beautiful trees that created hiding places for birds as well as shade or shelter from rain. The village had the look of one of those storybook villages, picture-perfect at first glance, but it sure was a strange atmosphere that greeted our arrival. The village's inhabitants had obviously expecting us; they had lined up in what seemed to be the main street without any sign of welcoming us. Children ducked and hid behind their parents instead of offering smiles and waves. The people were staring at me like I

was an alien and at Eileen as if she had come to execute someone, but maybe that was exactly what they thought. I wondered how often they had seen a human before, if ever at all. Amazingly, the *Aorí Thuaithe* could have passed for human without a problem if it hadn't been for their old-fashioned clothing, which reminded me of medieval fashion. The odd clothing made me take a closer look, noticing on second sight that the people's fine bone structure and weirdly shaped ears did not appear so human after all.

Eileen didn't look left or her right, continuing our ride stoically in a slow trot, seemingly undisturbed by what was happening around her. I wondered if this was the kind of welcome she was used to, or if she was still suffering guilt because of Madeleine.

I felt uneasy and jumped a little when Eileen covered my hands with one of hers, saying in a low voice meant for my ears only, "Try not to show your feelings too openly, Julia. They don't need to see fear or uncertainty from us but strength and serenity."

It was well-meant advice, but I was honestly relieved to recognize the six warriors from earlier today when we reached the marketplace, knowing they were Eileen's sworn people. Their addition meant security for us, in case it proved necessary.

As soon as Eileen brought Cinnia to a halt, two of the warriors came over, the younger one taking the horse's reins, the older one looking expectantly at us. Eileen said, "Julia, I'd like you to meet Carrick, who is my second-in-command. Carrick, this is Julia. Would you help her down, please?"

He helped me easily down from the horse, then surprised me by taking my hand and kissing the air above it as soon as I was on terra firma. Once again, I was more than unsteady on my feet, but Carrick kept me from falling over and embarrassing myself. I would have thought that crushing me in welcome would have been more the style of such a tough warrior, but he proved me wrong. With the most charming smile on his face, Carrick said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady. Finally, the mistress shows better taste in choosing her companions!"

I stared at him with what I was sure was a dumbfounded expression, hearing Eileen chuckle good-naturedly at my expense while dismounting. "Well, Carrick," she said, "don't frighten her, will ya? Now go tell, what is the matter here? I felt as if I was riding to my execution."

His expression grew serious. “There are rumors about you allowing Madeleine to take revenge on her former tenants,” he said, “and about a change of mind on your side regarding the refugees. Some of the villagers actually believe those stupid lies and ...”

Carrick didn't finish his sentence as a tall and heavily muscled man chose that moment to approach us very slowly and in a rather provoking manner. He advanced from a large group that was standing around the marketplace, keeping a respectful distance from us while whispering softly among themselves and watching the colossus coming closer to us. I didn't know anything about the customs of the *Aorí Thuaithe* but the big man breathed hostility from every pore. His overly polite and respectful words sounded rather mocking to me. “Welcome, mistress, milady,” he said. “We are very honored by your presence.”

I looked at Eileen, who seemed to have grown an inch or two, gazing at him with eyes that reminded me of ice chips. It was a truly impressive spectacle though I wasn't sure if it was the right approach to take. I kept quiet and watched the scene develop, too unsure about my own role to take the initiative.

Eileen's voice was cold when she replied, “Thank you so much, Donal. Please meet Julia, my fiancée and soon-to-be bride, which means the new lady of the manor and mistress of my domain as well. Julia, this is Donal, the village's reeve.”

He nodded in my direction but with a distinct lack of enthusiasm compared to Carrick's greeting. Eileen's lifted eyebrow was a sure sign that she had noticed it as well, but decided to continue her speech without referring to his behavior. “It is of the highest importance to us to be with you during these dire straits,” she said. “Let me assure you that I will do everything feasible to support and protect you in the coming days, just as I have done in the past.”

His expression didn't change during her speech; he still looked like a person forced to be polite, not allowing himself to articulate his thoughts and feelings. Eileen ignored the man's attitude completely. My guess was that she was used to such games. Nevertheless, I noticed the strain around her eyes and opening myself more to her feelings, I sensed her growing anger and irritation clearly. Still, her voice was filled with compassion when she continued, “Well, Donal, if you could spare some time, I would be happy to discuss security measures

with you and Carrick to see what can be done to make your people feel safe again. Defending your village is of highest importance for us right now.”

Donal squirmed literally while trying to decline her offer without being too disrespectful, pointing out that it wasn't a good time and that the death of the family was still too fresh and so on and so on. It could have been funny if the excuses hadn't been so pathetic and the danger to the villagers wasn't so serious.

While observing the byplay between Eileen and Donal, I contemplated Carrick's words. Why would the villagers think that Eileen would make common cause with Madeleine? Why should she suddenly change her mind after welcoming refugees for the past decades? I didn't get it. Besides, I absolutely didn't like the idea of a village full of angry and afraid *sidhe*, wondering what spark might make the whole thing escalate. I felt a chill run down my spine and wished for a brief moment that I had decided to ride back to the manor when Eileen asked me earlier what I wanted to do. However, it was too late to run away. Whatever happened, I would have to face it. Despite my shaky resolve, I couldn't get rid of a nagging feeling that there was something amiss, though I was not able to put my finger on the exact cause.

I tried to focus my attention back to what was going on around me and heard Donal finish an argument with, “Mistress, we are thankful for your consideration but think we are better off taking care of ourselves.” Finally, he let go of his false politeness and got to the point.

For a moment it was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop, only I could literally hear Eileen grinding her teeth. She said in a cutting tone, “Donal, let me be blunt as well: how exactly, do you think that a village full of people who are not experienced in fighting will be able to defend themselves against a horde of killers who enjoy what they are doing? I thought that one of the reasons your people fled Madeleine's grasp was because she wanted you to fight and you wouldn't. But even *if* you could... this is my land! I not only have the right and means but also the will to fight for it.”

Donal and Eileen stared at each other like two gunslingers waiting to see who would make the first move. My stomach sank. This visit wasn't going very well.

Donal opted once again for honesty. “We had a gathering yesterday evening and voted against having your warriors in our midst. True, this is your domain, but we won’t give your warriors shelter and they are not welcome. We believe that we will be able to handle the situation very well on our own. ”

Infuriated, Eileen took a step forward until she was nearly nose to nose with him, snarling, “My people are warriors and not shit-eating wimps. They don’t care if they are welcome and neither do I. They will stay. That is my last word! And it would be wise counsel to accept that fact, Donal. Do not defy me.”

For a moment I wasn’t sure how Donal would react; he looked really angry, as if steam would come out of his ears any minute, but in the end he gave in and kept quiet.

Eileen confronted the staring crowd, taking her time and looking each one square in the eyes as if daring them to speak. No one took her challenge. She turned her back on Donal, granting him one last and more than icy glare before taking my hand and leading me slowly back Cinnia with Carrick close at our heels. I was absolutely tense, not sure what would happen now. Eileen didn’t say a word until we reached Cinnia. Then she turned around to Carrick..

“Sundown is not too far away,” she said. “Carrick, I want you and the others to stay here in the village. Observe what is going on, try to find out why they are afraid of me. I can literally smell that there is something stinking.”

Carrick agreed with her, but not fully. “Wouldn’t it be better if you had an escort with you, mistress? Or at least let Kaytlin and Dechtire scout the way as we did this morning. I don’t trust these spawns of the devil.”

“There is no need for that, Carrick. Julia and I will take the shorter route through the forest.”

I was still thinking about what was nagging me and finally I knew what it had been. Carrick and I spoke at the same time.

“Mistress, I am not sure...” he said, while I burst out with, “Eileen, I think...”

The glare we received from Eileen made us both shut our mouth simultaneously. Carrick was the first one to be addressed in an angry tone, “Do you question my ability to protect Julia without your help?” she asked.

Carrick stayed calm and replied evenly, “No mistress, but even you won’t be able to fight against an army if you’re alone when they attack. Please remember that you aren’t responsible only for yourself any more; there is your fiancée to consider.”

Eileen answered him in a furious rush, “I chose the way through the forest for a good reason, Carrick. The *sidhe draoi* wouldn’t allow intruders into their territory. Besides, the fact is that the villagers need you here and I want you to stay until you receive further notice from me. Is that understood?”

“Yes, mistress.” He didn’t look too happy but seemed to know when to give in and obey a direct command.

Then she turned to me and asked coolly, “What was your point?”

I wasn’t sure anymore if I had one. Looking into her narrowed eyes and seeing the dangerous gleam in them made me forget everything except fear. I felt like turning around and running away. My heartbeat galloped and I tasted bile in the back of my throat. For a split-second, I saw an Eileen that was unknown to me, a dangerous and powerful person who reminded me of a predator stalking its prey. Until that moment, I had only experienced gentleness and kindness directed towards me, but this was the fearless warrior, the frightening *dearg-du*, the woman who was rightfully called mistress and behaved like one towards me.

What I saw in her scared me shitless and for a moment I felt like being in a time machine, caught in past experiences with Jennifer, my brutal ex-girlfriend.

I didn’t know if it was the fear that I obviously didn’t hide very well, or if she was able to sense through our bond what I felt, but something penetrated her anger and seemed to make her realize what she had done. Her voice was full of remorse when she spoke again. “I am sorry.” She rubbed her hands over her face and murmured so softly that I had difficulty hearing it, “This is a nightmare.”

I realized that I had been holding my breath. This was the first time I had been afraid of Eileen since the moment not that long ago when I realized she wasn't coming to my rescue immediately. It had been hard on me to learn that she had watched me while I got beaten and hijacked without interfering before it was nearly too late, at least from my point of view. Then she had come to my rescue, killing one of Madeleine's man and caring for me until I was healed again, but that hesitation of hers had brought us both a lot of pain and nearly destroyed our relationship before it even began.

This time was different. Yes, she had been downright scary for a moment and fear was still lingering within me, but now I was determined that there would be no conniption fit from my side and no running away from hers. We had decided to spend our lives together and even though every instinct I possessed was screaming at me to get away, I stayed. In the end, the sound of her defeated voice helped me to overcome my hesitancy and fear. I carefully put my hand on her arm and addressed her gently, "Eileen."

She didn't take her hands away from her face and so I tried again. "Eileen, please. Look at me." And very slowly she did just that, letting her hands fall, revealing her devastated expression. Honestly, seeing the agony in her eyes tore my heart apart.

"Oh, sweetheart, come here...." I pulled her towards me and enveloped her in a hug, wanting to let my touch speak for itself. For a moment, she was stiff and I was afraid that she wouldn't allow herself to be comforted, but then she melted against me and I could feel a warmth that went beyond the physical develop between us.

"I am so sorry," she whispered into my ear. "I didn't mean to bite your head off like that." I felt her shudder and tried to calm her down, rubbing her back with my hand in soothing circles. For a while both of us just absorbed the simple healing pleasure of the warmth that had grown between us, but then I heard Carrick clearing his throat.

"Mistress, milady, we have a very attentive audience," he said.

*Shit.* He was right. What would the villagers think about our little performance? In a way I didn't care too much, but I understood that it was important for Eileen not to lose face or

honor or whatever was important to warriors and rulers like her. Remembering her earlier admonition to not show the *Aorí Thuaithe* my weakness, I spontaneously decided to put on a show that would let her be the one to look strong and forgiving. I was quite sure that nobody had been able to overhear our conversation, so I said in a low voice, “Eileen, trust me and play along.”

I took a step back and got down on my knees, saying loudly for the benefit of everyone who had cocked their ears to listen, “I am sorry, Eileen, please forgive me my behavior. I shouldn’t have questioned you.”

For a second I was not sure if Eileen understood my intentions, but after the briefest of pauses, she said out loud, laying her hands on my shoulders, “There is nothing to forgive, Julia. As my partner you have every right to question me. Please get up, there is no need for you to kneel. You are my equal, beloved.”

I couldn’t suppress a smile and knew that I had done the right thing. Sure, she had altered my show a bit, not taking advantage of the opportunity to look kind and forgiving out of the greatness of her heart in front of our audience, but I was relieved to see my smile mirrored on her face. I realized that the worst part of this particularly moment seemed to be over.

I took Eileen’s offered hand and got up, still sensing her unease. This was not the right place to have a further debate; that would have to wait until we left the village or after we returned to the manor. “So, a ride through the forest, was it?” I asked.

“Well, that is what I think would be best, but if you wanted to propose something else...” Eileen lifted a brow, apparently receptive to any suggestion I might make.

“No, I didn’t want to propose another way, I really wouldn’t know how to find my way back from here without a GPS,” I said.

Carrick and Eileen looked blankly at me. Rather than explain, I simply continued my little speech, “There was just something I wanted to talk with you and Carrick about. It didn’t make sense to me, hearing that the villagers are of the opinion that you are making common cause

with Madeleine when you've helped them so obviously over the past decades. So I obviously wondered what could have caused that change of opinion."

Carrick stopped looking confused and agreed with me. "I did wonder myself and asked Donal right in his face, but he refused to answer."

"Well, what if one of the refugees isn't a refugee but a mole," I said, "a mole charged by Madeleine with spreading lies about Eileen so that the villagers don't trust her anymore?"

Carrick scratched his head. "Well, I'll be damned. I haven't thought about that."

Eileen agreed, looking at me with an unreadable expression. "Me neither," she said, "but that is for sure one possibility and makes it even more important for Carrick to stay here and find out if this could be the case. That damned bitch!"

## Part 5

A slightly cranky Carrick saw us off as we rode towards the forest. His bad mood was due to Eileen's insistence that the path she had chosen was the safest way back to the manor; Carrick was equally insistent that it was not safe enough for us to ride without an escort. But he and his comrades-in-arms had been commanded by Eileen to stay behind, not only to defend the villagers (if necessary, against their will), but more importantly to keep their eyes and ears open regarding a possible mole hidden among them. From my point of view, the existence of such a mole was an obvious reason for the villager's bizarre behavior. I was surprised that neither Eileen nor Carrick had thought of this, and for the first time I had felt useful and included and not as some kind of ballast. It was a good feeling, indeed.

Leaving the village behind, it didn't take us long to arrive at the edge of the forest where we followed a trail that soon became so narrow that it would have been possible to touch the trees on either side of us had I dared to loosen my hold on Eileen's slim waist. I was thankful for the return of our previous light mood, since the visit to the village had nearly seen a rift spring up between us. Fortunately, we had been able to overcome our fears and misunderstandings without further damage, a sure sign for me that our relationship was on stable ground and growing stronger. Now, I listened to Eileen's rambling about the forest and enjoyed the late afternoon laziness, despite everything that had happened already today.

This forest was not so different from the ones I had known in Germany. It was a beautiful place. The woods were dense and allowed no straying from the path, as if the forest was trying to protect itself from those who chose to travel through it. The trees were majestic and tall, possessing dark and sometimes even monstrous forms that made my imagination run riot. Wherever the sun was able to penetrate the thick crowns, it threw strange shapes and shadows on our way. I noticed the trees hadn't lost many leaves even though autumn was close.

The air was thick with the smells and sounds typical of a forest. They washed over me and brought back good childhood memories of hot summer days, roaming through the forests near my grandmother's home. All the while Eileen kept pointing out trees and birds, while I enjoyed our closeness and the rumble of her voice that I felt more than heard with my head resting on her back. We were escorted by bird-song and the sound of cicadas, and the wind caressing the leaves, creating a wonderfully relaxing atmosphere.

All would have been well, but the longer the ride lasted, the stronger an unwelcome feeling grew inside me, a strange ‘prickle’ of uneasy anticipation of something that I couldn’t put a name to. At first I dismissed it as an after-effect of Carrick’s warning words regarding our journey, knowing that I was easily influenced by fear. The baggage in my past still made it difficult for me to get a grip on exactly what I was feeling, and what caused sensations like the one I was experiencing right now. It took me a while to acknowledge that this ‘prickle’ seemed to intensify the deeper our way brought us into the woods.

After a while, I wasn’t able to sit still any more and began to fidget around behind Eileen. It didn’t take long before she asked if I needed a break, probably thinking that I was having a hard time because of my tender, saddle sore behind . I wondered how to express how I felt without really knowing what was nagging me and finally opted for the truth.

“No, I don’t need a break,” I told her. “It’s just that I feel nervous and jumpy and don’t know why. It drives me a bit crazy.” I had no idea how to explain.

It seemed to me as if my weak nerves were playing new tricks on me, but Eileen said in a quiet voice, “Well, this is no ordinary forest. I wouldn’t be too surprised if you were able to feel the energy in these old woods. And since you are not used to it, that could well be the reason for your feelings.”

So maybe I wasn’t as crazy as I thought. There was a strange energy around us for real? My curiosity was peaked. I asked, “What is so special about this place?”

“Well, as you maybe know, we do not have many forests any more in Ireland and particularly not old ones. Some of the oaks in this area are more than seven hundred years old. The beech and the Scots pines are a bit younger, but some of the hazel and ash scrubs in another part of the forest are among the oldest you will find on this island. It’s magnificent, aye?”

I had to agree. Magnificent was definitely the right word to describe what I had seen so far. Since childhood, I had an affinity for trees and felt moved by them in a strange fashion. As a youngster, I thought of them as the supreme but silent witnesses of all that happened, and I was profoundly convinced that they would be the best advisers and storytellers if they were

only able to talk. How I wished as a child that they would talk to me! Sitting under a tree and listening to the sounds of nature when feeling especially lonely had given me the impression that they were indeed whispering to each other, telling stories about ancient times, sharing their wisdom with each other and maybe even with those willing and patient enough to listen. I had never been among those fortunate ones but still, the trees had given me much needed comfort in an especially welcome way.

We traveled on. Some time passed in silence between us only to be disturbed when Eileen began to recite something that sounded like a song, but spoken rather than sung. The pure rippling sound of the words was beautiful, even though I didn't understand the meaning.

*“Bum yn lliaws rith  
Kyn bum kisgyfrith.  
Bum cledyf culurith.  
Credaf pan writh.  
Bum deigyr yn awyr.  
Bum serwaw syr.  
Bum geir yn llythyr.  
Bum llyfyr ym prifder.  
Bum llugyrn lleufer  
Blwydyn a hanher.  
Bum pont ar triger.  
Ar trugein aber.  
Bum hynt bym eryr.  
Bum corwc ymyr.  
Bum darwed yn llat...”*

Eileen let the silence linger afterwards, as if to give her words time to spread their magic and die slowly without losing their meaning. When she spoke again, it was softly. “These are the first verses of the *Cad Goddeu*, a very old Welsh poem. In English it is called *The Battle of the Trees*. In the poem, the magician Gwydion animates the trees of a forest to fight for him. Each tree is given a specific and different personality, something which relates very much to my kin's relationship to trees.”

That brought up memories of my own. I asked, “Did you ever hear about a book called *The Lord of the Rings*?”

“No, I can’t say that I ever did.”

“It is one of my favorites, a great story that inspired my imagination during my adolescence. My favorite part was not about the fight between good and evil, and not about the rings around which the plot resolves. I fell in love with the author’s portrayal of tree-like creatures who were the shepherds of the forest, and were estranged from their *Entwives*, who walked away and taught humans about agriculture.” I told her more about the Ents and about Tom Bombadil, which was for me the most intriguing character of the first book of the trilogy.

“This sounds interesting,” she replied. “It seems as if the author has an open mind and a certain level of understanding about our reality. You know what lass, I have a copy of the *Cad Goddeu* in my library. When there is more time, I will read this *Lord of the Rings*, and maybe you would like to read some of the old poems and bardic stories I own. I savor well written works very much and have a good collection.”

A picture of domesticity formed in my head — the two of us sitting together in the manor’s library, reciting sentences we just read to each other, and enjoying the quietness as well as the warmth of the open fire while drinking a good wine or one of Lena’s teas. There wasn’t much to think about and so I said enthusiastically, “I would like that very much!”

“Aye, me, too.” She hesitated a moment, then went on, “By the way, the *sidhe draoi* will be surprised to hear about your love for trees. They are the ones inhabiting this forest and are similar to what other cultures call dryads, tree-dwelling spirits. In fact, some of them have been observing us since we set foot in the forest.”

“Really?” *We were followed?* I frantically looked around, trying to see something out of the ordinary. There was no movement, nothing which stirred my suspicion. Nevertheless, my heart began to beat faster and I felt as if I had a bullseye painted on my back, sitting so exposed on a big horse. We made an easy target for anyone who wanted to do us harm.

Eileen turned her head around, peering at me over her shoulder. Seeing her relaxed face calmed me down a bit. “Don’t be afraid, lass,” she said. “The best thing is to simply continue our journey as planned. I don’t know what is on their mind and I sure didn’t expect to encounter them today, as they usually favor solitude.”

“But what if they ... I don’t know... do they like humans?” I remembered Eileen’s lecture about those *sidhe* who hated mortals like me. She hadn’t mentioned the *sidhe draoi* in particular, but I would definitely feel better after hearing that the ones following us right now didn’t belong to that group. Unfortunately, that was not what happened. On the contrary, Eileen stiffened and I felt sick to my stomach. *Oh no!*

“Eileen!” I gritted her name out between clenched teeth, needing more information.

“They have a bad past with humans, that is true, but you are with me and that makes you my guest, which means you are safe on my domain.”

That was stated with much confidence, but I felt that there was more to it, so I urged her until she relented and continued, “The *sidhe draoi* don’t trust humans. It is hard to imagine nowadays but Ireland was once a country covered with woodlands. Lena could tell you a lot about it. Trees and woods were even sacred to your kin. Anyhow, you must understand that when a tree is cut the *sidhe draoi* who had been in a symbiotic relationship with the tree dies as well. One can’t live without the other and the older and healthier the tree, the older and more powerful is the *sidhe draoi*. Each cares for the well-being of the other. But when most of Ireland’s trees were cut down, their guardian spirits nearly vanished as well. And since your kin, so to speak, was responsible for their death...”

My chest felt suddenly so tight that I had problems breathing properly. Eileen went on, clearly conscious of my distress, “I put a lot of effort in re-foresting parts of my domain with native trees once we build the manor here. I was happy that remains of an old forest survived at this place. And because of the mild winters and the high rainfall, trees grow very fast. But it is the old trees that we are missing and their energy for the land and for us.” Again she paused.

”Can you feel the increase of energy around us?”

I felt it, all right, but I felt some other things as well, with fear being the most dominant emotion that gripped me.

Eileen continued trying to distract me, which didn't work. I kept glancing around to see if there was anything unusual and strained my ears to hear some noise that didn't belong to the sounds of the forest I knew, but neither heard nor saw anything suspicious.

I held on tighter to her waist while she said, "As much as I plant and replant, only time will be able to create those old forests again. Sometimes time moves too slow even for a race like mine, and humans aren't much help by putting an emphasis on fast growing trees when re-foresting. The trees they choose don't belong here, but I understand that they bring a lot of profit, and I guess that this is the sole reason for planting their likes."

We continued our ride in silence. Although I still tried very hard, I saw no sign of the prying eyes that Eileen said were observing us, and no sign of the *sidhe* who were following us. I couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach, or the nervousness that made me jump at shadows. I really could do without a confrontation with powerful beings who disliked me only because I was human.

From one moment to the next, I felt totally on edge and began to shiver; the light breeze that had accompanied us for the longest time totally vanished, as well as the sounds of birds and chirping crickets. The silence lay like a heavy blanket around us, muffling every perception, and the forest seemed to be holding its breath. My scalp prickled. I felt a slight panic beginning to set in, and I struggled to keep my breathing normal. The tension began to escalate around us. I could clearly feel something... or someone...

Eileen did as well. She stopped the horse and said calmly while putting one of her hands over mine in a comforting gesture, "Julia, whatever happens next, remember that you are safe with me. I will not let them harm you."

*Shit!*

She had hardly finished speaking when an enormous tree branch crashed down right in front of us, blocking our way and irritating the hell out of the horse and me. Out of sheer reflex, I

was able to hold on to Eileen as Cinnia tried to rear up on her hind legs. Warhorse or not, that branch had really spooked her; no wonder, as it seemed to have appeared out of thin air! My only hope at that moment was Eileen, who seemed to know what was happening. I found it a miracle that she was able to keep the horse from bolting, controlling it expertly.

Suddenly, there was a lot of movement between the trees. My brain needed a second to process what was happening, then I realized that what had appeared to be small immature trees had actually moved out of the woods and formed a circle around us. Within seconds, we stood in the middle of a large group of obviously hostile creatures that had greenish-brown skin and arms that looked like branches, spindly and all awry.

A chill rippled through my body. No wonder I had taken them for small trees! Only at second glance was I able to make out that what had looked like leaves was in fact hair — hair the color of autumn, scarlet and gold and brown like the forest surrounding us. It was perfect camouflage. Eileen must have known that we were being observed. I guessed that these creatures surrounding us were the *sidhe draoi* she had been talking about earlier.

Eileen was still working hard to control Cinnia, who didn't like what was happening around her. The horse wasn't alone in her apprehension. The circle of *sidhe draoi* around us drew closer until Cinnia was hardly able to avoid bumping into one of the creatures. I was terrified that they would try to throw us from the horse, and I desperately clung to Eileen.

I had a hard time remembering that I was safe with her. Not a word had been spoken since the branch had come down in front of us, neither between me and Eileen nor from any of the creatures surrounding us. All of a sudden, one of the tree-like beings stepped out of the circle and spit in front of us, making his attitude clear.

Finally, Eileen succeeded in getting Cinnia under control and leaned forward in the saddle, saying with all her authority, "Is that the way you plan to surprise us whenever we are traveling through the WildWood in the future? You do remember who I am, don't you?"

The one in front of us glared angrily at her. "Why did you have to bring a murderer with you? She has no place here! Suck her dry somewhere else!"

The crowd cheered him on. Suddenly, something hit my head and caused me to lose my hold on Eileen's waist. I slid out of the saddle, expecting to hit the ground hard while more solid pieces of wood pummeled me without mercy. Eileen was at my side faster than lightning, holding me before my face impacted with the dirt.

She glared at the creatures, letting out a loud growl as if daring them to come closer or do something stupid. Waving her free hand, she stopped the flying barrage magically. My vision was blurred and I couldn't exactly see what was going on, but her action served its purpose as it silenced the *sidhe draoi* and gave me some time to compose myself while most of our attackers took a few steps backwards, apparently not knowing what to do next. Were they expecting that we would accept our fate and that Eileen wouldn't try to defend us?

I felt something wet running down my cheek and touching it with my fingers, I saw that the substance was blood. Eileen had turned her attention back to me, satisfied that she bought us some time. She stared at my cheek as if under hypnosis before lifting her shocked gaze to meet my eyes. Time seemed to stop before she asked, "Are you ok? Let me see!"

Eileen's frantic hands moved across my body and over the wound on my head. Despite my feeling like my skull was the size of a balloon, Eileen seemed to be satisfied that I was okay and had suffered no serious damage. She touched my forehead and whispered some words that warmed me all over; this ritual was familiar to me. It didn't take longer than a few seconds and made me feel better; only my fear of the creatures and what they would do remained. We were still surrounded by our attackers, who stared angrily at us and seemed more than ready to try violence again. I wondered what they were waiting for.

Eileen whispered for my ears only, "That little bump will stay, lass. I am sorry."

I leaned into her touch, reassured by her closeness, but I still couldn't keep the fear out of my voice when I asked, "Eileen, what are we going to do now?"

She touched her brow gently to mine and replied, still whispering, "You stay put, lass. I will teach them to treat you like that."

There was a determination in her eyes that I had not seen before, the color changing from the familiar steel blue to something nearly resembling a bottomless black. The transformation would have frightened me if I hadn't known that this anger was not directed towards me but towards those creatures surrounding us. At the moment, I didn't have anything against her teaching them some manners. My only reservation was against killing if not necessary; the anger I felt coming from Eileen was a dangerous one.

I said softly, "Teach them the lesson you feel it's essential but please don't harm them more than necessary. I am sure that they didn't mean to kill me." At least I hoped not, I wasn't keen on witnessing a massacre today on top of everything else.

She hesitated. I could see the battle going on inside of her, a fight to do as I asked her against the need to demolish those wanting to hurt me, the ones who had attacked her on her own land. Despite the situation, I felt warm down to my toes when I realized the depth of her need to protect me. I squeezed her arm and said only one word, "Please!" That finally earned me a faint smile and I knew that I had won.

"Your wish is my command, lass, even though I don't like it," Eileen said. "But I guess I have to be a tad more creative then, cutting of their arms would have been the easier solution."

There were around twenty or so of the creatures around us, but there was no doubt that she felt she would be able to defeat them. *Unbelievable.*

She made sure that I was steady on my feet, leaning against Cinnia before she turned around to face the *sidhe draoi* that still formed a loose circle, but weren't as close to us any longer. The air around Eileen seemed to spark while she deliberately unsheathed her sword and drew her thumb over the blade's edge as if to test its sharpness. Taking one step away from me, she murmured some words that I was sure I had heard before. Nevertheless, I was startled when out of nothing, a fire circle materialized that reached the height of my knees. It enclosed us, the horse and one of the unfortunate creatures that I was sure wished it was somewhere else.

Loud shrieking could be heard from the others outside the circle, all of whom stumbled back and stampeded over each other to escape the fire. The *sidhe draoi* were as terrified as I had been seconds ago, and even though I was a bit guilty about my feelings, I have to confess that

I was satisfied about that point. Eileen's tactic was as clever as it was simple — with their close relationship to trees, they had to be absolutely terrified of a fire in their forest, a genuine threat to their very existence. Apparently, they didn't know what I did, that this fire was like the magical one she had used on the torch inside the manor. That meant that it wouldn't harm them, but still fulfilled the purpose of frightening them. A smart move!

Eileen's voice was loud and threatening when she finally spoke, the voice of a very pissed ruler. "You *bodachs*! Now you tremble like a dog in a wet sack! But mere seconds ago you felt the need to be heroes and wanted to hurt my betrothed. Where is your courage now?"

The piece of news about me being more than her personal picnic for the day seemed to surprise them as the shrieking and murmuring gradually died away. I had to suppress a smile despite the tense situation. With a bit of magic and some words, Eileen proved herself the mistress of the situation. I was impressed about the way she had handled the whole affair up to this point. Without resorting to violence, she had been able to regain the upper hand. But she didn't stop her little play; I could tell she was enjoying toying with them.

Touching her chin with her finger, she pretended to be giving the matter consideration. "So what am I supposed to do with you?" she asked. "Maybe I should spread the fire around some more? Or I could play a bit with scattered wood first."

With a sudden movement she grabbed the figure closest to her, the poor guy who was still in the circle with us and had been trying to hide behind Cinnia. He was only slightly smaller than Eileen, though bulkier, but once she grabbed him she threw him one-handed and without difficulty over the fire and out of the circle. Simultaneously, she spoke more magical words, and the circle of flames burned even brighter so that it seemed as if the flying guy was in real danger of catching fire on his feet ... his roots ... whatever.

As a matter of fact, I was enjoying the show of Eileen scaring them like disobedient little children when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone advancing slowly from the tree line. The newcomer was taller but thinner than the others, and walked with a determined grace through the circle of *sidhe draoi*, headed directly towards Eileen. He crossed the fire without hesitation or fear, only stopping when he came eye to eye with Eileen. The other creatures

gasp as they realized that the fire had done him no harm. It seemed to me that the newcomer was definitely different than the others.

For a moment, it was so quiet that a pin drop could have been heard. The newcomer finally broke the silence in a creaking voice, his tone relaying his disgust, “So, are you telling us that this human is your wife?”

Eileen had a steadfast grip on her sword, her knuckles turning white. She replied, “My soon to be wife and your new lady, yes. Mind to tell me what exactly your problem is before I cut you to pieces, or would you like me to find out afterwards?”

I had to steel myself against the tension rolling from Eileen through our bond that threatened to crush me like a force of nature. I wondered if there was a way to block such an emotional storm. As much as I loved having this special link between us, and as helpful as it had proved until now, at that moment my emotions were in enough turmoil on their own without adding Eileen’s distress and fury to them.

Gathering my strength, I took the few steps necessary to close the distance between us, and put my hand on the small of Eileen’s back, hoping to anchor both of us with a physical touch. Thankfully, I felt her regain control again, which made it easier for me to get a hold on my own agitation. Finally, I felt her free hand fumbling to find mine, and I relaxed even more when I felt her warm grasp around my fingers. Although the danger we were in was still a reality, I felt illogically safer just by being in contact with her.

The newcomer was a keen observer of our interaction. His voice was as harsh as Eileen’s had been when he grunted, “Our problem with her is that she is a human. And that means that she is a murderer and not welcome in the WildWood, as you well know and should have well considered before bringing her here.”

Eileen’s voice was cold as steel when she replied without hesitation, “She is no simple human but my soon to be wife, and that makes all the difference necessary. As far as I remember, I am still the mistress of this forest and could cut your wooden tongues out or burn every single one of the trees in the forest without having to answer to anyone!”

*Oops.*

That didn't sit well with the creature. "I never knew you had a liking for humans except for them being your blood supply or toy, or whatever you felt you desired in the past. But I guess she serves your needs well enough to turn back on the old ways."

I stifled a gasp. That was an open insult against me and Eileen, and I feared she might take drastic action against him. However, instead of answering him verbally, Eileen simply held our clasped hands out in front of us, showing him the rings we were wearing. Her message was clear, guessing from the reaction it caused as the *sidhe draoi* around us gasped.

A cold smile curved Eileen's mouth. "She is neither blood supply, nor is she a toy. She is my *anam cara*. For the very last time, I expect you to show her the respect due to her rank!"

The creatures were clearly astonished. Their murmuring amongst themselves was no longer based on hate but on curiosity. *How could a dearg-du and a human be soul mates?*

Eileen raised an eyebrow "Surprised?"

But her opponent wasn't ready to give in just yet. His face distorted in anger and he spat, "So, you sold your soul as well this time? Why should that surprise me?"

Without warning, Eileen let go of me and wrapped both hands around the hilt of the sword. In one swift movement, she brought the blade's gleaming tip against what I guessed was her accuser's throat. "You really do have the desire to become firewood today, don't you?" she snarled.

"Stop it. Both of you," a rich deep voice boomed from outside the circle.

I hastily turned around, seeing another of the creatures approaching us, this one taller and bulkier than any of the others, its skin seemed ancient. Eileen and her opponent didn't obey the command but continued to glare at each other.

"I said stop it!" This time there was even more force behind the order.

Eileen slowly and with clear reluctance lowered her sword. I was amazed. So there actually was someone who could order her around?

Her voice dripped with sarcasm aimed at the newcomer, “You know, *sean coille*<sup>2</sup> I really wondered if you had grown roots somewhere! But now that you are here you could start teaching those *gais*<sup>3</sup> of yours some manners.”

The *sean coille* chuckled and replied, “You are still hot tempered as ever, aren’t you?”

Eileen needed to pause to counter, “I am as hot tempered as you are slow!”

The one she had called *sean coille* didn’t respond to her but concentrated his attention on the one who had been at the receiving end of Eileen’s sword just seconds ago. No word was spoken between them but a message seemed to pass anyway as our accuser turned around and slowly shuffled away from us. Even though he kept quiet, his foul attitude was still more than obvious because of the hateful glares he kept casting at me. He didn’t like what had happened, but he obeyed anyhow, and inwardly I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well, since you are here, *sean coille*, please meet Julia, my betrothed,” Eileen said, turning to me. “Julia, this is *sean coille*, one of the leaders of this group, and the one who is going to explain why we were attacked on my own domain!”

He looked uncomfortable, his expression showing a hint of guilt. “Well, well, what shall I say? The young *gas*<sup>4</sup> you just wanted to chop to pieces thought he could handle something on his own instead of turning to us for advice. And, as it seems, he gathered quite a few followers that were as eager to disobey our Council.” He turned to me and continued, pointing at me with his long, knobby fingers, “I never heard about a bond between a *dearg-du* and a human. It’s unheard of. Affairs and flings most definitely yes, humans being the submissive partner in something close to a relationship, yes. But soul mates, something on equal terms? Never before, never...”

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<sup>2</sup> Senior of the forest

<sup>3</sup> seedlings

<sup>4</sup> seedling

I stared at the ground, mumbling more to myself, “Well, it was a kind of surprise for me as well.” I clearly remembered my skepticism when Eileen had told me the first time about our special bond. It was something of a surprise to recall that this particular conversation had happened a little more than a week ago.

Looking up again, I stared into the deep brown eyes of *sean coille*, eyes that seemed to reach down deep inside, searching and absorbing the essence of my being. To this day, I don’t have any recollection of how long that moment lasted between us. An eternity, a second... I don’t know. At the time, I only knew that my worth was being judged and my soul assessed by someone who was far older than I could ever imagine. In front of me stood the personification of everything I had ever dreamed, imagined and hoped to be true about trees. Little did I know back then as a lonely daydreaming girl that it wasn’t only my fantasies, but a knowledge buried somewhere within me that was waiting to be unearthed and brought into reality.

The spell was broken when the face in front of me wrinkled into a warm smile that reached the eyes as well. “Please forgive our manners,” *sean coille* said, “we have not had much liking for humans since they became our biggest fear and worst enemy over the past centuries. But we did wrong towards you, that I have to admit.”

I was still too stunned to say anything. Eileen took over and said, “Nice words, but would you be so kind to let us know why I was attacked in my own domain? Even if Julia hadn’t been my betrothed, she would have been my guest and that should have been enough for you. The hospitality laws are clear.” She paced a few restless steps to and fro before adding, “You know, being attacked on my own ground... I still can’t believe it!”

*Sean coille* seemed to search for words, looking somewhat abashed. “Well, well, the young ones thought they had good reason to attack you. The seeds of mistrust and fear seemed to have sprung up faster than the Council expected. She must have convinced them that you would prove a danger. They are young *gais*, impetuous and prone to acting before thinking.” The last words were said loud enough for all to hear.

Eileen stared at him incredulously. “Who convinced them about what?”

“I was told by one of the *gais* that stayed behind instead of following these fools that over these past days, a cloaked villager has shown up several times, searching out the *gais* and telling them that you had turned back to your old ways, pointing out that you broke several of your promises like not drinking human blood,” he said. “The stranger told them that there was a massacre at the village and that you were behind it, being sick of all of these refugees seeking shelter on your land. I was told that she said that you wanted to make an example of what would become of those fleeing their masters and mistresses in the future.”

Eileen’s angry gasp sounded very loud to my ears.

“More so, during her last visit, the messenger said that you planned to sell the forest to humans, and that even the *gais* should know how that would end for the *sidhe draoi*,” he went on. I could see that Eileen was close to exploding; her expression made it clear to me she was trying everything to calm herself down and let *sean coille* finish his explanation.

He concluded, “Therefore the *gais* decided that they would take care that you would feel our wrath if you came into their reach, not wanting to bow before you and let you have your way without resistance.” He looked ashamed. “I am sorry for what happened. I came as soon as I heard about what these fools planned to do. It is a strange time for all of us; the *gais* don’t want to listen anymore without questioning things and there are a few who think that they know better than their elders. The old ways are not good enough for them. But seeing that they were wrong in judging you, this will hopefully teach them something.”

After hearing his story, it seemed to me like this was confirmation of a mole in the village. I wondered aloud, “Would any of them would be able to recognize this *sidhe*?”

He bowed his head a bit, clearly thinking about my question before summoning one of the *gais* over. Funny enough, it was the one that Eileen had thrown over the fire and he wasn’t eager at all to cross the line again, even though it must have been clear to everyone by now that the magical flames couldn’t do any harm.

Eventually *sean coille* was able to convince him to cross the fire so that Eileen could interrogate him about the cloaked stranger. Pinning her gaze to him as if he was prey, she

said, “You can do yourself a favor and answer my questions as fast as you can and maybe, but only maybe, I will forget this little incident. Do you understand me?”

It seemed that he was rather eager to answer her thoroughly if that meant that he would come out of this day unharmed when all the while Eileen’s opponent from earlier watched us with cunning eyes from the other side of the fire.

“Then tell me,” Eileen said, “do you know the stranger that gave you all this false information?”

He shook his head so hard that his colorful hair flew all around. “No, we never saw the face. But it was a female with a strange cruel laugh, or so I thought.”

Eileen and I stared at each other, clearly thinking the same thing — could the ‘hooded stranger’ have been Madeleine herself? Or perhaps one of her female warriors? Surely Madeleine couldn’t have been in the village without being detected. But still...

Eileen continued her interrogation. “Was it the same person who did the visiting?”

“Yes,” he replied eagerly, “I think so. The voice was easy to recognize.”

The muscles in Eileen’s jaw jumped. She said angrily, “You are really fools, you know! Let me make this clear once and for all — I didn’t turn around or go back to my old habits, damn it! But this story shouldn’t surprise me too much after what happened in the village.” And with that she dismissed the young *sidhe draoi* and told *sean coille* about what had happened after Madeleine’s attack and about my spy theory.

Long fingers stroked slowly over his chin as he answered, “Well, well, this is an interesting theory. Ah, unfair actions like that just never happened before between us.” *Sean coille*’s face crumbled even more until his eyes were nearly lost in nests of wrinkles. He was obviously fretting about them being an involuntarily participant in such an ugly game.

Eileen nodded. “You are right and therefore I won’t blame the *gais* for their actions, but only if they won’t be repeated. If this happens again...” She let the warning linger in the air before

continuing, “The *sidhe* have always fought honorably against each other, not like cowards who sneak here and there, dispensing vicious lies. I would wish that would be remembered the next time there are rumors spread about me. Nobody wanted to listen to me complaining about Madeleine’s underhanded ways before, and now the fat is truly in the fire.”

*Sean coille* looked a bit pale, but he rallied and said, “I would very much prefer for you to not use the name or the magic of that damn destroyer in the WildWood! But you are right, we shouldn’t have listened, there is still so much anger and fear of humans between us. Anger causes many evils and is no good adviser.”

What happened next caused my jaw drop. *Sean coille* said, “Welcome to the WildWood, milady,” and immediately most of those in the group still surrounding us knelt down.

I looked at Eileen, feeling absolutely bewildered. What was I supposed to do now? Where was the manual for situations like this? First, they wanted to tear my limbs apart, and now there were lots of tree-like beings kneeling around me! I felt totally and utterly at a loss.

Seeing Eileen smile, I was sure that she was able to feel my irritation and helplessness through our bond. She took the initiative, saying formally, “Your lady and I forgive this lapse of judgment and accept your welcome.”

She took my hand and squeezed it as if to give me a signal... *a signal*... right. I said, “Yes, thank you,” trying to look as dignified as possible.

Everyone stood up. *Sean coille*, tilting his head, said, “We haven’t welcomed a human among us for a very long time, and never thought we would again. It is not easy getting used to new ways at my age, but I will try. Do not think badly of us, milady, we are slow to change, but you will be safe in the WildWood from now on. You have my word.” He glared in the direction of those *gais* that had decided not to kneel down.

I had been hurt, and not only my head but Eileen’s ego had been bruised. I could hardly imagine what the *sidhe draoi* had gone through in the past because of what my kind had done to them. Not for the first time, I felt disgusted at the ignorance of us humans, always keen on seeing ourselves as the most superior beings of this world, and acting like owners instead of

the keepers we are supposed to be. Too often, we act as if we had been commanded to rape the earth. I hoped to be able to behave differently, knowing this was a crucial moment for my future with those beings who had experienced much harm at the hands of my race.

I tried to put my feelings into honest words, saying to him, “I am very sorry for the horrors your kin had to endure in the past because of humanity’s greed. Let me assure you that I condemn the actions wholeheartedly, and that I am very sorry for what happened in the past to the *sidhe draoi*.”

His brown eyes lit up, and I knew that I had found the right words. The rest of our conversation had a lighter tone as he inquired about my life before coming to Ireland. Before too long Eileen interrupted our conversation. “*Sean coille*, I am sorry, but we have to continue our journey to the manor if we want to make it back before nightfall. And with everything that’s happened today, I want us to be safe before darkness falls. I feel not up to meeting more hostile *sidhe* today. I’ve had enough.”

*Sean coille* wrinkled his brows and said, “Why don’t you take the ancient path? It would shorten your ride considerably.”

There was a lot of hissing around us and even Eileen looked astonished at the suggestion, but *sean coille* continued, while staring down those around us that looked askance, “It is the least we can do for you after being responsible for your delay.”

I was not sure what the commotion around us was about, but noticed that some of the *sidhe draoi* looked unhappy about this offer, one of them being Eileen’s opponent from earlier. He was barely holding back his rage but he still kept quiet even when *sean coille* turned his attention towards them and asked, “Don’t you agree with me, *óig coille*?”

“*Óig Coille* means ‘youth of the forest’ and puts them into their place,” Eileen whispered into my ear before saying aloud to our benefactor, “Thank you and yes, I like to take you up on this offer. I promise that we won’t stop in the clearing.”

“That is all I would have asked of you, beside my wish to see that fire gone, even though it is only a magical one.” He pointed at the fire circle which was still burning merrily.

Eileen bowed slightly and spoke some words, then the fire circle was gone, leaving no trace behind. After re-sheathing her sword, she said, “One thing I would ask of you — let me know when you are contacted again by anyone who is trying to spread rumors about me.”

*Sean coille* nodded slowly. “Well, well. That we’ll do, I promise.”

“Come lass, its time to continue our ride home,” Eileen said to me. “I am really looking forward to one of Lena’s dinners.”

I leaned closer to her. “Will they leave us alone?”

She whispered back: “I am fairly sure. You seem to have impressed *sean coille* enough to guarantee a safe journey for us.”

*Me?* “I didn’t do anything!” I protested.

She only chuckled and put her foot into the stirrup, easily mounting Cinnia. The horse had been standing close by us during the confrontation. I felt a sense of déjà vu strike me when Eileen offered me her arm, expecting me to allow myself to be lifted up into the saddle behind her. This time, I did not ask for a boost but let her pull me up, and smoothly regained my seat, a familiar place already. I held unto her waist in the same way as before, the *sidhe draoi* bid us farewell, and we slowly continued our interrupted journey, leaving behind one of my childhood dreams that had nearly become a nightmare before *sean coille* showed up.

As soon as there was some distance between us and them, Eileen said regretfully, “Lass, I am really sorry about that quarrel. How does your head feel?”

“I am fine, Eileen, thanks to your healing touch.” I held her waist tighter and leaned my head against her back, feeling her muscles shifting under my cheek while I watched the forest around us. “Did you think that we would meet them today?”

I felt Eileen take a deeper breath before she answered, “No, I didn’t, but maybe that was a simple lack of judgment from my side. They don’t usually visit this part of the forest, as they

prefer to stay in the older parts. I didn't plan on getting close to this area and thought that would be enough prevention. But the ancient behavior patterns seem to be upset more and more, and it seems to affect the ways of the *sidhe draoi* as well."

I was confused. "What do you mean?"

"I told you before, lass, not only your world is changing, but ours is as well. Some of us struggle mightily with these changes, while others try to use them to their advantage."

I felt that she didn't want to get further into the topic, so I asked something else that was on my mind. "Eileen, what are you going to with the information you got from *sean coille*?"

"Regarding the... how did he put it... the messenger?"

"Yes."

She pressed herself more firmly against me. "I will get word to Carrick as soon as we reach the manor. We don't know if the mole and the messenger are the same person, but it could very well be so." She hesitated for a moment and added, "I am sure that Madeleine is behind all this. She was always keen on betraying and deceiving whenever she could. Playing fair and fighting with honor is not really her style."

I thought carefully about my next words, sensing a possibility to get a bit more out of Eileen regarding her past. "Is that what she did with you was well?"

I could feel her muscles stiffen under my hands and immediately regretted asking. But she allowed me a first insight into her pain and placed her precious trust in my hands when she finally answered, "That would be a bit too easy and wouldn't do justice to my responsibility in all that happened. Let's just say that we didn't meet at a good time for either of us." She hesitated before continuing in a tone that sounded beyond frustrated, "It is very hard for me to speak about those times, but they formed what I am today. And you have every right to ask. I only ask you to be patient with an old fool like me."

I felt her agony as if it were my own, resonating through our bond. I felt the loneliness and the grief, the hate, the fear, the betrayal, the guilt; all that pain in a split-second. The other thing I felt was that she was building up emotional walls that I didn't want to batter against anymore, so I whispered in her ear, "Don't hide yourself from me. I love you, I trust you and I need you, Eileen. And you are definitely no fool. Old, maybe, but no fool."

Resonating through our bond, I literally felt Eileen's emotional walls tumbling down, and knew that we had taken another step forward. I patiently waited to see how she wanted to continue our conversation, and was rewarded with another piece of the puzzle. "Let me just say one last thing before I would appreciate changing the subject, lass," Eileen said. "I never told you the reason for waiting to come to your rescue that first night we met."

That was true. It was one of the things that had nearly caused a rift between us — a rift that could have destroyed our chance of a life together had I not been willing to let the issue go until Eileen was comfortable revealing more of herself to me. I was anxious for her to continue, not sure if I really wanted to hear her explanation, but eager at the same time to have part of the enigma solved.

"I was scared, Julia," she said. "Scared that it was another one of Madeleine's plots to torture me, and that you were just a puppet of hers. I couldn't trust what I felt right from the beginning — that you were my soulmate, the one I did not hope to meet in my lifetime. I am sorry that I was a coward and that my hesitancy caused you so much pain."

I felt lost for a moment, remembering how much physical, mental and emotional agony I had experienced in that fateful night because of her hesitation. I would have preferred to be able to look into her eyes, but instead I simply pressed myself against her back. I felt that she was able to talk about that night only because we weren't face to face, so I took what was offered without complaint and decided to be honest.

"I still wished that we would have met under different circumstances," I said, "and I could have done without the injuries. But if that was what it took to bring us together and to make you believe that I am no puppet of Madeleine's... well, then, that is fine with me, Eileen. I don't bear a grudge against you."

“Really?” she asked.

I heard the insecurity behind that question and answered with as much love and determination that I was capable of mustering, hoping that she would believe me, “Absolutely.”

Her voice was steadier but full of emotion when she replied, “Thank you, Julia. Having you in my life is like a miracle.”

Oh, what would I have wished not to sit on a horse behind her but to be able to seal that statement with a passionate kiss! As it was I could only reply sincerely, “And you are the best thing that ever happened to me, Eileen.”

“Even though I lead you into the arms of a mob of angry *sidhe draoi*?” The seriousness behind her words betrayed the teasing tone.

“Eileen, I am no child and don’t need patronizing,” I replied. “I know that life has a tendency to bite us into the ass with vehemence more often than we like. But the *sidhe draoi* could have thrown trees at me earlier, and I still wouldn’t regret spending my time and the rest of my life with you. I knew that I said yes to a life full of diversity when I decided to stay here..”

Eileen snorted in answer to my comment and exclaimed, “Diversity, my ass!”

We broke into a fit of laughter that helped to lift both of our hearts. The only tears flowing now were those caused by giggles, and I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

The rest of our journey was quiet and uneventful. Eileen pointed out animals to me that I had never before seen except in documentaries, like a badger and a stoat, both not too happy about being disturbed. During the remainder of our journey, I sensed Eileen’s focus was more-or-less riveted to our surroundings, as if she didn’t fully trust the armistice between ourselves and the *sidhe draoi*. In a way, I was thankful knowing that she remained alert, and understood that as a warrior, she would probably never be able to relax totally, always scanning the area around her.

Not much later, we passed a huge clearing, an important and mystical place as Eileen explained. Two circles stood in opposite corners of the clearing, one made of massive upright stones and the other of trees. Before I was able to inquire more about the meaning of these monuments, a high-pitched sound split the air.

Without warning, Eileen stood in the stirrups, unsheathed her sword and did a somersault out of the saddle that left me open-mouthed. While flipping through the air she deflected several arrows with her sword that were coming out of the forest. Eileen was moving so quickly, she was practically a blur. Before I was able to react on my own, Eileen was standing next to the horse. She grabbed my trousers and dragged me down out of the saddle in a controlled fall. Cinnia was intelligent enough to seek shelter on her own, galloping into the surrounding forest, leaving us behind as we ran into the direction of the stone circle, away from the source of the arrows that were flying to our left and right, much too close for my liking, but thankfully without striking either of us. Eileen's sword was in constant motion even while she ran backwards. As thankful as I was at the time, it was also somewhat unbelievable.

I was quite out of breath when we reached the large stone circle and hid behind one of the big standing stones that gave us a fairly good cover.

"You okay?" Eileen asked.

"Yes," I wheezed out while still trying to suck more oxygen into my burning lungs, letting my body sag against the cold stone.

An unappealing female voice that I remembered well could be heard calling out across the clearing. "I thought you promised not to enter the clearing. My, my, my... I wonder what the *sidhe draoi* will think about that." It was Madeleine.

Eileen swore under her breath and took a closer look at one of the arrows in her hand, checking the fletching. A feral growl poured out from her throat. "I'll kill her!" Then she added between clenched teeth, "Julia, I have an arrow in my shoulder. You have to get it out."

She turned around and for a moment I was unable to comprehend what I saw, before I realized that there really was an arrow shaft sticking out of the back of her shoulder. The

amount of blood soaking through her shirt and the rusted iron smell of it made my stomach clench. I scrambled away to empty my stomach, an act that surely desecrated this holy place, but my stomach didn't care and my retching continued for a little while before I was able to concentrate on Eileen again.

Wiping my mouth on my sleeve, I stared at her and asked, "You want me to do what?"

## Part 6

I still couldn't understand what had happened, how just when everything seemed halfway alright again, all hell could break loose the next second. There wasn't much time for me to ponder as there was that damn arrow in Eileen's shoulder, that bitch Madeleine with some of her warriors blocking our escape, and some young and potentially angry *sidhe draoi* in the forest. The latter group hopefully had no idea that we had entered their sacred place despite our promise not to do so.

Eileen was obviously in pain, her usually vibrant blue eyes gone alarmingly dull. Making a clear effort she said, "Julia, I need you to get this arrow out of me. I can't reach it!"

Swallowing hard against the lump in my throat, I asked, "Can't you use some of your magic to get rid of it?"

She shook her head. I knew before she even answered my question that this solution would indeed be too easy for a day like today, where so far nearly everything had gone downhill since we left the manor.

"I can't," Eileen said. "There's a strong spell on it. I already tried but my magical ability is not strong enough to break it. Julia, listen to me — the spell they've used on the arrow keeps my blood from clotting. It's really simple, the longer the arrow stays in my body, the more blood I lose, the weaker I get, and the less ability to defend us I will have."

"Oh, God." I nervously bit my lip. "What do you need me to do exactly?"

Her voice was hoarse when she replied, "If this arrow is the same as the ones I caught, you have no other choice than to push it through."

"Push it through?" She wanted me to push a wooden stick through her body without disinfecting it or giving her something to minimize the pain? Some heartbeats later, I wasn't sure what to do or say, struggling with what she asked me to do, fighting against a new wave of nausea that nearly caused me to humiliate myself again. Thankfully, I got hold of myself

and realized that there was simply no time for difficult or shy behavior. Eileen needed me. She needed my strength, and I knew that giving in to fear would serve no purpose. It was clear that I would have to be the one to push the arrow through if I wanted her to live, whether I felt like doing it or not. There was no one else around who would volunteer. The responsibility was mine alone.

With an effort, I laid a shaking hand on her arm, whispering fiercely, “Tell me what to do before I really lose it.”

“Thank you.” Eileen’s relief helped ease my anxiety a little. She turned around, giving me an unhindered view of the feathered arrow shaft sticking out of the back of her shoulder. She started with her instructions, speaking softly, “First, you have to cut the shirt open so that the fabric won’t hinder your work.” She produced a dagger from somewhere on her person, pressing the cold metal hilt into my hand.

I hesitated a moment before I began carefully cutting through her blood soaked shirt. Peeling the two halves of the fabric away, I was shocked by the amount of blood running down her back in a continuous stream. Seeing the red fluid caused a throb in my temples, and for a moment I was nearly paralyzed.

Eileen’s voice cut through the haze. “Julia, don’t think too much! I need you to push as hard as you’re able. The arrowhead has to come out through my chest! The faster the arrow goes through, the better and less hurtful it will be, and the sooner we’ll put an end to this.”

I swallowed hard. Grasping the slippery shaft, I pushed while trying not to concentrate on what I was doing, but rather on why I needed to do it, but the arrow didn’t move more than a few millimeters. It didn’t take long before I was ready to give up. I reminded myself how much Eileen was relying on *me* in this situation, and was determined to try again.

Trying to get a grip on my emotions, I put more pressure on the shaft, pushing as hard as I could, terrified it would snap off in my hands. Finally, the damned thing began to move, and I watched with sick fascination as the point broke through Eileen’s skin, bringing with it a surprising gush of blood that spilled over her chest. She collapsed on the grass, panting and covered in cold sweat. After a moment, she held herself up on a braced arm while I stared

disbelievingly at my bloody hands, not sure how much reason there was to be proud about what I had just done.

I knelt next to Eileen and hesitantly touched her with my sticky fingers. Unable to hide my deep concern, I asked, “Hey, are you okay?”

Eileen didn’t look good. I had never seen her pale like that. She took a deep breath and said, “Yes... but let’s continue. Time is not on our side. Now comes the next step, lass — you need to cut the shaft behind the arrowhead.”

She struggled to get into a position that granted me easier access to her chest. I closed my eyes, forcing my nausea down before I opened my eyes and timidly picked up the dagger. When I began, I found out that cutting through the solid wooden shaft wasn’t as easy as it sounded. My fumbling attempts must have caused her considerable pain. She made no sound, but I heard her teeth grinding against each other, and felt her muscles go stiff under my hands.

Just when I was ready to stop and give us both a break, the shaft snapped and I held the arrowhead in my hand. The flow of blood continued its deathly stream down Eileen’s chest. Looking at the triangular piece of metal I was holding, I said, “I did it.”

Eileen seemed as relieved as I felt, and continued her advice after several quick inhalations of breath. “Good, you’re doing good, Julia. Now comes the last step — you have to draw the arrow out from the back.”

I stared at her, not believing what I’d heard. First she wanted me to push it through her chest, and now I was supposed to draw it all the way back again?

“You really owe me, you know,” I muttered under my breath. I took hold of the shaft right under the fletching and drew back as hard as I could. The rubbery clench of her muscles resisted my effort, but this time the operation went a lot smoother. It wasn’t long before the pieces of that damned arrow lay next to each other on the ground, with Eileen laid out on the grass next to them, her exposed skin beaded with sweat..

After a while, Eileen sat up and asked between gritted teeth, “Is the wound bleeding much?”

I took a careful look at her shoulder and chest. “Yes, it is. It’s... well, it’s a constant flow, really. Can’t we stop it somehow?”

It was clear that even talking was a huge effort for her to make, so it was almost a half-minute before she answered, “Aye, you could cut the arms off my shirt to make a bandage, and try to put as much pressure as possible on both wounds. That should help a bit.”

I thought about that for a moment before I decided to take my own shirt off. Forgetting about my body shyness, I made short shrift of both arms, slicing through the seams with my borrowed dagger. Looking Eileen straight in the eyes after re-donning the remains of my shirt, I said firmly, “You are the one who is ill and sit here with an already ripped shirt. I can spare some of mine... and don’t you even dare argue!”

Eileen’s open mouth shut with a nearly audible click. I took the torn strips of cotton, wadded them up and put pressure on the wound on her back and on her chest, hoping against hope that this would do some good. It most definitely was time for luck to be on our side again, I thought, but luck seemed to be in short supply today.

A voice cut through the silence, echoing eerily over to our hiding place, “You liars, you said you wouldn’t set your foot in the clearing. You betrayed us. Come out and fight!”

Leaving Eileen, I crawled closer to the nearest stone and carefully looked around the corner without making myself a target. Eileen’s opponent from earlier was with a group of the younger *sidhe draoi*. They stood some feet away on the other side of the clearing, all of them angrily gesturing and shouting at us without coming nearer the stone circle.

“Shit, it sure didn’t take them long to figure out where we are and what we’ve done,” I said.

Eileen agreed. “Aye, Julia, the only good thing is that they are not allowed to enter the sacred stone circle before darkness falls. That will give us another thirty minutes or so before we have to face them, I think.”

I crawled back to her and reapplied the pressure on her wounds, worried that the cloth was already drenched scarlet. “You know what I don’t understand?” I asked. She coughed and tiredly shook her head. I continued, “Why doesn’t Madeleine come and kill us herself? I can’t imagine her feeling bound to honor a sacred place.”

“Well, lass, my guess is as good as yours, but I would think that she doesn’t want to be part of the real dirty work, and would rather let the *sidhe draoi* finish what she started. I bet she only wanted us where we are now — trapped and injured.”

I nodded; that made sense to me. “What are we going to do now?”

Eileen shifted a bit until she could look directly at me. When she spoke, her voice suddenly had the commanding tone I had noticed earlier. “Julia, I want you to listen carefully to me,” she said. “I most probably won’t be able to win a fight, but I will still be able to win you some time before the rest of my power abandons me. So what we will do is — I will go out there before they are allowed to enter the circle and start a fight with them, drawing the attention towards me. In the meantime, you have to find your way back to the manor on your own. As soon as you are out of hearing distance, search for Cinnia. Then...”

“What? You want to get yourself killed so that I have an opportunity to escape? Are you nuts?” I choked out, staring wide-eyed at her in disbelief.

She rested a hand on my shoulder. “This is your only chance to escape, Julia. Please be reasonable.”

Her expression was pleading with me to agree, but I wasn’t willing to lose this particular fight and told her, “I will have none of this. Either both of us will be able to escape, or both of us are going to die here! I don’t want your sacrifice. I want to live *with* you!”

“Julia, please. You can’t help, you’re not a trained warrior, and the odds are that you won’t survive if you decide to stay with me.”

“There must be another possibility. Isn’t there anything else...” I didn’t want to believe that there was no other way than Eileen sacrificing her life for me, or both of us dying here. I

covered my face with both hands, my mind frantically searching for a solution, when suddenly a thought struck me. Maybe there was one thing *dearg-du's* and vampires had in common. I uncovered my face. "Eileen, the spell on the arrow is broken right?" I took a look at her wounds before continuing, "It seems as if the blood flow has slowed down."

"Good. That is good," she said hesitantly, probably because she had no idea what I was thinking.

"You certainly lost a large amount of blood," I said, trying to be casual although my heart was thumping. "What if we supplied you with new blood, new energy? Would you regain some of your strength back?"

"What..." Eileen stared at me, realization suddenly dawning. "No!"

I expected her reaction and said in the most no-nonsense voice I was capable of mustering, "No, you listen to me. Drinking enough of my blood to make up for your loss should give you at least some of your strength back, shouldn't it? And then you would have a better chance to win any upcoming fight, right?"

"Julia, forget it. I am not going to do it," she said with grim determination.

"Eileen, you damn stubborn... I didn't save you from bleeding to death so that you can lose your life in a fight. Do you really want me to risk running through the forest and getting caught by either the *sidhe draoi* or Madeleine? You remember what she wanted to do to me the last time she got a hold of me, don't you? Can you imagine me outrunning her?"

Eileen remained stubborn, a mulish expression on her face. "I am not going to drink your blood!" she exclaimed.

"Then both of us will die today, 'cause I won't leave you."

She shook her head.

I clenched my jaw tightly and decided to opt for a different tactic. “If you drink my blood, will it kill me?”

She shook her head a second time, now looking irritated. “That is not the ....”

“Damn it! What is your problem with drinking my blood?” I interrupted.

“I can’t.” she admitted grudgingly. “Julia, you don’t really want me to feast on your blood! You don’t know what you ask of me...”

“Eileen, I don’t offer you my blood so that you will get drunk on it, but because I want both of us to survive.” I took a deep breath, blinking against the sting of the tears. “I never thought I would find love after Jennifer. Damn it, I deserve a future with you!” I knew that I sounded egoistic, but I didn’t know how else to voice my emotions. It was true: I honestly never thought I would never find the one person I was meant to be with, my one true love, and I had absolutely no intention of continuing my life without her.

I added after a pause, “We live together, or we die together. Please, Eileen... I’m not afraid.”

Eileen kept quiet for a longer time, keeping her gaze fixed on the ground. It hadn’t been my intention to make her feel guilty, but I was determined to fight this battle with all the ammunition I owned. I was not ready to surrender, knowing that my... no, *our* future was in doubt. I had to win. I had to! I wasn’t keen on letting her put her fangs in me, since I had no idea if it would hurt or what would happen to me afterwards, but allowing her to do it was a simple question of our survival. If that meant letting her drink my blood, well, that was what I was going to do. Desperate situations required desperate measures. I was ready to give her everything I had in me, literally, if it would save our lives.

Finally, Eileen looked at me and hesitantly reached out to touch my hand. “Julia, drinking your blood will change you... you will become like a slave to me, obey all my commands without question... it is going to affect you in a way you wouldn’t want. And, well, I once made a vow never to take human blood like this. Please reconsider what you’re doing.” Her gaze silently pleaded with me to take back my offer.

I shook my head. “Eileen, you don’t take it, but I offer it freely, and the sole reason for my offer is love.” I felt her resistance was beginning to crumble and pressed on, “Is there anything that can be done to avoid me losing my will?”

Eileen’s face was ashen. I wasn’t sure any more if this was due to the enormous amount of blood she had lost, or because of our discussion. At least there seemed to be a solution for our most immediate problem when she said, “There is something, but I am not sure...”

“What is it?” I asked impatiently.

Her voice was only a whisper when she replied, “You would have to drink my blood after I drank yours.”

“Drink your blood?” I squeaked.

She looked defeated. “Yes, that is the only possibility to avoid making you a slave, a *giolla* lacking a will of your own.”

That was a bit of a shock. While I didn’t really favor the idea of her drinking my blood, to imagine me drinking someone else’s blood was even higher on the list of things I had never intended to do during my life. Seeing the state she was in, and thinking about the situation we were facing didn’t really leave us many other options. I controlled my shudder and asked, “How would drinking your blood affect me?”

“How exactly it will change you, I can’t say,” she told me. “You won’t be human any more, well, at least not fully human. But you would keep your will, remain an individual, not a slave. You don’t need to drink much, though, after tasting the first drops of my blood I can promise you that you will very much cherish the taste, and it won’t be easy to stop sucking me dry.” A faint smile played around her lips.

I felt sick just imagining drinking her blood, and couldn’t really believe her when she said I would immediately begin to crave the taste. *Yuck!* However, now was not the time to be fussy. I said in a tone much calmer than I felt, “Okay, let’s do it! Where do you want to drink from?”

“Hang on a second, lass. I need you to understand something before you agree to that. Hear me out first, okay? Drinking each other’s blood is part of the bonding ritual between my kin, and is something not done lightly. We won’t be able to see the whole ritual through today, and I have no idea how your drinking of my blood will affect you.”

I frowned. “I thought you said that drinking your blood would be better than just you drinking from mine.”

“Aye, that is true. I am sure nothing dramatic or bad will happen, but I am just not certain if and to what extent you will be transformed. Your part of the ritual will be something like a rite of passage; you’ll be changed and won’t be completely human afterwards. You would become a half-*sidhe*, a hybrid, something close to what I am, but still different.” She ruffled her fingers through her hair, clearly struggling for words. “You would be different than you are now, but I don’t know how different...”

“But we will be able to see the ritual through at a later point?” I asked, a bit confused.

“Yes, we will, lass. I want to marry you in a proper way.”

I thought about what she had just said, and I was thrown back to the one major obstacle I had struggled with all my life — trust. Eileen had never betrayed the trust I had given her. Through our bond, I was able to get a hint of the myriad feelings she was going through right now. I knew that she wasn’t holding back, and there was no fraud in her whatsoever. Therefore, I decided to stick to my plan. “A ritual, eh?”

“Aye,” she said softly.

“Does it include getting naked?”

A small, startled chuckle escaped her. “In fact it does, lass.”

*Great.* But that was a battle for another day. “And music?” I asked.

“Aye, music as well, with drums being the main instruments. Their rhythm will cause our hearts to beat in sync for the rest of our lives.”

I searched her eyes and found what I was looking for, a deep love and affection that warmed me to the core. I smiled at her and said, “Then have a go at me.”

“Are you sure?” She watched me, her eyes hooded and dark. “I don’t want you to regret...”

“I am sure,” I replied. “There is nothing else that I want more than to have a future with you. And if this blood drinking grants us the chance....” I let my voice trail off.

She nodded slowly. “Julia, I won’t let you drink much of my blood, just enough so that you will keep your free will. The ritual will wait until we are home... and I promise that I will do my best to give us a chance for a future. You hear me? I promise.”

Again, I had to fight against tears. “That is all I could ask of you. Now stop babbling and suck my neck,” I said with much more braveness than I felt. The truth was that I was scared about what was going to happen to me, but I bent closer to Eileen, offering her my throat.

For once what I had learned during long and lonely hours in front of the television seemed to be right as she slowly raised her mouth to my throat, touching it first with her lips and gently kissing the skin over my fast-pulsing jugular vein.

She whispered, “Thank you,” then I felt her fangs slowly sink into my flesh, causing a sharp pain as if two extraordinarily thick needles were piercing my throat. For a moment I writhed against her grip as survival instinct insisted I was being attacked by a predator. She held me close to her body as she drank from me, becoming stronger every second with every suck of blood she took. Suddenly, the pain was replaced by a feeling of total bliss, an ecstasy I had never known. I groaned, the pleasurable sensations cresting higher.

Eileen released me without warning, withdrawing her fangs. This time when I struggled, it was because I didn’t want her to stop. I whimpered desperately, “Don’t let go. Don’t.” I felt like I would die if she didn’t continue her assault on my neck, but she didn’t listen to me.

I understand now that I was more than ungrateful for her act of heroism. At the time, I wanted nothing more than for her to continue to drink my blood. I would have done whatever she had asked of me; I would have obeyed her every command without question. I needed her more than life. She was a goddess to me, dazzling my sight, and I was her devoted slave. When she held her wrist to my mouth after slashing it open with her dagger and said softly, “Drink!” I did just that and took my first sip of blood, tangy and iron-rich.

I was dizzy when I came back to my senses, realizing first that I had a sticky, slightly salty tasting substance in my mouth which had a delicious aftertaste. I craved more. Opening my eyes, everything around me looked sharper, more defined and more alive.

I sniffed the air, detecting a musky smell that formed a picture in my mind of the group of young *sidhe draoi* that were milling around outside the stone circle. I heard them talking to each other, disputing about what to do with us. I knew what I wanted to do with them! An urge for revenge burned inside me, a primal need I didn’t want to fight. I wanted to rip out their throats and burn their dead bodies to teach the others a lesson...

A hand cupped my cheek in a tender caress. Confused, I looked into Eileen’s endless blue eyes and felt a longing replace the yearning for revenge. Without hesitation, I sought the one that was mine, tasting her unique flavor, running my tongue over her lips, demanding entrance into her mouth, taking whatever she gave me. Too soon, I found myself gently denied. Eileen ended our kiss by drawing back a little.

She said, “Slowly, lass, slowly. How do you feel?”

“Alive,” I whispered, searching for words to describe my altered state. “Intoxicated, dizzy, delighted. Everything seems lighter and sharper at the same time.”

“Your senses are heightened.”

Then I remembered our current situation. “Your wound, let me see your wound!”

Obediently, she showed me her chest and back. I was surprised to see that the wounds looked so much better already. Where moments ago the injuries had been raw and bloody, it now seemed as if the two wounds were nearly healed, the scabs dry and beginning to flake.

“It worked! It’s not bleeding any more.” I was excited but suddenly, I felt something different in my mouth. Seeking around with my tongue, I licked teeth that were too long, and realized that I was sporting fangs. “Oh my God.”

Eileen turned to me, alarmed. “What? What’s the matter?”

“I have... my teeth...” I closed my mouth, dismayed by the feeling of my new teeth. I had grown fangs! I was a ... what was I? I was not human any more, as Eileen had warned, but did that mean that I was a *dearg-du* as well?

“Let’s see,” Eileen said, carefully forcing my mouth open. “You have fangs. I didn’t expect that to happen now, but in the end it only means that you are able to open cans without a can-opener, nothing else.” She smiled, tracing my lips with her thumb.

“Listen to me, Julia,” she went on, giving me a serious look, “you are changed. Your senses are heightened, your emotions are stronger, and all that is something you have to get used to. I will help you with it. It’s no problem at all, just a question of time, discipline, practice and patience. But right now, we need to make a plan and try to figure out how to leave this place without getting killed. Do you understand?”

Her voice was smooth as silk and made me wish to throw myself at her, enemies be damned. I needed her. I needed to feel her skin against mine, needed to smell her, to taste her, to touch her... my blood began to boil. Desire beat at me, irresistible and hot.

“Julia, do you understand?” Eileen’s urgency cut through the fog in my brain.

It was hard to think clearly. My primal feelings were close to the surface. All my senses seemed to be focused on feelings, on tastes, on everything other than cool, logical thinking. Nevertheless, I was able to master myself and nod, closing and opening my eyes again and

again, shaking my head, trying to get rid of the overflowing kaleidoscope of colours, feelings, smells and tastes. “Eileen, I feel as if I am going crazy. I am out of control,” I whispered.

She pulled me into her lap and said in my ear, “We don’t have much time left, lass, but I want to try something. Close your eyes for a moment, will you?”

I did what she asked, closed my eyes and listened to her voice.

“Open yourself to the forest-bound energy around us,” she said.

I tried to do what she asked of me without having any clue how I was supposed to manage it. I tried to open my senses, and was surprised when I ‘saw’ wave-like energy dancing in my inner vision. I opened my eyes, and got a second surprise when the waves were still there, right in front of me. “Wow,” I breathed in awe.

“Yes, it is pretty impressive, isn’t it? Now, listen... can you swim?”

I stared confused at her, but confirmed that I could swim.

“Good,” she said. “It is the same as if you’re in an ocean — either you allow the waves to dominate you, and then you have to fight against them, or you go with the flow and use that energy and power for your own purpose. Try to work with the energy, use it instead of being used by it. The energy will help you to control your new abilities.”

I wasn’t really sure what she meant, and wondered how to use those ‘waves.’ I was a bit angry about Eileen’s cryptic instruction when what I felt I needed was a more hands-on approach. Before I could get too angry, I remembered the one time I had ridden waves at the beach. Closing my eyes, I tried to visualize being atop a body board, the only thing I’ve ever ridden only half successfully in the water.

I didn’t need to wait for the next wave to come, but had only to decide which of the waves around me I preferred. There was a vast variety of those — green, blue and brown; there were also bright orange, red and yellow and all of them were vibrating with energy. Going with a gut feeling, I decided for a cobalt blue wave and immediately feeling a pulsing around me that

at first seemed overwhelming. I tried to relax and just go with the pulsing instead of fighting against it, and was startled when suddenly I felt grounded, safe and brimming with energy.

I had no idea what just happened or how it was accomplished, but was nevertheless thankful for the effect it had on me. Slowly opening my eyes against the bright lights, I was stunned to find that even though I still saw the area around us with different perception, I wasn't as bombarded any more. I took a deep breath, enjoying these changes in myself, when I felt my fangs vanishing. "They are gone," I stated, stunned.

Eileen smiled, wiping away one of the tears that had slipped down my cheek. "Yes, you feel better, more relaxed, I can sense that. It won't take long until you will be able to control your fangs and everything else. I will teach you, but this will have to wait until we will be safe. For now, you just have to realize that your senses, your reflexes, your emotions and even your physical strength has increased beyond human limitations."

Still in Eileen's lap, I wrapped my arms around her and leaned my head against her shoulder, soaking in Eileen's love for a moment before facing reality. "So, what now?" I asked.

"Well, I will challenge this piece of shit who attacked us and cut him to fire wood," she said. I sensed her seething with anger.

"You feel up to it?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. I am not worried about any fight with the *sidhe draoi*." She hesitated for a moment and added, "But I am worried about what Madeleine will do once she realizes that I am not as disabled as she thought."

"Is there anything I can do?" Looking at her, I saw she was struggling with something.

She finally said, "As much as I hate to involve you in something you have no experience with, I guess it is too late now anyhow." Something cold was pressed in my hand. It was the dagger again. "Lass, I need you to get Cinnia and pick me up here."

"What?" I blurted.

“I have enough strength now to distract the *sidhe draoi*, and even be able to kill some of them, but then there would be a war on my own land. So I need you to get Cinnia. Bring her here so that we will be able to escape together.”

I protested, “But Madeleine is still around!”

“Aye, that she is, I’m sure. But that is the best chance we have if you don’t change your mind and flee alone back to the manor.”

“No way!” My growl was a perfect imitation of Eileen’s.

She sniggered. “You are really something else, lass. Where is the fearful and shy woman I met last week? And who is the feisty woman that replaced her?”

“I wonder myself, but the fearful and shy woman is still part of who I am, Eileen. The only difference is that now I know there is something worth fighting for.” I smiled shyly at her and received a warm smile in return.

“That is true. But let me tell you: I love the feistiness inside you and look very much forward to seeing that part of you blossoming in the future. But now, let me tell you what we will do...”

## Part 7

I was tied up in knots, all of my senses on high alert while I remained hidden, crouched behind one of the big stones that formed the sacred circle surrounding us. Dusk was creeping closer every moment. When the sun sank entirely behind the horizon, it would allow the *sidhe draoi* to enter the circle and do what they had come for — kill us. Our plan would hopefully prevent our deaths, but it wasn't without risk as it would separate me from Eileen. It was the only plan we were able to create within the short period of time at hand, taking into account our limited weaponry of just one sword and one dagger.

Eileen was going to stay behind and surprise the *sidhe draoi* with an attack of her own, drawing attention to herself so that I would be able to escape unnoticed. Not to make my way to the manor, though; my job would be to get Cinnia, her horse, and come back to the clearing to pick up Eileen without making the *sidhe draoi* or Madeleine aware of our deception until it was too late for them to interfere. Surprise should be on our side. We reckoned Madeleine and whoever was with her probably wouldn't count on Eileen being able to fight, thinking her disabled by a spelled arrow.

Perhaps the element of surprise would even work with the *sidhe draoi*.

Once again I cast a glance at Eileen, wondering what she was waiting for. She was concealed behind another boulder, her sword in her hand, ready to jump. Without warning, she suddenly exploded into movement and her battle cry pierced the air like a well-honed knife. That was my signal, so I started to crawl towards the edge of the clearing, hoping that all our enemies' attention would remain riveted on Eileen.

Screams reached my ears while I crawled over the ground. I could easily imagine the unpleasantly surprised *sidhe draoi*, who had just found out that this time, it was a real fire they were facing instead of the illusion spell Eileen had used earlier. The real thing definitely had the potential to harm them, linked to the trees as they were

I tried to produce as little noise as possible, though there was a lot of commotion behind me that covered any sounds I made. It was unfortunate that being utterly quiet wasn't among my new talents. My progress sounded to me as if a herd of elephants was stampeding over the

clearing! Never before had I come across so many twigs lying in my path as if waiting for me to snap them, accompanied by a vast amount of fallen leaves that seemed eager to be crushed beneath my body. I cursed under my breath when yet another twig snapped. My only hope was that Madeleine was still too stunned about Eileen's recovery to care about my immediate whereabouts. The crazy bitch would be too happy to put her hands on me and use me as a hostage against Eileen as long as I was alive. Killing me instantly would be absolutely too sane an action for someone like her.

It seemed like a lifetime before I reached the edge of the clearing. Relieved to have mastered this first part of my journey without getting caught, I crouched behind a small bush, breathing heavily from the unaccustomed exercise. It was much darker now that I had reached the forest and I was pleased to find that night vision was one of my newfound abilities. I was able to see equally well now as in broad daylight — a rather weird but helpful experience.

I stayed behind the bush until I was satisfied that no surprises awaited me, and then I got up from my position and stepped slowly behind the next tree. There wasn't a hint of Cinnia, which was to be expected. Eileen had been quite sure that her horse would be hiding deeper in the forest. As a good warhorse, Cinnia was trained to obey signals and would have come if called, but giving a whistle now would have been unwise. That meant that I had to find her instead of allowing her to come to me.

I took some steps away from the tree, wondering which direction to choose, when suddenly the rustle of leaves to my right caught my attention. I whirled around, facing the bush where the suspicious sound had originated. Hadn't I been careful enough? I put my trembling hand on the dagger's hilt while a rush of adrenalin flooded my system. I was ready to either run or fight when a small version of a fox appeared from behind a bush, its muzzle covered in earth. My heart was pounding like a wild horse inside my chest, and I felt sick with relief when the fox simply turned around and trotted away. Only the usual forest sounds remained, almost drowned out by the hammering of my heartbeat that echoed in my ears. I felt weak and leant my back against a tree to support my still shaking legs. This little episode had left me unbalanced, not the least because I had learned today that one could never be sure if an animal was really only an animal or some form-changing lunatic. What if it hadn't been a fox but Madeleine waiting for me?

I knew that I needed to calm down before I would be able to search for Cinnia. Eileen had taught me a relative simple mental exercise that would help me get an idea in which direction to search. I closed my eyes, tried to empty my mind and let my senses linger, trying to get a feel for Cinnia. I didn't know exactly what I was doing, but I had become much more used to the sensation since traveling with Eileen.

Just when I thought I felt something and wanted to explore it further, the wind brought the sounds of fighting to my hiding place. Immediately, my concentration went down the drain. The clash of swords and frenzied shouting could only mean that the trick with the fire hadn't worked long enough. The *sidhe draoi* must have found a way to avoid the fire or they had gotten reinforcements.

I took a deep breath and tried desperately to focus my thoughts anew, knowing that the time pressure had increased drastically. I tried to calm myself with the thought that as long as the sound of fighting could be heard, it meant that Eileen was still alive. Starting another attempt to empty my mind, I reached out for whatever I had felt before. There was a mysterious prickle again when I stretched my senses in a particular direction. I had no idea if the sensation was based on more than wishful thinking, but since it was everything I had, I carefully crept in the direction that called to me.

I had to repeat the exercise over and over, constantly afraid of going in the wrong direction, and simultaneously angry at myself for wasting so much time. After covering quite a bit of ground and snapping several more twigs, I was rewarded with the sweetest sound on earth, a soft whicker. My mouth dry, I kept on and there was Cinnia, peacefully pulling out mouthfuls of grass in a little spot under a tree, undisturbed by anything that had happened since we parted. The joy of being a clueless animal at such times... how I envied her.

But there wasn't time to rest. Now that I found her, there were other things I had to worry about, such as: would she allow me to catch her and ride her? There was only one way to find out, so I walked over to where she was grazing. When I was only steps away, Cinnia lifted her head, watching me cautiously.

I swallowed hard, trying to forget about her sheer bulk and those platter-sized hooves, and said in a low voice, “Come on, good girl! I am so happy to have found you,” while I held out my hand, advancing slowly without ever letting the dangling reins out of my sight.

I was startled when she neither turned around and fled nor attacked me, but simply remained where she was, her mouth working as she chewed grass. I crossed the remaining distance between us until I finally stood before her. As Eileen had instructed me, I carefully began to stroke her neck with slow and deliberate movements, whispering soothing nonsense.

Everything seemed to be going better than I had expected, causing me to believe that the tide of my luck had turned, when suddenly Cinnia began to nervously prance around. First I wondered what I had done wrong when suddenly, someone cleared a throat behind me. I nearly swallowed my tongue. Shit! I hadn't heard anyone approaching since my attention was solely focused on the horse, and it was my own damn fault that someone had been able to creep up on me. I knew that there was no way I would be able to escape and so, once again, I put a trembling hand on the dagger hilt, promising myself that I would not go down without a fight. I could have kicked my own ass, furious because a moment of abstraction on my part had smashed our whole plan to pieces.

“Well, well,” the voice behind me said, “a good thing that you found your horse. And luck is still on your side as it is only me finding you both, and not the ugly warrior that I ran into behind those trees, isn't it?”

I slowly turned around and looked into the brown eyes of *sean coille*. He wasn't at all whom I had expected to see. Not that I was sure that him finding me was much better than Madeleine or one of hers finding me first. I couldn't be certain what his agenda was. Judging *sean coille's* mood was difficult, but he didn't look upset or angry. Shouldn't he be out to avenge our violation of their sanctuary? I was confused and decided to wait for his next move.

He sounded friendly when he went on, “No need to be afraid of me! I am not here to do you harm, even though you promised not to set foot on the clearing.”

“You don't?” I was still far from relaxed and kept hold of my dagger.

He chuckled dryly. “No, I don’t. But the young ones are eager to destroy and do harm to you both. They have the law on their side. Only I wish that they would be more eager to balance reasons before stumbling into regrettable action, but their hearts have been poisoned.” He lifted one of his arms. I saw he was holding a long piece of wood.

“That is my present for you,” he said and tossed me the staff, which I caught in mid-air due to my improved reflexes.

For a moment I wasn’t sure if he wanted to press an attack, but nothing happened. He stood there watching me while I sceptically observed the smooth wooden staff in my hand. *Sean coille* came closer, and without further explanation touched me and the wood simultaneously with his long, knobby fingers before I was able to react. I was briefly immobilized by the surge of energy that flew from him into the wood and through that, into my body.

Closing my eyes in reflex, for the second time that day I observed there were strange energy waves running through my inner vision. This time, they were different shades of brown and gold. Although I was unable to think clearly, I somehow knew that this was the raw energy of the forest. *Sean coille* begun to hum a tune; the intensity grew constantly and vibrated deep within me. Just when I thought I couldn’t take it any more, the humming stopped and all the waves flashed into stunning white light. Whatever he had done, it was finished.

I opened my eyes, unsure about what just happened, while *sean coille* kept his gentle hold on me. His voice was serious when he said, “Listen carefully: This is no ordinary wood; it is what we call LiveWood. Wood that is able to direct itself. No human has touched something like this for a very long time, but it is easy to use after establishing the link, as I’ve already done. All you need to do is make clear in your thoughts who your enemy is and the staff will move in your hands, mainly to defend but also to attack if necessary. With practice, you will become a master of this staff.” He let go of me. Taking a single step back, he continued, “This wood is part of you now, like an extension of your body, and that’s how you should think of it. To everyone else it will just be an ordinary piece of wood, but to you it will be an ally, a strong and trustworthy weapon. Treasure it well!”

I stared wonderingly at the ordinary looking staff and said, “I would be stupid to not treasure a present like this. But won’t the others know that I got that staff from you?”

He nodded slowly, an unhappy expression on his face. “Yes, they most probably will. But there is no law against giving someone a betrothal present, now, is there?”

It was a clever move on his side, proving his kindness and wisdom. He couldn’t stand openly at our side but had found a different way to help. I was painfully grateful for any help today. Nodding, I said, “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your kindness.”

He nodded as well. “I am really sorry about what is happening, but this is all I can do for you.” His eyes suddenly twinkled mischievously. “Well, this and sending a lurking warrior into the lands of never-ending dreams, and I did send out a message to let your people know that you are in danger. With a bit of luck they will be here in time. And now you’d better hurry back!” He turned around, walking deeper into the forest and vanishing from my view.

I was alone again, left behind with an unexpected weapon. Although I was curious about what an untrained person like me would be able to do with the staff, I would be quite happy not to have to use it today in my defense or Eileen’s.

I had returned to Cinnia and taken hold of the reins again when an unearthly high-pitched cry echoed into the forest; the sound twisted my gut into knots and caused me to crumple to the ground, dropping the reins. The pain in my ears was immense and even covering them with my hands didn’t help. My brain felt as if someone was crushing it in an iron fist. A sense of absolute panic crashed over me. I knew that something awful had happened in the clearing, I just knew it. My mind was racing with possibilities, each of them more horrible than the other, while my head was nearly bursting from the ongoing sound.

As suddenly as the sound had occurred, it vanished again and the forest was silent.

I uncovered my ears hesitantly, relieved when the hideous cry didn’t torture me any longer. After sitting up, I took several deep breaths to centre myself. Looking around, I saw that Cinnia was gone, leaving no trace behind. No surprise there; I could only imagine how terrifying the warhorse would find such a sound.

I had to know what was happening with Eileen and tried to reach her through our bond, deeply relieved when I felt her response. She was still alive. For a moment, I hoped that whatever had caused the sound hadn't been too bad for Eileen, but then I heard her voice shouting in my head as if she stood next to me.

*Leave! Take Cinnia and leave. It is too late.*

A burst of searing pain ripped through my heart. A disaster had happened, something that caused Eileen to believe she was going to be defeated. For a split-second I hesitated, allowing my fear to dominate me. Honestly, what chance did I have to fight against anyone who could harm so fierce and skilled a warrior as Eileen?

Tears sprung to my eyes and for a moment I was ready to give up, but then a picture formed in my head: me and Eileen on our wedding day, she dressed in noble red and brown and me in a green gown, Lena and Monika at our side. A lot of happily celebrating *sidhe* around us. Another flash, another picture: in the manor's garden, a child with blond hair and blue eyes holding Eileen's hand and I... I was pregnant. The little girl turned to me and I knew that she was our firstborn. Another flash and the mental images were gone.

What had that been? A vision of the future or a wistful dream? I had no idea, but I didn't care. I had been shown me enough. As long as there was a hint of hope, I would cling to it with all my strength, doing everything I could to transform that hope into reality. Even if I wasn't able to defend myself against anyone who wanted to fight me, maybe I would be able to buy us time. Maybe help would come before it was too late. Didn't *sean coille* say that he sent a message to our people about us needing support? And above all these considerations was this: would I be able to live the rest of my life with the knowledge that I had left Eileen behind to die? The answer to that was easy. No, I couldn't.

Eileen's cry for me to leave still vibrated beneath my skin as I gathered the few remaining pieces of my courage and tried to reach out to her, wanting to let her know that I wouldn't leave her alone, that I would come and stand by her, but there was only silence from her end of the bond. No response, no answer, nothing. Either she knew how to block me or... I didn't want to follow that train of thought to its conclusion.

I got up and stumbled to the tree nearest to me, touching my cheek to the rough bark. While my biggest wish was still to curl up into a tight ball and wait until everything was over for good or ill, I knew that I wasn't living in a fairytale. Today was harsh reality and I needed to be my own hero, not wait around to be rescued. So I took the staff and leaned it against a nearby tree, hoping to be able to pick it up again once I mounted Cinnia. Eileen had tried to teach me the most important commands for a warhorse and I desperately hoped that I had memorized them correctly, thankful that all of them were rather simple.

Pursing my lips, I tried to whistle the first command but was unsuccessful since my mouth was as dry as the desert. My nervousness grew but I tried again, working up some spit and wetting my lips with my tongue. Though the tune was still not as loud as I would have wished, it worked. I was almost giddy with relief when I saw Cinnia trotting towards me. Another whistle and she knelt down on her front legs without hesitation. Walking to her, I grasped the reins and put my foot into the stirrup while trying to still my frantically beating heart. Thankfully, she didn't seem so dauntingly big in this position, and I was able to drag myself awkwardly into the saddle. Cinnia was a sweetheart through all my fumbling movements, and remained stoic even when I grasped her mane rather tightly at one point..

Finally, I was in the saddle. Cinnia remained kneeling, trained to wait for the next command. I whistled another tune and watched the ground disappearing as Cinnia got up. Vertigo struck me and I reeled in the saddle. This time, there was no Eileen to hold onto. For a moment, in my mind's eye I saw myself doing a head-over-heels descent, then I grasped the pommel to steady myself. I pushed down the wave of dizziness that threatened to overwhelm me and said out loud to Cinnia and to myself, "Come on, we have to go get your mistress." Another whistle sent her into a slow trot that allowed me to lean over and pick up the staff as we passed. Once I had the staff in hand, I spurred Cinnia on with my heels drumming her sides, only a single goal in my mind: get to Eileen as quickly as possible

The ride was an adventure that I hope never to repeat. One or two times it was a close call when Cinnia's flanks came within a hair's breadth of a tree trunk. I had to pay constant attention in order to avoid overhanging branches, and to make matters worse, I was hardly able to reach the stirrups, which were adjusted for Eileen's longer legs. It was a miracle that I didn't fall off or get scraped off the horse's back as she veered around obstacles.

Due to the warhorse's faster speed, it only took us a few minutes to reach the edge of the clearing. I saw Eileen standing at the opposite side. The *sidhe draoi* had been joined by three brawny looking warriors that I guessed had to be Madeleine's men. Watching them fight, I saw one of the warriors, an ugly guy, cut Eileen's upper arm with his sword, leaving a bleeding wound. He stepped back once he had been successful. Another member of the group came forward to continue the fight. These bastards were taking turns, trying to wear her out. It was obvious that they were having fun while Eileen tried to fight for her life and to give me enough time to escape. She was already bleeding from several wounds on her upper body. Those rats! They were playing with her.

I hadn't really decided what I would do once I reached the clearing but Cinnia took the choice away from me when she broke into a gallop, never hesitating as she ran over the group of *sidhe draoi*, scattering them and bowling some over. Without thinking, I threw the staff to the ground and slid off the horse, ready to turn those hot-headed *sidhe* into firewood. At the same moment Eileen, distracted by my arrival, didn't pay enough attention to her opponent. He didn't think twice about taking advantage and knocking her on the ground. She lay there motionless. Time seemed to stand still, and the breath caught in my throat. I wasn't sure if I had been too late or had even caused her death with my action.

It took a heartbeat or two before I got over the shock. As soon as I was capable of movement, I picked up my staff and ran over to where she Eileen lay so still on the leaf-litter. Suddenly, a hand covered my mouth from behind and a voice purred close to my ear, "Got you," followed by a hysterical cackle. *Madeleine!*

I struggled against her hold and was able to break free. Instinctively, I swung around, my elbow extended as I had learned in my self-defence course a long time ago. I didn't really expect that this move would have any effect against my superior opponent, but forgot something that Madeleine didn't know at all — I wasn't human any more. With my increased strength and reflexes, I was able to hit her squarely in the face, giving her a nosebleed. Blood flowed down her chin while she staggered backwards, looking utterly stunned.. For a second's worth of bravado, I felt like polishing my nails on my shirt and affecting a nonchalant air.

Madeleine stared at me with surprise-widened eyes, obviously still not believing what had just happened. She touched her face with a hand and glanced at the blood on her fingertips before

gazing at me again. “You hit me... you bitch!” she spat. “How did you...” She paused, her eyes narrowing, then asked, “You are transformed?”

Seeing her confused like that was deeply satisfying. I dared to cast a short glance at the place where Eileen still lay half-conscious on the ground. Cinnia was guarding her against the warriors, the brave warhorse striking out with her hooves, and I was satisfied that Eileen was still alive before turning back to Madeleine, who began to stalk towards me.

She growled, “You will pay for that, and don’t expect to die fast, either. I will have my fun with you for a good long while after letting you watch this poor excuse of a *dearg-du* die. I will make you scream and beg and no one will hear you. No one will come to your help and I will enjoy this immensely.”

I knew these were no boastful threats; Madeleine would make good on her promises. Although a small part of my brain told me to beg or even better to run, the bigger part thought, “fight.” I remembered the staff that was on the ground where I had thrown it down; it was too far away from me to make a dive for it. *Sean coille*’s words, *it is an extension of your body* sprung into my head. Desperate and out of other options, I decided to give magic a try. I knew that even with my enhanced strength and my preternaturally sharp senses, it had been luck to hit Madeleine and draw blood like that. I would never be able to win a fight against her without assistance; she was too skilled. My successful blow had only been possible because she never expected me to be something other than worthless, helpless human prey.

Clutching at any straw, I concentrated on the staff, wishing it to be in my hands. I guess nobody was more surprised than me when it suddenly flew across the space, smacking right into my palms. I heard gasps from the *sidhe draoi*, who understood right away what just happened. *Yes, this is LiveWood!* I thought at them, gripping the staff tightly.

The staff in my hands made me feel a bit better about my chances, but I was still not sure how much harm I would be able to cause Madeleine. She was a trained warrior, whereas my experience was limited to a nearly forgotten self-defence course and, of course, being a punching bag for my former girlfriend. Regardless of my doubts, I knew I needed to buy us more time to allow help to arrive.

Madeleine looked at me, a small smile on her face, and said, “You know, slut, you are full of surprises today, but that won’t help you at all.” For a moment I thought I caught a tiny bit of admiration in her eyes, but that emotion was soon replaced by her usual insanity.

She waved towards her warriors and shouted, “I don’t have time for this now. One of you get her and don’t bother to be too gentle; just keep her alive. I will have to pay some attention to my ex-wife, and then we are heading off with both of them. No point in wasting more time here. Play time is over.” She walked over to where Eileen was struggling to get up, still protected by Cinnia, while I saw Madeleine’s three warriors crossing to where I stood, all of them leering unpleasantly at me.

One of the warriors took the initiative and came straight at me. LiveWood or not, the truth was that I had no idea what to do with my weapon. Now it was time to see if what *sean coille* had said was true. Remembering what I once learned about being attacked, I steadied my stance and held the staff horizontally in front of me. As a reward, I received a cocky grin from my opponent, who obviously didn’t take me seriously; I couldn’t blame him for that. He was even so confident in his own abilities that he didn’t bother to unsheathe his sword, just lunged at me with his bare hands as if it hadn’t been me that caused Madeleine’s bloody nose. Of course, he probably thought it was just a lucky hit.

I felt the staff move like a live thing, lashing out to connect with my opponent’s face in a quick blow, causing a scream and a bloody lip on his side. The motion was so sudden and unexpected, I had been barely able to hold onto the staff without losing it, and fumbled it back to a ready position. My attacker was as surprised as Madeleine had been earlier, and his two fellow warriors were mocking him about being struck by a greenhorn.

Having learned his lesson, the seething warrior now unsheathed his sword and attacked me again. The staff raised itself into the air even as I cringed in anticipation. Metal hit wood, and I felt the vibration of the blow twanging through my body. Nevertheless, I was able to block his first attack as well as the second, doing nothing more than holding onto the staff while it moved into position of its own accord. It was becoming obvious to me that even though the wood was moving on its own, it was my muscle and bone that had to absorb the force. Countering attacks put a strain on me that I wasn’t used to. My lack of ability was the limit of

the effectiveness of the staff, and I was painfully aware that it wouldn't be too long before I wouldn't be able to defend against my angry opponent's attacks anymore.

*Bang.* Another blow that nearly sent me to the ground as he put his strength behind it. I wondered if there was anything that could be done to stop his attacks except retreat; my arms were already trembling from the power behind his blows. Suddenly, I felt the staff move again, but this time not to block. With astonishing speed, I was able to knock the man so accurately behind his kneecaps that he went down, leaving me gaping like an idiot.

For a long moment, only the harsh breathing of my defeated opponent could be heard. The remaining two warriors took a few cautious steps into my direction, obviously taking me more seriously now. My arms were trembling more than ever, my whole body ached and it was a miracle that I had been able to survive so far. LiveWood or not, I had no chance against the two of them. The only thing I could do was go down with honor. Once again, I took a defensive stance, ready to counter them as best as I could. After setting into position, I didn't have time to think any more but only time to react, blocking two blows before one of them knocked me down with his sword; kicking my head as I fell. Pain exploded through my skull, and everything went dark around me as I lost consciousness.

## Part 8

Slowly I became aware of... something. A scent, a sound, I didn't really know what it was that caused me to leave the darkness behind. As if through a fog, I became aware of noises: horses neighing, people talking with each other, and someone breathing hard nearby. It was still somewhat distant to my groggy brain and a part of me thought it could be a dream, but I also felt soft ground beneath my head, and that sensation was far too real. If this wasn't a dream, the chances seemed to be good that I was still alive, or perhaps that I had lost my life and crossed over to the Otherworld.

I carefully moved my hands and feet and found that I was not chained, which puzzled me. Did that mean that I was not a prisoner or that my foes were so confident that they simply didn't secure me, sure that I didn't need to be immobilized? If that had been their reason, they were right, because whether chained or not, I wouldn't be able to cause much trouble. Every bone, nerve and muscle in my body screamed '*pain*' though I had just shifted myself a few bare millimeters. Whatever the reason for my physical freedom, I felt it was wiser to allow my senses to sharpen further before making anyone aware of the fact that I wasn't unconscious anymore. But why did the ground beneath my head start moving?

Just when I had decided to play possum for a little while longer, I heard a voice calling my name. "Julia? Are you awake?" I recognized that voice and instinctively opened my eyes, looking up into the twinkling blue gaze that was staring back down at me with an expression of tenderness that left me short of breath.

"Eileen," I rasped, hardly able to believe the reality of what I was seeing.

"Yes, lass," she said with a warm smile. "It's good to have you back."

"You are alive." I had difficulty wrapping my mind around the fact that the ground under my head was actually Eileen's thigh, attached to her very much alive body. She wasn't dead or heavily chained, either.

Eileen chuckled dryly. "I am as alive as you are, lass, but it sure was a close enough call for both of us."

“We made it? We are safe?”

My brain only seemed to function in slow motion, but Eileen replied patiently, “Yes, we made it and we are safe.”

We were safe. Neither Madeleine nor *sidhe draoi* had been able to harm us. A dam inside me broke and I hid my face against her trouser leg. The fear, the anger, the feeling of helplessness, everything collapsed inside me, and I collapsed on top of Eileen, clutching any part of her I could reach. I sobbed and sobbed until I could no weep more, not caring about the pain every movement of my body caused. We were safe. All the while Eileen gently combed her fingers through my hair as if wanting to assure me through her touch that she was really there. When it seemed as if I didn't possess any more fluid in my body, I slowly turned my head, ignoring the ache, and looked up at her through my swollen eyes.

“I am sorry, I just...” I broke off, unable to find the words to continue.

“Hush. No need to be sorry for allowing your feelings to show,” she said while wiping away some of the lingering tears on my cheeks with her thumb. “If I wasn't so damned tired, I would possibly cry as well. This whole thing was a close call today. Too close.” She swallowed hard. “When I saw you go down and that bastard kicking your head...” She didn't finish the sentence, instead gazing into space.

I took a closer look at Eileen's face, taking in the bruises covering it and the blood on her shirt, hoping not all of it was her own. I lifted my hand to touch her face, but that movement was too much and pain shot through my severely abused body. “Ugh.” I let my arm fall down again, clenching my teeth against a wave of nausea, and gritted, “Oh boy.”

“Take some deep breaths,” Eileen said, carefully massaging the tense muscles in my shoulders. “That bad, eh?”

“Yes. I honestly don't think that fighting is my thing! If this is the way heroism feels, I can do without.” Another wave of nausea made me want to vomit but I refused my body its wish, panting through the roiling in my gut.

“I am sorry, lass. It is a good thing you are strong headed; that was quite a kick you received, and I had to use the rest of my magic to prevent serious brain damage. I have not enough power left to weave more healing magic.” Her fingers had wandered to my head again and her soothing massage nearly made me forget about the terrible pounding in my skull. She went on, still rubbing my scalp, “You are absolutely one of the bravest and equally one of the most stupid person that I’ve met in my life. And as you well know, I cover some decades and have met some interesting people.”

I was unsure how she meant that statement. “Thanks, I think.”

She chuckled and shook her head.

A male voice nearby said, “I agree with that statement! That was stupidity and braveness in equal amounts; the perfect mixture for a young warrior, as long as the result is survival.”

Moving my head slowly, I saw a grinning Carrick towering over both of us. “It was you that saved us?” I asked him.

“Only what you left for us to finish after fighting Madeleine and her warriors on your own,” he said with a respectful gleam in his eyes.

What I had done sounded somewhat foolish the way he put it and I felt the need to defend myself. “But, I didn’t plan on doing that... it was only... I couldn’t let Eileen...” I turned to her. “I thought you were severely wounded, if not dead...” I was unable to form a coherent sentence.

Eileen stopped my rambling with a kiss on my brow. “Sweetheart, although what you did was most probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever witnessed... thank you.”

She bowed her head and brought our lips together, the sweet caress lingering for a moment before she slowly broke our connection and whispered to me, “You saved my sorry ass. Just as you went down, Carrick and the others rode into the clearing as if the devil was after them. You sure did miss out on a mighty good fight and a very pissed ex-partner of mine.” Eileen

straightened up, leaning her head back against the tree behind her. She looked as fatigued as I felt.

I needed to know what had happened after Madeleine had left me in the hands of her warriors. “Did Madeleine hurt you?” I asked.

Eileen hesitated before replying, “Well, she tried. Actually, she was able to do me some harm but before she could inflict serious damage, she was distracted by you knocking down one of her elite warriors. Nice move, by the way, and a very nice weapon you acquired in the forest. Anyhow, as I said, Carrick showed up shortly after you fell.”

I couldn’t suppress a grin, thinking about how frustrated Madeleine must have been when her plan was thwarted. She had been in charge of the ambush; Eileen was down, I was about to get knocked senseless, and everything had looked perfect for her. I bet she had been thinking about what she could do to us once we were prisoners on her estate, and then *bang!* It was a shame I had missed that part. I asked, “And what happened when the cavalry showed up?”

Eileen gave me a weary smile. “Like I said, it was a mighty good fight. They rode in as if the devil was behind them. Dechtire was able to hurt Madeleine with one of the finest spear throws I have ever seen, which granted me the opportunity to scramble out of her reach. The rest of the fight didn’t take too long.”

I was sure there was more to it, so I prodded, “Was anyone seriously hurt?”

The sad expression that flickered across her face told me before she answered that something bad had indeed happened. My feeling was confirmed when Carrick said, “One of Madeleine’s warriors is dead, one was left behind severely wounded, and three of the *sidhe draoi* paid the ultimate price by standing against us. The others fled. One of ours died as well. But if you hadn’t held them off...”

“Carrick, please. Who died?” I wanted to know.

It was Eileen who replied with a catch in her voice, “Dechtire. Shortly after throwing the spear, she was killed herself.”

I couldn't place a face to the name, but remembered the way I had admired the female warriors earlier today. It seemed surreal that this had been mere hours ago, and now Dechtire was dead. I wasn't sure if I would ever get used to fighting, death and bitter enemies that were after my blood. Nevertheless, all this was a part of my life now and I had made my decision to stay, which meant I would have to find a way to deal with everything, even if it seemed overwhelming right now.

Eileen touched my cheek gently and said, "Don't feel guilty, lass. Her death hurts all of us, but she died a proud warrior and that is the way she would want to be remembered."

I knew that I had to accept this way of thinking but couldn't deny that guilt was still a big part of what I felt. I pushed aside my feelings for the moment and asked Carrick, "What happened to Madeleine? Is she dead as well?"

He looked unhappy when he replied, "No. She was able to flee. That damn woman has more lives than a cat and much more luck than she deserves!"

I knew that we were lucky to have survived the day, but Madeleine's escape put a damper on my thankfulness. She wouldn't leave us alone until either she or we were dead. Eileen's voice brought me out of my heavy thoughts.

She said, "Lass, as much as I am curious about what happened to you in the forest, we need to get moving before any of those who fled feels the need to come back with reinforcements. Do you feel able to get up?"

I slowly lifted my head from her thigh, wincing as I felt as if someone was twisting a sword in my neck. Everything hurt, but luckily it seemed to be just muscle soreness rather than serious damage. I had learned to deal with pain like that the hard way in my past, but this knowledge didn't diminish the actual unpleasant experience.

"To be honest, I feel as if a wall fell on me," I muttered.

“Well, there is not so much difference between some warriors and a wall,” Carrick said, holding out both hands out to help me up. Only partially successful in suppressing several groans, I finally leaned on him while Eileen got up herself. She didn’t seem to be in a much better condition as her movements were stiff, far from her usual gracefulness. Her shirt was cut in more places than I remembered and drenched in an alarming amount of blood.

Eileen reached behind the tree she had been leaning against and handed me my staff. “I am really looking forward to hearing how you came into the possession of LiveWood.”

I took the staff, thankful to be able to use it as a prop, and replied, “Well, our friend *sean coille* was involved.”

Eileen nodded. “That is good to hear. We will need him when negotiating with the *sidhe draoi*.” With that she turned around, looking over where the other warriors stood with their horses. One horse had a corpse draped over the saddle — I guessed it was Dechtire.

There was another body hanging over a different horse’s saddle; he seemed very much dead to me as well, but I was wrong. Eileen saw my questioning look and said with a hard voice, “That is one of Madeleine’s warriors. He’s wounded but alive. Maybe we will be able to probe some answers out of him later.”

Carrick had a grim determination on his face. It chilled me when he answered, “Aye, I look forward to helping him loosen his tongue.”

I didn’t know how I felt about this. Torture was not foreign to this world; that much had been made obvious when Madeleine told me in gory detail what she intended to do with me. My blood ran cold remembering her words, even though I knew that we weren’t in immediate danger any more. If Madeleine knew how to use torture, I shouldn’t be too surprised that Eileen did as well.

Why shouldn’t she? Torture was a common practice in my old world, although nobody said so openly. I wasn’t absolutely starry-eyed, being an avid reader of newspapers and magazines that covered what happened all over the globe. Whether I liked it or not, torture was a reality everywhere, only here among the *sidhe* I was much closer to those practicing it. What

honestly scared me was that I didn't feel upset at the thought of torturing an enemy. While my head still told me that torture was wrong, my gut told me that it would be the right and just thing to do.

There was a primal urge inside of me that was unknown. I discovered I wanted to take revenge, and that scared me. I had been on the receiving end of abuse myself over a longer period of time, and even today I felt a lot like a victim, helpless and afraid of the weirdest things. Looking back on everything I had gone through since seeing Eileen's painting for the first time, I realized that I had changed.

Some days ago, I wouldn't have been able to act as I had done today. I wasn't sure if my transformation was the main reason, or if there were more facets to it, and I was anxious about how much more change I might experience. There were so many questions running through my head. How much would being not entirely human affect me? Would I change in ways I wouldn't like, unable to stop the transformation? Or would I become more myself, previously hidden aspects of my personality coming to the fore? Only time would tell.

I glanced at Cinnia to get my mind on other things. The distraction worked as I had no idea how I was supposed to be able to ride home, since everything hurt. My chagrin must have shown on my face as Eileen said while hugging me close to her, "I am not going to enjoy the ride as well." She sighed. "Both our bodies have endured a lot and are in desperate need of some good rest and Lena's healing herbs. But still, we need to get out of the forest as fast as possible and riding is the only available option." I groaned and Eileen continued: "But it is going to be easier for you if you'll sit in front, believe me."

I didn't really believe that this would make much of a difference. "How long will it take us to get home?" I asked, already afraid of the answer.

"If nothing happens we should be able to make it within an hour or so," Eileen said. She let out a short whistle, causing Cinnia to trot over to where we stood waiting. The big horse stopped in front of me and gently lipped at my face, clearly happy to see me. The feeling was mutual but her affection was too wet to endure for long. I took a step back to get out of her reach, but to compensate I began to rub Cinnia's soft nose, unable to suppress a grin when it

was obvious that she enjoyed my touch. Who would have thought... maybe the beast and I would become friends after all, and that would be a nice improvement, indeed.

When Eileen mounted, her stiffness was proof that she was not well as she was barely able to make it in the saddle on her first try. The day had surely taken its toll on both of us, and I was still not sure if we would be able to make it through a one hour ride, but there was no alternative. I allowed Carrick help me up, and tried to get as comfortable as possible, sitting side-saddle in front of Eileen and leaning against her. Even though this position was probably better than sitting behind her, it was still far from comfortable or painless. Every movement, every jolt, caused my bruised and battered body to hurt all over.

After handing me my staff, Carrick whistled for his own horse and mounted with an ease that made me envious. As soon as he was in the saddle, he gave the order to start our ride back to the manor. Eileen and I took our place in the middle of the small group, all the warriors surrounding us in a way that would make it easy to protect us if we should be attacked on the way.

It was an awful journey and I had no attention to spare for our surroundings. We didn't have time to ride slowly enough for me to adjust to Cinnia's movements. I hurt and had a hard time keeping quiet about it, since every so often a groan escaped me.

Amazingly enough, despite my severe discomfort, I must have dozed off at some point, too exhausted from the day's activities and the pain I had to endure to remain awake any longer. Oblivious to the rest of the journey, I woke up when I was being handed down into Lena's arms. We had arrived in front of the manor.

"Hello, sleepyhead," Lena said, cradling me as if I was a child and not a grown woman. She whispered some words that I had heard before from Eileen, weaving her gentle magic and causing some of my pain to go away. It was bliss.

I tried to smile at her and said, "You know, you can let me down, Lena," feeling stupid and useless for not being able to stand on my own feet. I sure would be able to walk on my own.

Monika appeared next to Lena with a blanket in her hand and would have none of that, saying, “Don’t you dare to let her down. She needs to be in bed!”

So I was resigned to my fate, knowing that there was no way fighting Lena and Monika at the same time. Although I didn’t want to fall asleep again, that was just what happened, my head cushioned on Lena’s shoulder with the knowledge that all would be well now that we’d made it safely home.

## Part 9

Herbs in the planting beds scented the air, attracting a cloud of insects, most of which were buzzing around a huge lavender bush. Sitting on a bench nearby, I enjoyed their sound, the garden's fragrance and the light breeze that created soft rattling noises when it shook the plants that were already fading with the approach of autumn. It had not taken me long to find this bench when I was wandering around the grounds of the manor looking for a place of solitude. Today had been hard for me; watching Monika go off to Germany while I stayed behind had been difficult. It wasn't that I regretted the decision to stay with Eileen and leave my old life behind, not at all. It was just the finality of Monika's leaving that hit me hard.

The drive back from the airport had been a quiet one. Eileen had given me sidelong glances from time to time but respected my wish for silence. I was thankful that driving the car had given me something to occupy my mind; the typically narrow winding roads of Ireland were a challenge for every driver not born here. As soon as the car was parked in the manor's garage, I went off, needing to spend some time on my own. Sitting in the garden had done me worlds of good; I felt more settled and in tune with my feelings once again.

The light breeze began to turn chilly as the sun slowly vanished behind the forest. Still, I couldn't find enough energy to leave this place, caught as I was in my memories. The last three days had gone by in a rush. Lena had forced Eileen to stay in bed for an entire day, serving her lots of different herb and blood cocktails to help her regain her strength. As might be expected, Eileen was a lousy patient, constantly complaining about being treated like a baby. In the end, Lena had given up and didn't object when Eileen got out of bed and marched off to the dungeon to participate in the prisoner's interrogation.

I, on the other hand, spent an extra day in bed, gratefully drinking everything Lena served me, even some blood. I was totally aware of what I was drinking, contrary to the first time where I had felt as if a spell had been put on me. Although I hadn't been keen to drink the red liquid Lena offered, I had to admit that it quickened my healing tremendously. Nevertheless, I was happy that the portion of blood had been small. Not because the taste had been abhorrent; it was more of a mental 'yuck' thing, like imagining having to eat grilled monkey's brains or a goat's eyeball.

I sighed and felt something soft rubbing against my knee. Looking down, I found myself gazing into Tóraí's yellow eyes, my faithful companion during my time of recovery. Now the cat meowed and butted my knee with her head, impatiently ordering me to scratch her behind the ears. I was quite sure it was Eileen's doing that Tóraí had shadowed me into the garden, but I had to admit that I enjoyed the comforting warmth of a purring feline on my feet, her favourite place to rest.

Absently obeying Tóraí's demand by scratching her special itchy places, I let my gaze wander, taking in the details of the manor's garden. I wasn't really into herbs but knew enough to be able to recognize some sophisticated ones like foxglove, of which there was a surprising amount. I also recognized some of the more common herbs like parsley and chives, which I had used myself when preparing meals to share with Monika. But I also saw some herbs I didn't know, and I had no idea why a lot of different ferns were scattered in the darker and probably moister areas of the garden. Anyhow, the garden was beautiful and produced an energy which did me good. It was as if the herbs effected me in a positive way just from sitting here and enjoying this marvellous place.

Even deep in thought, I felt someone approaching, knowing that it had to be Lena before I even saw her. This heightened sense thing sure came in handy, I thought. Looking up, I saw Lena leaning against a wooden post, holding two steaming mugs in her hands. I smiled and waved her closer, saying, "I promise I won't bite your head off."

Lena approached me smiling, and sat down next to me on the bench, handing me one of the mugs. "I thought you would like some nice hot tea by now. It sure got chilly out here some while ago," she said.

I took the mug with both hands, thankful for the warmth, realizing that I was indeed freezing. Lena asked in a gentle voice, "Are you feeling better, little one?"

I didn't even try to stifle a sigh, answering honestly, "I don't know. Even though I knew that Monika would leave today, it was strange to see her go without me."

"I know; it must be have been hard for you, but she promised to be back again at Solstice and bring you some ... what was it called? 'Stollen' or such?"

I nodded and took another sip of the honey sweetened tea. I knew that Christmas or Solstice, as Lena named it, wasn't that far away. It was just that I felt this particular day marked the end of my old life with an aching finality. I wouldn't want it any other way, yet there remained a pain inside me, a wrenching hurt that I couldn't and didn't want to suppress.

We continued to sit on the bench in comfortable silence while dusk finally began to settle in. Both of us were listening to the last remaining insects buzzing around when suddenly an owl flew nearby, causing Tóraí to leave her place at my feet, thundering after the bird, probably envying the owl for the rodent it was going to catch. The manor and its grounds were Tóraí's territory, and I was sure that the owl would learn a lesson tonight.

I bumped my elbow into Lena's side, causing her to jump a bit this time. "She really is a bit territorial, isn't she?" I asked.

Lena laughed and got up, offering me her hand. "Come on, little one. I don't want you to catch a cold just after you and the thickheaded lady of the manor have recovered from your latest adventure."

I joined her, both of us walking slowly to the door that led into the kitchen, when Lena added, "Oh, by the way... I was asked to inform you that if you wanted a hot bath, there is one already drawn. Furthermore, I think I heard that the mistress decided that a bath would do her good as well." She winked at me and I felt a pleasant shiver running down my spine.

The truth was that the fight with the *sidhe draoi* and Madeleine had drained more than its fair share of energy from both of us, leaving us physically and emotionally exhausted. That ordeal and Monika's departure had left the two of us no room or time to explore our relationship further. Eileen and I had slept in each other's arms, but that had been it. Unfortunately.

I had not forgotten about the shared bath since Eileen had mentioned it the first time. At that moment, I felt a wave of arousal washing over me that at the same time made me feel energetic and shy at the thought of Eileen waiting for me in the bathtub, naked.

I didn't say anything but bid goodnight to Lena when we reached the kitchen. She shuffled to the sink with a satisfied smile, clattering the empty mugs into the sink. I proceeded to the stairs, feeling a bit funny that Lena knew what would happen tonight. Maybe happen. Hopefully happen.

I walked up the stairs and down the corridor, greeted by a spicy smell that wavered in the air, an intoxicating scent of oranges and cinnamon. Slowly entering the bedroom, I heard a muffled sound coming from behind the closed bathroom door. Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves, I cracked open the door and was absolutely stunned. I had never heard Eileen sing before, but wasn't really surprised that she was able to keep a tune and had a very sexy voice. What really threw me was the way the bathroom had changed from functional to amazing; lit candles were scattered around and created a wonderful warm light, and the smell of sweet and spicy herbs lingered, produced by the steam rising from the water. Bunches of beautiful flowers were lying all over the floor. It was a deeply romantic setting. I felt tears threatening to fall because never before someone had done something like this for me.

While I tried to compose myself, Eileen started a new song and this time I was able to make out the lyrics though I was highly distracted by the sight of a very naked Eileen sitting in the sunken tub. Her hair was wet and looked even darker as usual, and her body glistened from the droplets of water running down her incredible body. She was washing her arms rather sensually with a sponge while she sang:

*The time I've lost in wooing, in watching and pursuing,  
The light that lies in woman's eyes has been my heart's undoing.  
Tho' Wisdom oft has sought me, I scorned the lore she brought me,  
My only books were women's looks, and folly's all they've taught me!*

*Her smile when Beauty granted, I hung with gaze enchanted,  
Like him, the Sprite, Whom maid by night, oft meet in glen that's haunted.  
Like him, too, Beauty won me, but while her eyes were on me,  
If once their ray was turned away, O! winds could not outrun me.*

*And are those follies going? And is my proud heart growing  
Too cold or wise for brilliant eyes again to set it glowing?*

*No - vain, alas! th' endeavor from bonds so sweet to sever;  
Poor wisdom's chance against a glance is now as weak as ever.*<sup>5</sup>

The singing stopped and I realized that Eileen was looking at me with her head cocked to one side, her blue eyes twinkling warmly. “Hello, lass,” she said.

I was so caught up in the sight of her that I was only able to stammer: “I... I ...you are beautiful.” I felt my face growing blisteringly hot with embarrassment.

Eileen’s voice was even lower as usual when she drawled, “Why, thank you, Julia. Would you maybe care to join me?”

I couldn’t move, I couldn’t speak, but I was more than able to make an idiot out of myself. “Ugh,” was all I was able to articulate while I continued my imitation of a stone statue. Eileen’s skin looked like bronze or gold in the candlelight, her long black hair cascaded around her shoulders and her eyes, those eyes...

Sweat was dripping down my forehead, and the heat I felt was not only caused by the room’s sultry temperature. There was a fight going on inside of me. On the one hand, I wanted nothing more than to tear off my clothes and jump into the water-filled tub, getting as close to this vision of beauty as possible. I wanted to feel her and touch her and never let go of her again. But on the other hand, I felt trapped because deep inside me was still a part that couldn’t believe that Eileen would find me suitable as a mate. Even worse, how could she possibly enjoy sex with me? Suddenly I felt very ugly and heard a voice of my past whispering in my head: *no one finds you desirable. You are used goods and a lousy lover.* I wanted to turn around and run away as far and as fast as possible.

Eileen’s voice held me captive when she said, “Julia, look at me, please. I want to suggest something, alright?”

I nodded and looked at her as she asked, still feeling slightly ill.

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<sup>5</sup> The words of Eileen’s song were written by Thomas Moore (to an old Irish air *Pease Upon a Trencher*).

“Julia, why don’t I turn around until you are undressed and in the water with me. This tub is really big enough and what I said to you is still true — I won’t do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.” She held out her strong arms, muscles flexing, and crooked her fingers in a gesture of invitation when she continued, “But I am sure that you will be able to enjoy a bath before going to bed, don’t you agree?”

Undress? Naked? Me? For a moment I wondered if now would be a good time to faint. Instead, I successfully moved my feet to enter the bathroom, closing the door behind me. Eileen was still patiently waiting for an answer. I took a deep breath, acknowledging to myself that the situation was far better than any fantasy I ever had. Eileen had never shown me anything beside warmth and acceptance, and remembering our last make-out session, I knew that my fear of rejection was stupid.

I decided to throw my caution overboard and listen only to my heart, asking, “Would you wash my back if I joined you?”

If possible her smile grew even brighter and she nodded, turning around. My God, she was a vision, and the emotions I felt from her through our bond were intensifying my own, nearly causing my knees to buckle. I steadied myself with a hand on the wall before I carefully stepped out of my shoes. My trousers and shirt followed and I laid both carefully over a wooden bench, next to Eileen’s clothes. My bra and my briefs were next, and then I was ready to join her, just not sure how as I looked for a way to get into that huge tub.

“Eileen?” I asked to get her attention.

“Yes, lass?” she purred.

I felt a certain part of my body responding to that sound, and swallowed against a suddenly dry mouth. “Ah, how do I get in the tub without drowning myself?”

“I would never let you drown, but I guess you wouldn’t want me to turn around before you are inside the tub, right?” she asked.

I nodded, but realized that she was not able to see what I was doing and was about to answer verbally when she suddenly said, “I thought so.”

How? Oh, the little shit! “Eileen, you are cheating!” I cried.

She mumbled something under her breath. I was close to throwing one of the candles at her before I decided that my first priority was to cover my naked body with a towel..

“You said you wouldn’t look!” I complained.

“I didn’t. I just said that I wouldn’t turn around.”

I could clearly visualize her pout and had a hard time staying angry, but I was not letting her off the hook so soon. “You are busted! Now turn around and help me in the damn tub before I freeze to death!”

She complied immediately and turned around, facing me. I let the towel fall to the floor, my whole body growing hot under her gaze. Her smoldering gaze was like fire on my skin. I fidgeted until she finally reached out her hand, saying in a gentle voice as if speaking to a spooked horse ready to bolt, “There is a small step, be careful.”

I took her hand and after fumbling a moment, found the step. The warmth of the water on my body was pure bliss to my sore muscles. I kept hold of her hand and looked straight into her eyes, saying, “Eileen, I trusted you not to look. That wasn’t fair. You know how hard this is for me.”

This time I didn’t need to visualize the pout. Her mouth was a shape made for kissing. “But Julia, I am only human,” she said, “and I really like what I saw.”

“You are not human at all, you, you...” Oh, I had no idea what to call her and simply splashed water into her face without further warning. She didn’t hesitate long before taking revenge, and after a very short time there was a lot less water in the tub, the floor was soaked, and both of us were dripping wet when we agreed to call it a tie, shouting with laughter.

That was fun.

All of a sudden I was very aware of the fact that the water now only reached Eileen's waist. My view was drawn to her full breasts and the marvelous tribal tattoos circling both her upper arms. Eileen wasn't shy about the fact that we were sitting close to each other. She bent forward slightly to smooth the wet bangs out of my eyes, while at the same time bringing her breasts closer to my body. I had a hard time processing her question when she asked, "Would that be a good time to start washing our back, sweetheart?"

"I would like that, but Eileen... I... there are some scars and I..." Again, I felt unable to form a coherent sentence.

"Julia, look at me."

I slowly lifted my gaze. Eileen went on, "Julia, there is no need to feel ashamed or think you are less beautiful because of scars. I have several on my body as you will see. In my view, scars are proof that you were strong enough to survive a terrible event, and every warrior wears them with pride, so you should do the same."

Once more, she was able to touch my heart and soul with her words. Instead of answering her, I turned around, making myself vulnerable, granting her an unhindered view of my back. The next thing I felt were her soapy hands making slow and soothing circles from my shoulder blades to just above my buttocks. Her touch was warm and feather light, and I felt my anxiety fall away, replaced by a tingling sensation that shot down my spine and went right to the center of my being. Every touch she gave me made my arousal build higher and higher until I felt the urge to tilt my neck, granting her easy access to the sensitive area of my throat. Eileen responded with a deep growl that vibrated straight through me. She started to nip my pulse point, pressing her bare breasts against my back. The feelings drove me crazy and caused my nipples to harden in response.

"Please," I groaned, feeling my fangs grow longer. "Please, please, Eileen," I repeated, not knowing myself what I was begging for.

“Shh, sweetheart.” Eileen placed tiny kisses on my upper back, holding me nestled close and caressing my ear with her hot breath. “I don’t want to hurry,” she said. “As much as I want you, Julia, and believe me that I really do... we don’t have to do anything tonight that goes beyond what we are doing now.”

“What? You have no idea what you are exactly doing to me!” I felt like hitting her for wanting to talk when all I wanted her to do was to make love to me, to make me hers completely, to bite me, to drink my blood, to be one with her.

Eileen chuckled dryly, her mouth still close to my ear. The sound made me shiver. “Oh, I do have a very good idea if it is close to what you are doing to me,” she said. “But I do want to go slow. I want us to get used to each other and to each other’s body. I don’t want you to regret anything and I don’t want you to feel obligated.”

I turned around in her arms and cupped one of her breasts in my hand, feeling the nipple harden against my palm. I ran my other hand over her belly, the muscles clenching under my touch. “Feeling obligated? Are you nuts?” I whispered.

She moaned with pleasure when I played with one of her firm breasts, tugging the nipple and squeezing it gently. Our roles were reversed and I was the one in power, and it felt amazing to know that I was the one making her writhe with need. Eileen’s fangs were showing, a sure sign that she was losing control. I knew that we were walking close to a line that I wanted to cross tonight, so I continued my sensuous assault on her, fully aware of the fact that I had never before been the one to take the initiative in love play. With her, it just felt natural.

I loved the feel of Eileen’s body; she was all firm muscle covered by skin that felt as smooth as silk. Nothing had ever given me more pleasure than seeing her arousal so clearly written on her face. Nothing had ever been more important to me than to make her understand what I wanted right now. I stopped my wandering hands, causing her to groan in protest.

She opened her eyes and gave me a heavy-lidded gaze, murmuring: “Don’t tease me like that.”

I smiled and let my hands wander anew before stopping again. She growled, breathing heavily. When I felt that I had her full attention, I said, “Do you want me to stop? Cause I sure don’t.”

She closed the distance between us, her wet body gliding against mine, and dropped a soft kiss on my mouth. “Are you sure?” she asked.

My nerves were burning and my brain was empty of thought, but somehow I was still able to respond, “Sure... absolutely sure.” The delicious heat of her flesh against mine made me relax, and I let her take over again. I rested my hands on her shoulders, feeling her muscles flex under my touch. She bowed her head and took one of my nipples into her mouth, twirling her tongue around it; my whole body throbbed in response. My head lolled back and my eyes closed involuntarily, never before had I known such pleasure, never before did I feel like I was being cherished, worshipped, loved.

I breathed, “Don’t stop, don’t...” I didn’t want to lose any of these wonderful sensations. Her tongue left my body and I groaned, “No!” feeling betrayed. Opening my eyes to see what she was up to, I hoped that she would continue what she started.

Eileen smiled down at me, bending forward to brush first my lower lip and then both of my fangs with her tongue. Heat washed over me like a red wave before she withdrew again. She was driving me absolutely crazy! *Payback is a bitch*, I thought.

But Eileen wasn’t unaffected herself. Her face was flushed and her voice sultry when she said, “Lass, let us take this into the bedroom. We’ll be more comfortable there.”

I replied, “I am comfortable, honestly,” with a bit of desperation, not feeling the need to change places. Despite my protest, I felt myself lifted up, water trickling off my body. Gasping, I threw my arms around her neck as Eileen carried me carefully out of the bathtub and over to our bedroom, grabbing some towels on her way. For a moment I was surprised that I didn’t feel cold after being out of the warm water, but I quickly forgot about that when Eileen began to shower every little part of me she was able to reach with kisses, never allowing the heat inside me to diminish.

Next I was lowered gently on the bed. My breathing grew erratic when Eileen took one of the towels and began to slowly, oh so very slowly dry me with the soft material, deliberately lingering on some places. I was torn between cursing her and cheering her on, but more than everything I wanted to touch her, I needed to touch her.

She denied me the wish, pressing my arms gently but firmly to my sides and saying, “No. This is just about you, Julia. My pleasure will be for you to enjoy.”

With that she lay the towel aside and started a leisure exploration of the front of my body, cupping my breasts with her callused hands, taking her time playing and softly pinching my nipples. I was tingling from head to foot, feeling a strange kind of energy running through me, and thought I would die if I didn’t find release soon. Seemingly unaffected by my whimpers and moans, Eileen kept her slow pace, only chuckling a bit when I cursed her.

“You know lass, you have the most perfects breasts. So soft, so wonderful,” she said before gently latching unto my nipples with her fangs. The brief burst of pain turned immediately into indescribable pleasure, and I felt the wetness between my legs multiplying in response. Eileen continued nibbling my nipple so sweetly with her fangs until I arched up against her, reaching out a hand to touch her back and wanting to draw myself closer. Once again, she took hold of both of my hands and brought them up over my head, pinning them to the bed.

The shudder I felt this time wasn’t a pleasant one, bile rose up my throat. I felt trapped. A nightmare of my past was threatening to overcome me as I remembered in a flash the last time I had been in exactly the same position with someone else looming over me — Jennifer hurting me solely for her pleasure, not stopping even so I begged her. No safe word, just violence and pain that didn’t end when I passed out, as she told me later with cruel amusement. I felt sick. Out of habit long practiced, I did now what had helped me survive in the past: I closed down, fled to the one safe place within me that nobody could reach, stopped feeling and stopped seeing, and began to pretend it wasn’t me being abused.

Unlike the other times, I felt someone coming after me, a gentle presence, a soothing voice that was calming to my frayed nerves. Although I was still afraid, I realized that it was a familiar voice calling me back through our bond. I was hesitant to respond at first, but her

summoning became more insistent while remaining non-threatening. Somehow I understood it was Eileen's voice that was penetrating my shelter, and I willed myself to emerge from it.

Remaining gripped by fear, I carefully opened my eyes, unsure what I would find. I saw Eileen staring down at me with concern. "Julia, did I hurt you? Are you okay?" she asked.

My own voice sounded foreign to my ears when I said with great effort, "I... I need a minute, please." *Shit!* Would there ever be a time I would be free of the demons of my past? I grabbed one of the blankets lying around and used it to cover my nudity, ashamed that I obviously hadn't been able to distinguish between Eileen's and Jennifer's touch.

Eileen said in a soft voice, "Don't shut me out, Julia. Please."

I stifled a hysterical laugh and said, "I am a basket case, Eileen. That's it, plain and simple."

Her blue eyes gleamed with gentleness when she asked, "Why do you think so? Tell me."

For a moment I fought with myself, not sure if and how much I should tell her. So far Eileen only knew part of my past and how I had been abused by Jennifer, but there were things I hadn't told her. Despite feeling stupid and ashamed about my panic attack, I decided to tell Eileen about my flashback and about my past experiences with intimacy. I felt that I owed her that much after destroying what had started out as a night of pleasure. After my first tentative sentences, Eileen tenderly probed for more. Everything tumbled out, the whole story. It wasn't easy and I felt embarrassed about some of the things I told her.

Eileen listened patiently without interrupting. She lay stretched out next to me with a hand on my stomach, caressing my face with her other hand as if she understood I needed the contact to assure me she was really there. It helped me to feel her soothing touch as I stammered my sorry tale.

When I finished, Eileen said calmly, "Thank you for trusting me with all this. And let me tell you something: you are no basket case. You are a woman who overcame a demon I wouldn't have wanted to fight against. I'm not sure I have survived. You are a very brave person, Julia,

and I am honored that you trust me so much. I do love you!” She leaned over and gave me a careful kiss, clearly not wanting to spook me.

Tears were pooling in my eyes. It didn’t sound as if she thought little of me or was disgusted about the thought of touching me. The ice clenching around my heart began to melt.

Though I was exhausted, I was truly relieved not only by Eileen’s words, but by the love and the righteous anger that was coming from her through our link. The love was for me, the anger was directed towards Jennifer, the person who had violated me for so many years. Once again, I blessed the bond we shared that made it so much easier for me to figure what was going on in Eileen’s mind; I knew I could trust what I felt flowing from her.

For a moment we stayed quiet, just content to be close to each other. I was absorbing what she had said, and she was looking at me with an incredible tenderness that was like a caress for my soul. Eileen finally broke the silence, saying, “Lass, what do you say if we just go to sleep? I can only guess how tired you are and I would very much like to hold you if I may.”

I nodded and replied, “I would like that very much. I love you, Eileen.”

Eileen covered us both with the blanket and I cuddled into her as her strong arms surrounded me, making me feel safe like nowhere else. I began to understand in my heart that she was the one place I could flee to when I needed a safe harbor. Eileen was my shelter. With my head resting on her shoulder, I thought again about what had happened earlier. I had enjoyed Eileen’s touch, heck, more than enjoyed it until the point when I experienced that terrifying flashback. I wiggled around a bit, thinking about how much power my past still had in my life and how much I abhorred that fact. I wanted to control how I felt about my past, now allow bad memories to control me. I knew that telling Eileen about what had happened to me was a way of putting to rest the shame and the loneliness that continued to plague me. I had told her things I haven’t even told my therapist. But still...

I made a decision and asked shyly, “Eileen, are you asleep?”

“No. How could I with you wriggling around like a young dog?” she replied.

I had to clear my throat before I could go on. “Can I touch you?” I asked.

It took a moment before she replied, “Julia, you don’t have to ask. I am always more than willing to be touched by you. I belong to you.” She paused briefly before continuing, “But maybe it would be better if we just went to sleep now, lass.”

“I am exhausted, that is true.” How could I explain? Searching for words, I said haltingly, “But I need this. I need to leave the past behind, I need to feel like I’m the one in control of it. Please, Eileen.”

She nodded and I closed the scant distance between us. For a while we simply kissed each other, slowly and with more tenderness than passion. It was such a relief to feel love flowing so freely between us, love freely given and received.

Soon our kisses deepened as desire took hold and the atmosphere around us began to change. This felt cleaner to me, the ghosts of my past beginning to lose their substance. I tentatively withdraw my lips from hers and started to touch Eileen in earnest, running my fingers down her sides, stopping from time to time to kiss a particularly sensitive spot or one of her scars. I watched with fascination the way goosebumps followed the trail of my fingers on her skin. It didn’t take long before she began to writhe under my touch, but she made no move to interfere in what I was doing. She allowed me to take the lead, something unknown to me. I cherished this gift very much.

A wave of her arousal drifted to my nose, a scent like earth and spice. The fragrance made my mouth water. I couldn’t keep from telling her, saying, “You smell so good.”

Eileen gazed at me with passion-darkened eyes and said breathlessly, “You could smell it much better if you were closer to the source, now, wouldn’t you?”

I laughed but I had other plans and avoided the source of the mouthwatering scent. Instead, I settled in the cradle of her thighs and swirled my tongue around her jugular vein, remembering how much I had wanted to have her mouth there earlier. The lazy circles I drew with my tongue drove Eileen absolutely wild. She started to whimper every time I bit down a bit with my fangs, not actually drawing blood but just teasing little nips. I was far from

unaffected myself. The longer I touched her, the more of her I tasted, the more aroused I became. To be the one in control really did it for me. I felt safe and loved, and the way Eileen reacted to my touch made me also feel sexy and powerful, “Eileen, look at me,” I said, stopping for a moment. She opened her eyes, hazy with arousal. “Eileen, I love you. I love your body. So strong, yet so utterly soft,” I said. “Will you let me make love to you?”

“Goddess, yes,” she breathed in reply. From this point on, I knew the house would have to be on fire before I could stop. I slid down her body, taking the time to kiss her firm smooth belly before continuing my journey further south. There was little hesitation in what I did, since I simply did to her what I had always dreamed of someone doing to me. I pressed kisses over her hips and the tops of her thighs while Eileen’s hands tangled in my hair; careful not to pull. All the while, inviting whimpers rose from her throat.

In a low voice I asked, “You like what I do?” She only nodded in reply and so I continued.

Very slowly I dipped a couple of my fingers into her wetness, fascinated by the smoothness of her inner walls. Jennifer had never allowed me to touch her so intimately. Eileen’s immediate reaction was a growl that came from deep within her chest, vibrating through her whole body and into mine. If there ever had been any kind of doubt in my mind about her being hot for me... well. I didn’t have that doubt any more. Looking up at her face while I moved my fingers around, I saw that her mouth was open and her fangs were elongating from the pleasure. Eileen’s tongue played around them, flicking her fangs in sync to what I did to her.

I pressed my fingers deeper into her, marveling at the slickness, and heard her needy whimpers as she got even wetter. Never before had I felt such an intensity of love, lust and control. I began to grind my own hips into the mattress, seeking to relieve a bit of the pressure that had begun to build between my legs. The smell of Eileen’s arousal had multiplied while I continued to caress her sensitive flesh, stroking and teasing her, while all the while my own pleasure was cresting higher and higher. Eileen’s scent made me feel intoxicated, and through our link I felt that she was close to release. Her breathing had grown erratic and her whimpers came in a constant rush.

I could have taken more time, could have been a bit more playful, but I felt driven to continue bringing her to release, loving her. There would be other opportunities to go slow and to get to

know her body better. I felt that she liked what I did to her; hell, the smell and the sounds coming from her were proof of that. I continued my lovemaking and became even bolder.

When I touched her clitoris with the fingers of my other hand, Eileen growled, “Don’t stop. But inside... keep touching me there. I need you to stay inside. Please.”

I carefully worked the fingers inside her while continuing to make slow circles around her clitoris. It didn’t take long before I felt her inner muscles clenching around me. Her body jerked and twitched in a sensual dance on the mattress before she released a feral roar that nearly caused me fall over the edge with her. She was so beautiful, her whole body flushed and sweaty, still trembling from little aftershocks and absolutely desirable. I took the blanket and covered us before crawling up her body and wrapping myself around her. I listened to her fast and steady heartbeat under my ear, feeling absolutely swollen with happiness. I was more than a little bit proud about what I had accomplished.

“Lass,” Eileen said hoarsely, “you nearly killed me, but what a way to go...”

“I take it you liked what I did?” I asked smiling, trying to forget about my own itching ache.

“Liked? Liked isn’t the right word.” She turned in my arms until we were face to face and beamed at me. “I can’t tell you how much I am looking forward to a long life with you. And not only because of your cute nose.”

She dropped long lingering kisses on my collarbone that made me aware of the increasing pressure between my legs. I couldn’t stop a small whimper escaping my throat. Eileen turned me over on my back. Feeling her warm breath on my ear, she growled, “I would very much like to return the favor if you could trust me enough.” Her eyes were filled with love and a playfulness that sent a pleasant shiver down my spine.

Could I trust her? Yes. The more important question was: could I trust myself? Would I ever find out without trying? I replied, “Yes, I trust you. The only thing I ask of you is to be gentle... but not too much.”

Eileen weaved a special kind of magic. She was the most gentle lover, assuring me all the time of how much she loved me and how beautiful she found my body. Asking me if I liked what she did and what I would prefer. I was able to relax more and more, finally giving myself wholly to her. It wasn't easy for me to let go, but in the end, I found the release I sought so desperately. Both of us were left spent and satisfied and happy.

I stayed awake a while, Eileen quietly snoring next to me, wondering about everything that had happened since I came to Ireland. Thinking about how much had my life changed. I felt as if a weight had been taken from my shoulders and could truly say that whatever the fates would throw in my way in the future, I felt that I would be able to cope. Not alone, not easily; I wasn't self-delusional, but together with Eileen and her love, I knew at long last my life felt like it was worth living.

**THE END**