

# The SUBTLE BEAUTY



Ann Hunter

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The Subtle Beauty / By Ann Hunter

ISBN-10: 0989203425

ISBN-13: 978-0-9892034-2-5

### Author's Note

Thank you for downloading The Subtle Beauty!

Within these pages are creatures inspired by Celtic mythology, along with a dash of Celtic language.

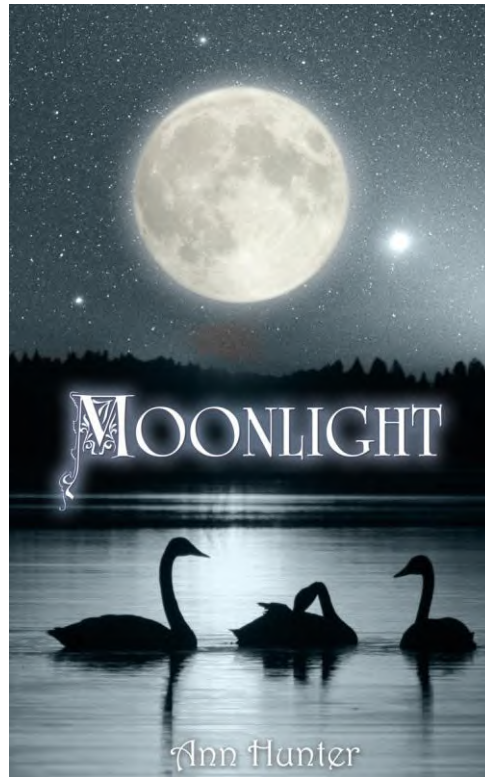
For your convenience and reading enjoyment, I have included a pronunciation and translation guide at the back of the book.

Enjoy the story, and remember....

*There's no such thing as monsters.*

~

*Be sure to stay tuned after the conclusion of The Subtle Beauty for an exciting preview of Ann Hunter's upcoming novel, [Moonlight](#)!*



“....for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

-- 1 Sam, 16:7

## Part I

### BLADE OF WOE

This is the story of a man and a monster, but really it is the tale of a blade...

In a black castle on the cliff tops by the sea, near the high moors of Sigil's Gate, the Celtic Princess, Aowyn, snuggled close to her dark-haired husband. He slung his arm over her wide belly. She smiled as he bowed his head and buried his face in her copper hair, breathing deeply. The child in her womb squirmed. Aowyn grasped her husband's hand and placed it over the baby's kicking.

"Do you feel that?"

"Mmm." He freckled her neck with kisses.

Aowyn giggled as the baby became more active. "He likes you."

"How do you know it is a he?"

Aowyn chewed her lower lip. She didn't know. What if she let her royal family across the sea down by failing to produce a male? Worse, what if she let her husband down? "The baby is so strong, like you, Xander. I always assumed it was a boy."

"Let us hope."

Aowyn stared into the darkness for a long time. Tables and chairs were rough shadows, save for where moonlight bounced off the edges. The peace in the room lulled her. Her vision blurred in a sleepy half-consciousness, until a voice, none which she had heard before, took her attention.

*"Aowyn, daughter of Aodhagáin, hear me."*

Aowyn's eyes widened, and she propped herself up on one elbow. "Did you hear that, Xander? Someone is in the room..." she looked over her shoulder, but Xander was frozen in time. Aowyn began to tremble. "Who's there?"

*"Be not afraid, young one, for we bear glad tidings."*

Aowyn slowly pushed back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Who are you?"

*"Step into the light and know us better."*

Aowyn was filled with doubt. Slowly she moved to the stretch of moonlight that reached through the room.

"Aowyn..." as her name was spoken, the pale light became blinding. She had never seen such glory, for it was brighter than the noon-day sun. Gradually her vision returned, and the warmth of spring grass, dotted with little yellow flowers, tickled her senses. The light remained around her, as pure as an artist's canvas, save for this little haven of green and yellow.

The voice became many now, in a rush of hushed murmurs, like the caress of a soft breeze. *"The child you bear will one day be great. See him now."*

The canvas of light swirled in to many colors, taking on depth and definition. Aowyn's heart swelled as a broad-shouldered man, clad in royal purple, descended a

gilded staircase toward her. His amber eyes were startling and held a knowing twinkle. His hair was like the setting autumn sun.

*"Behold Eoghan, prince of the future Crown Realm."*

Aowyn reached out to the image, wanting so desperately to touch this young man with Xander's stature and her nature. He smiled at her boyishly, then vanished.

The light faded. Aowyn's heart raced, her breathing increased. "Wait."

The grass and the flowers shriveled into empty space. She shook her head.

"No. Wait. I want to see him again. Gods, why taunt me so?"

But the voices were gone, and Aowyn was in her bed.

Xander's hand rested over her belly. The baby squirmed.

"Do you feel that?" she asked.

"Mmm." He freckled her nape with kisses. The baby became more active.

Aowyn giggled. "He likes you."

"He." Xander breathed in his wife's lovely scent. "How do you know?"

Aowyn was startled when the words flowed from her without her consent.

"The gods have made it known to me." She chewed her lower lip. Was it true?

Xander propped himself up on an elbow. "The gods." He sounded incredulous.

Aowyn's shoulders rose to her ears. It was a wild statement, to be sure. Her voice was timid. "I have seen him." She rolled on to her back, glowing with excitement. "Oh, Xander, he is beautiful!"

Xander flopped over and rubbed his face. Aowyn slipped her arm over his brawny chest. "He has your brow and shoulders. He was so big and strong. You will be proud, my love." She snuggled into his shoulder with a dreamy sigh.

Xander stared at the ceiling. A son. He wanted nothing more. But his wife was a princess, bearing a prince. A prince needed provinces to govern and kingdoms to rule. All Xander had was Blackthorn Keep. He clenched his jaw. One decrepit fortress was not enough. He had fought all of his life to retain his birthright over what very little land his family had left, but he would have to fight harder with a son on the way.

Xander's breath came in a shudder. He glanced down at Aowyn, who had nodded off. It was going to be a long, sleepless night.

Xander stood before the window the following morning, gazing at Aowyn in the black rose garden below. A blue butterfly landed on her hand, and a smile lit her face. Xander sighed, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips as he leaned against the windowsill. The sunshine warmed his bare chest and shoulders.

*A son.*

His forefathers would have given their kingdoms for sons. Perhaps that is how Blackthorn's hold had dwindled. Such a small land for a great prince to enter. It



simply would not do. Yet Xander saw no peaceable way to expand. Was there no one with whom he could form an alliance? He had fought for so long to retain what little he had, yet now he would willingly swear fealty to anyone for more.

Could he perhaps arrange a marriage? High King Balthazaar at Winterholme, far away to the northwest, had recently announced the birth of a daughter, Alexa. Xander had a feeling such a proposal would be frowned upon. Aowyn's people were newcomers to the land. Winterholme's hold was full of ancient, royal blood. Balthazaar would likely see the proposal as a taint upon his lines. Xander, alone, did not feel that way, though his bloodline ran through the land just as deeply. He had been fighting in Aowyn's country under his father's command when he, serendipitously, met and fell in love with the princess. Her father saw an opportunity to forge his own way on to a new continent and offered Aowyn to Xander as a truce between the kingdoms. Now here she was, bearing a son, and Xander had no provinces to deign to him, save for the tiny hold of Blackthorn. No doubt, once word reached Aowyn's homeland of the coming prince, great expectations would arise.

Xander shifted his weight. Perhaps Aodhagáin would send assistance. Then he remembered that his father's battle had drained the coffers of both kingdoms, and what little Aodhagáin had remaining was given with Aowyn as a meager dowry.

Xander thumped his forehead against the windowpane, closed his eyes, and clenched his jaw. He did not hear the bedroom door open or register that he was no longer alone until a startled voice chimed in the background.

He looked over his shoulder. "It is alright, Maeb, you can come in."

Maeb shielded her eyes so blue that they were nearly gray. "*Ní hea1*," she shook her head, then continued in Xander's tongue, slowly and broken, "you are only half-dressed."

Xander chuckled. "Maeb, how many children have you nursed? I do not have much you have not seen."

"It is not proper."

Xander rolled his brown eyes and crossed to his wardrobe. He pulled on a loose tunic and offered Maeb a rueful smile. "Better?"

Maeb looked away and fanned herself with her hand. Xander's own mother would not have been half as sweet as Aowyn's old nursemaid. Xander took a seat at a small table that overlooked the garden. Maeb set about changing bed linens and arranging fresh garments in Aowyn's wardrobe.

Xander slid down in the chair and folded his hands over his stomach, lost in his thoughts. It was not until Maeb raised her voice to him that he realized how much time had passed.

"I ask you three times now what you want for first meal."

Xander raised his hand carelessly to wave her off.

Maeb crossed to him and picked at a few black curls, as if fawning over her own son. "What troubles you?"

Xander leaned forward and hung his head, slowly rubbing his hands together. Should he tell her? What help could a nursemaid be? He exhaled a long breath. "Wyn says the gods have revealed that she carries a son."

Maeb let out a noise not unlike a chicken who has laid an egg. "Wonderful!" She tussled his hair. "Why worry? This cause for great joy."

When she calmed down, Xander explained. "It would be, save he is a prince by birthright, and I am just a man. I have nothing to offer him." He looked up at Maeb, forlorn. "A prince needs kingdoms; I only have this crumbling heap of a fortress. It is unfit for a prince. Do you understand, Maeb?" He rose slowly, his gaze fixed on Aowyn outside. "My father was not exactly keen to make allies. I have no one to turn to for assistance." He looked at the round, elf-like woman. "Unless you know of someone?"

Maeb's expression was blank, and she stepped back slowly.

"Maeb?"

Maeb wiped her hands on her apron and hurriedly turned away.

Xander knocked over his chair in his haste to catch her. "Maeb, do you know of someone?"

Maeb was trotting toward the door. Xander caught her wrist and spun her round. "Maeb, you must tell me."

Maeb shook her head.

Xander grasped her shoulders. "If you know who can help, for the love of all your gods in the firmament, tell me!"

Maeb trembled in his hands. She would not meet his gaze. She swallowed hard. Her words trickled barely above a whisper. "There is rumor... but we do not speak his name."

Xander's grip softened, and he held Maeb's face, pressing his lips to her graying temple. "Please, sweet mother, tell me."

Maeb bit her lip. "Sylas Mortas."

Xander turned her gaze to meet his. "Please tell me where I can find this man."

Maeb clutched his wrists and pulled them away from her. "He is no man. He is only evil. Please do not seek him out."

"Maeb," Xander implored.

Maeb's eyes turned icy. "In the swamps of Morgorth, not far from head of River Trefnwy." She stole away from him and reached for the door, pausing. "But you not hear it from me."

Xander spurred his horse onward. Rhun was a hulking black steed who practically had to rear up to get his front under him in order to launch forward with every stride. His mane, dark as midnight, whipped by Xander's face. Xander crouched low over Rhun's withers, driving his hands against the horse's sweaty neck. They splashed into the River Trefnwy, water exploding into the air with each hoof beat and turned westward, putting the pink blush of dawn behind them. A line of alder trees loomed in the distance, still cloaked in twilight.

They cantered into the woods and wove through the trees, hopping over logs, and prancing through streams. The further in they rode, the darker it got. The forest floor turned soft and loamy. Rhun kicked up bits of silt, and a damp smell rose from below. The ground broke in to muddy patches. The dense woods around them turned mossy and abruptly sparse with narrow spruces. Rhun slowed, no longer sure of his footing. Xander dismounted and tossed the reins over Rhun's head. Bullfrogs croaked nearby. Xander swatted a mosquito nuzzling the vein in his neck. Rhun nickered warily. Xander patted his shoulder to reassure him. Black peat squelched beneath them, belching up the rank odor of standing water. Xander could barely see in front of him. Thank the heavens for the native moonflies that glowed and dimmed like stars on the horizon. Rhun threw his head, pulling on the reins and balking. Xander exhaled between his teeth. "Easy, lad."

Rhun's nostrils flared and contracted, his eyes wide.

Xander chirped to him, hoping to offer some encouragement.

After a moment, Rhun finally took a step forward. Xander rubbed the horse's forelock and forged ahead, squinting. Pockets of brackish open water gurgled and foamed. Bubbles ballooned so large that a young child could have fit inside. They burst with a splat, reeking with acidity. Xander wrinkled his nose and swallowed against the sick knot in his throat. Vines twisted at his boots as if trying to pull him into the bog and snuff out his life force. Rhun halted again and stamped his hoof. Xander thought he caught a glimpse of firelight through the trees ahead. He rubbed Rhun's nose. "It's not much further."

Rhun shook his mane. Xander tugged on the reins. Something long and thin snaked through the water. Rhun skittered his haunches round, knocking into Xander and smashing his foot. Xander bit his lip hard, wanting to punch Rhun in the neck. Idiot beast! He limped a few steps, trying not to yell out and startle Rhun further. Rhun followed behind placidly as though nothing had happened. The mud sucked Xander's boots deep into the earth. Great veils of lichen swung from the trees like specters. Xander pushed a curtain of them aside and glimpsed a campfire-lit clearing.

A pot bubbled over embers. Barrels leaned against an old, creaky shack. Across the way, a table stood beneath a steaming, burbling alchemy station. Xander tied Rhun's reins to a branch, and the stallion dropped his nose to graze. Xander

reached for the dagger at his side, wishing he had brought something larger. However, he had learned as a lad that a man who cannot defend himself at short range could not really defend himself at all. His hand tightened around the hilt. He planted his feet firmly on guard, pointing the blade in the direction of a snap from the woods. His breath raced as a tall form appeared between the trees. A figure, cloaked in royal blue with stitchings of runes, seemed to float toward him carrying a pile of logs. It dumped them beside the fire and stood before him. "It took you long enough to find me, Barwn Blackthorn."

Xander's breath seized in his lungs. "You know my name." It was a startled statement, not a question.

"Of course I know who you are. I know who everyone is."

"Are you Sylas Mortas?"

"The one and same."

"If you know who I am," Xander began to circle cautiously closer, "do you know why I have come?"

Sylas Mortas watched him patiently from beneath his cloak. "You seek power, young Xander. Power you cannot obtain alone."

"Do you know why I seek this power?"

Sylas held up his hands. "I do not concern myself with the whys of men, only the what and how. You seek power; I seek to help you."

Xander paused. "Why would you want to help me? What is in it for you?"

Sylas chuckled. "Do not worry your lordly laddie head over that."

Xander lunged at him, jabbing with his dagger.

A massive blue light launched him through the air and landed him hard on his rear. His dagger went flying in the opposite direction. Rhun danced, startled, in the background. Sylas crouched by the fire and poked at the coals. "When you are ready to behave, I will be ready to talk business."

Xander wiped mud from his arms and neck. What did Sylas do to him? "What is your price, Mortas?" he asked with disgust.

Sylas rose and dusted off his hands. "Allow me to help you, Xander, with payment due only with fulfillment of the bargain."

"Bargain?" Xander got to his feet and searched for his dagger. He kept an eye on Sylas. "People say you are wicked and not to be trusted. Why should I trust you without knowing the cost first? How do I know you will not demand my firstborn?" He spotted the hilt sticking out of the ground and bent to retrieve it. He cursed as he burned his hand on a hunk of molten metal.

Sylas moved to an anvil near his shack and picked up a falchion blade. He held it with reverence. "Xander, Xander, Xander.... Have I not made it clear that I care not for the lives of men? I only seek to make a means to an end. I am sure we

can come to some agreeable terms.” He turned the hilt to Xander in offering. “I believe you stand in need of a new blade. This is Idegwaed. Try her out, won’t you?”

Xander eyed the cloaked figure. After a long while he grasped the falchion. Idegwaed’s balance was unlike any he had ever experienced. Her guard was styled to resemble a screaming mouth. The flawless obsidian blade glinting in the firelight extended like a tongue. The grip was black pearl, bound in silver wire. The pommel bore a single ruby as counterweight. Xander swung the falchion with such ease. Never had his movement been so fluid and effortless. He felt as though Idegwaed had been forged exclusively for him. She sang as she sliced the air. Xander’s arm grew stronger, a river of power flowing through him, as though he could never be conquered so long as he kept swinging. Sylas’s dark laugh cut the moment, a cold piercing sound. He clapped slowly. “Beautiful, is she not?”

Xander was breathless. Idegwaed was beyond compare. She was a sword men would kill for. He swallowed. Such a prize did not come free.

Sylas’s voice was thick. “Do we have a deal?”

Xander stared into the surrounding darkness. Oh, gods, did he want this sword! Blackthorn would never be threatened again with the likes of this blade, this extension of himself, at his command. “Name your price.”

“Oh, really, my dear Barwn. It’s nothing you need to worry yourself over. Merely a trifle compared to what you’ll gain from Idegwaed. I can assure you that I deal quite fairly. You get what you want. I get what I want. Everyone is happy.”

He looked at Sylas. “If I am to make a deal, then I wish to look the man in the eye of whom I’m making the deal with.”

Sylas nodded and slipped back his hood. Sallow, spotted, green skin framed a gaunt face adorned by long, pointed ears. A blaze of flaming, orange-red hair stretched down the middle of his scalp from widow’s peak to nape. He gazed at Xander with almond-shaped, glossy black, pupil-less eyes.

Xander had never seen such a being. He quaked inside.

“With that blade,” Sylas pressed his webbed fingers together, forming a point with his thumbs and index, “I can guarantee all the power you seek. Nations will fall to your feet. However, I cannot guarantee the consequences.”

Xander swallowed. “How do you mean?”

Sylas began to pace. “The weapons I forge have their own personalities. Much like people, relationships with such things have lasting effects. I will guarantee your victory, nay, I foresee it, Barwn Blackthorn, though I cannot say at what cost. Now, do we have a deal?”

Xander caressed the ruby on the pommel as though awakening a lover. Idegwaed seemed to hum his name pleurably. Xander felt braver and stronger the longer he clutched her. She assured him that the consequences would pale in comparison to the things she would do for him. Sylas *foresaw* his success. It was a

sure thing. How could the Barwn of Blackthorn resist? "You say you foresee my victory..."

Sylas nodded. "You need only tap Idegwaed's power."

Xander ran his hand against the cool flat of the blade. Idegwaed warmed to his very touch. "Tell me how."

Sylas stepped beside him with a twisted smile, full of piranha-esque teeth, and placed a clammy hand on Xander's shoulder. "Simple. Kill."

Rhun cruised into the sunlight with Xander astride. Idegwaed, nestled in a red stag hide scabbard, swung gently at their sides. Rhun snorted and dropped his head as they crossed the River Trefnwy. Xander loosened the reins and let his feet hang free of the stirrups. The midday sun felt wondrous after so many dark hours in that dreary, cold swamp.

Xander felt that all would be right in the world now. Archduges, Iarlls, and Tywysogion would swear fealty to him in exchange for his protection. They would gift castles and fiefdoms to his son. Life would be perfect for the first time in Xander's family.

They rode all day until Rhun stopped at the edge of midnight and gazed at Blackthorn. He whickered softly and pawed the earth. Xander shifted in his saddle. "What is it, lad?"

Then he saw it, or rather didn't. The kettledrums normally lit at night by the gate had been quelled. Blackthorn was suspiciously quiet, until Xander heard a scream.

*Aowyn!*

Xander dug his heels into Rhun's side and rocketed toward the gates. Rhun couldn't move fast enough. Xander drove hard against the stallion's neck, booting him over and over. Rhun's breaths came frantically. The tall grasses brushed by in a blur of moonlit gold.

Once in the bailey, Xander swung from Rhun's back before the stallion had come to a halt. Before he could draw Idegwaed from her scabbard, two men clad in chainmail and boiled leather barreled into him. Xander's hands were bound behind his back as a fist slammed into his jaw. He arched his back to try and kick out, but failed. With a grunt, he hammered his heel into his captor's foot then pummeled his elbow into the man's ribs, breaking free. He raced to Rhun's side and drew Idegwaed. In one fell swoop, he spun and hacked into one of the men's pauldrons. The man staggered backward, gripping his shoulder. The other raced toward Xander, swinging a claymore. Xander grit his teeth and pitched a blow into the oncomer's side. A voice from the curtain wall above cackled with glee. "Keep him busy, boys!"

Xander rolled away from the blow of a mace and saw a hulking man clutching Aowyn. Aowyn struggled against him, her voice muffled by the man's hand over her mouth.

"Wyn!" Xander yelled.

Aowyn tried to cry out as the large man laughed again. "I have a date with a princess."

Xander bellowed and affronted the one with the claymore. Steel screeched against obsidian. Xander rammed his shoulder into the man's chest, then pivoted and slashed into the place between the other's neck and shoulder. A spray of blood splattered against Xander's chest. He raised Idegwaed and swung again. She chewed through chain and bit deep into flesh. The man dropped to his knees, his open-mouthed face blankly turning skyward. Xander roared again and spiraled toward the one with the claymore, shoving Idegwaed into his belly. Xander's heart pounded as the man looked at him with the same wide-eyed expression as his comrade had. Xander grabbed the man's head and pulled him close, pushing Idegwaed deeper through the man's gut with a primal yell. As the man choked, the sneer on Xander's face turned to a dark smile.

He pulled Idegwaed out and watched with an unnatural pleasure as the man fell to the ground. Xander placed the toe of his boot against the man's face, and turned it away from him. The rapid breath in his lungs burned. The blood on Idegwaed rained like tears down her guard as Xander ran toward the nearest door.

The door had been battered open and hung in broken pieces. Xander leapt over the rubble, squinting in the darkness. Bodies lay on the floor. He stooped by one and recognized his captain of the guard. A glance over his shoulder revealed three of his other best men. Xander swore under his breath and stole up the staircase. He found Maeb gagged, bound, and unconscious in a darkened corner. He checked her pulse and breathed a sigh of relief. *Alive*. He whispered an apology and left her as he found her. He didn't want her causing a commotion and running off to find Aowyn only to get herself in to more danger.

He tightened his grip around Idegwaed and crouched, prowling down the hall. He heard Aowyn's scream. He was getting close. The sound of pottery smashing and bodies clunking against furniture was just around the bend. When he reached the door, he kicked it open.

"Unhand my wife."

The burly man captured Aowyn by the wrist and pulled her close to him. He chuckled. "My men and I were beginning to wonder if you were coming back." He regarded Aowyn momentarily and laughed again. "Who do I kid? A pretty girl like this. Of course you would come back." His lips curled as he pressed his nose to Aowyn's jawbone, breathing deeply.

Aowyn stared at Xander in terror, uttering his name. The man covered her mouth and pressed a dagger to her throat.

Xander growled. He tightened his hold on Idegwaed and took a step in their direction. "Let her go."

The man looked at him from the corners of his eyes with a baleful grin. "Uh, uh, uh, Barwn Blackthorn. Play nice now."

Xander began to circle them. Who was this man? Why had he come? By the looks of his furs, his cape, and the rings on his beefy knuckles, he was a man of importance. Xander continued to pace around them, frustrated that Aowyn was being kept between them like a shield.

"Tell me where you are from," Xander snarled, "so that I may send your head there when I cut it off."

The man sniggered. "Such a shame they want her dead. She's so very beautiful."

Xander's anger raged as the man pressed his tongue against Aowyn's cheek and slowly slithered it up to her temple. Aowyn's breath coursed and her eyes flashed. She bit hard into the man's finger until a line of blood trickled to the floor. The man sounded like thunder, "You venomous she-devil!"

He grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder, bolting for the door. Xander had not been mindful and left it unguarded. He charged after them. The man was lumbering down the hall. Xander could hear Maeb clucking beneath her gag, then squawking and making a ruckus as the man drew near. With a bellow and a mighty heave, Xander hurled Idegwaed after him. The falchion sang through the air and buried herself deep between the man's shoulder blades. The man sucked in a sudden breath and paused mid-stride. He staggered toward Xander, his eyes open capaciously. Xander bolted to grab Aowyn and push the man forward. With a deafening thud, the man fell. Xander held Aowyn close. She trembled in his arms. Xander took her face with both hands and looked her in the eyes. He didn't need to speak the words he was thinking, wondering if she was alright. She simply nodded and hugged him hard. He scooped her up, cradling her, and leaned his forehead against hers. He walked down the hall slowly, never wanting to take his eyes from Aowyn again. The world seemed to disappear. He made way to their bedroom and gently laid his wife on the bed, pressing his mouth to hers softly. He made her comfortable and dropped to one knee, weaving his fingers with hers. "Tell me what happened."

Aowyn winced. "It happened so fast. One moment we were enjoying dinner, the next the castle went dark. Our men started fighting. Maeb and I tried to escape, and then that man..." she shuddered, then cried, "Oh, Xander, where were you?"



Xander kissed Aowyn's knuckles. This was his fault. If he had been here to protect his keep, this might not have happened. "This will never happen again. I swear it."

"How can you promise that with assurance?"

Xander looked at her earnestly. "Everything will be different from now on." He leaned over the bed, placing a hand on his wife's belly. He kissed the widest part of it and spoke quietly. "You will never have to fight for our land so long as I live."

His fingers tightened around Aowyn's nightgown as the baby kicked beneath his hand. He kissed Aowyn long and deeply, then rose.

Aowyn stirred uncomfortably. "That sword you had... I've never seen it before. Where did you get it?"

Xander tensed and said nothing.

Aowyn tried to turn his head to look at her. "I have only seen one other like it, forged by a creature from our lands. Tell me where you got that sword."

Xander clenched his fists.

Aowyn choked. "Sylas Mortas. You've been to him, haven't you?"

Xander turned his back.

"You don't understand what you're dealing with, Xan. I *know* him. He will only make things worse for us. Even the gods want no business with him! Please believe me."

"I love you. Goodbye."

"Where are you going?" Aowyn shifted in bed. "Please don't leave me alone."

Xander glanced over his shoulder as he exited the room and shut the door behind him. Any threat to Aowyn was a threat to his son and must be hunted down without hesitation.

He returned to the man's body, took his dagger, and dislodged Idegwaed from her sticking place. He strode to Maeb, shook his head, then cut her loose and ungagged her. Maeb started ranting in her tongue. Xander ignored her and helped her up. When she paused to take a breath before her next tirade, Xander shoved the dagger into her hands. "Go to Aowyn. Protect her. Do not leave her side. In the morning, you shall have fresh men to guard the keep. Understand?"

Maeb nodded and waddled down the hall to the bedroom.

Xander bolted downstairs to the bailey and mounted Rhun.

"Aowyn..." the gods called again.

Aowyn answered their beckoning and rose slowly from her bed. Maeb snored beside her, clutching the dagger she had been given. Aowyn crept to the window, bathing in the last moonlight before dawn. She hoped the gods would show her another vision of her son.

"I am here," she whispered. "What would you have of me?"

*"Behold Xander..."*

Aowyn found herself enveloped by a dawn as red as fire. This canvas was painted with her husband marching into a castle. He swung a terrible black sword at the guards, slicing through their armor and rending them to their knees. A spin found the blade clean through another guard's belly. The next was beheaded. More and more guards came, but Xander only grew stronger with each kill. His face was grim. Aowyn barely recognized him. He was dropping men dead as easily as rain fell until he reached a throne room. He pointed his sword at the Iarll in charge. "Swear fealty to me or die," Xander demanded.

The Iarll at throne was aghast and trembling. With a wave of his hand, a servant brought him his sword. The Iarll took it, then dropped to his knees and proffered up his blade to Xander.

Xander snatched it. For a moment he looked unsure of himself. He erupted with a sudden holler, and beheaded the man. He breathed hard as he stood over him. Xander looked at the servants and pointed the blades at them. "You answer to me now."

The servants cowered in a corner and nodded emphatically.

Xander kicked the body across the floor, blood streaking the polished tiles. "Clean this mess up."

Aowyn watched Xander march back outside and return to Rhun. He rode forth unopposed.

The red dawn grew brighter.

Aowyn bit back a cry. "Why do you show me this?"

*"Xander walks a dark road,"* the gods answered. *"He has sought the aid of Sylas Mortas."*

Aowyn looked on as Xander rode into another city. Women and children fled before him. He offered his ultimatum to the men at arms. Those who refused met a swift end.

*"He must be stopped,"* the gods said.

Tears burned Aowyn's ruddy cheeks. Surely this was not *her* Xander. The world went black, and she awoke in her bed.

Birds chirped outside. It was a beautiful day.

She looked over her shoulder. Maeb snored loudly, clutching the dagger she had been given.

"Maeb." Aowyn poked her. Maeb stopped snoring and opened an eye. "Maeb, how did Xander find Sylas Mortas?"

Maeb shut her eye and let loose the loudest snore of all.

Aowyn grimaced. She leaned close to Maeb and muttered, "You're useless." She threw back the covers. She never saw Maeb's pained expression.

Xander lit from Rhun's back. His boots hit the earth in a dusty cloud. Idegwaed rested in his hand, bloodied from a two-day rampage. He grabbed the wrist of the first man he came across and hacked off his hand. It was a hand that could pose a threat to Aowyn and their son. He moved on mercilessly, bringing down anyone who came across his path. A twisted pit of excitement formed in his stomach. He was keenly aware of the way his muscles flexed whenever he danced with Idegwaed. The sunlight that beat off his shoulders now only made him more aroused. Even the guards were fleeing before him by the time he reached this city. He strode into the great hall, offering his ultimatum to the Tywysog of this province. The Tywysog rose swiftly and drew his sword. Servants quickly equipped him with a shield.

Xander shook his head. "Do you think that will save your rotten hide?"

The Tywysog banged his sword against it, announcing his intent.

Xander grasped Idegwaed's hilt and rushed the Tywysog. The Tywysog deflected Idegwaed with the shield and whacked Xander in the back with the flat of his blade tauntingly. Xander growled and windmilled around, crashing Idegwaed against the other sword. He pressed the attack. Idegwaed's obsidian edge scraped down toward the Tywysog's hand. The Tywysog clenched his jaw and kicked out, shoving Xander back and slicing at his shoulder. Xander spun away, just in time, and cut hard into the Tywysog's thigh. The Tywysog bawled and staggered, clutching his leg. Xander raced toward him, Idegwaed raised over his head. The Tywysog tried to limp away as Idegwaed fell through the air. The Tywysog lifted his sword, and the black blade glanced away. The Tywysog forced himself upright, his face drawn and pale. Xander swung at his head, then his shield arm. Idegwaed's tongue sparked against its rival and then bit into the shield arm. It gnawed through bone, and the shield fell. The arm hung awkwardly, sinew exposed. Xander reeled around and swept the legs out from beneath the Tywysog with the flat side of Idegwaed, then grabbed the Tywysog's hair, pulling his head back to expose the man's throat. Idegwaed hummed as she slid against stubble.

Xander felt alive with an intense spark. His muscles rippled with renewed power. He savored having this man's life in his hands. He would never again be subject to anyone.

"Submit or die," Xander murmured.

The Tywysog swallowed. "Either way I am a dead man. I pity those who bend to tyrant—"

Blood spilled. The Tywysog gurgled and crumpled to the floor.

Xander cleaned his blade on the Tywysog's clothing. As he did so, he noticed small chinks along Idegwaed's edge that had not been there prior. He sheathed her carefully and turned to the fearful guards in the room. "You there. Cowards." He crossed to them swiftly and took them by their collars. "You're mine now. Inform

your comrades. We ride at dawn. Those who refuse will be hunted and killed for the dogs that they are.”

The guards nodded in unison.

Aowyn had not seen Xander in three weeks. After her vision of the blood dawn, she feared for Xander’s life. Maeb could do little to comfort her nightmares. Aowyn only wept in to Maeb’s shoulder and begged her to tell her where to find Sylas Mortas. Perhaps if she could talk to him, he would tell her where Xander was and why this sudden, dire madness. Yet no one would give her the answers she sought, and with each passing day she felt as though a piece of her died inside. Even the baby kicked less.

Xander wove his way through the Twelve Kingdoms, increasing his army with the fall of each hold. A third of the kingdoms were at his disposal after only a month. In the battle at Three Ogre Fief, his army doubled. With the demise of each hold’s ruler, however, Idegwaed’s chinks became more abundant. Little imperfections had grown into teeth. She was saw-like and even more fearsome to behold. With every battle, Xander grew more powerful. Yet he felt bits of him vanishing, not unlike his precious falchion. It wasn’t immediate. It was little things. The more he noticed them, the harder he fought and tried to hide them. Trying to convince his army, who only fought beside him for fear of him, that they were undefeatable. The harder he fought, the more noticeable such weaknesses became. He started feeling hollow. When they took the sixth kingdom, his men sensed something was amiss. No one could put their finger on it, but it put the warriors off, and men went missing from the ranks.

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Aowyn clutched her belly and winced.

*“Aowyn...”*

She cursed the gods when they called on her now. Pain. So much pain.

*“He must be stopped,”* they insisted.

A vision came to her of Xander and Rhun galloping into a large city. He wielded his terrible sword, beheading women and children alike. He grabbed a torch and urged Rhun toward a cathedral. Rhun reared, his hooves drilling against the heavy wooden doors until they burst open. Xander cantered inside and lit banners and beams, then flung the torch deeper into the cathedral. They careened outside. Houses burned. Children wept over their parents. Bodies piled in the street. Orange, smoky haze plumed from the cathedral.

*“Xander must pay for his sins,”* the gods noted.

“No!” Aowyn cried. “Please. Don’t take my Xander.”

*"A curse on your house then, Aowyn, and all you bear in it."*

"No," she pled, "spare my child." She curled into a ball, barely able to withstand the agony within her. "Take me instead."

"You?" The gods considered it. *"A cursed life will he lead, until the day he dies, but we will take you for the sins of Xander."*

Aowyn's eyes were wide open as she screamed for Maeb.

Maeb held her tight, stroking her hair.

Aowyn gripped her belly. "The baby's coming."

Maeb kissed Aowyn's hair. "It is too soon."

Aowyn let out another cry. Blood trickled on to the bed sheets. *"Now!"*

Xander found himself drunk and abandoned at Council's Realm. He was dragged before High King Balthazaar, who towered over him on horseback. More men than Xander had ever seen were gathered on the horizon. Their shields of blue and white unmistakably marked them under the command of the king. Balthazaar's horse pawed the ground as ten men surrounded Xander. Somehow one of them had gained possession of fanged and hungry Idegwaed and held her against the vein in Xander's neck. He really could not remember much in his drunken stupor. Last night's escapades had left him weak, off guard, and at the king's mercy. He felt drugged. As he squinted against the sunlight, he was certain he saw no less than four Balthazaars, all swirling and dancing around each other in a blur of blue and gold robes. Xander winced as all of the kings spoke at once in separate voices, something about treachery, lucky to be alive, and being found wanton.

The twenty, or was it fifty, men got him to his feet, holding him captive, bound with his arms behind his back. Idegwaed's broken glint blinded him. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to concentrate on what was being said. He picked out one of Balthazaar's voices and hoped it was the right one.

"I underestimated you, Barwn Blackthorn. Too long have I left you unchecked. I have failed my people by allowing them to fall by your hand, and for that I must pay. I understand that now. It is by the grace of the God of Mercy, whose cathedral I built and you destroyed, that I allow you to keep what has been forcibly taken from me, but you will come no further than Council's Realm. It is the free city of the Twelve Kingdoms and should remain so. For this purpose have I brought my army, to ensure that you do not try to resist this treaty. Killing you for your treason is a mercy you do not deserve. You may keep this new blood realm, but it comes with its own price. You are responsible for the recompense of all those poor souls, and any I find unlawfully in my lands after a reasonable time of refuge will be driven back. There is no place for your kind in my world."

*My kind*, thought Xander with a stab of conscience.

"Lord only knows why you have crossed your king thusly."

"My son," Xander answered dryly.

"I'm sorry?"

Xander opened his eyes, rolling his tongue in an attempt to dismiss the feel of cotton in his mouth. He coughed to clear his throat. "My wife bears a son. He is to be a prince of the realm by birthright."

Balthazaar shifted uneasily in his saddle. His horse snorted and chomped at the bit. After a moment, a contract and quill were being shoved under Xander's nose.

"What's this?" Xander asked.

"The land you have taken maledictions you. I know you are destitute and have no monetary means to rule. Sign this, and your life will be spared... for now. Consider it a gift to your son."

The lands were his if he signed. Die, if he refused; live if he accepted. Either way, he was a condemned man. Balthazaar was right. Xander never had the means to fund the lands, only the power to take them.

Xander forced his name across the scroll before he could regret it all. The price was too steep. He only wanted to return home and forget this had all happened.

Balthazaar gave a curt nod when it was all said and done. The world went black to Xander.

When he came to, he found himself bound and gagged, slumped in Rhun's saddle. The horse plodded along calmly as if knowing with certainty where to go. Xander glanced at the sky. The sun was slightly behind them, but not by much. They were headed southeast to Blackthorn. Xander groaned as Rhun jarred against a bank. The guards must have knocked him out. His head was splitting, and he tasted dried blood on the rag in his mouth. He reached to pull it out and looked to his side. Idegwaed swung in her sheath. Xander bent over carefully to retrieve her and slid the rope around his wrists against the blade's jagged edge. He held her up in one hand. She had once been polished, smooth, and a prize to be won, but was now rugged and terrifying, and ugly. Xander felt this same ugliness within himself. How many lives had paid for this blade, now swollen with tiny cracks and veins? He clenched his teeth and swallowed back a sick taste. He sheathed Idegwaed hard and kicked Rhun into a gallop.

A few of the men Xander had sent on his earliest conquest remained at the keep. It was only enough to guard the household. He swung over Rhun's wide back and passed the reins to one of those men. Another ran out to him and took him by the arm.

"What is going on?" Xander demanded, prying away his elbow.

"Please, my lord, come with me. It's urgent."

Xander marched behind. "Is it Aowyn? Is she alright?"

The guard said nothing, but led him upstairs where Maeb was exiting Xander's chambers. Her face was ashen and haggard. She looked at Xander bitterly. "*Do locht2.*"

Xander pushed past her into the room. Even from where he stood, he could see Aowyn was deathly pale. He rushed to her side and took her icy hand in his. Her hair was dull and matted. Even the sun kisses across the bridge of her nose were faded. He pressed his lips to her fingers, willing warmth back into her. Her eyes opened to him. She moved her mouth to speak, but no words came.

Xander could scarcely stand to look upon her glazed expression. "Oh, Wynn..."

"Her birthing time came days ago," Maeb said softly from behind him. "He will not come."

Xander held Aowyn's hand tightly. Was there a way to save them? "Bring me a dagger, Maeb."

Maeb returned quickly and pressed the dagger in to Xander's hand. He looked at the blade, hands shaking. *I must do what Maeb has not.*

He rose slowly, jaw trembling. He gently pushed back the covers to reveal Aowyn's naked body, frail and gaunt. "I'm sorry, Wyn."

Carefully he pierced her belly with the blade and tore through flesh. Aowyn's back arched, and her face lit up like white fire, eyes fully open and aware. Her throat gurgled, and a cry split the air, but it was not hers.

Maeb unwound the babe from a mess of cord and fluids.

The dagger fell from Xander's hand, and he dropped to Aowyn's side. She stared into space, her lips pursed and pulsing. Xander stroked her hair. "I'm sorry, Wynn. I'm so sorry!"

She turned her head. Her gaze came in to focus. For a moment, Xander saw *his* Aowyn, not the ghost of her. She smiled. Her chest sank with a peaceful sigh. The care of the world faded from her countenance. Xander buried his face against Aowyn's lifeless fist and choked back a sob. He shook his head. *No.* No, this couldn't be happening! This wasn't what he wanted. This wasn't part of the bargain.

Through his misery, he became aware of Maeb shushing a squalling clamor in the background. She nudged Xander's shoulder, proffering a ball of whimpers. "*Do mhac3, Eoghan.*"

"Eoghan," Xander echoed hollowly. He took him, staring into the face of a prince. Carrot-colored fuzz graced the baby's head. Golden eyes considered Xander from behind a misshapen nose that wrinkled close to his face. A twisted spine writhed against Xander's hands. Xander looked between Eoghan and Aowyn. Maeb was singing a soft, mournful song in her tongue as she cleaned Aowyn's body and closed her glassy eyes. Xander looked back at Eoghan and tried to feel some sort of love for this purple-faced being. He swallowed as his emptiness was replaced by

compelling loathing. Eoghan squirmed and kicked free of the swaddle, revealing a blue, clubbed foot covered in orange fuzz.

Xander grabbed Maeb, shoved Eoghan back into her arms, and stormed from the room.



Five years had passed since Xander had sent Aowyn's remains across the sea to Aodhagáin, so that she might be buried with her ancestors.

In that span, strange creatures began stalking the countryside. Howls rode the air from Litchwood Forest at the edge of Blackthorn. Howls that Xander did not recognize. There were nights he would stand at the window, a flask of Blacksteed ale in hand, and watch massive, black forms prowl the skirts of the keep's land. Green eyes glinted and blinked in the moonlight. Maeb called them barghest. Somewhere between a bear and direwolf was this monster. They were never far off. Xander would never have rest. If it was not brigands after his land for all those years, it was now barghest. Their cry, meant for him, made the hackles on his neck stand at attention. Other creatures were taking up residence as well. There was word on the air that giants roamed the land, and white stallions with long, golden horns. No one knew where they were coming from, but Xander had an inkling.

He took a deep swig from his flask and then flung it into the fireplace. With a clap, the fire roared, fueled by the alcohol in the now molten container. Xander looked over his shoulder. Idegwaed hung above the mantle. Shadows danced against her ragged blade. Xander squinted. His mouth drew in a tight, grim frown. *Idegwaed*.

The blade had brought him all the land and subjects he desired, as promised, but it brought all the worldly troubles with it. He had not needed to fight for Blackthorn since the day he hung Idegwaed, for all now feared to cross the very blade that had brought them under Xander's rule. Except the barghest. Xander felt they would not keep to the woods much longer. Why, though? What would such monsters want with a crumbling keep? Xander ran a hand through his wavy, black hair. Why were any of these creatures drawn to Blackthorn?

He moved slowly to Idegwaed. She appeared milky liquid in the flickering shadows. Ethereal. Alive. He reached toward her. He could drive the barghest out. He had been unstoppable before, surely he could be so again.

Dawn edged in behind him. He paused in this moment, on the edge of daylight and darkness. The door of the room creaked open, and an excited breath came from outside.

Eoghan.

Xander's arm fell. He gazed in the direction of the boy. The gleam of firelight skipped off of his bright eyes. Xander looked back at Idegwaed. She had brought him power, but that power had damned his son.

The boy scampered in on his knuckles, dragging his clubbed foot. He gave Xander a wide berth and a wary eye. He scooted to the table in the corner to snatch a boiled cream treat, leftover from his father's untouched supper. He watched Xander as he gobbled up several cold sausages. Eoghan's eyes burned into Xander's back. The boy had an insatiable appetite. He was ugly to the point where Xander felt that he should be shut away. Sickly and weak he was not. Where most babes grow

out of some shortcomings at birth, the years had not improved or been kind to Eoghan. His crumbled nose had grown black and dead. The twisted spine stretched beyond his bottom. He never allowed Maeb to trim his nails. Whenever he got away with something, he behaved as though it were a giant joke. Maeb tried to keep him in line, but she was no match for his savage strength. He was smart, too. Xander saw it clearly. The boy knew how to throw his weight around and when to use someone else's moment of weakness to his advantage. He could act dull and helpless, but there was no mistaking the intelligence in his eyes.

He grunted and whimpered as he ate Xander's food, possessive as though he had never been fed. Xander stared into the fire. His shoulders rose to his ears in disgust. His jaw clenched. His fists tightened. A roar rose in his throat.

*"Maeb!"*

The nursemaid hurried in.

"Get him out of my sight." Xander pounded the fireplace mortar, glancing sideways at the animal that was his son.

Maeb scurried to the boy and scolded him softly in his mother's tongue.

Eoghan bared his teeth and growled.

"Naughty boy. Come now, Eoghan." Maeb tried to reach him. Eoghan ducked away, ham bone in teeth, spilling what little food was left with a clatter.

Maeb chased him, hand splayed to catch him, but the boy was too quick.

Xander spun on his heel with an angry holler, snatching Eoghan by the scruff of his neck. He lifted the boy and glared eye to eye with him. Eoghan blinked, chin trembling. He proffered the ham bone to his father.

Xander grabbed it and flung Eoghan to the floor then hurled the bone into the fire.

Eoghan crab-walked across the floor, his eyes never leaving Xander.

"Honestly I do not know why I keep you, Maeb," Xander spat.

Maeb wiped her tears away. She knelt beside Eoghan and stroked his hair.

"If you cannot control him..."

Maeb kissed Eoghan's temple, caressing his ruddy cheek.

"I should just shut him away," Xander said quietly.

"Aowyn would never forgive you," Maeb choked bitterly.

Xander could barely swallow. His eyes rose to Idegwaed. "She never will."

Xander's hand shot to Idegwaed's hilt. He took her from the mantle and rounded violently. "I should have sent you with her. Aowyn is gone, Maeb... and so shall you be come morning."

Eoghan rolled and scuttled from the room with wide eyes. Maeb stared up at her master helplessly. "What are you going to do?"

Xander raised the blade and felt the blood cry of old rising inside of him. "I'm going to end this."

Rhun plodded wearily through the swamp of Morgorth until he refused to go further. Xander dismounted and swung the reins over the stallion's head. Rhun resisted being led at first, but gave in and followed. Xander hoped he could still find Sylas in this dark and vile place. What if the shack was abandoned? What if Sylas had been killed by some new creature Xander had brought upon the land?

A dull pain in his hip reminded him of the power Sylas wielded and promised death was not likely for the warlock. The crackle of campfire and the sway of lichen ahead put aside any doubts Xander had remaining. He ground-tied Rhun near a log and a patch of green and made his way into camp.

"I summon thee, Sylas Mortas!"

Sylas appeared a moment later in the doorway of his little shack. A slow, thin smile snaked across his face. "I was beginning to wonder when you would return. Are you satisfied with yourself?"

Xander drew Idegwaed and cast her into the ground. She stuck a few feet away, wobbling slightly.

"No deal." Xander crossed his arms.

Sylas's black, almond eyes narrowed. The gills on his neck opened and closed slowly. "I'm afraid it's too late for refunds."

Xander remained firm. "I said, 'No deal.' Your blade has brought me nothing but heartache and strife. It has cursed my son and killed my wife."

Sylas raised a long, spindly finger that ended in a yellow, dirty, bent nail. "Correction. *You* brought it upon yourself the moment you left my swamp with my sword."

Sylas moved forward. Xander sidestepped. "Take it back."

Sylas shrugged, moving closer. "I cannot."

Xander moved away again into a shadow. He nearly fell into a hole that he had not seen before. He teetered precariously. His arms windmilled. The heels of his boots dug into soft loam and teeth leapt toward him from the darkness, gnashing hungrily.

Xander glanced over his shoulder. He could vaguely make out the form of a creature below with the body of a man and the head of a lion. He slipped as more ground gave out from below. A slimy hand gripped his collar and hurled him toward the earth with a high laugh.

Xander raised his head and spit dirt as a voice behind him voice crooned, "Is Daddy's pet hungry? Yes, he is. Daddy will feed you soon. He will."

Inches away, Idegwaed glinted in the firelight. Xander scurried over and retrieved her. He was on his feet instantly and brandished Idegwaed at Sylas. "No more tricks, warlock."

Sylas was still stooped over the hole, watching his monster. "Do you not see? I cannot take back the blade of which you have paid so dearly. My donestre--"

"Tried to kill me."

Sylas looked over his back and rose. "I saved your life."

"You destroyed it with this sword."

Sylas brushed off his hands. "You believe your curse is the result of your actions, but I tell you, Xander, it is so much more than that. Your actions have far-reaching consequences. Farther than you can fathom."

Xander tilted his head, squinting. His grasp on Idegwaed tightened. "What have you done?"

Sylas strode toward Xander, his hands clasped behind his back. "Can you not see? The price you have paid in blood has brought forth a new era. My era. By sacrificing your wife and child, you have opened the way to my creatures—creatures from the ancient lands. Many portals, both seen and unseen, are ripping through the Twelve Kingdoms. The innocent lives you took now return to haunt you in the form of those supernatural. Honest men who fought for their masters return as giants; brigands as barghest, righteous kings as great stags and unicorns... do you see?" Sylas paused. "This is the price you have paid. I cannot take back the sword. It is too late. You may think I am trying to kill you, but it is quite the opposite." Sylas's smile widened enough to reveal his stained, razor-like teeth. "I am trying to protect you."

Xander swore aloud.

Sylas continued. "There is another whose destiny is intertwined with yours. They alone can end your son's torment. Please take one of my creatures as a guardian of your own."

"Enough!" Xander roared and raced toward Sylas, ready to strike.

A gash of blue light shot from Sylas's hands. Xander was ready for it. The bolt bounced off Idegwaed, downing a tree branch. Idegwaed cracked visibly, but did not break. The gap became filled with a sliver of blue light. Xander spun and swung the blade at Sylas's thigh. The warlock sidestepped and waved his hand. Another streak of blue snaked toward the blade, but missed. Sylas vanished just before Idegwaed struck him. Xander stumbled from the force and cried out as electricity snapped him between the shoulder blades, forcing him to the earth.

Idegwaed let out a low squeal. A new crack filled with light.

Sylas reappeared near the shack. Xander forced himself upright and hurled Idegwaed at him. The blade tumbled through the air, singing with each turn, then suddenly hovered. Sylas held up his hands. Idegwaed was surrounded by light, floating only inches from her creator. Xander watched as the black blade seemed to split into pieces, yet remained intact, filled with the same light that surrounded her.

Xander's chest rose and fell rapidly. He crossed the camp and looked into Sylas's eyes. They were bright white with the reflection of it all, so focused and intense. Xander could see himself and Idegwaed as though in a mirror. His trembling hand reached out to the hovering blade. He didn't want the blade, yet it called to him in agony. She cried, saying his name over and over. She begged to be released from her prison. Xander flinched as his fingers passed through the light between he and Sylas. His other hand clasped his wrist, trying to pull it back. Idegwaed screamed. Xander's hand shot forth and took her from the light.

Sylas slumped with a sigh of exhaustion.

Xander's chest heaved, and he stared at Idegwaed. Without hesitation, he raised the sword. He expected Sylas's back to split in two with a spray of red ooze as he buried Idegwaed in the warlock's shoulders. Instead the Barwn of Blackthorn was hurled in to the dirt as Sylas rose into the air, face turned skyward, spread eagle, full of light-filled cracks and burst in an explosion more blinding than the noonday sun.

Xander's dark hair whipped around, trees swayed, the campfire went out. Xander lay motionless in the dark, listening to the crickets and bullfrogs and the hungry growl of a donestre. Rhun whinnied nervously. The swamp filled with light again, this time from Idegwaed. Xander leapt to his feet as the sword flew from his hand, surrounded by green light. She floated, humming. All of her cracks and jags were visible. Xander shielded his eyes as Idegwaed burst into shards that soared into the stratosphere.

Xander crumbled to his knees, staring skyward. The shards hovered briefly, then shot out in twelve directions over the treetops.

Xander dropped his head and wept.

## Part II

# THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MONSTERS

The early spring sunlight glinted off the polished black blade. Ten-year-old Glory, daughter of High King Balthazaar, reached out to touch the cool obsidian, but her friend, Colin, pulled it away.

"Don't touch it! Father said she is not a toy."

Glory's face scrunched up at the admonishment. "Than why are you showing it off as though it were?"

Colin sheathed the dagger carefully. "I got it for my birthday. I'm a man now."

"Only nearly. You're twelve."

"I wanted you to see her."

"*Her*. You speak as though it is a person." Glory stuck her tongue out to feign disgust.

"Father said her name is Ilyndiil."

"Only weapons of legend have names. Why would a falconer have such a thing? And why would he give it to *you*?"

Colin squared his shoulders and stood proudly. He opened his mouth to speak, but Glory batted his arm and began to jog off. "I'm the princess, so you be the giant. Chase me!"

"There's no such thing as giants," Colin said.

"There is so. My nursemaid, Maeb, told me that when a princess marries, they bay at the moon and dance in the dark."

"That's silly."

"No, it isn't. Maeb says there are fairies and unicorns in the world. Last night, I asked Papa to catch me a unicorn."

Colin rolled his hazel eyes. "Your father told the kingdom no such creatures existed."

Glory scowled. She stomped her foot. "Chase me!"

"I'm nearly a man now. Your game is childish."

"That didn't stop you the day before last. Are you slow now that you are *old*?" Glory taunted and dashed off.

Colin sighed, exasperated, and ran after her.

Glory liked the way Colin followed her around and that she could generally get him to do what she wanted. She bolted through the garden gate and outside the castle grounds toward the line of trees over the hillside.

Brown leaves and the last remnants of snow crackled under their feet. Birds scattered from trees as they raced by, laughing and leaping over their shadows.

"Fee, fie, foe," Colin roared. He reached out to tag Glory but only brushed her skirt. "Fum!"

Glory squealed. "You cannot catch me!"

Colin grew winded and slowed. "Why do I have to be the giant? Why do your sisters not play with you?"

Glory hid behind a tree, her palms resting against the smooth birch. "Half of them say they are too old. Except Portia, but she is so..."

Colin caught a glimpse of Glory's skirt and crept toward the tree. "Fat."

Glory's nose wrinkled. A rush of excitement filled her as Colin stalked closer. She squeezed her eyes shut as if doing so would cause her to vanish.

"Portia is so fat, I am surprised she does not make up half of your sisters. She is so fat that the earth shakes in fear when she steps on it," Colin murmured. His voice escalated gradually. "She could single-handedly fell trees by getting stuck between them. Animals flee before her. Rawr!"

Glory didn't like what Colin was saying. She peeked out from behind the tree. "Do not be so cruel. She is my sister."

Colin slapped her arm. "Got you!"

Glory's face drew into a pout. "I don't like this game anymore. You are a mean giant."

Colin beamed. "I play my given part well. Perhaps I shall be an actor when I am grown."

Glory sprinted away while Colin gloated. She crested a hill, deeper into the woods, and screeched as the ground caved from under her. She fell into darkness and landed with an "*Umph!*"

She trembled and sat up slowly.

A rhythmic thumping drummed overhead. Colin stopped just in time. He peered into the hole. The sunlight blocked out his features so that only his silhouette was visible. "Are you all right?"

Glory tried to shield her eyes from the sun. Something rustled in the darkness, and she jumped. "Colin, I don't like this."

Roots had thrust themselves through a stone ceiling and surrounding walls. She swallowed and tried to shake out her nerves. The fourth wall was not made of stone. She scuttled to it and felt earth beneath her fingernails. She raised her hand and closed it around one of the roots and tried to pull herself up. It slipped instantly from her.

"I don't think I can get out."

There was a groan from the shadows. "Who's there?" Glory bleated. A drip, drip, drip echoed. Dankness filled her nose. "I am not afraid!"

Her heart hastened its beat. She yelped as Colin's boots landed behind her. "What are you doing?"

Colin brushed himself off. "I'm rescuing you."

Tears welled in Glory's blue eyes; her lungs began to ache with a swollen, staggered breathing. "You stupid boy. Why did you not get my father?"

Colin pushed her aside. "Shh!"

Glory clenched her fists. "I want Papa!"



"Be quiet," Colin hissed.

Sobs echoed in the shadows. Colin unsheathed Ilyndiil. "Show yourself."

Glory whimpered. The shape took its full height and pressed its form into the light. The face of a lion with great, furry ears and a shaggy mane rested atop the body of a man. He was muscular, clad only in a loin cloth, and otherwise human. His nose wrinkled as he took in the new scent on the air.

"What is it?" Colin whispered.

Glory's head felt empty. "I don't know."

"Think! Now is not the time to forget Maeb's stories."

Glory squeezed her eyes shut, racking her memory. Maeb had mentioned such a creature that gobbled up its victims, save for the head, then sat and wept over it. Her whole body vibrated with fear. "Donestre."

Colin's hand tightened around Ilyndiil.

The donestre covered his face and bemoaned itself, then peered between his fingers at the children. His snout wrinkled, revealing gleaming fangs.

Colin's breath was ragged. "Stay where you are." Ilyndiil gleamed in the light. "I'm warning you."

The donestre charged, snarling savagely. Glory screamed. Colin sunk Ilyndiil into the donestre's ribs and spun away. The donestre doubled over and tumbled past. He groped the oozing wound then lifted his shaking, bloody hand to stare at it in the light streaming in from above. Colin tried finding a foothold in the earthy wall, but his boots slipped in the mud. He faltered. Glory caught his back and nudged him right again. With a bellow, the donestre rose and lumbered toward them. Colin gripped Glory's arm and swung her away as he slashed the donestre across the back. The donestre reeled and pivoted, gnashing his teeth.

Colin reached for Glory's hand. "We have to get out of here. We have to tell someone."

"How?" Glory cried.

The donestre charged. Colin sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth, grabbed the donestre's mane and plunged Ilyndiil into its left eye. The donestre howled, wobbling backwards. Colin remained on guard, watching with terror.

The donestre reached to pull Ilyndiil from his eye, wailing and shaking his head. His heel knocked against a skull on the floor, and he tripped over it.

Colin turned his face upward, searching frantically for a way out. He found a dry root and jumped hard, snatching the end. His legs and hips swung as, hand over hand, he pulled himself up.

"Don't leave me," Glory begged.

Colin disappeared into the sunlight. Glory quaked alone in the cell, which had grown quiet except for the constant drip of water in the background. She jumped,

startled, when Colin's head appeared over the edge of the hole. He leaned in as far as he could and reached down. "Give me your hand."

Glory stood on tiptoe. She reached, but her hand swept through empty space. "I can't."

"Try!" Colin urged.

Suddenly, a massive form lurched through the shadows. Glory screamed as a bloody, one-eyed donestre hurled itself at her with snapping jaws. Glory leapt. Her fingers brushed skin, and she was propelled into the light. She barreled through the damp, hard ground on one of her shoulders.

Colin lay on his back, panting. Glory touched her fingers which were sore from being yanked so hard.

Colin swallowed as he caught his breath, then rolled over and pushed himself up. "Let's go."

Glory pulled herself together and rose. "Who should we tell?"

Colin marched toward a hut next to the castle. "My father knows every beast in the kingdom."

"This morning magical creatures did not really exist. Why would your father know of this one?"

Colin paused. "I... because... I'm sure he will know what to do. Alright?"

The little thatched cottage sat on a hillside overlooking the kingdom. Smoke wound its way through a cobbled chimney into the clear blue sky.

As they entered, a young falcon sat on a perch, and food was on the table. A hearth fire crackled in the back of the hut beneath a bubbling pot.

Colin gently stroked the snowy breast of the bird whose eyes were covered by a rufter to keep it calm.

"Father?" Colin called.

Glory crouched by the fire, warming her hands. She wondered how anyone could live in such a meager home.

A door near the hearth opened, and a tall, burly man with brown hair and a beard entered, wiping his hands on a chamois rag. "What is it, boy?"

Glory had never met Colin's father before, although she had seen him with the king in the bailey before their hunts. She got a good look at him now, clad in a buckskin tunic and leggings. She thought he looked like a tree with his barrel chest and trunk-like legs and arms.

Colin crossed over to him. "Father, Glory and I found something."

Colin's father glanced at Glory. He seemed surprised to see the princess and a bit put off in a way that made Glory feel very out of place.

"Let's see it," he said.

"Well it's not really a thing, that is." Colin shifted from foot to foot, rubbing the back of his sandy-blond head. He grew nervous. "We sort of fell into a hole, and there was a creature... in a jail cell."

Colin's father's nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed. "Do not lie to me, boy."

"He's not lying, sir," Glory said quietly. She felt intimidated by this man. She wondered if Colin did, too.

Colin opened the front door, and Glory followed his cue. "Let us show you," Glory implored.

The man grunted and trailed behind.

Colin led them to the line of trees where they had been playing. As they drew closer, his father grew more and more agitated, huffing and muttering curses under his breath. "What in the name of the gods were you doing out here?"

"It's not much further," Colin called, ignoring him.

"Haven't I told you not to play in the woods?"

Glory bit her lip. *Oh, Colin, please don't say it was my idea. If Papa knew...*

"This way." Colin darted toward the hole. He picked his way around the muddier places carefully.

"You are wasting my time."

"It was right," Colin stopped, staring at the ground, "here," he said blankly.

Colin's father crossed his massive arms.

Colin stared at the ground where the hole should have been. "I swear by the gods it was right here, Father."

"I cannot believe you called me out here for a child's game. You have wasted my time."

Colin shook his head. "It was here. We fell, and..."

Colin's father began stomping away. Glory wondered if he had ever bayed at the moon or danced in the dark.

"It was right here!" Colin yelled.

"There was a donestre," Glory called after Colin's father. It stopped him in his tracks.

He turned, his eyes narrow. "What did you say?"

Glory felt very small and insecure all of a sudden, but she stepped forward.

"We fell in the hole, and there was a donestre. Colin stabbed him in the eye and saved us."

The man's hands curled into boulder-like fists. His eyes shifted to Colin's side. His expression turned dark. "Where is Ilyndiil?"

Colin's hand went to his scabbard, but his hand grasped thin air. He looked to his hip with horror.

"You lost it?" the man roared. He lurched toward Colin and began boxing his ears. "You stupid, stupid boy!" He pinned Colin against a tree, backhanding his jaw. "How could you lose it? You've not yet had it a day."

Glory staggered back. How could a father treat his child so? She watched as the man grabbed Colin by the collar and lifted him into the air, continuing his tirade. Spittle slung from his lips like a rabid dog with the force of his words. "Do you realize what you've done, you dim good-for-nothing whelp?"

"Please, Father!" Colin cried. "I can find it again. Please! Give me a chance."

Colin's father shook the boy like a rag doll.

"Please, if you let me go, I can find it... I'm sorry!"

Colin's father grew red with pulsing, plump veins in his neck and forehead.

Glory couldn't stand to watch anymore.

"Stop it." Her voice was quiet at first as she cowered in the man's presence, but it grew stronger. "I said, 'Stop it!'"

She charged toward them. "Let him go." She gave the man's ankle a solid kick. "By order of the princess."

The man growled and looked down at her.

Glory crossed her arms. "I charge you to let him go."

Colin's father gritted his teeth. "Or what?"

"I shall tell the king how you treat people."

Colin's father threw the boy to the ground and laughed. "That's a good one, little highness." He continued laughing. He laughed so hard that tears sprang to his eyes. He wiped them away and crouched down before Glory. He leaned in until his face was an inch from hers. "How I treat my boy is no one's business but my own."

Glory stared him down.

The man grinned, then gave a sudden snarl with a gnash of his teeth.

Glory wanted to bite him.

Colin's father cut across to his son. "Do not come home until Ilyndiil is found. Hear me?"

Colin bit his already bleeding lip and nodded. His father stormed back to their cottage.

Glory offered her hand to Colin. He pushed it away, got up by himself, and started kicking the leaves and dirt.

Glory placed a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Colin brushed her hand away, sweeping through the leaves more fervently.

"Do you want help?"

Colin shook his head and stooped. "It's gone. I left it in a hole that does not exist."

Glory knelt beside him. "Don't say that."

Colin rocked back on his haunches, turning his head away and wiping at his face with his sleeve.

Glory knew he was crying. She slipped her hand into his. "What we saw was real. You are a hero." She scooted closer and put her arm over his shoulders. Colin swept her into an embrace.

Glory's eyes widened with surprise, but she assured him, "We will get through this together. We will find someone who will listen. Then we can get back your dagger."

"I should have cut off its hand for proof," Colin muttered. "It does not matter. I cannot return home until I have llyndiil."

Glory blinked. "Your father doesn't really mean that... does he?"

Colin was silent.

It had not occurred to Glory that Colin would be alone in the woods at night. He would be hungry, and cold, and unarmed. It was a very real possibility that he could perish, especially if there were any more creatures—like the donestre—lurking.

"Perhaps Papa could find you a new dagger," Glory suggested.

Colin let her go and shook his head. "Father would know the difference."

"Well at least come back to the castle with me. I will ask Maeb to speak with the scullery maid. You can sleep in the kitchen."

Slowly, Colin put his hand into Glory's and wove their fingers together. "I'd be lost without you."

Stout Maeb waddled around Glory's bed on creaky bones. She hummed a tune of her Fae-people, tucking in her charge for the night. Glory had told her about Colin's predicament and kindly Maeb had seen to it that the boy was fed and looked after.

"Maeb, tell me more about donestres."

Maeb was about to speak when King Balthazaar appeared in the doorway. "You will do no such thing, Maeb."

Maeb grimaced, then gave Glory an apologetic look and left.

Glory sat up in bed. "Colin and I saw one today."

The king smiled. "I do so love your active imagination, dear one."

"No, honestly, Papa, we really did."

Balthazaar shook his head and moved to her. "You saw no such thing. I fear if Maeb continues with her stories that you will have night terrors."

Glory clenched her fists. She was going to tell her father how Colin's father had treated him when Balthazaar extinguished her bedside candle, kissed her cheek, and murmured, "There's no such thing as monsters."

## CHAPTER ONE

### Morning Glory

*Five years later...*

White buds, like little delicate cowry shells, sprang from kelly stems. They blossomed into alabaster petals, and silvery dew hung from each frond until it dripped to thorns below. Ivy crept along the trellises of each latticework wall. Sunlight strolled through the land and leapt the bulwarks of Winterholme Castle, bidding the rose garden good morning, asking the buds to rise to its kiss like a sleeping lover.

Princess Glory stepped lightly over the cool gravel of the garden path. The golden beauty, radiant in a pale beryl gown, trimmed in silver filigree, hummed a simple, pretty tune that caused the robins to harmonize. Her fair hand grazed the coarse white mortar of the garden wall. She stopped by the lily pond to check her reflection, smoothing herself over, then wound her way to the middle of the garden and stopped. She stared at the ground, watching the sunlight edge toward her bare toes.

"Come on," she whispered, "a little further."

The light crept over the ground, and she felt a wash of warmth cross her feet. She smiled and tilted her head back, soaking in the morning's most delicious gift and breathed in the botanic perfume balancing on the air. The light seemed to set her golden tresses ablaze, accentuating every exquisite detail of her face and frame. Even the roses turned back for shame in her presence.

The morning sunlight not only filled her body, but it filled her soul, mantling her with an Apollonian robe. She welcomed the day, feeling blessed that the sun loved her so. Today was Lucullia's wedding, and Glory was relieved to have escaped the madness of the preparations inside, especially her overbearing older sisters. Now she waited for the only thing she desired to hear. To her, the world went silent. No birds sang, no cricket chirped.

"There you are," his tenor voice chimed.

She knew he would come. She turned toward the voice and graced the man with a perfect smile. "Colin!"

"I love when you smile."

She ran to the arms of her father's Royal Falconer. "I am so glad you came."

"Why would I not?"

Glory gazed up at Colin. "Because Father would have your head if he knew."

"Let your father worry about his other daughters. Let him especially worry about Lucullia today. What he does not know will not hurt him."

"Poor Lucullia," Glory sighed.

"Yes. Poor, *poor* Lucullia... marrying that poor, poor Lord Davenport with hardly an Adamantine Nickel to his name."

"It is a good thing falconry pays so well."

"Yes, it is." Colin took Glory's arm in his and began to walk. He was quiet at the interim. Glory could see, from the corner of her eye, Colin's gaze fixed on her face. She soaked in the sunlight again, sublimely happy. "A good thing indeed," Colin said, "for I have been saving every cent."

"Why? Are you at last replacing that knife we never found?"

Colin stopped and swept Glory into an embrace. "Because, Little Bird, soon we will fly away."

Glory's mouth formed a little 'oh'. Her heart fluttered. "Colin, do you mean it?" Colin laughed and lifted her into the air with an agile spin. "Yes, my love, every word of it."

He set her down and took her head into his hands, as if clutching a small bird, and stared into her eyes. "Glory, I love you."

He sealed his mouth to hers and held her tightly. They lingered, hanging on the edge of excitement, then Glory pushed him back. Colin lost his balance against a marble bench and fell over it.

"Oh, Colin, tell me again!"

Colin chortled. "I love you?"

"No," Glory whined with a little stomp of her foot. "Tell me why."

"Oh, Glory, because you are so very beautiful." Colin grasped her lithe fingers in his hands and rose.

"Tell me more, Colin."

"Your eyes are like two glimmering agates, polished by the angels themselves."

Glory smiled. "Go on..."

"Your hair is like the golden fleece, captured by Jason from the serpent at Colchis." Colin's hands slid down to Glory's svelte waist. "Your silhouette is like the hollow wing of a bird that flies on song and rules the sky."

Glory giggled as Colin squeezed her hips. "More, Colin. Tell me more! What else do you love about me?"

"Your voice. When you speak it's like the skylark's song. I could hear it for eternity."

"Oh, Colin," Glory sighed.

"Even the sun worships you."

"Oh, Colin, stop!" Glory laughed, "You are too much."

Colin seemed lost in her presence. He was beaming like an idiot, obviously reveling at how supple Glory felt in his grasp.

The grin on Glory's face vanished. "I didn't really mean that."

Colin's face was blank. "What?"

"I said, 'Stop', but I didn't mean it."

"Uh... your shoulders are like two snowy doves?"

Glory sighed exasperatedly. "Must you compare me to avians, you birdbrain?"

"But I love birds..."

Glory pivoted abruptly, whisking herself away. She wasn't really angry with him. She counted to three under her breath. She knew he would follow like a pup at any moment. Sure enough, she heard his boots crunch against the gravel.

"Glory, wait!"

Glory paused. Colin's hand reached for hers and turned her toward him.

"You are absolutely right. You are far more beautiful than any bird. Birds are jejune. Birds can not hold a candle to you."

Glory smiled smugly.

"It does make me so happy to see you smile. I am sure the gods forged the sun from your very smile. How unfortunate Lord Davenport will not be able to afford teeth for Lucullia when she is old and they all fall out." Colin tickled her.

Glory burst into laughter.

"And poor Murtia whose husband demands she answer his every beck and call," Colin barreled on, "Poor hungry Portia who can not even attract a man who will continue to indulge her insatiable appetite."

Glory joined in. "Poor Alexa whose husband can not keep the bed hot enough for her. Poor cheerless Ophelia who's espoused is eternally happy."

Colin laughed. "You mean eternally obnoxious."

"And poor, poor Odessa whose betrothed does not have the ballocks to bridle her rages."

"Glory!" a voice shouted across the garden.

Colin tensed. Glory gasped, "That's Odessa."

"Will I see you tonight?" Colin whispered.

"Come to the wedding."

Colin nodded and dashed away.

"Glory."

Glory turned to see her older sister, Odessa, pink with vexation.

"Where have you been?"

"Here," Glory said.

"I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Obviously not very hard," Glory chortled.

Odessa's face contorted. She grabbed Glory by the elbow and pulled her along.



"Ow," Glory whined, "you are hurting me. Help!" she yowled half-heartedly, "I am being pulled to certain doom by a wild woman masquerading about as a princess."

Odessa's fist tightened on her elbow, her fingernails bit into her skin. Glory's face scrunched up, and she paled. "Odessa, that really hurts."

"We have a lot of work to do today, Glory. Father will be returning tonight from Council's Realm, and everything must be set for Lucullia's wedding."

"Why can't Ophelia and Portia help you?"

"They already are."

Glory blew a stray strand of hair from her face. "I have better things to do today."

Odessa dragged Glory into a corner and quickly looked about to ensure no one unwanted was coming. "As in consorting with Colin?"

Glory's face was drawn. The blood rushed out of her complexion. She felt dizzy. "You know about us?"

"Everyone knows about the two of you," Odessa growled.

Glory swallowed hard.

"Everyone, that is, but Father. If you do not pull your weight today, I will make it my personal charge to change that."

"You wouldn't!" Glory hissed.

"Try me."

She glowered at Odessa, but was no match for her obstinate stare. Glory yowled in frustration, conceding with a huff. "Fine! Where am I needed?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Lucullia's Wedding

Glory knelt near a seamstress, helping her put the finishing touches on Lucullia's white gown.

"Ow, be careful!" Lucullia stomped as a needle poked her ankle.

"I am sorry, My Lady," murmured the seamstress.

"This should have been done weeks ago," Glory muttered.

"It would have if I were not being wed to such a beggar," Lucullia retorted. "It is all I can do to at least turn this rag he sent me into a proper dress."

Ophelia, Odessa's twin, had been sniffing softly in the background and suddenly burst into tears. "I wish I were getting married!"

"Your day is coming. What's the rush?" Glory mumbled.

"It is just that...that..." Ophelia sniveled, "Lucullia looks so pretty."

Odessa rolled her eyes at her twin. "Ophelia, you already are pretty."

"You are only saying that," Ophelia sobbed, "because you are my sister."

Portia stood near a table in the corner laden with food. "We're all sisters," she garbled with a mouth full of rump roast.

"That may be so," said Lucullia, "but do not dare put your fat little sausages on this dress. It is bad enough as it is without the stains of whatever garbage you have been eating."

Ophelia wailed.

Odessa growled. "Oh, what is it now, Ophie?"

"Lucullia called Portia fat again."

"She is," grumbled Odessa.

Ophelia dried her blue eyes and dabbed at her nose. She looked at Portia who was now stuffing her face to conceal her hurt feelings. Ophelia burst into broken laughter. "Hey, you are right. She *is*!"

Portia's mouth stopped moving, and her chin began to tremble.

Glory looked at Odessa plaintively.

"You two are driving me crazier than the loons in the dungeon. Go and find something else to do before I throw the both of you out of the window," Odessa snarled.

Portia swallowed her food, plucked a pastry from the table, and took Ophelia's hand with her free one. "Come on, Ophie, let's find some nice flowers to arrange."

Lucullia fidgeted. "Are the three of you really not done yet? How hard is it to sew a few flowers on a piece of lace? It shouldn't have taken this long."

"Forgive us, Your Highness," said the seamstress, "but there are thousands, and the stitch you requested is the most intricate—"

Odessa gave the seamstress *the look*. It was enough to say, *Silence, fool. Princess gets what princess wants.*

Glory smirked.

They toiled in silence for a few hours. Lucullia grew more and more fidgety. Odessa threatened to drive the sewing needle into Lucullia's Achilles if she did not hold still. They would bicker, but Glory knew Odessa was the smarter, if younger sibling, and always won.

Suddenly, the doors of the room burst open and work ceased. All four young women looked up to see large vases of colorful flowers flow in. Portia, stout and rotund, was concealed behind one and Ophelia, tall and swan-like, behind the other, blubbering again. "I can not help it."

"Too beautiful?" asked Portia, setting one of the vases down.

"No. Allergies," Ophelia sniffled.

Portia crossed the room and knelt near Odessa.

"Do not touch my dress!" Lucullia warned.

Portia stuck out her pink little tongue from her chubby, freckled face. She leaned toward Odessa. "They're here."

Odessa handed her needle and thimble to a servant and motioned for Glory to do the same.

"Where are you two going?" Lucullia demanded.

"Do not concern yourself with it, sister."

"It is my concern. The two of you are supposed to be on my time today."

"Not while we welcome your guests, you greedy little priss," Odessa chided.

Odessa marched to the bailey, with Glory filing behind, along with waddling, panting Portia, and languishing Ophelia. An ornate carriage crested the hill and rambled across the drawbridge. The horses, crowned with plumage and elaborate trappings, slowed to a halt, snorting and chomping on golden bits. The footman hopped off and opened the door. A raven-haired Venus of twenty-one stepped down, her eyes fixed on the footman as she slathered her charm upon him. The footman smiled foolishly and almost shut the door on the man who was also trying to exit the carriage.

Odessa stepped forward, offering her hands to the woman. "Alexa."

"Odessa."

Alexa regarded her other sisters as well. "So good to see..." Alexa's eyes wandered to a stablehand across the yard. "You."

Alexa's head tilted to the side with a smile; the other sisters looked at each other knowingly. Their handsome, wealthy brother in law, Lord Coventry, was about

to take Alexa's arm when she parted company. "Excuse me, dears," she said, "I need to see a man about a horse."

Lord Coventry kissed the princesses' cheeks chastely. He motioned to a trunk on the back of his carriage. "Gifts for my sisters. I'll have my servants bring them to your quarters." He trotted after Alexa, calling, "Oh, dearest! Wait for your Sugar Plum."

Glory snorted, "Sugar Plum."

Ophelia started crying. "I wish my Lord Gaylord would call me Sugar Plum!"

Odessa prodded her twin in the ribs with her elbow. "Oh, *do* try to compose yourself, Ophie."

Portia brushed crumbs from her skirt and smoothed it out, not that it did much good. "Here comes Murtia."

Another fine carriage pulled through the gate, much the same as the first. A heavy man threw open the door and only gave the girls a brief nod. "Bring the trunks up, Murtia," he grunted as he lumbered off.

Murtia waited for the footman to help her from her perch within the carriage. She opened her arms to her sisters, motioning them over. They knew she was too lazy to take two steps toward them and closed the distance between them politely.

Murtia, who looked strikingly similar to rotund, umber Portia, hugged all of them and rolled her hand in some abstruse wave. "Do tell the servants to bring our things up."

It would not have been hard for Murtia to say this herself with the servants only inches away, but the younger girls dared not muddle with either of their two eldest sisters. The servants had heard her clearly and grabbed her things.

They watched her make her way into the castle. "We better get back inside," Odessa said.

"Oh, good," Portia smacked her lips, "I am hungry."

More and more guests arrived throughout the day. Nearer to dusk, Glory found some idle moments as the princesses awaited the arrival of their father who was journeying home with the groom from the region of Council's Realm.

Glory adjourned to her room to change dresses for Lucullia's wedding. When she was ready, she examined herself in the mirror and thanked her servants. She began to brush her hair in long, fluid strokes, counting each one. She was only halfway to one-hundred when a servant entered and announced that her father's carriage had been seen a short distance from the castle.

Glory put her brush down, grasped the garland crown that had been made for her, and wound her way down the darkened hall. Ribbons fluttered behind her from the garland, and torch light from the wall flickered and shuttered. She placed

the garland on her head and smoothed it all out, stopping before a hall mirror to make sure it looked perfect.

When she turned again, Colin was there. He grinned and slid his arms around her waist, pulling her around a corner.

"Colin, what are you doing here?"

He squeezed her playfully. "Readying the doves."

Glory squealed and squirmed. "Stop it. Father will be here any second!"

"Let him come." He removed the garland from Glory's head. "I want him to see." He kissed her passionately, dipping her back a little.

Glory giggled through the kiss.

Colin pulled away. "Let's fly away tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Right after Lucullia's wedding. I do not want to wait any longer."

"Colin..." Glory started.

"Well, well," came a catty voice. "What have we here?"

Glory pushed Colin away. "Alexa!"

Alexa sidled up to Colin and almost purred. "Hello, handsome. What's your name?"

"Colin," the young falconer squeaked, then cleared his voice and spoke in a deep, exaggerated tone. "Colin." His back straightened and his chest puffed up. Glory pulled him to her and dug her nails into his arm.

"Who is this boy you are being so cozy with, Glory? Do not tell me you are falling for a commoner."

Glory scowled at her oldest sister. "He is Father's royal falconer."

"Still, I do not think Father would be pleased with the idea of such a tryst. After all, he beheaded mine."

Glory glanced at Colin. The expression on his face was that of both intrigue and terror.

Alexa stroked Colin's bicep and "oohed" a little.

Glory felt Colin flex as he tried to show off. She gave him a sound elbow in the ribs to remind him of his place.

"Imagine Father's dismay when he arrives, and you are not there to greet him. He will wonder where his baby girl is. Will I have to tell him?"

"I was planning on telling him."

Alexa's ebony eyebrow arched. "Really?"

Glory stood her ground.

"Was that before or after you '*fly away*' together?" Alexa's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "Are you sure, little sister? I believe an arrangement could be made to keep me quiet."

"Leave us," Glory snapped, "I'll be right behind you."

"Very well." Alexa turned and glided off.

Glory's blood curdled. "Ooh, that witch! She thinks she can seduce any man she wants. She is not even that pretty."

Glory looked at Colin. His head leaned to the side as he watched Alexa's backside get smaller in the distance. "I said, 'She is not even that pretty.'"

"Wha-- ?"

Glory punched Colin in the arm as hard as she could and stormed off.

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"His Majesty, The King," the herald announced.

All seven princesses bowed deeply as their father stepped down from his carriage. Lord Davenport remained in the carriage and was driven to the lawns of the wedding. King Balthazaar greeted each daughter with a kiss until he came to Glory. He caressed her face and drank her in. "My Glory."

Glory smiled her best, cooing sweetly. "The Glory be thine for ever and ever, dear father."

Balthazaar chuckled and kissed Glory's forehead tenderly. Glory wrinkled her nose as her father's beard tickled her face.

"My dear, where is your crown?"

Glory reached to her head. The garland was gone. Her mind ran wildly. Colin must still have it! She could hear her sisters whispering amongst themselves. Surely Alexa had told them what she had overheard. "Forgive me, Father," Glory bowed, "I must have left it in my room. I was so excited to see you."

The king regarded her with a smile and patted her shoulder. "No matter." He crossed to Lucullia and offered his arm. "We have more pressing matters to attend to."

As Balthazaar led Lucullia to the wedding, Glory breathed a sigh of relief, even though all of her sisters' eyes were boring into her.

Although Lucullia was miserable, she hid it well. Lord Davenport did not seem so bad to Glory. He was clean-shaven and kind and very excited about being chosen as a husband for Lucullia. Glory watched all the guests make themselves merry through food and good drink, dancing and laughter. Alexa was batting her eyes at every male on the lawn whenever her husband wasn't looking. Murtia was bribing the servants well to get her husband good and drunk so she wouldn't have to cater to him later. Lucullia was trying to buy out horses and households. Portia was hiding behind the banquet table, stuffing her face. Odessa, whose betrothed had traveled far to visit, was bawling him out for stepping on her toes as they danced, while Ophelia was in a corner being consoled by her excessively happy future husband. Ultimately, Glory thought they all looked pretty miserable. She loved her

father fiercely, but she felt he had terrible tastes in mates for his daughters. How lucky she was to have taken fate into her own hands with Colin. Dear, sweet Colin... with whom she was still very cross, she might add! Glory sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. How dare Colin look at another woman, and one not nearly as beautiful as she, for that matter! No matter. Tonight they would elope. She would be his. He would be hers. That would be that. Glory huffed restlessly and moved to the edge of the tent where the air was cooler. She leaned against a tent support and looked at the stars. There was an eerie howl and rumble in the nearby woods. *Giants*, flicked through Glory's head. She brushed the absurd thought away and shivered. Where was Colin anyway?

"Psst! Glory."

She turned to see Colin peering out from behind a marble statue of one of her ancestors, heroic Prince Maghnus.

Glory made sure no one was looking and went to him.

Colin stole a kiss and whispered, "Forgive me?"

Glory nodded emphatically.

"At midnight tonight, we'll run away. I will wait by the garden for you."

"I will be ready."

Colin ran off to release the wedding doves, and Glory returned to the party. Her stomach fluttered with excitement and apprehension. The guests clapped as white blurs flew by the open-air tent.

Balthazaar raised his goblet and stood. The party fell to a hush. "On this, the day of my daughter's wedding, I am both pleased and most enthusiastic. I hope this marriage will be fruitful in both children and worldly riches. To aid Lord Davenport in this high expectation, I wish to give with Lucullia a dowry." Balthazaar smiled at the bride. "The Paladin's Flask at Monmouth Flail, which I purchased quite recently, five fine horses of Lord Davenport's choosing, a trade galleon to seek riches abroad, and a trust of ten thousand Imperial Rupees for the private acquisition of land and trade. I have no doubt, my boy, you will turn these gifts into the most profitable annuities in no time."

Lord Davenport looked incredibly humbled, while Lucullia looked relieved that there might actually be a bearable life after she left the palace. The guests applauded Balthazaar's flowing generosity.

"And finally an announcement. Most exciting news indeed. You may know that I have seven daughters, but only five sons or sons-to-be. My youngest daughter, Glory," Balthazaar raised his glass to her, "has yet to wed. However, it has been brought to my attention that there is a match for her."

Glory's heart raced; the room started spinning. How could he know?

“On this most auspicious night, I wish to celebrate the betrothal of Princess Glory to Eoghan, Prince of The Blood Realm.”



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Midnight Run of Princess Glory

The world was spinning. *No*, Glory thought desperately, *No, no!* Her lungs were tight, no air would come. *I am marrying Colin. This must be a dream. Wake up, Glory.* She pinched herself hard. *Wake up!*

But this wasn't a dream. It was all too real. The guests were either stunned now, that she was being married to a mystery prince, or applauding the announcement, but Glory heard none of the clamor, for the roar in her ears was too loud. She ran.

Glory cut her way through the darkness to her father's quarters. She wilted into the soft chair near his desk, her face pressing onto the desk top. She swallowed. Her lungs burned from running through the cool night air. She wanted to scream. She wanted to weep. Neither would come. She pounded the desk. Her head lifted when she heard the door creak open. Servants preceded her father and his jolly laughter. Balthazaar paused in the doorway. "Is that you, Glory?"

Servants lit lamps in the room, chasing out the shadows.

Balthazaar crossed to the desk. "You left in an awful hurry. Is everything alright, my dear?"

He reached out to stroke Glory's hair, but she pushed his hand away and rose from the chair. "No, Father, everything is *not* all right."

Balthazaar lowered his creaky bones into his chair with an achy groan. "It is about your betrothal, isn't it? Come on, let's hear it then."

Glory pressed her palms into the front of the desk, glaring at the king. "How could you do this to me?"

"It is time you take a husband, Glory. You are nearly fourteen."

"Fifteen," growled Glory.

"Oh," Balthazaar shook his head, "I am more behind on your betrothal than I thought. You shall marry at sixteen."

"You can not make me love another!"

Balthazaar's fingers wove together, his old joints rounded like snubbed tree branches, knobby and ashen. He rubbed his white beard over the top of his hands, most likely wondering what had gotten into his young daughter. He was quiet a long time, then simply asked, "What's love got to do with anything?"

Glory straightened. "Everything."

Balthazaar sat back against his chair and chuckled. "My dear child, do you honestly think I loved your revered mother the day we wed?"

Glory's brow furrowed.

"Love is a splendid thing, Glory, but true love is forged and tempered over time. It is a thing we learn to do. I grew to love your mother more than anything, and miss her every day now that she is gone, but I would not trade some frivolous young love for what I came to feel for her."

"I love Colin!" Glory blurted. The words left a dry taste in her mouth the instant they fled her lips.

Balthazaar did not seem nearly as shocked or enraged as she was sure he would be. He was as placid as a mountain lake. "No, Glory. You do not."

"I love Colin, and you can not make me love any other. Who are you to say who I can and can not love?"

"I am your father and, more importantly, your king. I have every say on this matter. You will marry the suitor I choose for you, as I have done with your sisters. Lord Regent Barwn Xander and I signed the pre-nuptial papers at Council's Realm. It is already done. He is on his way to collect you."

Glory froze. She had heard that name as a child. Xander was a fearsome warlord. His name had been screamed in nightmares by refugees escaping to their kingdom. Whispered rumors flew that the gods had cursed his son and made him deformed as repayment for the sins of Xander. A monster for a monster.

"How could you choose a prince no one has ever *seen*? People say he is a recluse. How do you know if he is even worthy of me? How will he know my beauty?" Glory ran a shaking hand through her hair. "Do you not see how this will make me the laughing stock of the Twelve Kingdoms?" She straightened, raising her chin defiantly. "You are better off allowing me to marry Colin. At least he can *see* me."

"Let you..." Balthazaar laughed. "Why, the very idea.... Still such an active imagination at this age. Charming."

Glory leaned over him, hissing, "You are a fool, old man."

Balthazaar's face was stern. "You will show me proper respect, girl. Xander assured me Prince Eoghan can care for you. He rules his kingdom with swift justice and an honest heart. Already his lands outnumber ours. It is in our best interest to merge with him and form a Crown Realm."

Glory slammed her fist against the desk so hard that the quill in the inkwell rattled. "Honesty?" she scoffed. "Eoghan is the son of a *monster*. How can such a person understand our principles? Xander gained those lands for Eoghan through force."

"What Xander has done was in the interest and preservation of his son. I would have done the same. I have forgiven him."

"He slaughtered innocent people and burned down our churches!" Glory cried. "How could anyone forgive that?" She crossed her arms and pursed her lips, looking away. "You can not do this to me. I will not consent." She looked back at her father, her blue eyes flashing. "Colin and I are in love."

"I assure you that you are not."

"How would you know?"

Balthazaar rose sluggishly. "You are merely in love with the idea of it all."

Glory's eyes widened.

"You are in love with his love for your beauty. What does a girl of fourteen—"

"Fifteen," Glory interjected.

Balthazaar grimaced. "—know about love?"

"I know enough."

"What you believe you know is wrong, Glory."

Glory clenched her fists at her side and was opening her mouth to argue, but Balthazaar waved her off. "My word is final. You may go."

Glory brushed away a burning tear that formed in the corner of her eye. She clenched her fists as she stormed down the hall. *I am not wrong*, she thought, *Father is wrong. He is a fool! All of my sisters are miserable because of his choices.* Glory brushed away another tear with the back of her hand. It then occurred to her that perhaps her sisters would help her escape unnoticed. If they were so unhappy, surely they would want at least one among them to be spared. Glory hurried to the common room she and her sisters shared. The room was empty, but a fire was crackling in the hearth. Glory tried to think of what she should say. How could she convince them to help her find happiness? A servant entered the room and asked if she could be of service.

Glory inhaled sharply. "Go and fetch my sisters."

Within a few minutes Ophelia, Odessa, Portia, Alexa and Murtia appeared. They were yawning and rubbing their eyes, unamused to be bothered at this late hour after such a busy day.

"Sisters," Glory began, "I have summoned you here in the midst of a dire family emergency."

Instantly, Ophelia burst into tears. "It is Father, isn't it? Oh, no, Father is dead!"

"Shut up, Ophie," Alexa chided.

"As you have heard, I am to be wed to Prince Eoghan. This can not come to pass."

Odessa folded her arms. "Really? Why is that?"

"I am in love with Colin the Falconer. We have already arranged to be married."

Murtia stretched out on a nearby chaise. "What do you expect us to do about it?"

"I have watched each of you this very night and observed your misery. Not one of you is happy with the match Father has chosen." Glory paused, reconsidering. "Except Portia, but she chose food."

Portia looked up from a small table with a turkey leg in her mouth. "I was hungry."

"You are always hungry." Murtia rolled her eyes.

"And you are always lazy," Portia retorted.

Before arguments could break out, Glory regained their attention. "Sisters, I know we are not always kind to each other, but nevertheless, we are still sisters, and I dare say we love each other."

No one argued that point.

"Now it stands to reason that with you all so unhappy, you may want to see at least one of us happy. Dear sisters, will you not find a way to spare me from the fates you all have suffered?" She looked around at them, the orange firelight dancing off their sleepy faces.

The princesses all looked at each other, then back to Glory.

"Why in the world would we do that?" Alexa asked.

"If we are not happy, why should you be?" Odessa pressed.

Murtia agreed. "Yes, that does seem rather unfair."

"Because I am in love!" cried Glory. "Have none of you ever been in love before?"

"Of course we have," Alexa stated. "Father made sure those affairs never came to fruition. There are consequences when it comes to love. Why do you think I-

Glory glared at her. "You do not count, you man-hungry, beetle-headed gudgeon!"

Odessa cackled at Glory's spunk. "Alright, little sister," she soothed. "Say we help you. Then what?"

Glory saw the glimmer of opportunity. "At midnight tonight, Colin will be waiting for me by the garden. We will ride off together and be wed at once. The lot of you will be rid of a burden of a little sister, and I will be free to live my life. I need you all to help me get to him, undetected."

"That's so romantic," sniffled Ophelia.

Alexa beckoned Odessa over and conspired with her. Glory wondered what they were whispering.

"All right, Glory," Alexa nodded, "we'll help you. We will whisk you away to your midnight rider, but on one condition."

"Name it."

“That when you wake up one morning, you will not hold us responsible for your utter misery.”

Glory smiled. “That will never happen. We will live happily ever after.”

Alexa motioned to the door. “Well, then, sisters, let us to it, post haste. The witching hour approaches.”

Glory felt a rush of excitement and grinned.

Alexa smiled wryly. “We wouldn’t want to keep your bridegroom waiting, would we?”

Glory shook her head no.

The princesses padded down the darkened hallways. Murtia slipped a sleeping potion to the guard by their shared common room. Odessa ordered another to keep quiet or there would be consequences (it helped that she passed him a satchel of gold coins); Ophelia turned a corner and sobbed violently upon another who became equally distraught over trying to calm her. At the Great Hall, Portia distracted the guard with a late-night snack. Finally, Alexa seduced away the most stalwart guard close to the doors of the garden with a husky, “Hey, there, soldier.” Odessa spirited Glory out.

Glory ran to the other side of the garden. Her feet could not carry her fast enough. A cloaked rider on a black horse was silhouetted against the inky, starry sky. He reached down with a calloused hand and pulled her up behind him. Glory, ecstatic, waved goodbye and mouthed enthusiastic *thank yous* to Odessa. Glory gushed to her rider, but he motioned with his hand to keep quiet.

Through the night they rode frantically. The horse’s hooves hammered the ground with staccato, matching the beat of Glory’s heart. The fields rose and fell, undulating with the countryside, as they passed through Edward’s Bane. They splashed through Four Elders Fjord, through all of Iron Berry County and over the banks of the River Trefnwyr near Council’s Realm. That was where Glory stopped recognizing her surroundings.

She snuggled close to the cloak, feeling its warmth in the chilly midnight rush. She held her arms tight around the man’s waist and sighed, “Oh, Colin, we’re going to be so happy together. We will make a beautiful home with ample fields and crops, and your falconry trade will afford us a few servants. I would help out, of course, except that I will be too busy keeping myself perfect and pretty for you.”

Glory rambled on and on through the night. The horse’s breaths came rhythmically. He dug in to the earth and sped on when they passed a barren forest of gangly, spectral trees and through a lush, floral fiefdom, barreling up the coast. Cliffs plummeted beside them, the ocean beating against the rocks and black coral.

Moonlight glinted off the sea. Something arched through the water that was neither whale nor shark, but serpentine. Glory's breath caught. "Did you see that?"

The horse's excitement seemed to grow even more when he raced through an eerie, hilly valley, and crested over a horizon stamped with a wide and ominous Celtic arch.

Glory began to wonder why Colin wasn't responding to any of her comments. Maybe he couldn't hear her over the wind and the galloping, so she tried speaking louder, but still no response.

The land changed to high moors, and a castle began to rise in the distance.

A water droplet landed on Glory's nose. Another on her forehead. One more on her chin as she turned her face skyward. Suddenly she was soaked as the heavens ripped open and poured out their anguish. Thunder rumbled and a flash of light split the sky. Glory cringed. The castle came into full view. A heavy iron gate began to open.

"Colin, when did you acquire a castle?"

The horse's hooves clattered into the bailey, slowing to a canter.

Glory felt faint. "You are not Colin, are you?"

Something massive and eerie moved in the shadows ahead.

The horse came to a halt and the rider dismounted. He grabbed Glory's waist, and the hood of his cloak fell back to reveal a dark-haired man, not at all like Colin. He spoke with a husky brogue. "Do you never shut up? I do not know who this Colin fellow is, but welcome to Blackthorn Keep."

Glory tried to fight him. "Unhand me at once! Who do you think you are? My father will hear about this."

Suddenly the massive shape in the shadows took form. It walked through the rain on two scaly forelegs and two furry hind paws. Glory screamed. Her fists pummeled the man's shoulders, and her feet flailed. The horse spooked. The creature in the rain paced with agitation; its tufted tail swished angrily. "4

*An í seo an cailín?"* it asked in a clear baritone.

The man nodded. "5*Is í.*"

"How dare you! Do you even know who I am?" Glory howled.

The creature drew closer, its amber eyes fixed on Glory, studying her features. It was a gryphon, something Maeb had scared her with during bedtime stories as a child. Always imagined, she believed, never realized until now. The hair on the back of Glory's neck stood on end. The gryphon reeked of wet hide and raw meat, a stench far worse than any of her father's dogs after a soggy foxhunt. Glory felt hollow.

"Send her back," said the gryphon.

Glory stopped fighting. Both she and the cloaked man asked simultaneously, "What?"

The gryphon's black beak clacked, yellow ceres flaring. "You promised to bring Eoghan a beautiful princess, Xander."

"And I have."

"Indeed!" Glory concurred.

The gryphon's golden feathers ruffled, and it shook off some of the rain that continued to pour.

"I am the most beautiful princess in all of the kingdoms," Glory declared.

The gryphon hissed, the fur on its back bristling. "*Greannmhar*6. All that I can see is ugly."

Glory's fear was replaced with fury. She started to flail again, trying to get at the gryphon, but the man wouldn't let her. "How dare you! Why I never—"

The gryphon's eyes flashed at Xander. "*Níl sí tarraingteach dom*. Send her back."

"Please be reasonable," Xander petitioned.

Magnificent wings spread over the gryphon's body. With an angry screech, he leapt into the air, beating the sky in an upward spiral until he disappeared behind Blackthorn's highest bastions.

Xander's face was haggard. "I am sorry, Princess Glory. I hope you will not mind."

Glory, held together only by her indignation, clenched her fists. "I certainly *do* mind! No one speaks to me like that."

Xander sighed. "If you come with me, I'll take you to your quarters."

Glory stomped her foot in the mud. "I will not!"

Xander respired. "Look, you self-fawning tot, you have two choices. You can come inside and not catch your death, or you can stand there and rot in this bloody rain."

Glory's breath rose like a specter on the air.

Xander offered a sarcastic, toothy smile. "We wouldn't want to spoil that pretty little head of yours, Princess."

Glory crossed her arms. "I am not going anywhere."

"Fine. We'll do this your way, My Lady." Xander threw Glory over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and trudged through the mud to the keep. "I've had enough theatrics from royal children for the night!"

Part III

THE MAN  
AND  
THE MONSTER



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Beauty is a Beast

Glory threw herself onto the bed in tears. How dare that... that... *monster* call her ugly! No one had ever called her ugly before. From the day she was born, she was the fairest in all the land. Even the sun worshipped her. Colin had said so.

*Colin.* Glory wailed. *I'll never see Colin again.* She imagined him waiting by the gardens of Winterholme, wondering where she was, realizing she would never be coming, all thanks to her backstabbing sisters.

Her sisters. *Those low, lying, unmuzzled dog-hearted strumpets!* Glory punched the mattress and screamed into her pillow. *Traitors!* And where in the Twelve Kingdoms was this dark Blackthorn Keep? She hadn't recognized the countryside they rode along. She had been too busy dreaming of a future that had now been robbed from her. That future most certainly did not include a gryphon. *That hideous, stinking, talking* beast. Glory wiped her eyes. *I am not the ugly one!*

She rolled off the bed, found some dry night clothes in the wardrobe to change into, and sat before a mirror in the corner. On the table beside her was a beautiful gold-plated brush, which she began to smooth over her dripping locks, counting each stroke. She stared into the mirror, transfixed on her image. Her glorious, perfect image.

It was soothing to her, her conviction in her beauty. The reflection did not lie about her fair, smooth skin, golden locks, and blue, blue eyes. Mirrors did not lie. That is, until, the one before her began to blur. Glory paused, mystified. The mirror was clear again. She resumed brushing her hair. *Eighty-one... eighty-two...*

The mirror's surface seemed to ripple.

Glory rubbed her eyes. The mirror remained blurry. Glory blinked. *I must be very tired.* She finished her nightly ritual, extinguished the candles in the room and slipped into bed.

The rain had eased to a drizzle now, and moonlight cast its glow through wet, silvery veins on the window. Glory stared at the canopy above her. Faintly, over the soft patter of rain, she heard a song. There were no words, but the tune was clear. It was melodic, even flute-like, and so very, very sad, filled with longing and soft disappointment. Glory's heart swelled and tears sprang to her eyes. Someone was singing, and she felt the very same way as the song. She turned her back to the window and the haunting tune and let the tears come freely until there were no more, and the world went dark as she answered the call of sleep.

*Glory ran through the gardens of Winterholme. "Colin!" She called, "Colin!" She rounded the corner to see Colin standing in the sunlight.*

*"Where have you been?" Colin snapped, "I waited all night."*

*Glory recoiled. "I am so sorry, Colin. I must have fallen asleep. I had this horrible dream..."*

*"Well, I had a dream, too," Colin growled, a long tail whipping behind him. "I dreamt I ran away with a beautiful Princess." His gray eyes turned amber and a black beak suddenly protruded from his face. "We were going to live happily ever after." Colin's blond hair grew into a head of golden feathers; his clothes turned into tawny fur. "Then I woke up and was stuck with a hideous, selfish girl." Colin screeched, spread massive wings, and took to the sky.*

*Glory ran in his shadow, calling to him in desperation. "Colin!" She broke in to tears, "Colin..."*

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Doves flitted over Lucullia's reception canopy. Colin brushed his hands against each other and raced toward the little thatched cottage on the hillside overlooking the kingdom. Colin visited from time to time after his father had passed away. He kept all of his most precious things hidden there. The cottage was well-guarded by the patrol that roamed the kingdom's border nearby. Tonight he came for one thing. He shut the front door behind him and flinted a candle to life in which to see by. He pried a loose floorboard from the ground and reached in to retrieve a leather sack heavily pregnant with jingling coins. One spilled on to the floor beside his foot and oscillated with a metallic ring until it rattled to a stop. Colin stooped and picked it up, regarding the likeness of High King Balthazaar upon its shining face. A reminder how he had come by every cent. He had worked for it; taken what he'd learned from his father and applied it to his craft, honing it with what he learned on the job. When his father passed, he had become a natural choice as successor. His methods were a little unorthodox but they achieved the result the king desired. Colin launched the coin in to the air with his thumb and caught it. He kissed it mirthfully and returned it to its place with its numerous brothers and sisters. He had been saving for this night from the moment he had earned his first coin. Glory seemed proud of him for doing so. And by the gods, he vowed to provide her a life she would love.

Colin locked the cottage and stashed the key under the eave above the window outside. He slung the sack of coins over his shoulder and whistled a tune back toward the reception. A smile ascended his face as he drew closer to the party. He passed from crowd to crowd only thinking of Glory and oblivious to all else until he heard her name repeated by one group and then another. He hung back to listen to two couples walking toward their carriages.

"Can you believe it? Princess Glory being married to an unknown. Why, it's unthinkable!"

Colin's brow furrowed. How could they know?

"Yes, it must have taken some nerve to arrange that union. Imagine, a princess and a cursed boy. I wonder what price was paid to Balthazaar for her."

A red heat rose in Colin. How dare they speak of Glory as if she were property or an animal even! Colin muscled through them, splitting the group in two. He strode around to the garden with a scowl upon his face. His sack of coins jangled as they smacked against the ground. Colin paced beside them. How had their plans been discovered? Colin slid down against the castle wall abutting the garden and ran his fingers through his hair. His foot jittered up and down, thumping against the stones. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. His face tipped skyward, and he gazed upon the glittering stars. Everything would be alright. Glory would soon be beside him, and they would dash away to leave this world behind. The hours passed. Colin spent his time pacing and whittling away at a fallen rose branch, already devoid of its thorns. Where was Glory? Why wasn't she coming? Colin peeked around the garden gate. He was sure they had agreed to meet here. Where was she? He bit his lip. Maybe Glory had changed her mind. Colin sank to his knees at the very thought. He stared at the stars. What would he do if Glory rebuffed? Colin clutched his heart. Oh, Glory!

He hung his head. His shoulders sagged.

He heard voices and slowly looked up. A brief distance away he saw two golden-haired young women in the moonlight. His heart fluttered. Glory! Colin staggered to his feet and grabbed his bag of coins. His eyes left the girls for only a moment as he stooped to hoist the bag. When he turned around, there was only one girl in the moonlight, and it was not Glory. Colin raced toward her. He recognized Odessa whose gaze was daggers upon his approach.

"Where's Glory?" Colin asked breathlessly.

A smirk lighted the older princess's lips as she pointed toward the horizon. Colin's eyes followed, and he saw two riders on a black horse dashing off into the night.

Colin swallowed. "I don't... I don't understand."

"No," Odessa said with dark contempt, "you wouldn't."

Her smirk transformed in to a self-satisfied smile as she left Colin standing there downtrodden and with a fat sack of coins swinging by his knee. Colin stared after Glory and the other rider. Her name rose in his throat. He opened his mouth to yell it, but no breath of air escaped him. An ache filled him. He pivoted. Odessa had not gotten far back down the castle hall connecting it to the garden. Somehow Colin found his words. "Where are they going?" He marched after her. "Odessa, tell me where they are going."

Odessa rounded on him. "It is *Your Highness, boy*," she snapped. "And you will begin addressing the rest of my sisters properly as well. You do not need to know where Glory is going, only that she will be safe and far away from this nonsense between the two of you. She is no longer your concern."

The moon shone down on Odessa in her fury through the arches of the hall.

Colin's face darkened. "Gods curse you, *Your Highness*," he swore. "I will find her. We *will* be together."

Odessa lifted her chin. "By the time you secure a horse and saddle it, you will not even remember which direction they went."

Colin pointed at Odessa defiantly. He crossed his heart. Nothing would keep him from his happy ending.

Colin banged upon the door of the king's chambers. "Your Majesty. Your Majesty!" He beat on it harder and harder until the king's steward opened it with a grimace.

"I demand an audience with the King," Colin blurted before the steward could say a word.

"Do you know the hour?" the steward growled.

"Of course I know the hour! I demand an audience with the King!"

"The King is not currently accepting calls. You would be wise to chasten yourself and return in the morning."

Colin grabbed the door and put all of his weight against it. "Balthazaar? Balthazaar, it's Colin!"

The steward pushed back. Beads of nervous sweat formed at his temples. "How dare you address the king in such a manner. Go away, boy, lest you suffer the wrath of your king."

Why was everyone suddenly treating him like rubbish? Colin grit his teeth. He had served this family with unquestionable devotion. They had treated him well until this night. Colin let out a cry of frustration as he pushed the door with all of his might. The steward tumbled backwards with a yelp. Colin looked around the darkened room. "Balthazaar!"

He scattered papers from the king's desk as though Balthazaar were to be found under them. Nevermind the king, perhaps Glory was under there! Colin began

scrounging for information on where she was going. The steward regained his feet and moved toward him.

A thin halo of light glowed upon the wall. Colin turned. His eyes were wide. His breath raced. He clutched a number of parchments to his chest with the king's seal upon them. His eyes adjusted. Balthazaar's haggard face was framed in grim shadows. He crossed slowly to his desk and placed the candle holder down upon the corner of it. He pulled out the chair and sank in to it. He wove his long fingers together and nodded for the boy to sit down. Balthazaar waved his hand to the steward to stand aside.

Colin's knees buckled beneath him. The papers in his arms floated to the table top as his arms went limp. He leaned back in the chair and stared at the king.

Balthazaar was the first to speak. His voice was steady and quiet. "What in the world is the matter with you?"

Colin's mouth opened and closed repeatedly as though to begin his words but only to lose them again.

"Well?" Balthazaar's voice was like distant thunder.

Colin pitched forth against the desk. "Where is Glory? Where have they taken her?"

Balthazaar stroked his beard. "Is that what this is about?"

"Please, Your Grace, please tell me where she's gone." Tears burned the corners of Colin's eyes. "I beg of you. I don't know what I would do without her."

"You must figure that out now, Colin, Son of Craig. For Glory is now betrothed to one of her own station. I urge you to forsake this folly and do the same. Find a girl who will love you."

Colin sprang to his feet. "Glory loves me!"

Balthazaar looked up at him placidly. "She thinks she does."

Colin ran his hands through his hair. "I know it. I will find her with or without your help."

Balthazaar smiled slowly. "You may try."

Colin folded his arms and wondered if that was the king's blessing or a challenge.

Balthazaar leaned forward. "You will fail."

Colin's expression darkened.

Balthazaar rose slowly and with some effort. "You can search all of the Twelve Kingdoms for her, but should you pursue her, you may not return."

"Who will hunt your meat for you? If I have no home or well being, you will go hungry."

Balthazaar's gaze sent a shiver down Colin's spine. It was the first time he realized he was replaceable in his own world.

Balthazaar picked up the candle holder and crossed to the door of his quarters. He paused in the doorway and looked over his shoulder. "I have no doubt you are clever enough to find her, but when you do, it will be too late."

The door shut behind the king.

"Too late for what?" Colin choked. "Too late for *what?*"

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Glory snapped awake, sitting straight up. It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the morning light. She caught her breath. Last night was no dream. She was a prisoner at Blackthorn Keep. Glory buried her face in her hands. *This is a nightmare!* That wasn't the worst part, however. The worst part was that there would be no waking up from it. This was her reality now, and it couldn't be worse. Glory peered through her fingers across the room and out the window. She could sit here all day and mope, or she could try and figure out where this place was. *I don't think things can get any worse, so perhaps I can improve them.*

A good look around the castle and countryside from the towers, and she may be able to secret away a letter of rescue. Glory pulled some suitable clothes from the wardrobe and dressed. There was no time to waste. The sooner she got a good idea of her surroundings, the sooner she could get away from this place. She opened the door of her room and started down the hall.

The keep was decorated handsomely. There were none of the frilly mirrors, furniture, or flowers of Winterholme, but Glory did appreciate the portraits that hung carefully, no doubt completed by master artisans long ago. Full knight armor guarded the halls, polished high and as gleaming as any mirror. Claymores hung from the walls. Glory disliked any heads or antlers of animals hanging about. If she was certain of anything, it was that men ruled this keep. The last time it had seen a feminine touch had been a very long time ago.

Glory came to a spiraling staircase and wondered where it went. She lifted up her skirt a little and started her ascent. She looked out a dusty window on her way up, but couldn't get a decent view. The stairs continued onward and upward until she came to a landing and a door. She tried to open it, but it was stuck. She frowned, then tried to budge it with a few solid pushes of her gossamer shoulder. It gave way, opening on to a wall walk that led to another bastion.

The sun shone on miles of rolling, generous hills, tall with wispy new spring grass, still wet from last night's storm. Patches of purple wildflowers dotted the land. To her distant right was the sea, crashing against sweeping cliffs. Not far from the keep was a forest, still bony and bare from winter's cruel toll, even though spring was present. The keep was built from exotic black ashlar. She smiled with relief when she saw a garden below. Maybe waiting for a rescue wouldn't be so

intolerable with a garden to pass the time in. She surveyed the land one last time, memorizing the way it rolled and swayed, then hurried down to the gardens.

The onyx roses of Blackthorn Keep were a sight to behold. They grew wild and free, untouched by a gardener except to weed. It was a savage, beautiful look that struck a chord in Glory. She had never seen anything like it; black flowers crawling up green ivy on black walls. By contrast, the gardens of Winterholme were impeccably kept. Every bud, leaf, and branch was carefully trimmed and told where to grow and exactly how to exist. But here, the flora seemed to grow strong and make its own way in the world.

Glory's fingers grazed the satiny obsidian petals as she walked along, unafraid of any thorns that might decide to prey upon her. She felt a need to be braver here in this wild place, a desire to stand a little firmer on her own little two feet.

Gradually, she became aware of the feeling that she was not only being watched, but followed. She was sure of it when she heard a dry twig snap and leaves crackle.

"I know you are there, Gryphon," she called.

She could hear a soft puffing through the bushes. Glory peeked through the leaves to see amber eyes staring back at her. She smirked. "Could not keep your eyes from me, Gryphon?"

His beak clacked in the empty air. "I am sorry I called you ugly, Princess. His Highness shall note that you are not so bad in the daylight."

Glory's hands went to the hollow of her waist. "That doesn't seem like much of an apology." She walked along, listening to the gryphon pad beside her from the other side of the bushes.

"Forgive me," said the gryphon, "it is not often I speak with females. My manners are rusty."

"Not good enough, Gryphon. Even an idiot should know how to treat royalty."

*"Labhair ar do shon féin7,"* muttered the gryphon.

"What was that?"

"I have apologized, Princess. Will you not have it?"

Glory crossed her arms. "I will not."

The gryphon hissed and clacked his beak. Glory simpered. She could picture his feathers ruffling. The floral scent in the air barely masked the gryphon's earthy smell of lion musk and a recent kill. They continued walking along.

"Tell me, Gryphon, of this wild place I am captive to. Tell me of the arch I passed last night and the black coral below. What are these places?"

"The landmarks you speak of are Sigil's Gate and Seahorse Reed. Why do you ask?"

"Tonight I will send a letter to my Colin, telling him where I am. He will find me and take me away from this miserable place."

The gryphon stopped. "Colin? I was not informed of a Colin. Who is this whelp you are so sure will come for you?"

"He is Father's royal falconer."

The gryphon ground his beak. He sounded bemused. "You are very stupid." "What!"

"You have told me, the guardian of this keep, that you are trying to escape and how you plan to do so. You are very stupid, *Dúrð*. I suppose someone below your station, and equally stupid to dare coming here, would deserve you."

"Colin *does* deserve me, you monster," Glory shot back.

"Tell me about this Colin fellow, then."

"He is kinder than you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. He is gentle and noble. He says my eyes are like agates."

"Like rocks?" The gryphon pushed his head through the bush, his large fox-like ears close to his head. Glory glared him in the eye. She was put off by his stench, but utterly unafraid. "Ah, yes." The gryphon seemed to smile. "I see."

"He says my voice is like the skylark's song."

"Skylarks is it?" The gryphon's ears perked. "I do like skylarks... they are delicious!"

Glory clenched her fists; heat rose to her face. "My hair is like the golden fleece captured by Jason from Colchis."

"So he says your hair is like the dead hide of a castrated sheep. How quaint."

Glory bit her lip and stomped her feet. "Even the Sun God worships me!"

The gryphon's eyes flashed. His head cocked to the side, his mouth gaping a little. Glory could see his tongue rise and fall with his breath. For a moment she thought she had won.

"Forgive me, Princess, but I wish to retract the apology."

Glory blinked.

"You are still ugly."

"I am not ugly!" Glory screamed.

"Your vanity is unbecoming," the gryphon stated calmly. "You are too vain for Eoghan." He disappeared through the bushes. "Send your letter. Let this Colin come, though I do not understand why he ever would want to be burdened with the likes of you."

"I am not vain, beast."

"What makes you so very sure, Princess?"



“Eoghan must be mad, as well as deformed, to hold such an opinion. To say that the most beautiful princess in all of the kingdoms is not good enough for some psychopathic, deformed recluse is the epitome of vanity.”

The gryphon was quiet for a long time. “Do not confuse vanity with standards.”

Before Glory could form a retort, the gryphon took to the skies. He flew straight into the sun where Glory could see him no more. She drilled her fists at the heavens and kicked the dirt, hollering at the top of her lungs. She had half a mind to find this recluse Prince and set the record straight.

Glory was on a mission to find Prince Eoghan. None of the servants would tell her where he was, or what his room even looked like. She trudged through every corridor, stuck her head through every door, seeking out the prince. The longer it took, the angrier she became. She clenched her fists and ground her teeth. How dare her beauty be questioned! How dare this prince allow his... *dog* to insult her. Glory wound her way deeper into the castle, down a darkened staircase, until the place was strong with the smell of dampness. She shivered and paused. Memories of a similar place and a wild donestre replayed themselves. She took a deep breath and pressed on. A drip, drip, drip echoed in the distance. *I am not afraid*, Glory assured herself. *I am not afraid*.

At the end of the hall was a very heavy wooden door. A slot had been carved low into it, as if for food. Glory retrieved a torch and placed it into a sconce close to the door so she could see better. She knelt down and peered through the opening. “I am Princess Glory. I seek Eoghan, prince of this keep.”

In the corner of the room was a hay pile and a bucket. Something scurried through the shadows. “Hello?” Glory whispered, “Is anyone in there?” She felt a rhythmic rush of air beating against her shoulder. An angry growl rumbled the walls. Glory swallowed and slowly turned her head. The gryphon stood over her.

“What are you doing here?”

“I wish to see the prince.”

The gryphon placed his claw on her shoulder and pushed her down. “You shouldn’t have come.”

Glory’s heartbeat burst into a sprint. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered.

The gryphon lowered his beak to her neck, crouching over her. “Get out.”

He lifted his claw, and Glory scuttled from under him as fast as she could, backing away on her hands and heels like a crab. The gryphon turned, holding his head high and panting. “Do not ever return to this door.”

Glory spun onto her feet and bolted to her room.

*Dear Colin, I’ve been kidnapped.*

Glory ground the black words into the soft parchment, nearly tearing it.  
*I am being held against my will in a black castle near Seahorse Reed, by a vicious monster. Blackthorn Keep sits high on the moors of the East, near Sigil's Gate. Come at once, or I will be utterly destroyed by the beast.*  
--Glory

Glory rolled the note and bound it with a string she had found. Now came the trick of sending it out. Who would take care of it without allowing it to be intercepted?

A knock fell on the door. Glory traipsed over and opened it.

"Dinner is served, Your Grace," said a servant, "will you come?"

Glory did not want to endure the sight of the gryphon again today, if such an animal was allowed at the dinner table, and declined. "I am not hungry." It was a lie.

"I will send your apologies."

"That will not be necessary." Glory had no regrets to send. Instead, she placed the letter to Colin in the servant's hands. "Could you see to it that this letter discreetly finds its way to the page-boy?"

The servant accepted with a bow. "I will handle the matter with the utmost of care, My Lady."

After her nightly ritual, Glory slipped into bed. Outside, she heard the same tune as the evening before. Her chest tightened with yearning again, but she stifled it all with a growl and pulled her pillow over her head. She no longer heard the song, but the steady drumming of her heart to the beat she would not answer. Eventually her eyes grew heavy and sleep found her.

*Houses burned, children cried for their mothers, bodies piled in the street. A man in a black cloak threw a torch into a church and swung his bloody sword at innocent souls. The orange, smoky haze turned black, billowing into the air, taking the shape of an ominous black castle. A woman inside screamed in agony, gripping her wide belly.*

*"A curse on this house, Aowyn, and all you bear in it," said a voice.*

*"No!" pled the woman, "Spare my child. Take me instead."*

*"A cursed life will he lead, Aowyn, until the day he dies, but we will take you for the sins of his father."*

Glory bolted upright, gripping her stomach. It growled loudly. *Blast!* She cursed. *And what an awful dream.* She tried to settle back into bed, assuring herself it was only a dream. She tossed restlessly. Why on Earth would she dream something like that?

She lay on her side, facing the mirror. She closed her eyes and invited sleep to return, but it would not come willingly. A soft light filtered through her eyelids. She opened her eyes. At first she thought the moonlight reflected off of the mirror, but when she squinted at it she saw something else. She looked over her shoulder. A translucent figure hovered near the door. Glory's breath caught. A woman with wavy hair and serene features smiled at her. She wore a flowing gown in Glory's favorite shade of blue. The light around the woman was bright white at the center and forest green at the edges. Glory pushed back the covers.

"Who are you?"

The woman only continued smiling. Her nose wrinkled. Glory saw faint freckles across the bridge of the woman's nose.

"What do you want?" Glory's voice trembled.

The woman turned toward the closed bedroom door and passed ethereally through the heavy wood.

Glory stepped on to the cold floor. She winced, but padded on, quietly opening her bedroom door. Torchlight swayed against the darkened hall. She caught a glimpse of the specter turning a corner further down the hall. Glory padded after her.

"Where are you going?" Glory hissed.

Just when Glory thought she might catch up to the ghost, it passed through a wall. A nearby door was cracked open. Glory peeked through.

"She *is* beautiful, Xander, but for every inch beautiful, she is three times as vain."

"Show patience. She has only been here a night."

The gryphon was pacing, his tail switching back and forth.

"Are you sure Eoghan could not have another, more humble bride?"

Xander sighed. "He that dares not grasp the thorns should never crave the rose."

The gryphon hissed. Obviously he did not like that answer very much.

"We can not lose her, my pet. She is too valuable to our kingdom."

"What good will she do us? She is a lot of trouble to me."

"If we have her, our kingdom will be whole. The people will have no choice but to unite under our reign. No one will argue my right to the throne with a gryphon by my side," Xander explained.

"What if that is not what *I* want?"

Glory covered her mouth to prevent her gasp from escaping. She backed away slowly, hoping Xander and the gryphon had not seen her. Xander as High King? It was unfathomable! Glory bit her knuckles. Did Prince Eoghan know of this plot? She dashed back to her room, shut the door, and braced herself against it. *Am I only*

*a pawn in a game?* Surely once her father found out that he had been tricked, he would send an entire army to aid Colin in the rescue.

She pictured Colin marching at the head of the force, bearing King Balthazaar's coat of arms. He would battle the gryphon, slay Xander, and rescue her. The princess looked out her window to the countryside below. She imagined how it would all play out. Colin, shining in knight's full armor, would place her in the saddle before him and ride home a hero. Balthazaar would be so elated to have Glory back that he would forget the silly betrothal he had made to Eoghan, and he himself would ordain the marriage of Colin and Glory. With Colin the victor, nothing would stand in the way of their union. Balthazaar would deign entire kingdoms to Colin and knight him for his heroics.

Glory shivered. That dirty, old gryphon didn't stand a chance. He would be slain, and Blackthorn Keep would be overtaken.

Glory closed the curtains and went back to bed. She dreamed of Colin, her knight in shining armor. He would come. She would be free. They would ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after.

Glory closed her eyes and pulled the blankets over her shoulders.

*Oh, Colin, hurry!*

She didn't think he could ever come swiftly enough.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Too Late for Curses

Glory made a point of visiting the gardens each morning before the sunlight reached the center. She welcomed its familiar warmth, but gradually started missing this morning ritual. One day she overslept, another week she felt unwell, and soon the ritual seemed unimportant. The idea that the sun worshipped her was ridiculous. Glory even laughed a little. Once she stopped this silly routine, she couldn't help but feel punished because dead things started showing up on her windowsill. The first few mornings that she neglected her routine, it was a mouse, then a sparrow. Glory was disgusted and disturbed. The dead creatures were getting progressively bigger with each day she missed. Finally she had had enough. She threw open the window, effectively shoving off that morning's dead March hare, and screamed.

Birds scattered from the buttresses, stablehands stopped working below, and suddenly the gryphon appeared before her. Glory, startled, bellowed again.

"What is it?" asked the gryphon, his talons digging into the stone, bracing himself against the great commotion. "What is wrong?"

Glory ran a shaking hand through her hair, trying to recompose herself. "I am being punished by the Sun God."

The gryphon's head cocked, and he blinked. "Bel is punishing you?"

"Ever since I stopped going to the garden to greet the sun in the morning, dead *things* have been showing up on my windowsill," Glory frantically explained. "I have surely angered the sun, and now I am being punished."

The gryphon's beak ground with amusement. "Those are not dead things, Princess. Those are gifts."

Glory paced her room, her hands on her hips. "Who in their right mind would leave carrion lying around as a gift?"

The gryphon's feathers ruffled, and he preened himself nonchalantly.

Glory shrieked. "You?"

The gryphon winced, his talons digging into the wall again.

"That's disgusting! You great, blundering buffoon, what were you thinking?"

The gryphon reached out a leg, snapping his talons at her. "Have you any idea how difficult it is to catch a tiny field mouse with feet this big?"

Glory threw her hands into the air, as if to curse the gods. "You have got to be joking!"

"It is no joke, Princess."

"Why in the world would you leave dead *things* as gifts?"

The gryphon's tail thumped. "Do they not hunt where you come from?"

"Of course they do."

"Would something larger impress you? Eoghan is concerned you're eating so little. There *is* a white stag I have— "

"No!" Glory stomped her foot. "Dead creatures do not impress me, Gryphon. Chocolates, flowers, those kinds of things are gifts. Dead creatures are not gifts. They are just dead."

The gryphon hissed, the fur on his back bristling. "Flowers are dead things, once disturbed, yet you say you like them. *Ní thuigim tú!*" he squawked with frustration. "What will make you happy?"

"Colin."

The gryphon scoffed. "Is it not clear to you yet, Princess? He is not coming. Surely he is tired of your pretensions and is only too glad to be rid of you."

"Do not be so sure," Glory admonished.

"Can you not see? Open your eyes, Glory. It has been a moon since you first came here. He is not coming."

Glory's feet stopped moving. She mentally recounted the days. The gryphon was right. With a howl, she ran to her bed and grabbed her pillow. The gryphon seemed to know what was coming and scrambled to take flight. Glory flung the pillow toward him. It sailed through the window. There was an explosion of feathers. Glory was suddenly filled with a dread that she had somehow injured the creature. She ran to the window and leaned out, looking to see where the gryphon had gone. Instantly she was walloped in the head with a half-empty pillowcase and could hear the gryphon chortle with delight. Glory growled and yelled at him as he flew away. "Curse you, you infernal birdbrain!"

The gryphon hovered in mid-air, the sun behind him, and called back to her, "I am afraid that it is far too late for curses, Princess."

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Balthazaar's steward grabbed Colin by the collar of his shirt and flung him from the room. The door slammed. Colin stumbled into the hall but caught himself. He paced and ran his shaking hands through his hair. With a roar he hammered his fist against the door and kicked it solidly. His nostrils flared. Colin swore loud enough for the entire castle to hear. He stomped down the hall. He returned to his sack of gold coins which he had hid well in the garden. He opened the sack and ran his hands over their shining faces. His jaw clenched at the sight of Balthazaar's likeness. Colin pulled hard on the drawstrings and snatched up the bag. He began to think. How could he prove the old king wrong?

It was said amongst the Twelve Kingdoms that “All Rumors Begin in Council’s Realm.” It was the hub of commerce and one of the most densely-populated areas in all of the Twelve Kingdoms. Colin thought if he could make his way there that he could garner information on Glory’s whereabouts. Surely, of all places, Council’s Realm would be abuzz with the juicy gossip of the princess’s betrothal. Especially when it had been originated and signed there. But Council’s Realm was a good three day’s journey on foot by the King’s Road. Colin peeked again at the coins in his sack. He didn’t want to spend the coins, save for his future with Glory, but he needed to find her quickly. It couldn’t hurt to spend a few, right? He could hire a palfrey horse. What would take him three days to walk would only be a few hours on horseback. But good horses did not come cheaply. Well, he didn’t want to *buy* the horse, he reasoned with himself, only to hire it for a day or two. He could get Glory back in that time... couldn’t he? Colin rose and squared his shoulders. He hoisted his bag of coins and strode toward the livery. He had to do it. It was for Glory!

The cobbled road thumped under his boots. The stones glistened with twilight spring dew. An old draft horse plodded by hauling a cart heaped with vetch that was fragrant with delicate lilac buds. The horse’s breath plumed from his nostrils in cottony puffs. The last of the stars twinkled overhead as a thin line of fuschia eeked over the snowy, jutting peaks of mountains to the north that they called the All Father’s Spine. Winterholme’s blue-roofed white towers clawed the oncoming dawn. Colin saw none of it. His eyes fixated on the livery down the lane. The blacksmith was just beginning to hammer away at his forge. Horses whinnied impatiently as a livery apprentice accidentally spilled part of a sack of grain outside. Chickens scrambled to gobble it up. The livery master cuffed the apprentice for wasting the feed. Colin winced. He saw himself in the lad’s place being beaten by his own father. He shook his head to drive the memory away. He wasn’t that boy. He had made his own way in the world. He had changed his stars, and he would do so again by rescuing Glory and securing his happily ever after! He approached the livery master with a scowl on his face. “You, sir, how much for a horse to take me to Council’s Realm?”

The livery master, a fat, squat, balding man, squinted at him. His wide lips pursed. “Wait a moment.” His thick hands tucked into the back side of his belt and pulled out a folded paper. He looked at it, then at Colin, then back at the paper. “No. Sorry, can’t help you.” He folded the paper and returned it to its original place and pushed past Colin.

Colin pivoted. “Why not?”

“Can’t,” said the fat man.

Colin pursued him. “Tell me *why*.”

The man produced the paper again and shoved it at Colin.

Colin paused to unfold it and saw his own image staring back at him. Words were scrolled beneath his name. Colin's lips moved as he read.

"Let it be known that from the day of Her Royal Highness Princess Lucullia's wedding, henceforth, the young man known as Colin Falconer shall not be aided, sold to, or consorted with within the boundaries of the four northernmost territories. Any violation of this decree is punishable by means found pleasurable by the king."

Colin's grip slowly tightened around the paper until it crumpled into a rumpled mess. He threw it on the ground. Lucullia's wedding was only last night, and the town had already been papered. It had to have been done before. Colin's heel ground the paper as he realized Balthazaar had known all along. Colin tapped his fist to his chin and thought carefully. There had to be some way around this. The bag of coins weighed heavily in his fist. A smile crept to Colin's face. He shook the bag, allowing the money to talk. *Jingle. Jingle jangle.*

The livery master paused in the open breezeway of the livery.

*Jingle jangle jingle.*

The livery master's shoulders rose to his ears. He turned and practically gravitated to the sack of coins. Colin proffered one to him with a haughty, triumphant look upon his face. The livery master bit into the coin to make sure it was real. His thick, bushy, gray eyebrows rose with excitement. His eyes became the size of saucers as he held the bitten coin up against the rising sun. Colin offered another one. "Name your price."

The livery master clutched the coins. His hand shook feebly. Beads of sweat formed on his brow. He stared at Colin. Colin was sure he had a deal, no matter the cost. He'd soon be on his way to Happily Ever After!

The livery master shoved the coins back into the sack. "No deal."

Colin nearly choked. "What?"

The livery master turned away. "As much as I like your money, I like my head even more. You keep your money, and I will keep my head."

Colin's shoulders slumped.

The livery master walked into the stable and yelled at the apprentice.

Colin grit his teeth and marched after him. He knew it wasn't his place to tell the old man to leave the boy alone, but he had to do something, even if it was two-ply by distracting him with another offer. He flicked a coin and hit the livery master in the back of his bald head. The livery master's sausage-like fingers rubbed his head, and he turned with a scowl.

Colin leaned against the open breezeway arch and folded his arms with his sack of coins clearly visible. "How about I give you the money, you give me a horse, and no one has to know? It wouldn't be the first time straw was mysteriously spun in to gold." Colin winked.



The livery master's lips pursed. "That's an old wife's tale."

"Is it now?"

The livery master was quiet. His chin quivered. "Yes." He picked up the coin and pocketed it. "Now get out!"

Colin rolled his eyes and walked away, trying not to appear too dejected. He stood by the side of the road and wondered if there was any other way to Council's Realm. A light breeze kicked up, and the crumpled paper with his image and the decree on it tumbled past. Colin sighed. He was going to have to walk. He might as well get moving while the day was young. He returned to his father's cottage where he raided the larder for a small wheel of hardened cheese and a hunk of bread. He hadn't thought he would need it before because his plans had been so different. Yet here he was hording the food in to a burlap sack like a pauper. He put his bag of coins in there as well to not attract attention to himself along the way. The King's Road was well-maintained and patrolled, but it was still dangerous. He closed up the house and slipped the key into a pocket underneath his shirt. He headed back into town and followed the signs to Council's Realm.

Colin covered nearly a solid league his first day. When dusk came, he took refuge in a small clearing of nearby trees. His feet ached. He wished he had stopped ten miles earlier when The Paladin's Flask tavern had peeked over a hill. People laughed inside the warm orange glow of the place. The small smoking house in back was hard at work and made Colin's stomach ache with hunger. He had paused to eat and wished he could go inside the place, but he was still within the northern territories and knew no help would be found, not even for the sake of his thirst. Guards patrolled the King's Road sporadically and generally minded their own business as Colin walked along. He kept plodding on and now made camp with the aid of a flint and a small amount of tinder. He carefully rationed a portion of his bread and cheese and ate again. He curled on his side next to the fire and watched the flame dance. He thought about Glory and how the golden licks reminded him of her. Her warmth, her charm, the way her middle thinned and swayed like the flame.... Colin's eyes drooped. He dreamt of his Glory. Of their Happily Ever After. They'd build a home somewhere together. He'd provide for them through his falconry trade, as well as plowing their own fields, and selling the produce of their land. If the gods were kind and saw fit, they would bless Colin and Glory with perfect blonde children who played in their home and snuggled close to their parents. Colin's heart said he would be a good father with a rare hard hand, unlike his own father had.

Colin woke the next morning damp and chilled. He felt foolish for allowing the firelight to die during the night. He kicked dirt over the ashes and snuffed out the last of the embers and continued on his way. His day was uneventful. Occasionally a carriage would pass or another pilgrim on their way to this kingdom

or that. Colin covered a little less today than he had the day before. His legs tired more easily and had started out stiff anyway that morning from not having moved much during the night. He retired early enough to set a few snares around his roadside camp. They could protect him or provide him a decent meal the following day on the other. His bread and cheese were running low. He put his back to a tree and a fire before him, keeping a hand close to his hunting knife. He managed to doze periodically while keeping watch.

In the morning, he doused the fire again and got on his way. A hare had found its way into one of his snares during the night. Colin thanked the gods for this bounty before sending the hare's spirit to the After World and bagging its body. He would have a decent meal when the sun reached its highest point. He knew today would be a hard stretch. He felt compelled to make up the distance he didn't travel the day before.

Colin grimaced when he came upon a fading sign that pointed the way to Council's Realm a solid league away. A small knot formed in his stomach that the sign hadn't been painted in a while. One of the nails was loose on a marker, and the sign hung limply. Some of the boards were cracking on the others. Colin looked down at the ground and noticed the road was a bit more broken here. Weeds overtook some of the stones. Rubble formed other stepping places. Colin looked around and couldn't see a guard tower for miles. He reckoned he must be in the middle of the northern territories where the peaceful rulers under Balthazaar did not feel an expediency to guard the area as tightly.

Colin's hand went to the hilt of his hunting knife to reassure himself. If Brigands were about, he would be ready. He steeled his courage and pressed on. The countryside was open here with miles of rolling hills and fields. Windmills turned slowly in the distance. Farms occasionally dotted the landscape. As he walked, Colin was glad it was not summer for there was little shade to be had in this stretch. His mind changed quickly, however, when silver clouds knit together and fattened with rain. He slogged through the chilly wetness and kept one foot in front of the other despite the tiny rocks of ice that pelted him in the spring storm. He found it amusing how the little white balls bounced off of the stony road and reminded himself to purchase a travelling cloak as soon as he reached Council's Realm. He told himself what an idiot he was for being so ill-prepared. He had been so eager to chase after Glory that he hadn't thought things through like he normally would have. He had spent years planning and saving for the moment they would run away together, and he could not even remember to bring so much as a hat or cloak!

Colin's shoulders rose to his ears as he hunkered down under the hail. The storm got worse as he got closer to the middle of it. A forest appeared as he crested a hill. From this vantage, he could just make out Council's Realm. He had to squint in the sheet of rain, but it was there. He only had to get through the forest. It would be

a good respite from the storm, but he was sure other dangers lurked in its place. A shock of lightning struck a nearby fence post. Colin jumped. The forest was sounding like a better place to be than out in the open. He hurried toward it, lest he remain the tallest and most appealing thing for the lightning to strike next!

Once inside the forest, he stumbled more on the road. It was ill-kept here, overgrown with roots and vines that twisted and smashed stones in their unforgiving path. The rain fell more softly, however, buffeted by the towering firs and redwoods. Colin had to slow down and pick his way along carefully. He knew if he could get to the other side, that Council's Realm would only be a few more hours of walking. He could be there by nightfall. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of a roaring fire at The Fox And Wolf Inn, hot food in his belly, and a bed to sleep in. He would willingly part with a gold coin or two for a luxury like that tonight!

Colin remembered the hare in his sack when he thought of the hot food. He convinced himself that if he continued for a few more miles, he would stop to enjoy it. The thickest part of the woods was nearly dark under the storm. Colin's skin prickled. He kept a hand on his hunting knife. A rustle in the bushes made him turn. A squirrel darted out and scampered up a tree. Colin shook his head and breathed with relief. A young doe ahead snapped a branch. A crow dropped acorns on the stone road. Each made Colin jitter, but he shook it off until he finally noticed the forest getting lighter. The trees no longer grew together as thickly. Colin realized he was moving faster. The road was better maintained. Not much, but enough to really move again. He could make Council's Realm out in the distance. He sighed and slumped down by the side of the road. He felt this was as good a place as any to enjoy the last of his bread and cheese and that lovely hare. Here he had shelter from the storm that was letting up. He could get warm and gain his second wind. He got a fire going and stoked it well before he skinned his kill and began roasting it. He gnawed on the hunk of bread as he waited for his meat to cook. When it was done, he enjoyed the hare with the last of his cheese. He put his hands behind his head and leaned back against a tree stump. The fire warmed his aching, wet bones. He listened to the rain slow to a gradual, serene drip. Birds began singing overhead. The air smelled so clean. Rich with the scent of moss and earth and pine needles.

Colin closed his eyes and thought of Glory. She would like this. His breathing slowed and deepened. She would like this very much. His muscles relaxed. His hands slipped from behind his head to his sides. His chin bent to his chest. A pop of the fire made him jump awake. He squeezed the bridge of his nose and blinked. His eyes grew heavy again. He couldn't resist the lull of a brief nap. He would be back on the road shortly, he told himself. It would be alright. He was safe here. He could see Council's Realm and guard towers and farms and houses and...

When Colin awoke, his head throbbed. He lay face down on the King's Road not far from his snuffed-out fire. He touched his hair and felt it matted. He rubbed his fingers together in front of his eyes to see dark-red flakes fall. He pushed himself up slowly. What had happened? He looked toward Council's Realm, but could only see from one eye. His other was swollen shut. He touched his nose and found a cut and a new path his bridge had not taken before. He groaned and laid back down on the ground for a moment. He turned to look toward the tree stump for his sack of belongings, but it was gone. The world spun. The stars in the night sky swirled. *Brigands!*

Colin vomited into an ironberry bush.

His life savings—*gone*. Why hadn't he kept moving when he realized he was nodding off? Why hadn't he hidden his sack? He knew there was danger here. Colin wanted to pound his head against the King's Road, but his head was already doing its fair share of pounding. He tilted his face toward the sky and bellowed. He stood in the middle of the King's Road, breathing hard. His legs shook beneath him. He fixed his good eye on Council's Realm and staggered toward it.

\*\*\*

Glory slid her foot onto the edge of one of Blackthorn's crenels. Glittering black rubble crumbled under her toes. Waves crashed against the cliffs nearby, and a salty breeze whipped her golden hair. She stared at the ground several stories below. Her lungs stretched and burned with the cold air, and her eyes narrowed. The gryphon had to be wrong. Colin was coming! Glory searched the horizon desperately.

"I would not do that if I were you."

Her shoulders tensed. She did not need to turn to see it was the gryphon. *He probably thinks I am going to jump.* "It is a good thing that you are not me then."

"Do you not value your life?"

"I value it, Gryphon, it is *you* I try to escape from."

Glory heard him spread his wings and hiss, "You are foolish to think that this is the only way out."

"What is the point of staying here if Colin has abandoned me and my," Glory ground her teeth, the very words painful to her, "*husband-to-be* will not even look upon me? A month I've been here and your prince does not even wish to see me. Why does he not come?"

Glory glanced behind her to scowl at the gryphon, but lost her balance as more of the wall crumbled beneath her. The air cradled her. She shut her eyes to the world, accepting her inevitable fate. She pictured the ground racing up to meet her.

The whistle of the air around her masked the screech of a gryphon above. Glory knocked into something warm and alive, breaking her fall. Jarred, her eyes opened in time to see the beat of wings and the ground rushing by. She tumbled through the damp grass, her teeth chattering. The air in her lungs surged out of her as she saw the gryphon barrel roll into the sunlight. Glory jumped to her feet and hammered her way toward the forest. The gryphon screeched. His tail snapped angrily around and his talons curled. Glory gasped, struggling for air, yet continued racing through the high, wild grasses. They clutched and snagged at her slippers. She kicked them off in desperation, wincing at the passing nettles and hard earth. The gryphon cried out again and Glory looked behind her once more. The great beast stretched out long and lean like an arrow, increasing his speed exponentially. Glory crashed through the trees, tripping over gnarled roots and wet leaves. She pressed herself against an ashen trunk and squeezed her eyes shut, as if doing so would afford her some level of invisibility to the gryphon's keen eyes. She sensed his shadow above, the beat of cyclopean wings on air. Circling, circling. She swallowed hard and sucked in the frigid air. A gryphon's scream echoed, then nothing. Silence. Glory's eyes haltingly opened. A glint of sunlight, the forest coming back into focus. The snapping of a branch made her jump. She swung around to see a fat gray hare scurry by. Her thundering heart eased, and she sighed. She turned to make her way, hopefully, to Winterholme, but was overtaken by a massive shadow. Glory fell hard against the ground and stared up into the face of the gryphon. His ears were flat against his head. Glory took in a deep breath of wet earth and pungent, angry male.

*"A oinseach10,"* he growled.

Glory gulped.

"Why would you do something so reckless? Or is it that you *want* me to hunt you like an animal?" The gryphon's large, scaly claw stepped to Glory's slender shoulder, pressing her down further. "Because I can." The gryphon lowered his head close to Glory's, murmuring into her ear, "I could snap you in half."

Glory felt the weight of the gryphon's hind paw lay across her belly. She was sharply aware of his raw power as his muscles coiled and rippled. Glory turned her head, her eyes locking with the gryphon's amber ones, burning like two embers. "You wouldn't dare."

The gryphon shifted his weight, drawing a polished talon lightly against Glory's supple neck. "I could slit your throat."

Glory trembled, but arched her back defiantly. "Do it."

The gryphon forced her against the ground, opening his beak a little. Glory squirmed, but was pushed down again. The gryphon's breathing increased with excitement. Glory forced her eyes shut, half expecting him to gobble her up. She tensed when his bill brushed against the throbbing vein in her neck. The gryphon inhaled deeply, and he uttered a soft groan. Glory dared peek. He was drinking in

her scent. He lifted his head and stared her down, as if recomposing himself. His tail whipped high above his head with extreme agitation. “*Tá tú dom nimhe,*” he muttered.

Glory felt the full force of him as he pushed off and lit the heavens. She lay on the forest floor, staring upwards. Her head swam, trying to make sense of what had transpired. She rose, brushing herself off. Without understanding why, her feet dragged her back to Blackthorn Keep.

\*\*\*

Colin made his way to The Fox And Wolf Inn. Once inside he did not go unnoticed. The innkeeper’s wife took pity on him and found him a bed for the night and offered him a meal, the barkeep reckoned he could use a strong drink. The innkeeper’s wife sat Colin by the fire and draped a blanket about his shoulders. Colin thanked her and tucked into his meal and flagon. Patrons talked boisterously, and Colin tried to pick out the conversations. He hoped word of Glory’s betrothal was not old news by now. Colin chewed slowly on a stew of roast venison, spring vegetables, and potatoes. He lifted the flagon to wash it down and sputtered. He had had wine and woodmead before, but nothing this strong. He put the flagon down with a clatter and blinked. The heat of the drink ran down his gullet and fired his belly. Sitting next to the fire now was almost too warm. He removed the blanket from his shoulders and draped it over the other chair at the table. He bit into a chunk of bread. All the conversations seemed to run together. No word of Glory. No mention of weddings. Only “My wife’s bottom...” or “Did you hear about Farmer Jeoffrey’s cow?” Common town commotion.

As the night grew later and the tavern part of the inn thinned of guests, the conversations became easier to discern between. Eventually a hush fell as a bard lifted his voice. He sang slowly in a deep voice.

*“Far to the South,  
Past All Father’s Mouth,  
Lies a keep of blackened stone.  
Where weak men fail,  
’yond Monmouth Flail;  
Made Realm by blood and bone.  
Barwn Xander waits  
On Sigil’s Gate  
For a princess to undo the tome  
Of his son’s curse  
Made only worse  
By time’s unfeeling drone.*

*Old gods bind  
young body and mind  
He who would be crowned,  
Guarded in the plight  
Of Gryphon's might  
Far as the curse was found."*

Colin polished off his flagon and pushed back his chair. He moved to the bard and asked him about the song.

"The place you sing of, does it have a name?"

The bard counted the few gold coins he had earned from other patrons.

"Aye."

Colin pulled up a chair at the table by the bard. "Will you tell it to me?"

"Perhaps."

Colin sighed. "I don't have money."

"Then I don't have—" the bard glanced at him. He straightened once he saw how beat up Colin was. The Bard ordered two Elder Ales and pushed one of them toward Colin. He sat down and tucked into his flagon. "Blackthorn."

Colin didn't want to seem rude, but the drink was beyond his interest at the moment. "You sing of a gryphon..."

The bard leaned in. "Look, mate, I don't know how much of the song is truth, and which is mythos but between you'n'me, strange things happen in the south. I gain my songs from travelling the road. I hear rumors of people disappearing, eaten by barghest, or beheaded by donestre. But as far as I know, they are just rumors."

Colin frowned and rubbed his finger against the table's grain. "There's no such thing as monsters."

The bard leaned back in his chair, hanging his arm over the back of it. "Who's to say?" A smile played at the corner of his long, thin mouth.

Colin kept an eye trained on him and took a drink. He put the flagon down. "I."

"What does a lad of your age know of monsters?"

"I've met my share," Colin said wryly.

The bard laughed. "Well if that isn't the shameful truth by the looks of you!"

Colin drank again. "I need to fight off a few more. Is there a way Blackthorn can be snuck into?"

The bard crossed his boots on the table. "Well, if there is a gryphon like they say, you won't be getting in straight on, will you? Best go 'round. Keep to the dark side of the realm."

"And that would be...?"

"Morgorth."

Colin swallowed hard.

The bard polished off his flagon. "You'll love it," he said sarcastically.

Colin rose. "Thank you for your time. I will repay you one day. When you sing again tonight, sing of Princess Glory."

The bard nodded. "Aye. Everyone knows the song of Her Highness the Beauty. It would be my pleasure."

Colin smiled and ascended the stairs to the room the inn had provided for him, which happened to be right over the bard. He fell asleep to dreams of Glory.

\*\*\*

Glory found herself daring to wind down that old, dark staircase to the mysterious door again. She had a feeling the gryphon would stay out hunting after what had happened. Did the prince know how this monster was treating her? Not only had her beauty been insulted, but now her honor as well. She wanted to find the prince and tell him to chain his vile dog. She took a torch and once again placed it in the sconce near the battered door. She peered in through the slot. If the gryphon had been guarding this place, it had to be important. "Prince Eoghan, are you in there?" she asked. She reached up to the door handle and found it unlocked. The door swung open with a squeak that turned into a moan. Glory took the torch from the sconce and entered the room. "Is anyone in here?"

She pointed the torch toward the shadows as a shape scampered across the room. She was relieved, if disgusted, to only find a rat burrowing into the hay pile. She took another step in, trying to get a good look around. Her nose wrinkled at a rotten smell emanating from the floor and back wall. Glory guided the light toward the offending odor, illuminating the blood that splattered the walls and floor. She shuffled to one side and tripped over several bones. She tried not to scream. Golden feathers were strewn over the stone floor. Tattered clothes piled in the opposite corner. Glory shoved the torch back into the sconce, slammed the door and ran.

The next day, Glory looked out her window on to a gray and misty morn. In the distance, she caught sight of the gryphon who paused, as if he felt her gaze upon him. A ray of sunshine split the heavens and framed him. The sun lit the gryphon's ruddy feathers and ginger coat, making him appear like a newly-minted bronze statue. Glory could see a wild boar hanging limply from the gryphon's mandible. He turned his head in her direction, lifting his foot as if on point, like one of Balthazaar's hunting dogs. Glory's stomach churned, and she rolled her eyes with disgust, backing away from the window.

In the evening, one of the servants informed her, "Dinner is served, Your Highness."



"I'm not hungry," Glory lied.

"Very well," said the servant, "I will inform the masters."

Glory scurried to the door. "Wait."

"Yes, Princess?"

Glory's stomach growled loudly. "What is being served?"

"Wild boar, Your Grace, caught on this morning's hunt."

Glory pictured the gryphon with the dead creature in his mouth and suddenly lost her appetite. "Never mind."

Glory rubbed her stomach, trying to ease it. A scratch, like that of a dog, grated against her door. Glory glared at the door. Scratch, scratch. Glory had seen no dogs about the place. She cracked open the door to see a lone amber eye peeking back at her.

"They allow you in the house?" Glory did not realize she had said this aloud.

The gryphon clicked his beak. "It is my house to guard. I come and go as I please."

Glory turned away from the door and crossed to her bed.

"Why will you not come to dinner?" the gryphon asked. "Surely you must be hungry."

Glory folded her arms. "I do not eat with animals."

She heard the door creak and glanced over her shoulder. The gryphon had nudged his head in through the door. "And if Eoghan requested you, would you abide my presence then?"

Glory was beginning to have her doubts about Prince Eoghan after what she had seen in that horrible room yesterday. She stuck her nose in the air. "I cannot eat that which has already been in another's mouth."

"I see," the gryphon said softly. "Will you at least come and keep company for Barwn Xander? I will not burden either of you with my presence. I am a beast, not a man, and I would prefer to be outside."

Glory looked at him. She wasn't sure if she would rather eat with a mangy beast or a tyrant.

"Perhaps," the gryphon mumbled, "one day you will eat when you are not reminded of how the meal was provided."

Glory sighed. Perhaps it would be best if she kept up the appearance that she was unaware of their plot to take over all of the kingdoms by marrying her to Xander instead of Prince Eoghan. "Leave me, Gryphon. I will join Barwn Xander presently."

Glory sat at the dining table with a great deal of enmity. At the other end, Xander was enjoying a cheeseboard and a goblet of ale. He raised it in her name and

nodded to her. Glory stared at the dead boar on the golden platter before her. The apple in its mouth didn't help her appetite.

"What is wrong?" Xander asked, "Why do you not eat?"

"It's looking at me." Glory sulked.

"Surely it is not your first time eating pig. Do you not eat meat at Winterholme?"

"None with eyes, My Lord."

Xander chewed thoughtfully, then rose and drew his sword. "Very well." He raised his sword high over the roast boar.

Glory jumped to her feet. "No, no, no! That won't be necessary."

"Would you prefer something else?"

Glory shook her head.

"By the gods," Xander grunted, "you are such a girl."

Glory leaned against the table, looking plainly into Xander's dark-brown eyes. He sheathed his sword and pulled off the boar's whole shank, taking a big bite. Hot juice and grease dribbled down his black goatee. Glory gripped the edge of the table, trying not to faint from savage hunger. With urgency, she grabbed the nearest goblet and took a deep slug.

Xander nearly choked. "That's Blacksteed, the castle's personal vintage. Be careful, it's extracted from deadly ivyburn."

Glory didn't care. She sucked down the wicked, sweet burn, tilting her head back to get it all.

Xander began laughing. "Drink up, Princess. That one will put hair upon your breast!"

Glory muscled her way past the promise-induced gag reflex and slammed the goblet down against the table.

Xander's dark brow lifted and his mouth puckered. "Well there's a challenge if I ever heard one." He motioned to the servants to refill Glory's goblet. Glory lifted it to her lips and knocked back another round. Her head swam and her ears rung.

Xander took another big bite of the boar's shank and watched with a great deal of amusement.

The cup clattered against the table.

"More!" Glory charged.

Xander obliged, and the servants filled the goblet again. His eyes fixated on her with wonder. "It pleases me to see you enjoy yourself so thoroughly, Princess."

Glory sank into her chair, slogging the Blacksteed down. It galloped into her belly with the vengeance of a runaway horse.

Xander crossed to his own seat. "Pain makes you stronger. Tears make you braver. Heartbreak makes you wiser and ale makes you forget it all."

A metallic clatter against the stone floor made Xander turn. A half-empty goblet rolled under the table. Glory was unconscious in her chair.

Glory woke to soft orange firelight and groaned. Her head throbbed as though it had been pummeled by an entire castle's worth of ashlar. She reached up to hold it while her other hand fell from under the covers to the side of the bed.

"A little to the left," came a soft sigh.

Glory sat up quickly to see the gryphon lying peacefully on the floor beside her. Glory bit her lip hard. Screaming would only make everything worse. She buried her head in her hands and began to cry. *I wish I were dead.*

The fire crackled in the background. Glory wept for her aching head and for home. After some time, she heard a soft, steady thump on the floor. She spread her fingers to see the gryphon upright. His head was turned to one side, and the firelight danced in his eyes. "Why do you weep, Princess?"

Glory wiped away her tears. "I am so unhappy. Why do I not die in this awful place?"

The gryphon blinked. "Well, you're certainly trying hard enough, aren't you!"

Glory sniffled and wiggled her head up and down in agreement.

"You've been asleep three days. Xander was impressed that you drink like a man."

Glory began to cry again.

"What is wrong now?"

"I do not understand why you continually torture me."

"Torture?"

"You call me ugly and stupid, and now I am a man!"

The gryphon turned his head to one side, then the other. "Man looks on the outward appearance, but I see man's true heart. Yours is too proud, too vain, too ugly. Eoghan will not accept such a bride." The gryphon lifted a claw to Glory's bed, but withdrew it when she recoiled. He regarded her momentarily, then bowed, costively exiting.

Glory buried her face in the pillow and wept. *Oh, gods, where is Colin?*

\*\*\*

Colin forced himself to stay in Council's Realm a fortnight. If he was going through Morgorth, he would need all the strength he could muster. His wounds needed time to heal. Since Council's Realm was the last free city of the Twelve Kingdoms, he was able to do odd jobs around the city without worry of the king's decree. Townsfolk quickly learned his name and recommended him to others. He even managed to secure a couple of hunts with the Lords of the Magistrate. They did not pay as well as Balthazaar had, but well enough. It kept Colin afloat.

At last there dawned a morning where Colin awoke feeling strong. The cuts on his face and head had healed, and there was only a shadow of a bruise around his once-swollen eye. He washed himself and headed downstairs to the tavern to take in a bit of gruel and a mug of ale. He thanked the innkeeper and his wife for their kindness and paid his portion to them for last night's room and this morning's meal. With what little money he had remaining, he purchased a green hunting cape of heavy wool and a new hunting knife. He had been lucky the brigands hadn't killed him with the one they stole.

With the morning wearing on, Colin made haste south. He did not look forward to deviating from the main road to Morgorth, but he felt it was his best bet to infiltrate Blackthorn without being detected. He had met the bard again on occasion and received instruction on how to reach Morgorth. Not many dare to go into such a land, so few maps were in existence. If one were to view a map of the Twelve Kingdoms, Morgorth would be just as ominous looking on the paper as it was in life-- a dark, vague area with wild borders.

After walking for most of the morning and part of the afternoon, Colin stood there now staring at the forest of alders and willows. The sun shined cheerily behind him. A long stretch of shadows framed the entrance to Morgorth. It was uncanny, as though the sun actually refused to shine upon the place. Colin took a step toward it. Toads croaked from a small reedy pond before the wall of alders. Blades of green grass, as tall as Colin's waist, wafted in a silent breeze. Colin shivered. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that his Happily Ever After was through this place of never-where.

Colin gripped the hilt of his new hunting knife in the densely-growing trees. It reminded him of the forest before Council's Realm, and the hurt of that ordeal was still fresh upon his mind. He walked further in. The forest floor turned soft and loamy. The dense woods turned mossy and sparse with muddy banks that he slipped and slid in. Water squelched up from under the mud, releasing its rank, standing odor. Mosquitos sidled up to Colin unabashedly. Moonflies dimmed and brightened like floating stars. If not for them, Colin was sure he would not be able to see where he was going at all.

Open pockets of brackish water gurgled and foamed. When the largest bubbles burst with an audible splat, they reeked of acidity. Colin coughed and gagged at the smell. Vines twisted at his boots as if trying to pull him into the bog and snuff out his life force. Colin saw something slither through the water. He pulled his hunting knife from its sheath just to be safe. The mud sucked his boots deep into the earth. Each step was a battle. Lichen veils swung from the branches overhead like gowns of the dead.

Colin arrived at a clearing of packed ground. He squinted in the darkness. It had grown over, but it looked like it had once been a camp. A fire pit was in the

center. Several strides away from it was a decrepit shack beside a crumbling table. Vines wrapped around loose boards like snakes trying to crush the remaining life from them. The shack slanted on weakened supports and creaked faintly when a slight breeze picked up.

Colin cleared away the fire pit and stoked up a fire, then took a small log as a torch. He moved toward the shack to see if it was salvageable. He would rather stay at an inn, but he could not pass up a shelter that would cost him nothing instead. It was closer to Blackthorn than Council's Realm at least, and nobody would come looking for him here should any problems arise while rescuing Glory. He did not believe brigands would even make camp this deep in Morgorth. As he reached out to touch the rotting wood of the shack, he heard his name.

*"Colin...."*

Colin looked over his shoulder. The willow swayed.

*"Colin...."*

Colin looked out into the darkness. "Who's there?"

*"I've missed you, Colin...."*

The hackles on Colin's neck stood on end. "Is that you, Glory?"

*"Come to me, Colin...."*

Colin moved in the direction of the voice. A knot formed in his gut. "Glory?"

He raised the torch over his head as he moved past the fire.

*"I'm here, Colin...."*

Colin swallowed. He rushed toward the voice. "I'm coming, Glory!"

The ground caved under him. Colin landed hard and grabbed his leg with a cry. The torch rolled forward over a stone floor. Strong roots thrust themselves through the wall to his right. The flames caused shadows to dance upon stone walls before it. A form lay on the ground. Colin massaged his leg. He reached for a root and pulled himself upright. He bit his lip when he tried to put weight on his injured leg. White pins of light swirled around his head. He blinked to clear them and breathed deeply. He could still move his toes and knew his leg was not broken. He opened his eyes and got his bearings. Colin bent to retrieve his torch and get a better look at the form in the corner. He held the torch close to it to see a man's skeleton. The head was not human. In fact the only human heads in the place were scattered around the creature. Colin stared at the giant fangs, and square, bulky skull atop of the beast. His eyes began to widen. Jammed into the left eye socket was something he had not seen in a very long time.

*"Ilyndiil."* Colin reeled back, scuttling across the floor away from it.

Memories came flooding in. Colin's breath was ragged. *"Stay where you are." Ilyndiil gleamed in the light. "I'm warning you." The donestre charged, snarling savagely. Glory screamed. The donestre lumbered toward them. Colin gripped Glory's arm and*

*swung her away as he slashed the donestre across the back. The donestre reeled and pivoted, gnashing his teeth.*

*Colin reached for Glory's hand. "We have to get out of here."*

*"How?" Glory cried.*

*The donestre charged. Colin sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth, grabbed the donestre's mane and plunged Illyndiil into its left eye. The donestre howled, wobbling backwards.*

Colin's breath caught. It wasn't possible. He had killed the donestre in Winterholme, not Morgorth. How was it here? He trembled in the shadows. *"We sort of fell into a hole, and there was a creature... in a jail cell."*

*Colin's father's nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed. "Do not lie to me, boy."* Colin stared at Illyndiil. His father's voice came booming at him. *"Where is Illyndiil?"*

*Colin's hand went to his scabbard, but his hand grasped thin air. He looked to his hip with horror.*

*"You lost it?" the man roared. He lurched toward Colin and began boxing his ears. "You stupid, stupid boy!" Colin's father grew red with pulsing, plump veins in his neck and forehead. He backfisted Colin in the jaw. Colin's breath raced. He took it all in. The donestre's skeleton, Illyndiil plunged into its left eye socket, and what Colin was feeling left him hollow. He shut his eyes, but the sight was burned into his mind. He opened them again and looked up. He had to get out of this hole. He reached for a root and began to pull himself up. He heard a voice again.*

*"Don't leave me...."*

Colin looked back. Illyndiil seemed to beckon to him. *"Please, Father!" Colin cried. "I can find it again. Please! Give me a chance."*

Colin's hands trembled. The torchlight danced on the walls of stone and earth. The crackling of flame and Colin's strained breath was the only sound in the room. He felt the memory of Glory's childhood hand in his. *"What we saw was real. You are a hero."*

Colin limped toward Illyndiil. He was the hero, he reminded himself. Glory had said so. A hero deserved a legendary blade to help him get to his Happily Ever After.

As Colin lay in the dusty cot in the leaning shack that night, he turned Illyndiil over and over between his fingers hypnotically.

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The longer she spent in bed, the more Glory was able to clear her head and think. There had to be some way of finding Eoghan. Hopefully the prince was still alive. Hopefully she was only jumping to conclusions about the room. Thinking about it, even now, made her queasy. She recalled stumbling across an athenaeum

during her initial search for the prince. Perhaps there would be records there that she could divine information about him from. Birth records, proof of his existence, would help her feel a little better. She finally mustered the strength to get up, dress herself, and find the athenaeum.

Once there, she scoured the shelves for any scrolls that might look like family records. She found a few clustered together and took them out, spreading them over a round table. Xander, descending from the line of Stephan the Black, had wed the princess, Aowyn. Aowyn's family hailed from across the seas. At last, Glory found birth records for a boy born of Xander and Aowyn, shortly after the Great War. That's where her search ended, for as she went seeking more scrolls, she stumbled across several battered books that seemed out of place. She pulled one out and blew off the dust. The book's spine crinkled and creaked. Glory lovingly stroked her finger over a beautiful painting; one of a maiden and a prince embracing, locked together by an intricate woven border that met in the middle and intertwined itself around them. Blossoms and vines hung from the weave. The maiden wore a robe of flame-colored silk, with a collar of ruddy gold, in which were emeralds and rubies. More golden was her hair than the flower of the broom, and her skin was whiter than the foam of the sea. Glory sighed, wishing Colin was here to see it. She crossed over to a chair and sunk into it, book in lap. The words on the opposite page were in a language she did not recognize. She traced the strands of the border individually, slowly, wondering if it was written in sweet old Maeb's tongue.

She was so lost in it that she jumped when the gryphon's voice purred over her shoulder. "I love that one."

Glory turned her head and practically bumped noses with the creature. Did he have no sense of propriety?

"You read?" she asked incredulously.

The gryphon skirted the chair and sat down before her, nodding his head.

Glory was skeptical. What beast knew how to read? She lowered the book and pointed to the strange writing. "What does this say?"

The gryphon chortled. "You don't know how to read?"

Glory pulled the book back to her chest, frowning. "Of course I do." She lowered the book after a moment, speaking with hesitation. "I just don't understand this writing."

The gryphon's feathers fluffed and he rose, scooting closer to her. Glory leaned away, but held the book between them. The gryphon raised a talon. "This, here," he pointed to the first few sentences, "speaks of the maiden Olwen, who was fairer than the blossoms of the wood anemone amidst the spray of the meadow fountain. Brighter were her glances than those of a falcon; her bosom was more snowy than the breast of the white swan, her cheek redder than the reddest roses. Whosoever beheld her was filled with her love."

Glory pointed to the prince in the picture. "Who is she with?"

"That is Kuhuch, the son of King Kilyth, whose mother died shortly after his birth. Before her death she charged the king that he should not take another wife until he saw a briar with two blossoms upon her grave. The king went every morning to see if anything had grown. After many years the briar appeared, and he took to wife the widow of King Doged. She foretold to her stepson, Kuhuch, that it was his destiny to marry Olwen, and none other. He, at his father's bidding, went to the court of his cousin, King Arthur, to ask as a boon the hand of the maiden. He found himself on a great quest to win her affection."

Glory pointed to a word.

"*Fíorghrá*," said the gryphon. "True love."

"And this?" asked Glory.

"He has won his prize. *Is liomsa mo ghrá*. My beloved is mine."

Glory pulled the book closer to her, trying to discern the words. It was all symbols and curves. How could anyone make sense of this? The gryphon's talon remained on the page, tugged innocently closer to Glory. Glory looked at him from the corner of her eye.

The gryphon slowly lowered his claw to the floor and sat, resting his head on the arm of the chair. "Do I frighten you, princess?"

Glory chewed on a fingernail and stared into the book.

"I am sorry if my behavior since your arrival has been..." the gryphon paused as if trying to find the right word, "*uncouth*." He shifted uneasily. "Please forgive me. Your presence causes great confusion in me. I do not know whether to hunt you, or, well..." he looked away ashamed.

Glory slunk down in the chair. Heat crept up her cheeks to her ears. There was a long silence.

"I like your smell," the gryphon mumbled.

Glory looked straight at him, her chest full of a tightness she had never known. "Does Prince Eoghan know of your feelings? I should say he would punish you for your actions if he did."

The gryphon panted nervously.

Glory shut the book. "Where is Prince Eoghan? Is he alive?" She rose and placed the book back on the shelf, trying to get away from this accursed creature. "Does he even know my name?" she asked bitterly.

The gryphon lowered his head. He spoke so softly that Glory did not hear him. "Speak up, beast."

The gryphon looked at her timidly. "*Breátha*. Splendor. Glory."



## CHAPTER SIX

### The Cursed Prince

Glory woke to a light in her room. The glowing specter floated before her. Glory sat up. "You again?"

The ghost smiled and reached out, then turned and passed through Glory's closed door.

Glory rose and pulled a robe over her sleeping gown. She padded down the hall behind the woman. Glory stopped across the hall from a door.

"Listen to me, beast," Xander snapped.

What had that dirty gryphon gone and done now? She remained in the shadows.

"You must make her believe there is a prince in this castle. Do you understand?"

The gryphon screeched. "Do your past sins teach you nothing? She will never love—"

"She must believe there is a prince in this castle or all is lost. If you cannot do the job I have set you about, then it is I who will wed her in her sixteenth year and become king."

Glory pressed herself against the wall. Her knees buckled. *Oh, gods!*

"Either way," Xander vowed, "she will fulfill the purpose for which she was brought here."

The gryphon rumbled resentfully.

"Be a good little beast and run along now," Xander said.

Glory rose and bit her lip. She darted down the hall. The door creaked behind her as the gryphon told Xander, "You sicken me."

Glory bolted out of the bailey and into the field surrounding Blackthorn. Torchlight danced on Blackthorn's high walls. Glory placed her hands on her knees and tried to catch her breath. There was no prince. Glory stared out across the field. She sucked in a deep breath. The sea crashed against the cliffs. The air was rich with salt and mist. She shivered. She looked down a moment and tried to steady her racing mind. When she looked up, a cloaked figure stood in the middle of the field. They stared silently at each other. Slowly the figure began to slip back his hood. Glory caught a glimpse of short, blond hair and a chiseled face. Her heart leapt. *Colin!* The name caught in her throat. She moved toward him just as the gryphon landed before her, blocking the way.

"What are you doing, Glory?"

Glory froze. The gryphon paced around her. Had he seen Colin? Glory stared straight ahead. Colin had vanished. Glory blinked twice. Had she been seeing things? Glory shook her head. "Nothing."

"Why are you out of bed?"

Glory glared at the gryphon. "What concern is it of yours?"

The gryphon growled. "It's not safe outside at night."

Glory closed her fists. "Why? Is the great protector not so great after all?"

The gryphon paused and stared off into the woods. "Years of being hunted in the north have driven certain creatures south."

Glory's eyebrow perked. "Certain creatures? Is it monsters you speak of? They are only fairytales."

"Are they? You are talking to one, need I remind you? I suppose you think unicorns do not exist either."

"My father denies the existence of such creatures." Glory said under her breath, "I wanted so badly to believe him." She shivered as the roar of a donestre echoed in her memory.

"Your father keeps secrets." The gryphon's tail twitched. He motioned toward the woods. "Look there."

Glory followed his gaze. A tall, lean, magnificent horse glowed in the woods. A single horn spiraled forth from the center of its head. Glory gasped.

"Day is my domain, Glory. I live in the light. The creatures of the forest rule the night. There is only one I dare seek, and only by day. We are in danger here." The gryphon put himself between Glory and the forest. He nodded toward the unicorn who nodded back and turned away. The gryphon pressed his beak against Glory's ribs and nudged her back inside.

Glory resisted at first, still trying to see Colin, but she finally turned with a sigh.

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Colin escaped Morgorth with Illyndiil unscathed. The dagger seemed to warm to him somehow. He swore he even heard her speak his name. She pulsed with life in his hands whenever he held her. Now he came across an expanse of field abutting a great, black keep. The coral ashlar glinted in the torchlight as though tiny diamonds had been embedded in each block. Waves beat nearby and the air was thick with the smell of sea water.

Colin's eyes were fixed on the open gate when a blonde girl sprinted out. Colin's heart leapt. *Glory!* He had found her at last. He hurried to the middle of the field. The light barely touched here, but he knew if he showed himself to her that all would be right in the world. He watched her bend over and catch her breath, and he

waited for her to see him. When she straightened he stared at her with awe. She looked different somehow. More beautiful than he remembered her. She had grown and filled out. He was certain of it. She seemed taller. The land had improved upon her if such a thing were possible. He began to slip back his hood when a sudden shadow descended upon Glory. Colin crouched down low. Great wings such as he had never seen beat on the air. Colin held his breath as he beheld a mighty creature with the body of a lion and the head of a hawk. The firelight played on its copper hide. Colin swallowed. He feared for Glory. His hands shook. He reached for Illyndiil. The gryphon spoke to Glory in a language Colin did not recognize. Colin's breath caught when Glory answered back in kind. When had she learned a tongue other than her own?

Colin's hand tightened around Illyndiil when the gryphon moved his beak close to Glory. Colin watched Glory strain against him before being bullied back inside the keep. Colin cursed under his breath. The gryphon paused by the gate, ears perked. He looked around as though he had heard something. Colin's mouth drew. His eyes narrowed. The gryphon's tail twitched. His beak opened slightly and his tongue undulated. Colin saw a pulse in the gryphon's throat as the creature smelled the air. Finally he lowered his head and strode inside the keep. Colin kept his eyes trained on the beast. "Do not worry, Glory," he whispered, "I'll save you."

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The air was getting warmer by the day. The sun shined down on the savage garden as Glory plucked a black rose and began pulling off the petals. Had her eyes played her the fool? A few days had passed since she had wandered into the field and glimpsed who she thought had been Colin. Where was her knight in shining armor? Glory threw the deflowered sepal on the ground listlessly. She was too sullen and lost in her thoughts to notice someone slip behind her. A hand went over her mouth, and an arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her into a corner behind some bushes. Glory flailed wildly, trying to fight the abduction until a voice hushed her.

"Shh! Do you want us to get caught?" Colin's voice whispered.

Glory turned. Her mouth tried to speak, but her brain sent no words.

"Well, do not look so delighted to see me."

Glory threw her arms around his shoulders.

Colin lowered his head to kiss her, but was met with a slap in the face. "What took you so long?"

Colin rubbed his cheek. "When you did not come to the garden after Lucullia's wedding, I went looking for you. I asked every one if they knew where you were, but not even your sisters would answer."

"That is because they are all a bunch of yeasty, unchin-snouted snap dragons!"

"So I set out on my own. This is so far away. How ever did you end up here of all places?"

Glory blinked. "Didn't you get my letter?"

"What letter?"

"Blast!" Glory imprecated.

Colin took her head in his hands. "Oh, but it does not matter anyway, does it? We are together now. We'll find a way out of here, and then we are going to be so happy."

Colin tried to draw her close for a kiss, but Glory turned her cheek. "Colin, there is something you should know."

He freckled her face with slow, soft kisses. "I know I went to the ends of the earth for you. Isn't that enough?"

"Colin, listen."

"Come on, Glory, can you not give me a proper hello? It has been so long, and I am here to rescue you."

Glory grabbed his wrists and sent his hands away from her. "Colin, please, listen to me!"

Colin stepped back with an exasperated expression. "What could you possibly have to say to me that I do not already know?"

"Glory!" came the gryphon's voice.

Glory gasped.

Colin peered through the foliage to see the beast headed their way.

"That is the reason I am stuck here, Colin. Now, quickly, go!"

Colin stole a reluctant kiss from Glory. "I will return tonight."

"Glory?" the gryphon called again.

Glory pushed Colin away. "Hurry, you fool."

Colin leapt over a low wall and disappeared into another part of the garden. Glory took a deep breath and turned a corner. "I am here, Gryphon," she answered calmly.

The gryphon crossed to her. "I heard you talking with someone. Who were you with, Glory?"

She did not look him in the eye. "No one."

The gryphon circled her, his ceres flaring, filling with her scent. "Really? My sources tell me otherwise."

"I was sitting behind that rose bush there, talking to myself. I have been lonely."

The gryphon's ears relaxed. "You could talk to me," he suggested.

Glory parried, "Why would I want to do that? You never have anything nice to say... and you *smell*."

The gryphon continued to circle her. His muscles rippled in the low afternoon sun. Glory thought his coat, filled with tones of gold and orange, might burst in to flame. He held his tail high, the small brown tuft at the end dancing about. His feathers, freshly preened, sat smoothly against each other, glowing in the light. He paused mid-stride, his ears perked. "I know not of what you speak. I say nice things every day."

"Calling me ugly and stupid is not considered very nice, Gryphon."

"Just because it is not something you want to hear, does not make it unkind."

Glory folded her arms, unconvinced.

The gryphon put his foot down and gazed at her thoughtfully. "Why, ever since you stopped thinking that Bel worships you, you have become less ugly to me."

"There you go again."

The gryphon's ears dropped. "What did I say?"

"You called me ugly, Gryphon."

The gryphon's beak gaped, his tongue rising and falling a little with each of his breaths. "Surely, I did not."

"And now you are inferring that I am stupid. Your words do not exactly inspire any kind of affection, you know."

The gryphon resumed circling her, burning a path into the ground. His head dropped; an eye remained trained on Glory. Glory watched him warily.

"*Gcroí agus Inní11*," he muttered under his breath. "I am sorry. Allow me to make it up to you."

"How do you intend to do that?"

"You will join me for dinner."

Glory grimaced. "I would prefer to dine alone."

The gryphon's feathers ruffled.

"After your little gifts these last several mornings, I am afraid seeing you while I eat would upset my appetite."

The gryphon's ears flattened, and he growled. His wings spread, casting an ominous shadow. He looked over his shoulder at Glory and leapt into the air wordlessly.

A large, long table was heavily laden with enough sumptuous food to feed the household. Roast game, carefully decorated for presentation, with succulent root vegetables, exotic fruit, and vintage ale all graced the table on silver platters, glowing with temptation in candles' light.

A servant seated Glory and presented her with endless choices. She chose her favorites of fruit, fine cheese, and fresh bread that was still warm from the hearth.

For good measure, she drank in a goblet of mead. It was strong and tasted of fermented apples with a hint of ironberry. She let it linger on her palate before swallowing. The burn down the back of her throat was mild and warming. The cheese she sampled was sharp, with notes of hazlethorn—an almost nutty, buttery taste. Glory smiled. Food had not been this enjoyable for her in a very long time. Her shoulders relaxed, and she sank in her chair, resting her head against the high back.

“I am glad to see you finally eat something.”

Glory’s muscles tightened, and she sat up, carefully chewing her food before swallowing and washing it down with a sip of mead. She put the goblet down. “I asked to dine alone, Gryphon.”

“I know. I am sorry.”

“Why are you here?”

“I was lonely. I am sorry if I have been harsh with you. When I was very young, I learned the difficult lesson that one does not stay out after dark in this kingdom. I had escaped my nest. Xander found me outside of the keep, deeply wounded. He nursed me back to health. I prefer to be outside, but it is simply too dangerous at night. I did not think you would mind if I sat where you cannot see me.” His voice was coming from behind a pillar in the shadows.

Glory pushed her plate away. “I do mind. Having someone watch you eat is not pleasant.”

“I do not need to watch, Princess. I am content to share the room with you.”

Glory drank more of the mead and leaned back in the chair.

“Do you like it?” the gryphon asked. “It is called Woodmead. The Fox And Wolf Inn at Council’s Realm retains a special reserve for us.”

Glory did not answer. She picked at her food instead. The room grew very quiet. A Celtic harp began to play. Glory gave in to the melody, her body relaxing again. Maybe the gryphon had left her. She felt her appetite returning. After a few bites, she gave a nod to whoever was harping. “You play beautifully.”

“Thank you,” the gryphon replied.

Glory’s eyes widened. “*You* play?”

“Yes.”

Glory leaned against the table, resting her head in her hand. The song continued. The notes floated through the air like summer cotton. The ebb and flow was like the tide, washing its way through time and space. When it was over, Glory found herself smiling. “Well done, harper. Well done.”

“Would you hear another, Princess?”

Glory drank more mead. “Please.”

A melodic tune carried across the air. She recognized it. The gryphon lifted his voice in a haunting, lyrical, wordless harmony. Glory closed her eyes. She had heard it before so many times, that song of longing and disappointment. A tear

slipped from one of her eyes and wound down her cheek. All of these nights, the gryphon had been singing for her. How could she not have realized it? He knew the song of her heart.

The music came to a halt, and the last chords carried through the hall.

"What is that song?" Glory felt compelled to know it by its name.

"It is nameless. It is a curse. It is merely what fills my heart. If I did not let it out, I fear I should die from the agony."

"Tell me your name."

There was a silence.

"Please, Gryphon," Glory implored, "I wish to know the name of my harper this night."

He strummed quietly and thoughtfully, as if trying to remember a long-forgotten song.

"Surely you must be called by something other than Gryphon," Glory urged.

"Shall I give you a name?"

"If you wish."

"You are both harper and scholar. Is there a name in your language for a bard's soul?"

The gryphon picked out a few shy, awkward notes on his harp.

Glory pushed back her chair. "Well, then, I suppose you shall remain Gryphon to me."

She adjourned to her room and leaned against one of her bedposts. She could not bear the silence. She felt so tired. Gradually she became aware of music. Her heart raced, and she hurried to the window. She looked down. Colin was playing a pan pipe. Glory opened the window. "What are you doing here? It's dangerous here after dark."

Colin sighed. "You have been behaving oddly, Glory. First you are less than thrilled to see me, and my serenade does nothing to impress you. Where is your mind?"

Glory was silent.

Colin sighed. "Do you think you could come with me to the inn down the road?"

"It's not that easy. I've tried leaving this place before, but I always wind up back here. I am sure it is a curse."

Colin's shoulders slumped, and he kicked the ground.

Glory grunted. "I will try again. Run along ahead of me."

Glory glanced over her shoulder to ensure she was not being followed down the dirt road that led from Blackthorn. When she turned back around, the gryphon was suddenly standing before her. Glory jumped with a yelp.

"What are you doing, Glory?" the gryphon's tail twitched.

"Leaving." Glory pushed by him, continuing on. The gryphon strode beside her.

"Did I not warn you that going out after sundown was dangerous?"

Glory stuck her nose in the air defiantly.

"You are very—"

"Do not even say it, beast."

The gryphon pinned his ears. "You are *unwise* to ignore my counsel."

"What could possibly happen? It is not as though the unicorns are bloodthirsty." Glory was not so sure. Sea serpents in the water, gryphons in the castle, strange women that glowed and floated around. "Are they?"

The gryphon stopped. "We are on the hunting grounds of the barghest chieftan, thanks to you."

Glory rolled her eyes. "There's no such thing as a..." Reflective, green eyes flashed between the trees ahead. They blinked, then started growing larger. In the moonlight, Glory could make out the grizzled form of a large creature prowling closer to them. The gryphon stepped beside Glory, the fur on his spine bristling.

"What is that?" Glory's voice trembled.

"Barghest."

More eyes blinked from between the trees and took form on top of long snouts. They drew closer. Glory's breath caught as bear-like, hunchback wolf monsters bolted toward them.

The gryphon charged at them, commanding, "Run, Glory!"

For a moment, Glory was unable to pry her eyes away from the oncoming creature. Moonlight glinted from its hungry fangs. Glory's breath caught in her throat again. Her feet beat the ground.

She pounded the earth as hard as she could. As she glanced over her shoulder, she saw two barghest leap upon the gryphon. They bayed and snarled wildly. Another galloped after Glory. She could barely muster a scream. She felt as though her heart would hammer its way out of her chest. She struggled for breath. Up ahead she saw a broken, dead silver-birch branch, hanging limply from its trunk. She raced toward it and grabbed it, whipping around to brandish it at the barghest. As she spun around, her skirts snagged upon bramble and brought her to her knees. She swung blindly. The barghest slowed and growled.

"Leave me alone!" Glory cried.

The barghest lunged at her. Glory held the branch before her with enough strength to bar the beast from her face. The barghest's breath reeked worse than the gryphon's. Saliva slung from its mouth. Glory gave a cry as its gruesome teeth gnashed at her. She tried to pull her knees close enough to launch a powerful kick to the beast's gut. Her arms trembled with fatigue. Suddenly the barghest leapt off her.



Glory lay on the ground, shaking. A long howl echoed over the trees. She sat up to see the barghest glare at her, howl back, and then retreat to the pack.

Glory fell back against the cool earth in relief. She dropped the branch and stared up at the full moon. A few scratches here and there stung her, but she was grateful to be alive. Carefully, she untangled her dress from the bramble and rose to dust herself off. She knew she should get moving again, lest the barghest return.

Faster than before, she took off through the woods. Beads of icy sweat formed at her temples, and the breath in her lungs stung. The sound of her skirts rustled like the rapid beat of owl wings. She picked them up with a small cry of frustration, freeing her feet to race faster. Slowly, her thoughts came back to her. The night became clearer, the trees blurred less. Suddenly, Glory gasped, "Gryphon."

She grabbed the trunk of a tree to help stop herself. The forest swirled around. Glory hugged the gray trunk and gazed up at the moon. She caught her breath, taking in her surroundings. What was stopping her? This was her one true chance to escape the very bane of her existence. She already had a great head start. Glory squared her shoulders and continued on her way. She was free, at last! A pang in her chest stopped her in her tracks. "He could be hurt."

Glory's hand went to her heart. She swallowed. She touched her forehead to make sure the sweat on her brow was not some fever that had driven her mad. She checked her scratches and saw no swelling or infection from rabid barghest. Why did she suddenly care about the gryphon? She loathed him... didn't she?

"He saved my life."

Glory looked over her shoulder. Her throat tightened.

Before it could even register, she dashed back the way she had come. No worldly obstacle could seem to impede her. When she finally reached the clearing where she had last seen the gryphon, three barghest were making their last stand against him. Glory's eyes flashed as the gryphon fell to the ground with a groan. Glory picked up a stone and hurled it as hard as she could at the barghest.

"Leave him alone!"

Without thought to herself, she picked up another rock and flung it hard, nailing one of the barghest square in the shoulder. It cried out and the other turned. Glory clocked him between the eyes with a sharp-edged stone. The barghest dropped to the ground, and the one with a wounded shoulder took off into the woods. Before the last one, who was intently guarding the gryphon's weakened body, could realize what was happening, Glory lifted the largest stone she could find and dropped it on its neck.

"I said 'Leave him alone'," Glory growled.

"Glory—" the gryphon whispered.

Glory stepped to his side and knelt beside him. His wing lay twisted on the ground. Blood oozed from his withers.

Glory covered her mouth. "This is my fault."

The gryphon's breath was shallow. "Get ... please get Xander."

Glory leapt to her feet and took off toward Blackthorn.

Torchlight danced along the stone wall. Glory pressed her back against the stones just outside of the chamber where the gryphon was being tended. She heard muffled voices and winced as the gryphon roared in pain.

"Where is she? Where's Glory?"

"Calm down, you lummo. It cannot hurt that badly."

The gryphon's breaths were quick and labored. "Is she safe? Please, Xander, tell me she's safe. Glory!"

"She's fine. Hold still."

The gryphon screeched. "That stings! Glory?"

Glory dug her fingers into the mortar.

"Glory! Why will she not come to me, Xander? I want to see her. Glory!"

"Stop thrashing about, you infernal beast. She does not wish to see you."

Glory swallowed hard and sank to the ground.

"She could have left me for dead, but she came back. She loves me."

"Stop it," Xander admonished. "You're being overdramatic."

"She must. She must! She came back for me. I nearly died. Glory!"

Glory choked as tears slipped down her cheeks. She buried her face in her hands upon her lap.

The room behind her quieted with time. She dashed her tears away when the door creaked open. Xander emerged and towered over her.

"He's feverish, but he's resting now. I think you should go to him."

Glory rose slowly and locked eyes with the surly man. Without words, she turned her back to him and strode away.

A soft knock fell on Glory's bedroom door.

"Glory, it's Xander."

Glory lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling with her hands clasped over her stomach.

Xander knocked again. "Glory, it's been two days. He asks for you. Will you not go to him?"

Glory rolled on to her side, back to the door. Xander sighed.

"Why will you not go to him?"

Glory curled into a ball.

"It would do him good if you would just see him."

"Leave me," Glory finally answered.

"You cannot stay in there forever, Princess."

"Yes, I can."

"You'll starve."

Glory let silent tears slip down her face.

"He doesn't blame you for what happened," Xander said quietly, "if that is what's bothering you."

"I will not abide it," Glory sobbed.

"Please, think—"

"I said, 'Leave!'"

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Colin waited up all night for Glory and the next night as well. Not that he could sleep anyway. He hadn't been sleeping well ever since the brigands had nearly killed him. Ilyndiil helped calm him at night as she turned over and over in his hands, reassuring him that he was the hero, he was invincible, and his happily ever after was attainable. Ilyndiil whispered of the gryphon, how he was holding Glory prisoner and treating her roughly. He needed to be dealt with. Ilyndiil wanted his blood. Dark circles began forming under Colin's eyes. He hid behind flagons of Bitterbrew and Fireblonde at the inn on the nights he did not see Glory. His brain began to hatch a plan. He sent a message ahead 'from a friend' to the princess to meet him in the garden the following night.

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Glory slipped into the room where the gryphon was recovering. He lay silently on a bed, the setting sunlight tinting his tawny coat and feathers with gold. He almost seemed to glow.

"I knew you would come."

Glory's hand tightened on the door; she started to leave.

"Come closer."

Glory hesitated, then obeyed, shutting the door behind her.

The gryphon's tail tuft thumped against the bed. Glory crossed the room slowly. She reached the bedside and peered into the creature's dulled amber eyes.

"What took you so long?"

Glory sank to the edge of the bed, sitting inches from the gryphon's talons. Her hands rested on her lap, and she stared at them mutely.

"I begged for you," he murmured.

"I do not love you."

"Then why do you continue returning to Blackthorn... to me?"

Glory shook her head, for she knew not.

The gryphon rustled uncomfortably, moaning a little with pain.

"Why did you save me?" Glory rose. "You could have been rid of the burden I am to you. Yet you fought off three barghest so I could get to safety." Glory pressed her palms into the bed and leaned over, very close to the gryphon. "Why?"

The gryphon's eyes lit up a little. His feathers ruffled. "What sort of husband would I be if I did not protect you?"

Glory straightened. "Husband? Need I remind you, I am betrothed to your master, Prince Eoghan. Just because you are attracted to me does not make me yours." She folded her arms. "You are not my husband. I will not be your wife." Glory pivoted and stormed toward the door.

"Wait."

Her hand halted inches from the door lock. The room was growing dark.

"I wasn't always like this."

Glory's brow creased.

The gryphon continued. "Eoghan was born like any other baby. Well, that is if any other baby had a tail and furry feet. Xander tried to hide him, to protect him. He didn't want the world to know that the gods had placed a curse on them. He didn't want Eoghan to be laughed at or scorned. However, the harder he tried to hide Eoghan, the more animal the prince became. That room... that room where you were searching for Eoghan is mine. That awful room is where I had my first molt... and my first kill. It was where I changed from boy to monster. I am Eoghan. This gryphon body is my deformity. And the longer I remain under my curse, the more animal I become. I am losing sight of the man. Please... please, Glory, stay. You remind me of who I could be."

Glory remembered the anger and denial she had felt the first time she had heard the name Eoghan. How could she have been so blind, so utterly naive all of this time? She had not been kidnapped. She had been ably placed into the hands of her suitor's steward. Maybe this gryphon was not such a horrible monster after all. Glory felt like such a fool. She looked over her shoulder. "Why should I stay?"

"All of my bad memories stem from the dark." Eoghan's soft twill came in a whimper, "I fear the night."

Glory turned back toward him. "Why? Will you turn into a marrow squash next?"

"Perhaps. Please, Princess, abide with me. Tis eventide. Just having you here makes me feel braver. With you near, I feel whole."

Glory opened the door to summon a servant to light a fire in the hearth. She settled into a high-backed, red-velvet chair, watching the flames dance. When they were alone again, Glory heard Eoghan sing softly, "Thank you."

The smell of warm food caused Glory to stir. She yawned and stretched, blinking in the morning light that filled the room. A small cart was parked beside her

chair laden with meat, cheeses, and fresh, sweet rolls. She reached for a roll, but paused.

“Eoghan, there’s food here. Are you hungry?” Glory stopped mid-sentence. She looked at the bed where the gryphon had been last night. It was now void of its occupant.

“Eoghan?” Glory rose and went to the bed. A small lump lay near the pillows. She pulled the covers back and gazed upon a bright, green marrow squash. The blood from her face drained, first from horror, and then from anger as the practical joke sank in.

*“Eoghan!”*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Man and the Monster

Later that evening, she lay on her bed in the darkness. She stared at the ceiling, feeling empty and listless. The room started to take on an ominous green glow. Glory looked at the ghost that she knew was waiting for her. She sighed and followed her down the hall, wondering what she would overhear this time. She crouched and peered through a keyhole.

"There is a stranger in our keep, Xander."

Glory's heart swelled. *Eoghan!* He was pacing with more agitation than she had ever seen before. His tail swung wildly.

"I believe him to be Colin, King Balthazaar's royal falconer. He has come for Princess Glory," Eoghan said. "I believe she was trying to go to him the night of the attack."

"And you are merely going to let him take her?"

Eoghan's ear twitched, as if a fly were buzzing inside. The ridge of fur along his sturdy back bristled. "She loves him, Xander. It is a war I can not win."

"Try."

Eoghan let out a low rumble.

"What girl worth having," Xander reasoned, "has ever been won over without a good fight?"

"She has told me she has no love for me."

Xander raised a finger, "Ah! That much may not necessarily be true. She came back, remember?"

Eoghan's eyes fixed on Xander as he circled him.

"Give her the opportunity, and she may have something different to say."

Eoghan's ears flared in a deep breath.

"Come now, boy," Xander implored, "you cannot have anything beautiful or worthy in life without a fight. She knows you are her prince. The ruse is over. Now end hers. I believe she only pretends to loathe you."

"What about the falconer?"

Xander's expression darkened. He smiled.

Glory put her hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. Colin was in danger. Not catch-and-release-somewhere-else danger, but very real, tangible, mortal danger. Glory had to warn Colin. She found him in a corner of the garden waiting for her as his letter had said, well hidden from passerby.

"Colin, you have to leave!"

"What on Earth for?"

Glory pushed him toward an exit. "You are in danger."

"I told you that I would not leave without you."

"Colin, now is not the time to be an idiot."

"What in the world are you blathering on about, Glory?" He grabbed her arm firmly. "What's gotten in to you lately? I see you less than I ever have before, and I feel like you are pushing me away."

Glory tried to pull her arm from his grasp. "The gryphon has discovered you. If you do not leave now, you never will."

Colin laughed. "Is that what this is about? Some mangy, old gryphon?" He took both of her arms in his hands, but more gently now. "I am not afraid of that big, bumbling creature." His hand went to his black, jagged dagger. "I have Illyndiil!"

Glory swallowed and shook her head. "You do not understand."

"What more is there to understand?" His grip tightened on her elbow momentarily. "I will get you out of here, Glory," he said hoarsely.

Glory fought his hold on her. "We do not know what he's capable of, Colin. Please! It is too dangerous. *He's* dangerous."

Colin let go. "I do not care, Glory. Can you not see that the gryphon has gotten into your head? You think you're bound here, but you're not. That monster has you convinced you are his prisoner. We are leaving tonight." He paced, his hands running through his champagne-highlighted hair. "We only need to remove the gryphon from the picture to convince you of it."

Glory watched him stress. What *had* gotten in to her anyway? *You're protecting him*, Glory assured herself. However, something deep down told her it was not entirely Colin that she was protecting. The more agitated Colin became, the more concerned Glory was growing about which one of her two suitors was the more dangerous one.

Colin stopped. "I've got it!"

Glory raised her eyebrow.

"I am a falconer, right?"

"The last time you told me, you still were."

Colin started pacing again, the cogs in his head obviously smoking. "And a gryphon is a really big bird."

"I suppose."

"Sooo..."

"So?"

Colin pivoted, facing Glory, his face manic and alight. "So you and I will kill him."

The world stopped. Glory's lungs felt as though they had been filled with iron. There was no breath to be had.

"We will kill the gryphon," Colin reaffirmed.

Glory's head shook. It was not some old gryphon that Colin was planning to kill. It was *her* gryphon. It was Eoghan. He was a prince. Assassination of a prince in any land was punishable by public humiliation, torture, and death, in exactly that order.

Glory's words were barely audible. "We cannot do that, Colin."

"Do you have any better ideas? Do you happen to see any other way out from your circumstances?"

Again, Glory's head shook no. But this was not for lack of better ideas; it was a stronger no. Killing a living soul was wrong.

"Right, then. It will be easy in his weakened state. I will set a trap in the woods. I will hire men to help me bring him down." Colin looked at Glory. "I know you are on speaking terms with the beast. You can get close to him. Mention a morning hunt in the woods. Oh, and it would be helpful if we could finish him off easily. You could poison him." Colin shoved a small satchel into Glory's shaking hands.

"What is this?"

"Ivyburn, ground down in to a fine, tasteless powder by way of mortar and pestle. I give it to any small prey that young falcons in training bring back alive to me, in order to finish them off quickly. It is very humane. Put it in to the gryphon's supper tonight... all of it. It will bring him down easily when I spring the trap on his morning hunt."

Glory stared at the satchel of poison while Colin continued wildly plotting. It seemed so surreal to Glory. Colin had arrived with none of the fanfare she had imagined him with; no valiant steed, no shining armor, no army, but with every intention to kill. She had dreamed of this moment, planned on it, hoped for it, prayed it would come, only a short time ago. Now she stood on a great, gaping precipice. Here in her hand was Eoghan's demise. He may not have always been kind to her, but Eoghan had saved her life. Slowly, her palm turned over, and the bag slipped from her hand and fell to the ground. "No."

Colin stopped.

Glory squared her shoulders and held her head high. She kicked the small bag back at Colin.

Colin stooped to pick up the bag. "What do you mean, 'No'?"

"I loved you, Colin, once upon a time. You were a noble hunter who cared for me and loved me as well as you did Father's prized Merlin falcon." Glory clenched her fists resolutely. "But now I see a killer, bent on conquest and me as the prize."

Colin approached her, his expression turning from crazed executioner to softened lover. "Glory, what are you saying? This is our happily ever after."

"Do you love me, Colin?"

He took her hands in his. "You know I do."



"Set me free."

Colin's shoulders hunched. "I thought that was what I was trying to do."

Glory shook her head and stepped back. "Leave."

Colin's mouth hung open a little. "Glory, I would do anything..." he dropped to his knees.

"Then leave."

"You do not mean that."

Glory's eyes narrowed. She turned her back to him and walked away. "I do not love you. I cannot love a monster."

Glory's heart was heavy. She found the winding staircase to the tower she had climbed her first morning and ascended it once more. The door was stuck again, but she got it open with the first try. The walkway was breezy. Glory sat in the middle and pulled her knees to her chest. The wind gently whipped her hair back. She gazed at the first early-evening stars that were starting to spark above a fiery sunset. It was a good place to be alone with one's thoughts. Glory heard music close by. She rolled her eyes and grimaced. Had she not told Colin to leave? She rose and followed the notes. They were coming from the other side of the opposite tower. The door opened willingly, and she moved through the tower to the walkway. The music grew louder. She moved along another walkway through another tower. Blackthorn Keep faced the ocean from this vantage point. Waves beat off the nearby cliffs. She opened the door, ready to cowl Colin. In the middle of the walkway sat a familiar harper.

*Eoghan.* Glory smiled, all thoughts of Colin vanishing.

Eoghan's small Celtic harp hung from a leather strap over his shoulder and across his neck. He gazed at the strings, plucking them gently with a single, careful, polished talon. He seemed very deep in thought. Glory leaned against the tower, watching him play. For extra emphasis, he used his beak on the strings a few times. Eoghan shook his head as if something were not quite right. He plucked the same chords over, progressively. He paused and gazed out at the sea. The sunset cast orange lines of fire over the waves. The breeze rustled Eoghan's burnished feathers. His free foot strummed the stones beneath him like the drumming of impatient fingers in a tired tutor's schoolroom. Then he began playing fervently and raised his voice in song.

*"Croí uasal milis,  
gearrtha ag grá agam,  
Míshásta agus tá mé ciúin,  
Ná aon áthas nó pléisiúir dóigh liom gur.  
Le haghaidh a thabhairt duit  
mo anam cara is grá,*

*Tá mé mo chroí a thabhairt dá bhrí sin."*

Eoghan gazed in to the sunset. His head held high and allowed the breeze to smooth over him. He seemed satisfied at last.

Glory stepped toward him. "That was beautiful."

Eoghan's wings spread defensively, and he leapt to his feet. When he saw Glory, his wings folded, and he relaxed again, turning his view to the sky.

"What did the words mean?"

Eoghan's tail drummed the stones. His eyes shifted, as if to decide whether or not to divulge such information. He spoke softly. "Sweet, noble heart, I am wounded by love, so that I am sad and pensive and have no joy or mirth." He turned his head and looked at her. "For to you, my sweet companion, I have thus given my heart." Eoghan stared out at the sea once more, the sunset outlining his body with an elysian glow. "But love is blind to me."

Glory's hand went to her burning heart. *Oh, Eoghan! I am not blind. I see you now.* She drew close to him, closer than she had ever been before. She saw the rise and fall of his proud chest, heard the breaths he drew. She reached out to him. Her hand paused and her eyes looked into his. Her fingers slid over his rippling shoulder and under his feathers. He trembled at her touch. His mouth opened, his tongue rolling a little. Glory relished his warmth, the exquisite down of each silky vane. She saw her reflection in his great eye.

"I am so very sorry for all of the ill things I have said, Eoghan. It is no way to speak to such a noble prince. Please forgive me."

Eoghan bowed his head. "There is something I wish you to know, Princess," Eoghan murmured.

Glory's gaze turned to him.

"You were never my prisoner during your stay here."

Glory's eyes widened.

"You could have left any time you chose. You may have felt there was no way out, or that you had no other options, but you were wrong to believe so." Eoghan gazed at the stars, a certain sadness washing over him. "I was wrong for allowing you to believe so. There is always a choice. You kept choosing to return to Blackthorn." He sighed and looked at Glory. Her hand was slipping away from his shoulder. "Seeing your unhappiness, Glory, causes me great sorrow," Eoghan admitted. "I do not wish you sorrow, Princess, but your happiness only. If you can not find it here with me, then you are free to leave whenever you wish. In my faery tale the princess rescues herself." Eoghan looked into the face of the heavens once more. His expression was pained. "I release you from our betrothal."

"Eoghan, I—"

Eoghan shook his great head and spread his wings. Glory gave him his space, and he took flight.

Glory sat on the bed in her room. She pondered what had transpired between them. She was free. Did she want to be free? For a season, she had wanted nothing more. The door was now open to her, and the road she had been so eager to take sprawled out ahead. Glory could not take the first step. She looked across the room to where the ghost usually appeared to her, willing it to show itself. "Now would be a good time for you to do your magick," she told it. But the specter did not come.

Glory's shoulders sagged. She was alone. Staying at Blackthorn Keep or returning to Winterholme Castle was going to be her choice to make. She tried to weigh the pros and cons, but they both seemed to equal each other out. This matter was presenting itself as very difficult. However, the more she thought, the more questions began to arise, and she realized that they could only be answered by one person. With a deep breath, she steeled herself and went to the door. She summoned a servant.

"Please ready a carriage immediately."

"Yes, My Lady."

Glory took one last look around the room and left. She made her way to the courtyard. A black carriage was ready and waiting, drawn by two black horses. A footman opened the door and assisted Glory inside. She sat down and stared up at Blackthorn Keep.

The driver turned from his perch up front and asked Glory through the window, "Where to, Princess?"

"Please take me to Winterholme Castle as fast as you can."

"As you wish." The driver flicked the reins and the carriage lurched forward. Tears welled in Glory's eyes, but she never looked back.

## Part IV

# THE SUBTLE BEAUTY

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Wisdom and the Glory

The early-morning sunlight glinted off of the sparkling white stone of Winterholme Castle the same way it had done for centuries. The snow on the All Father's Spine had melted. The silver peaks were lush and green with summer. Yet, to Glory, who had arrived in the middle of the night, it seemed as though she was seeing it all for the very first time. Her reflection in the polished and ornate marble floors did not seem to gleam as it once had. Instead, she noticed the intricately-painted details of each shining tile. The gardens seemed more beautiful than she had ever remembered them being, and mirrors did not catch her eye the way that the swaying trees and singing robin did. She had been tired, resting on very few hours of sleep in her own bed, but she rose at early dawn anyway. Questions pressed upon her mind. She dressed without assistance and snuck away from her room. She tiptoed to her father's room. She sat on the edge of his bed and gingerly touched his shoulder. The old king startled from a deep sleep. His eyes fixed on Glory and bit by bit adjusted.

"Glory?" he mumbled groggily. "Is that my little princess? What are you doing here?"

"I have come home, Father. Will you rise and walk with me in the garden?"

Balthazaar sat up. "Give me a moment to dress, and I will join you down there."

Glory smiled and left her father to his privacy. She made her way to the rose garden and waited by the lily pond. She looked in, not seeing her reflection, but wondering when all of those beautiful, rainbow-like fish had ever existed in the water. The sun was beginning to peek over the hedges. Glory sat on a bench and watched the sunlight roll in. She pictured herself only a few yards away, in the center of the garden. She could imagine a beautiful girl waiting in the shadows, her beauty only surpassed by her vanity. Glory shook her head, banishing the image from her mind. That seemed like an eternity ago. She felt like a fool to have been so vain. That girl was someone else, a stranger even. The sun crawled over the ground to where her feet rested near the base of the bench. She still loved the gift of the sun's warmth, but she recognized it as only that: a gift. Every day was a gift and precious in its own right. She leaned back on her hands and turned her face skyward with a smile, closing her eyes and feeling a compelling gratitude deep within.

"You look very serene," said Balthazaar.

Glory hummed contentedly, "I am." She opened her eyes and looked at her father. He offered his arm.

"Shall we walk?"

Glory took it and rose.

"I have missed you, my dear," Balthazaar murmured.

"Yet you do not ask where I have been. Have you not worried for my sake?"

Balthazaar shook his head. "I hope your regard for me will not diminish when I say that I have not wondered one day after your whereabouts."

"And why is that?"

"The night that I announced your betrothal, I had the suspicion that you would try to run. It was in my foresight, and your best interests, that I confide my concerns to your sisters."

"To what end did you hope this would achieve?"

"I disclosed to Alexa that Barwn Xander, Regent of the Blood Realm, would be expecting you after the wedding. I had felt there was no time to waste on your betrothal, especially when I knew how spirited you are."

Glory momentarily resented the fact that her father knew her *too* well.

"Xander approached me at Council's Realm with a proposal that I could not ultimately turn down. Your marriage to Prince Eoghan would unite all of the kingdoms and bring about a long and celebrated age of peace."

"So it *was* a political union."

"Not entirely."

"What do you mean?"

"You must know that I love you and your sisters more than anything else in the world. You may think that the men I choose for your sisters are unsuitable to their dispositions, with the way they carry on in a show of misery. What you all fail to realize, however, is that I desire nothing more than the happiness of the lot of you. As your father, I see beyond what you all stand to see. I see, from my own experience, that you all are already a bunch of miserable mongrels."

Glory looked at her father; her brow furrowed.

"So when I pick a suitor for one of my daughters, it is my every intention to change that misery into joy. I wish for you all to know the unconditional love that your mother and I shared."

"I am sorry, Father, but I still do not understand."

"Yes, yes. I thought you might come to say that. I wish you to know that you and your sisters possess certain... *qualities*, shall we say. You each are like a rough and dirty lump of coal."

Glory did not exactly appreciate that metaphor.

"However, with guidance and the proper care, that lump of coal can be put through a fire and polished in to a brilliant, perfect, and most exquisite diamond."

"I still fail to see the point you are trying to make, Father."

Balthazaar patted Glory's hand. "Perhaps you should ask your sisters."

“For what purpose? Will they not all bemoan and wail of their misery?”

“Not necessarily. Each one has been matched to a man who is their equal, if polar opposite. Each of your sisters was also presented with the option of leaving their betrothed. Not one of them has chosen to end her marriage, so they are not as miserable as they appear. It is my intention to instill desire to serve into lazy Murtia; frugality to extravagant Lucullia; happiness to melancholy Ophelia; temperance to wrathful Odessa; moderation to Portia, who is a glutton; and chastity to lustful Alexa...”

“And to me?”

Balthazaar smiled broadly. “My dear, I think you may have fulfilled my intentions for you already. I hope you will return to your prince.”

Glory wandered the palace. She still had some unanswered questions, but she had followed her father’s advice. She hoped to bump into any of her sisters, but they did not seem to want to be found. No doubt, word had spread of her return home. Could it be they feared how she would treat them for what they had done to her? Now that she understood that they had been under the direction of their father, how could she possibly be angry with them? She was keeping her promise. She did not blame them for where she was now. It had made her a better person, as her father had intended for each of them. Knowing she was beautiful and finding peace with the knowledge that it was enough not only made her stand a little taller on humbled self pride, but it had lifted a tremendous burden from her shoulders. Everyone conceded that she was the fairest in the land. What more did she need? She did not feel compelled to gloat or enforce such knowledge on the world. Her vanity had been a curse.

Glory halted. That was it, wasn’t it?

Her father knew that each of his daughter’s qualities, as he had so diplomatically put it, was a curse to them. There was only one way to break curses: love.

Glory suddenly wondered why she was free from vanity and happy, when her sisters were long wed or betrothed and still miserable. What made her different? What did she understand, what had she done so differently, that freed her, but not the others?

Glory’s feet started moving with urgency. She had to find her sisters.

She ran into Ophelia first. They both stopped in the hall, across from each other. Glory was not sure how her older sister would react. Without hesitation, Ophelia burst in to tears and ran down the hall toward Glory. Glory braced herself. Ophelia swept Glory into her arms.

“Why are you crying?”

"I am happy to see you!" Ophelia squeezed Glory.

"You are not usually so happy," Glory wheezed, the air squishing out of her.

Ophelia released her death grip. "You are not usually away from the palace for a season, tricked into a marriage."

"This is true," conceded Glory.

"After the others tricked you into the hands of Barwn Xander, I could not still my tears, for my conscious was heavy. It was a terrible thing that Alexa and Odessa did, but I hope you understand why."

"Do not worry, sweet sister," Glory assured, "all is forgiven. How is it with you?"

"Well, when I could not bear the weight upon my soul, I told Lord Gaylord of it. He came at once and chased away my demons. I am much better now and do not cry nearly as often."

"And the others? How is it with them?"

"Why do you not ask them yourself?"

"I would, if I could find them. I fear they expect me to be cross with them and are hiding from me."

Ophelia shook her head. "It is not so. They have kept quite busy. Not long after you left, Father was approached with a suitor for Portia."

Glory's eyes widened. "Really!"

Ophelia giggled. "Shall we go see how miserable she is today?"

Glory nodded eagerly.

Ophelia took her by the arm and led her to Portia's room. Odessa knelt, seamstress pins held in between her lips, at the foot of a girl in a white gown who kind of resembled Portia.

"I do not understand why we continue to work on this dress when it will not fit when I am wed."

"If we do not continue taking it in," Odessa growled through the pins, "you will be wed in a tent rather than a gown."

Glory squinted at the girl in the white dress. "Portia?"

Portia looked over her shoulder. "Oh, thank The Dagda! Go and fetch me something to eat, would you?"

Before Glory could even consider it, Ophelia grabbed her hand and shook her head no.

Portia stomped her foot, yowling, "But I am so hungry! Lord Carson starves me."

"No, he does not, Portia," Odessa sighed. "You are being dramatic."

"Yes, very," Ophelia concurred. "Lord Carson is only concerned for your health. He has told you this repeatedly."



"You are very lucky," said Odessa, pulling some of the pins from between her lips and placing them in to the dress, "to have a suitor who loves you so well and wants a long life with you, filled with all sorts of adventures."

Portia wrinkled her freckled nose. "I fail to see how this resolves my feeling of hunger." She lifted her arms, making the excess fabric from the last alteration clearly visible, as it hung from her as wispy lichen from a willow tree. "I am wasting away. Can you not see how much has changed since the last fitting?"

Glory was stunned. "Portia," she stammered, "you look astonishing. Can you not see how beautiful you are?"

Portia crossed her arms. "Beauty does not feed my snarling stomach, Glory. Besides, beauty was always your element."

What Lord Carson was doing was so clear to all except Portia. Why could she not see it? Glory hoped Portia would realize that the gift Lord Carson was giving her would one day, hopefully, see her through to being an able, old woman, actively chasing her posterity.

Glory shifted her attention to Odessa. "Why do you not have a seamstress assisting you?"

"She fell ill." Odessa sat back on her heels, examining her work.

Ophelia leaned in toward Glory. "Embroidery work calms her," she whispered, "Lord Bedricht suggested it as a hobby. It gives her something to focus her energy on."

Lord Bedricht was smart, Glory noted. Come to think of it, Odessa had seemed calmer while they had worked on Lucullia's dress before everything happened, too. Glory was glad she had started doing it more regularly.

Portia looked over her shoulder at Glory. "What of your Eoghan? Does he feed you?"

*My Eoghan*, Glory thought with a pang of guilt. "He does well at the hunt. No prey escapes him."

"Are the rumors true? Is he cursed by deformity?"

Glory closed her eyes. The memory of her reflection in Eoghan's glassy eye made her smile. "He is beautiful."

"How convenient Father matched a beauty with a beauty," Portia muttered.

Glory opened her eyes and bit her lip. *How unfortunate you do not see your beauty as I see it now, sister.*

"How is Lucullia?" Glory asked. "Has she sent news of her new life in Council's Realm?"

"Lord Davenport has already doubled what Father has given him. He has uncanny luck with overseas trade. Yet, he does well to make Lucullia mind him and live frugally. She is not happy to be living on a budget, but she does well. Lord

Davenport dotes on her occasionally and allows her certain gifts whenever he returns home."

*So half of my sisters are working through their tribulations, Glory thought. Ophelia seems happier. Odessa is less often full of wrath. Lucullia is learning to live within her means. However, Portia does not yet recognize the burden Lord Carson is trying to lift from her.*

"Do Alexa or Murtia ever write?" Glory inquired.

"I believe Father mentioned that Alexa has softened to Covington's advances, and they are expecting a child. Murtia has taken to working among the people of her kingdom and has become very well-loved for her charity."

Glory laughed with both delight and shock. Alexa was with child. She and her husband had found a way to make their marriage last, and now they were being blessed for their efforts. Somehow, Lord Covington had outsmarted Alexa's game and turned her desire for all men in to a solitary desire for him.

Murtia had gained a work ethic and become a humanitarian. Not only that, but she was surely on her way to becoming a beloved ruler. Glory's chest swelled. She felt a sense of pride and was highly impressed upon. This change in Murtia had seemed the most dramatic from among all of her sisters. Furthermore, Alexa's love of men had turned to one man, and Murtia's disdain for her husband had blossomed in to a love for her people. Glory pondered this. As it was, her sisters seemed to possess an initial resentment toward their marriages, or at least maintained an air about their misery, but their arrangements had definitely improved upon them. Such improvements did seem to make them happier and kinder to one another.

She felt as though she was on to their little secret. They may appear miserable, but it was not so bad after all. In fact, it was downright good for them. Could it be that they were not unhappy with their mates, but with the change within themselves instead? Perhaps what they all wanted wasn't what they had needed.

Glory left the room, meditating on how her father's will had affected her. Her vanity had been obvious, and she had cursed the very gods for ending up at Blackthorn Keep. This seemed to be in line with what her sisters had experienced as well. She had also resented Eoghan, though she did not know it was him at the time. He had opened her eyes to her vanity and freed her from its bonds, Colin included. *But how do I feel about Eoghan now?* she asked herself. All of her sisters still had arrangements after coming to terms with their weaknesses. Glory had none, as Eoghan had released her from their premarital contract.

*It would not have worked, anyway, Glory told herself. He's a beast. I am a princess. It would have been a fruitless marriage.*

Glory walked to her room. *Why am I so disappointed to be released from the one thing that I dreaded? Half of my sisters would be rejoicing if given this opportunity.* Glory laughed to herself a little. *Half of my sisters do not care for their*

*husbands.* Glory paused in her thinking. If the reason her sisters would rejoice from being freed from their contracts was that they had not learned to love their spouse yet, had not taken the time to appreciate their souls and connect with them....

It all made sense now!

*What I want isn't what I need!* Glory breathlessly raced through the castle and out into the courtyard where a riderless black horse stood.

He looked at her with great, dark, liquid eyes and whickered. Glory approached him with her hand outstretched. The horse threw his head, prancing impatiently.

"Easy," Glory murmured, rubbing his neck.

A stable hand stepped in front of her. "Sorry, Princess. That's not your horse."

Glory chewed her lip. "I shall take my father's, then."

"No, Your Highness. His Majesty intends to go riding with the princesses Ophelia and Odessa today."

Glory's mouth hung open. "You mean to tell me there is not one horse in all of the stable that is free?"

The stable hand grabbed the reins of the horse in front of them. "Sorry, princess."

Glory put her hands on her hips. "What about this one?"

"No not this one. He's not yours."

"I'm the princess."

The stable hand shook his head.

The horse stomped his foot impatiently.

"I need to return to Blackthorn."

"You only just arrived," the stable hand tried to reason.

Glory stuck her nose in the air haughtily. "I order you to fetch me a carriage at once."

The stable hand's mouth opened and closed, but he obeyed and trudged off.

Glory watched him from the corner of her eye and smiled. She stepped to the horse's side, pulled herself up, grabbed a handful of mane and hung on tight. "Let's go!"

The horse reared then rocketed forward, his haunches rippling with effort. As they galloped away, the stable hand chased after them with flailing arms. "That's not your horse!"

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Great Stag Hunt

Glory rode tirelessly through the afternoon and late into the night. By twilight, she recognized the landscape. The rolling hills were ripe with wheat, and the sea spread out nearby. Glory hunkered down and dug in her heels, urging her mount onward. They bolted over The Middle Kingdom, dragging behind them the orange light of dawn. The light grazed over emerald, dew-kissed stalks, turning back the night. The starlings' song rose and fell. The tears of the River Trefnwy turned silver with the morning sun, bursting into the air as the horse and rider pounded through it.

Blackthorn Keep loomed in the distance. Glory galloped up to the castle and hastened into the courtyard. She swung herself over the horse's back and rubbed his sweaty neck, praising him for his very hard, very long run. She charged into the keep and grabbed the elbow of the first servant she saw. "Where is Prince Eoghan?"

"I am sorry, M'Lady." The servant bowed. "I have not seen him since you left."

Glory caught her breath and then flew up the stairs to her room. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw the castle ghost floating before the mirror.

"Please," she said weakly, "I need to see Eoghan. Show me what you wish me to know."

The ghost smiled at her and floated into the mirror. With a blast, the mirror glowed in blinding light. A dark, swirling vortex opened on to a clearing near dense woods. Eoghan soared high above the tree tops. Suddenly, four men rose from the tall barley grass below and snuck into the woods. One of them was blond. Glory recognized the back of Colin's head. The men drew their bows. Colin reached for Ilyndiil. The mirror went dark. Glory's breath caught.

"Glory?"

She turned her head. Xander leaned against the doorway.

"I did not expect you to return."

Glory rose. "Where's Eoghan?"

"He's taken up the hunt in Litchwood for the white stag."

"When will he return?"

"There's no telling. He's been trying for years to capture that infernal creature."

Glory bolted past Xander and down the stairs.

Glory swore under her breath as her skirts caught on the tall grass. She hiked them up and plowed on through to the edge of Litchwood. The downey-birches

swayed in a summer breeze. Glory leapt over rock and root into the woods. The trees grew closer together and ranged from birch to pine. The forest floor was fragrant with mulch and cool, damp earth. Birds scattered as she raced by. A squirrel chattered crossly at her. Glory looked up, trying to find Eoghan. How would she warn him of Colin's presence without being discovered? She wished there was a way for Eoghan to find her first. She swallowed and inhaled deeply. She had to find Eoghan before Colin did. Deeper in she pressed, splashing through a rocky stream bed. Her feet grew sore from the rough, uneven terrain. A white blur bounded through the trees ahead.

*The stag!* Glory changed her course immediately and dashed after the creature. Voices shouted not far away. Glory whimpered, knowing it was Colin. She glanced up and saw a shadow streak by.

The white stag wove through mossy, lichen-enveloped trees. Glory gasped for air but forged on. The stag broke into a small, earthy clearing surrounded by pines. It stopped and raised its head. Glory halted a short distance off. The stag scanned the sky, his ears swiveling. Glory crept closer. The stag saw her. She held her breath. The stag swished his tail and calmly crossed the clearing to the other side of the woods. Suddenly, a massive form of burnished copper dove in.

Glory burst into the clearing. "Eoghan!"

The stag broke into a canter, narrowly missing the gryphon's talons.

Eoghan ricocheted awkwardly off the ground, not unlike a coiled spring. He turned in mid-air, swearing. "*Damnú air!* I nearly had him." He glared at the intruder, then realized who it was. "Glory."

Glory ran to him. "Eoghan!"

Eoghan closed the space between them. "You came back."

Glory was breathless. "I will always come back. I need you."

They took a step closer to each other. Eoghan bowed his head to nuzzle Glory. "*A chuisle mo chro. Mo Breátha.12*"

Glory was nearly touching him when a high-pitched noise whizzed into the clearing. Eoghan gasped, and his eyes opened wide. Glory jumped. An arrow pinned the gryphon's wing to his ribs. Glory stepped back as Colin and his men emerged from the woods, surrounding them. Eoghan couldn't get a deep breath. He looked at Glory in betrayal and stepped backwards. Glory shook her head. "No."

She thrashed about as a man locked her arms behind her and pulled her away. "No!" she cried.

Colin and two other men swarmed Eoghan. Colin ripped into Eoghan's back with Ilyndiil. Eoghan roared and whirled, brandishing his talons at them. One of the men caught Eoghan's leg, and Colin severed it instantly. Blood gushed, and Eoghan collapsed. "*Breátha ...*"

Glory kicked and struggled against the man's hold, reaching out to the gryphon's tense form. "Eoghan."

The man pulled Glory's hair, tilting her head back, and pressed a dagger to her throat, trying to bring her under control.

Two of Colin's men climbed onto Eoghan, pinning him down. Colin plunged Ilyndiil into the gryphon's belly.

Glory shrieked. "Colin, stop!"

Eoghan's paws began twitching.

"Colin, I love him!" Glory choked. She stopped struggling and broke into sobs. "I love him."

Colin looked over his shoulder at Glory and paused.

The man pressed the dagger against Glory's skin more firmly. "How about we have some fun with her?"

"Let her go," Colin growled.

"Fair trade. The girl for the whole gryphon." the man sneered.

"She's not part of the deal. Let her go."

"Or what?" said the man.

Colin pointed Ilyndiil at the man.

Tears streaked down Glory's face. The man pushed her away, and Glory crumpled to the ground. She wept uncontrollably.

Colin grabbed the man by the collar, sticking the tip of Ilyndiil into his jugular lightly. "Don't ever cross me again."

The man grinned toothily.

Colin walked to the gryphon's carcass and carved out one of the talons for himself, then plunged Ilyndiil into the gryphon's eye. He walked away and took Glory's arm.

Glory tore it away from him. "Let me go, you monster."

"Glory, it's okay now. The creature is dead. You're free." Colin knelt beside her, caressing her tear-stained face. "It's me, Colin."

Glory pulled away.

"We can go home now," Colin murmured. "We can have our life together."

Glory's throat was dry. "I don't want anything to do with you."

"You don't mean that."

Glory gritted her teeth. Her stomach knotted. She swallowed back bile.

Colin helped her up. "If we hurry, we can make Lucullia's home in Council's Realm by nightfall."

"I never want to see you again," Glory hissed.

Colin grabbed her by the waist and made her look at him. "Please try to understand that your head is not in its proper place. What you want right now isn't

how your little fairytales work. The hero slays the monster and lives happily ever after with the girl he loves. Now let's go."

Glory had no fight left in her and followed. After an hour or two, Colin gave up trying to "talk sense into her" as he put it, or make any sort of conversation for that matter. Glory's feet shuffled along as though they were some other autonomous part of her. Her mind was filled with the image of Eoghan lying still in the forest, his last breath uttering her name. Several times she swore she caught a glimpse of him just ahead, or around the corner, but knew without a doubt he was dead. The men had begun skinning his body just as they were leaving.

By nightfall, Colin was knocking at the door of Lucullia's estate as promised. He nudged Glory forward, announcing that Princess Glory was here to visit her sister. Lucullia settled them in and took Glory aside.

"You're a mess."

Glory did not meet her gaze.

Lucullia closed the door of Glory's room. "What happened?"

Glory collapsed into Lucullia's arms, burying her face in her sister's shoulder.

Lucullia's arms hung stiffly for a moment, obviously in shock, then embraced their sister.

Glory wailed and choked, unable to catch a breath, shaking. Lucullia stroked her hair and pressed her cheek to Glory's. "It's alright. You're safe here. Tell me what's wrong."

Glory could barely muster the words. "Colin murdered Eoghan."

"Eoghan. Your betrothed?"

Glory nodded, clinging to her sister.

"I thought you loved Colin? Why would you be upset over such a convenient termination of your marital contract?" Lucullia's brow knit. "Unless..." She held Glory back and looked at her gravely.

Glory nodded again.

Lucullia pulled her close once more and rocked her. "Oh, Glory."

Glory felt sick again and choked back tears.

Lucullia led her to her bed and tried to make her comfortable. Quickly, she scribbled a note on paper and called upon her courier. "Take this at once to Castle Winterholme. Take Lord Davenport's fastest horse. Do not stop, on pain of death, until this note finds itself in the hands of High King Balthazaar. Is that clear?"

The courier nodded emphatically. "Crystal."

The courier scurried away, and Lucullia turned to Glory who was staring at the wall. "Do not worry, pet. Colin will pay for what he has done to your prince. I will make sure of it."

When Balthazaar learned of what had transpired on the field of Spirit's Barrow, he commanded that a dispatch be sent to Barwn Xander, letting him know that all of the lands were open for a little hunting. He also requested that his horse and dogs be made ready to join in the hunt. The troupe rode out the next day and met Barwn Xander at The Fox And Wolf Inn at Council's Realm. Together, they drew up a strategy to right the wrongs committed at Spirit's Barrow. The following morning, Balthazaar presented some of Colin's affects to the scent hounds. They did not pick up the trail at first, but by early afternoon they were on to something. With his new falconer made ready, Balthazaar gave the nod to send forth his Merlin falcon, who had a certain relationship with Colin. The little hawk flew, and Balthazaar and Xander watched carefully and waited. Within a few miles, the Merlin dove into a forest.

Balthazaar gathered the reins of his steed. "Barwn Xander, I believe we have found our quarry."

Xander sat deep in the saddle of his own mount and with a mighty yell, dug his spurs in to the horse's sides.

Colin sat with his back against a tree, resting. In his hands, he held a polished knife-like talon. Lucullia had asked him to catch her a little something for dinner, suggesting that a show of his hunting prowess might remind Glory that he was a capable provider and could win back her favor. He spun the talon between his forefingers, admiring the way it caught the dappled sunlight through the trees. He gazed up at the sky and was surprised to see a shadow streak by. He wondered if it would respond to a call. He gave a sharp, high pitched whistle, not unlike an eagle's cry. The shadow screamed back and dove. Colin was further surprised when it lighted on his shoulder and even more so when he recognized the bird.

"Rouen, what are you doing here?"

The bay of hounds in the distance made Colin stiffen. Were they hunting him? His blood turned cold when Rouen flew from Colin's shoulder back to the pack with a cry. The forest seemed to spin. Colin bolted.

The hounds were hot on Colin's scent now and grew increasingly more excited. Their howls and barks became more frequent as they raced through the woods. Crashing into daylight near the river Trefnwyl, they could see their prize now. They were closing in quickly and bayed for blood. Both Xander and Balthazaar hunkered down, urging their mounts onward.

Colin stumbled through narrow stream beds, looking back over his shoulder. His legs were failing him, and there was no air to be had. Why were they hunting



him? He sprinted with abandon, but his two legs were no match for the hundreds coming after him. The hounds leapt upon him, taking him down like a stag. They pinned him and tore his clothes, snarling and gnashing their teeth. Colin tried to fight them off, but he was overpowered. The thunder of hoof beats rumbled over the ground, and a loud whistle streamed over the air. The hounds withdrew, and Colin sat up. The sun blazed in his eyes. He shielded his sight from the light to see King Balthazaar looming over him, high on horseback.

“Falconer Colin—”

“My Lord, why am I being hunted?”

Xander rode up beside Balthazaar. “You do not speak, you treacherous whelp!”

Balthazaar’s face was solemn. “Falconer Colin, you are under arrest for consorting with a princess, and the most heinous offense against the kingdoms, the unlawful murder of Prince Eoghan. For which you will be publicly tortured, humiliated, and executed, to the pleasure of Lord Regent Barwn Xander.” Balthazaar motioned to Xander who rode restlessly in circles, his horse on a tight rein.

“Murder? Colin’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. “No... I would never... Princess Glory... I didn’t know!”

Balthazaar waved his hand, and his guards beset Colin. He stared wildly up at Xander who growled under his breath. His horse pawed the ground, snorting uneasily. Xander turned his mount. Balthazaar’s guards bound Colin by his wrists and strung the tethers to Xander’s saddle. Colin struggled against them. “Please, no! *No!*”

Xander looked over his shoulder and spat. “By the god, Arawn, you will suffer for what you have done, and slowly, as my son did.”

Xander dug his spurs in once more and launched back toward Council’s Realm. Every rock, thorn, and burr tore into Colin’s flesh, and he yelled. The louder he yelled, the faster Xander rode.

Glory stared blankly across the lawns of Lucullia’s estate. The sun was setting behind the forest. Colin would be dead by now. She had tried to ask that he be shown mercy, but even the High King could not change the law, for what had happened at Spirit’s Barrow was in Xander’s realm. Xander would carry out the execution. Glory sensed the presence of her father, but did not turn. Balthazaar approached her tiredly.

“It is finished.”

A tear slipped down Glory’s cheek. “It brings me no solace.”

Balthazaar stroked his daughter’s hair gently. “Oh, my dear heart.”

“The death of Colin only makes Eoghan’s passing worse.”

Balthazaar took Glory into his arms and hugged her close. "Be of good cheer, sweetheart. We can move forward now. We can begin to heal."

Glory shook her head. "I can not bear it."

"I know it seems impossible now, but I promise you it will get better. A piece will always be missing and hurting, but it dulls over time."

Glory buried her face in her father's shoulder and wept. "I mourn what will never be."

Balthazaar kissed Glory's forehead gently. "There, there now. It will be alright. You will love again someday, when the time is right."

"I do not wish to love again, Father. Love kills more people than war."

"That may be true, but time heals all things."

"Time?" Glory looked up at her father through blurry eyes. "Time is irreprehensible. Time is something I will never have back. Time spent with Colin... time wasted fighting Eoghan. Time is not a kind friend, Father."

But time marched on.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Rise of the Phoenix

Glory watched numbly as the summer fields grew ripe in autumn's glow. She watched the harvest come in and life gradually leave the world as winter approached. Leaves fluttered from trees in a confetti of burning colors, leaving their foundations barren and bony. The blue sky faded to gray. Soft orange light began to fill homes and businesses daily. Cold, white dust fell from the sky, blanketing barren hill and sunken barrow. Barrel-chested, bearded men began felling Yule logs, pulling them behind with children gaily astride. The castle was decorated festively, but it brought Glory no joy. While Ophelia tried to show empathy, the rest of Glory's sisters could not understand her sorrow. Why could she not rejoice in being free of all contracts with a potential husband? Normally, Glory loved Yuletide, but this year the only solace she wrought from it was that winter outside was as cold and bleak as she felt inside. At the Winter Ball, she pushed the food around on her plate, then sat by her father as she watched her sisters dance with their mates. When they adjourned to exchange gifts, Glory bolted to her room and collapsed upon her bed. The icy wind howled against the castle, and Glory could not help but think that it sounded like Eoghan's lonely song. She yearned to hear it again. Yet all she heard was the rush of spirits haunting her. Glory cursed them in her heart.

"Curse you, Eoghan. Curse your song and your soul!" Glory wept upon her bed. "Curse this pain you make me feel. Curse the joy your death has taken from me. Curse the life I must endure without you."

The wind roared against the castle ominously. Glory remembered glaring into the sunlight, so angry with Eoghan as he laughed at her, *It is far too late for curses, Princess.*

Glory climbed into bed, listening to winter's song and pining for Eoghan until sleep finally found her.

Spring crept in like the budding of tiny flowers peeking through receding snow. The castle once again began bustling with final preparations for Portia's wedding. Glory went about the daily demands with no more zest for life than a wraith. She mechanically did whatever was asked of her. The days bore little difference between each other, inasmuch that Glory could not tell anyone the name of the day or the hour of it. When approached by her father regarding celebratory preparation for Glory's sixteenth birthday, she merely requested to be left alone, for she felt the world dead to her and she dead to the world. Balthazaar's brow creased, and the look in his eyes waxed heavy for her, but Glory would not have his comfort.

The following week, Glory found a package on her dresser, bound in ivory silk. The note attached was from her father.

*"A gift on your sixteenth birthday. I had hoped that somehow I could help you preserve Eoghan's memory. Please do not do anything rash, my love."*

Glory unbound the material, and a single, polished, gleaming talon rolled out. It fell at glory's feet. A part of Eoghan was in the room with her. Glory stared blankly at it, lying in the sunlight that streamed through her bedroom windows. She wondered how her father could be so cruel and thoughtless. Hesitantly, she bent over and carefully picked up the talon. The point was dagger sharp, naturally equipped for capturing prey and tearing flesh. Glory's grip tightened, and she pressed the talon to her breast. She could end this pain now. She could be with Eoghan in paradise. She could take her life just to spite the gift.

So what was stopping her?

Hot tears streamed down her face. Carefully she slid the talon between her skin and dress, feeling it cut into her ribs a little. She wore it close to her heart, secreted away there, every day thereafter.

One late summer morning, Glory awoke to a clamor. She sat up in bed and listened.

"...But Portia, you must!"

"Unless you intend to feed me a swan, no, a *horse* in the next hour, I will not marry that man!"

Glory rubbed her face.

"Princess Portia, you will enjoy the most magnificent feast of your life tonight, I assure you."

"And I assure you that I will not move from this very spot until I have been properly fed."

Glory threw back her bed covers and flew to the door. She wasn't exactly sure where the space between she and Portia went, but it escaped more swiftly than Balthazaar's hounds hot on a quarry.

"You selfish, gluttonous swine," Glory snarled.

Portia's mouth opened. Suddenly there was a crowd swarming them.

"Don't you realize how lucky you are? Don't you see that you have your entire life ahead of you? You think you are so hungry, that you have been starved and deprived a year now, but I tell you this," Glory looked around, met by the wide-eyed stares of her sisters and royal household, "and hear me now," Glory growled at Portia, "you do not know hunger. You do not know pain such as I have known."

"Glory, what has come over you?" Odessa asked.

"Yes, Glory." Ophelia yawned, "you haven't said two words in... well, since Eoghan—"

Glory's hand went up to silence her. "A year."

Today was the anniversary of Eoghan's death.

Glory's eyes narrowed with a fierce glint. Her voice quivered, but she stood strong. "How could you think of your stomach and whine of 'pain' on a day like this...."

Glory looked at her sisters. "All of you...." She took a deep breath, trying not to show weakness. "A day that we will all remember for our sister. A day... meant for joy and celebration. And Portia," she looked her in the eye, softening, "you've worked so hard for this day and are healthy and beautiful. You, of all people," she smoothed a crease in Portia's nightgown, "should be the happiest."

Portia's expression was unconvinced. "Such an easy thing for you to say, Glory."

"Easy?"

Portia's brow furrowed. "You have always been beautiful."

Glory stiffened. "Is that what you think?"

Portia stared at the floor, ashamed.

Glory looked around wildly. "Is that what all of you think?" She staggered backwards.

"You have never been a subtle beauty, Glory," said Ophelia softly.

Her hands shaking, Glory thrust them under her nightgown and pulled out Eoghan's talon. "Long have I considered joining Eoghan." She pointed the talon at her heart dangerously. "Long have I mourned all of your ignorance. I would give... *anything*... to have a chance at what the lot of you possess. And even now, is beauty the only thing I still retain in this world? My beauty is a curse. It has only brought me sorrow this past year. Colin killed for my beauty, and I was too vain to treat Eoghan with any kindness in the beginning. What if I pierced my heart this very moment?" She pressed the talon deep into her flesh.

"Glory, no!" implored the sisters.

"I'll do it!" Glory threatened, "If it would diminish my beauty. Would death make me less glorious to behold?"

"Glory— "

Glory grabbed a handful of her own hair and with a fell swoop, sliced it to the floor. "How about now?" Another cut. "And now?" Another slice, until all of her long hair lay unraveled on the floor. Glory squared her shoulders, breast heaving. "Am I beautiful now?"

It took a lot of convincing on the royal servant's parts, but eventually they got Glory calmed down. She refused to be a part of Portia's wedding-day festivities so long as Portia was still ungrateful for her groom. However, by nightfall, Balthazaar bid Glory to join them, asserting how ridiculous her behavior was. Indignant, Glory

refused, but Balthazaar won her over. He understood how the quarrel had risen its beastly head that morning and promised Glory would have at least an endurable time if she sat in the throne beside his and kept him company. Glory emerged, brightly gowned, close-shaven of head, and defiant. Balthazaar offered a relieved smile and his arm.

Glory slouched in the throne in the Great Hall. She watched her sisters dance with their husbands and betrothed and drummed her fingers on the arm of the throne. She leaned her head glumly into her other hand. The room was bright and festive, filled with rich food, strong drink, and a summer breeze. When the dance was over, everyone but Glory applauded. Suddenly the heralds posted at the doorway blasted their trumpets, and the doors swung open. Another wedding guest. Glory rolled her eyes at their late arrival.

The master herald pounded his staff to turn all attention to the door. "His Royal Majesty, King Eoghan of the Blood Realm."

A hush fell over the room as a tall, strapping man entered. Glory gripped her seat and swallowed hard. He was handsome and regal, of ginger hair and unmistakable amber eyes, clad in royal purple. Glory leaned forward, transfixed by the single connection between his eyes and hers. Her heart galloped and her body trembled. Eoghan seemed to glide with ethereal ease to her. Those eyes... Glory would know those eyes anywhere. But it couldn't be... she must be dreaming.

Eoghan approached the throne and said nothing. His eyes bored into hers, and he offered a single gloved hand. Glory reached forth, but hesitated. It couldn't be! With an electric touch, her hand met his, and he pulled her to him. Glory's knees nearly buckled, but Eoghan's strong arms held her tightly. He led her to the center of the hall, never taking his shocking amber eyes from her icy blue ones.

Glory's voice came in a hoarse whisper. "Eoghan?"

Eoghan offered a gentle smile. "Glory..." He reached up to stroke her short hair tenderly. "It suits you."

Music began to play, and Eoghan swayed rhythmically. Glory's body followed instinctively.

"How?" she blurted. "How is this possible? I watched you die."

"And so I did. I was born cursed, Glory, trapped in the body of a creature as penance for the sins of Xander. When I died, I was finally set free of all earthly boundaries and laws. I met my beautiful mother, whose wraith form often haunts the keep, and she saw that I was free of the curse, but not truly of the world, for you were still in it. And so she sent me back from the Land of Faerie."

"That's impossible."

Eoghan smiled. "Yet here we are. My mother likes you very much. She said the universe can be changed, Glory, if it is for the good of mankind."

"Your mother?" She squinted at Eoghan, mentally matching his features against the glowing woman often seen in her room. "I saw such a ghost." She smiled at him and shook her head. "This is but a dream."

Eoghan lowered his head, pressing his strong jaw against Glory's pulsing temple and whispered sweetly, "Then let us dream on, for nothing's impossible when you're in love."

Glory breathed in Eoghan's new, human scent.

Eoghan chuckled. "Rosewater. A nice change, yes?"

In an instant, Glory felt a flash of malice, turning the moment bittersweet. She pushed Eoghan away. He had cost her so much agony. How dare he come back!

"Glory..."

"How dare you," Glory hissed. "How dare you leave me alone in the world."

Eoghan drew her in once more. "It doesn't have to be that way anymore, for I have a secret."

Glory looked at his boyish grin suspiciously.

"Tonight isn't Portia's wedding."

Glory's brow furrowed.

Eoghan leaned in close, breathing her in. "It's ours... if you'll have me."

Glory clutched his arms. He was still as bull-headed as ever! "I hate you."

Eoghan beamed, his nose brushing hers. "And I, you."

Glory's lips parted, and she tilted her head, her breath beating against his. "Make me yours."

Eoghan swept her into his arms and kissed her fiercely, with all the passion and love Glory could ever have hoped to know.

"In the end, only three things matter: how much you loved, how gently you lived, and how gracefully you let go of things not meant for you."

--Buddha's Little Instruction Book, J. Kornfield



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## THE ESCAPE

An Excerpt from [Moonlight](#)

A clatter rose from down the hall. Fourteen-year-old Aowyn lifted her head and looked toward her door. It grew quiet. Another crash-bang erupted. Aowyn ran into the hall. The noise was coming from Áodhán's room. There was yelling and groaning, not unlike Aowyn had heard on other nights Ciatllait came to visit Áodhán. Aowyn moved toward her brother's room and pressed her ear to the door. There was grunting and cries followed by a very animalistic *Honk!*

Aowyn's brow knit. She rapped on the door. Ciatllait opened it. Her hair was disheveled, and she blocked the view into the room. Aowyn tried to push past her. "Where is Áodhán?"

Ciatllait smoothed her gown and took a deep breath. Her eyes bore through Aowyn.

Aowyn's jaw set. "I'll not ask again, she-witch. Where is my brother?"

Another awkward honk came from the room. Áodhán's silver plate with the family sun crest toppled from the shelf behind Ciatllait. Aowyn rammed her shoulder into the woman. Ciatllait toppled backwards. Aowyn stood in the middle of Áodhán's room staring at the open window as black feathers floated down around it. Ciatllait was laughing. Aowyn rounded on her. "What have you done with Áodhán?"

Ciatllait's laughter grew maniacal.

Before Aowyn could stop herself, the back of her hand left its mark on Ciatllait's cheek. Aowyn's chest heaved.

Ciatllait raised her hand to her offended cheek and stared up at the girl. She rose and screamed.

Aowyn's eyes widened. She backed toward the door. Her closest brother, Aogán, was the first to the scene. He looked just as surprised as Aowyn. Before he could ask what was going on, a shock of blue light shot forth from Ciatllait's hand. Aogán crumpled to the floor, writhing. Aowyn faced Ciatllait. The woman's nostrils flared and her eyes flashed, filled with crazed intensity.

"What have you done?" Aowyn cried.

Five-year-old Aonwys appeared in the hall, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "What's going on?"

Another bolt of blue burst from Ciatllait's hand.

Aonwys fell to the floor.

"Aonwys!" Aowyn yelled. She looked back to Aogán who was beginning to change. He howled as his arm twisted behind him. White feathers began to sprout

from his skin. Ciatllait started cackling. Aonwys squeaked weakly from the floor. Aowyn turned and watched in horror. Aonwys shrank as he wept in pain. Soft grey down covered his body. Aowyn ran and fell beside him. She scooped up his limp, fuzzy body. His neck twisted and lengthened. His face contorted. All humanism left him as a small beak protruded. Aowyn rose and turned to Aogán who lay still on the floor. Ciatllait towered over him. Aogán had grown wings and a similar beak. Ciatllait was chanting under her breath. "Twist the neck and break the back... twist the neck and break the back."

The shriek that Aogán tried to release came out as a *Honk!*

Aowyn clutched the transformed Aonwys close to her heart and charged toward Aogán. She barreled into Ciatllait, knocking her back. Aowyn reached for Aogán to help him up as his transformation completed. "Get up!"

Ciatllait huffed and rose just as the children bolted down the hall. Aogán banged and bashed against the walls clumsily, honking with disorientation. Their elder brothers, Aodan and Aohearn, appeared in the hallway with bewildered looks. Aowyn blew past them. "Run!"

The princes looked behind them.

A shock of blue darted toward them.

Aodan was thrown through the air as the bolt made contact with his heart. Aowyn and Aohearn grabbed him and tossed him to his feet, even as his arms began to form into wings. Ciatllait stomped after them, her magic shooting and whizzing every which way through the castle. It pummeled its way into Aohearn just as Aodan was finding his webbed feet. Aogán gained speed and began flapping his wings. They bounded through the kitchen into the open yard. Second-born Aodh sat outside strumming a Celtic harp. Ciatllait's eyes narrowed as she aimed for him. Aodh reeled back in a heap of feathers. Aogán took flight into the vast darkness overhead, followed soon after by Aodan and Aohearn. Tears formed in Aowyn's eyes as she ran. Aonwys peeped softly in her arms.

Aodh came to and began waddling quickly after his sister, honking helplessly.

"Run!" Aowyn cried, "run!"

Aodh honked and picked up speed. His black neck stretched out. His wings spread. He began flapping until the wind slid under him and carried him skyward. Aowyn stared as he flew, lost to the sights of Ciatllait. Aowyn looked behind her. Ciatllait stood near the castle doors, shoulders squared, triumphant. Aowyn bounded over the green hills and through wide fields, around dell and into glade. She ran with little Aonwys to the one place she thought they and their brothers could find safety.

An Cuan Áille.

## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE FOR MOONLIGHT

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Aodhagáin “Eed-gun”

Áodhán “Eye-oh-wan”

Aodh “Eed”

Aodan “Eden”

Aohearn “Ee-han”

Aogán “Ee-gahn”

Aowyn “A-oh-win”

Aonwys “Ain-wis”

Ciatllait/Crwys “Key-at-el-let” (sounds a little like Cadillac)/“Crew-is”

(Sounds a little like Chris)

Sulwen “Soul-win”

An Cuan Áille “Ahn Coo-an Ale-ya”

### BIRTH ORDER (And one-line character sketch)

Áodhán (19 at beginning of book), crown prince of the Summer Isle

Aodh (18 at beginning of book), the bard/poetic soul of the family

Aodan (17 at beginning of book), like that one cool guy you know in real life  
and wished you were friends with, but secretly flighty

Aohearn (16 at beginning of book), middle sibling syndrome

Aogán (15 at beginning of book), wise and scholarly, old soul

Aowyn (13 at beginning of book), our heroine. Moody like her fiery father,  
Aodhagáin,

Aonwys (5 at beginning of book), the baby of the family

### About The Author



Ann Hunter wrote her first multi-award winning story at age 12. She is the author of the young adult fantasy novels *The Subtle Beauty*, *Moonlight*, *The Rose In The Briar*, and *Ashes*. *The Subtle Beauty* is her first novel-length story to be published. She likes cherry soda with chocolate ice cream, is a mom first and a writer second, has a secret identity, and thinks the *Twilight* movies are cheesier than cheez whiz (which is why they are her guilty pleasure!)

She lives in a cozy Utah home with her two awesome kids and epic husband.

## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Correct Pronunciation Provided by <http://www.abair.tcd.ie/?lang=eng>

The author wishes to include the way she says it in case you're also a goof like she is. You can pronounce it in your head in any way that increases your reading enjoyment.

AP = Author Pronunciation

If the phrase or word is underlined below, you can click it for an audio pronunciation! Be sure your tablet/reading device's speakers are not muted.

*Unfortunately it won't work in kindle touch*

Aowyn "A-oh-win"

Xander "Sander" (Xander's full name is Barwn Xander Blacksteed of Blackthorn. Barwn Blackthorn is a shortened title)

Aodhagáin "Eed-gun" (AP: "Owed-a-gan")

Eoghan "Own" (AP: "Ee-gun")

Maeb "May-b"

Rhun "Roon" (The author loves Friesian horses. Xander's ancestors perpetuated a Friesian-like breed long ago. Rhun is a descendant of that line.)

River Trefnwy "Tref-nu-way"

Sylas Mortas "Syl-loss Mart-us" (AP: "Sigh-lus Mort-us")

Idegwaed "Ed-ah-gwed" (AP: "Eye-da-gwed" Alternative: "Eed-a-gweed")

Archduges "Ar-ock-do-jus" (AP: "Arc-do-jus". A Duke or Archduke)

Iarlls "Yells" (AP: "Yarls". An Earl)

Tywysogion "Tee-wee-saigon" (AP: "Twy-sog-on". Plural form of Tywysog, a Celtic Prince)

Barghest "Bar-yesht" (AP: "Bar-guest")

Balthazaar "Bal-the-zar"

Ilyndiil "*Ill-in-dale*" (AP: "Ill-in-dill" One of the shards of Idegwaed)  
Donestre "*Doe-nes-tre*" (AP: "Duh-nos-tree")

\*\*\*

During the chapters "Too Late for Curses" and "The Man and the Monster" several Celtic words are used. The author does not feel a translation is necessary, because the meaning is repeated almost immediately after the word is spoken. However, the author has attached the following for your convenience.

#### TOO LATE FOR CURSES

Fíorghrá "*Fewer-grey*"

Is liomsa mo ghrá "*Is lum-sa ma grey*"

Breátha "*Brey-ha*" (AP: "Bree-ah-tha")

#### THE MAN AND THE MONSTER

Croí uasal milis, "*Cree wassal milish*"

gearrtha ag grá agam, "*Gare-ag grey-gum*"

Míshásta agus tá mé ciúin, "*Me-asta gus-ta mic-yoon*"

Ná aon áthas nó pléisiúir dóigh liom gur, "*Nigh-in hast no pleasure doy lom-gur*"

Le haghaidh a thabhairt duit "*Le hey-ah ah-hort dwit*"

mo anam cara is grá, "*Mo-an-em caress-grey*"

Tá mé mo chroí a thabhairt dá bhrí sin "*Ta-mah ma-cree a-hort da-bree-shun*"

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#### PRONUNCIATIONS TO ACCOMPANY TRANSLATION GUIDE

1. Ní hea "*Nee-ha*"

2. Do locht "*Doe-locked*"

3. Do mhac "*Doe-mock*"

4. An í seo an cailín "*On ee-shawn kai-lean*"

5. Is í "*Eh-sea*"

6. Greannmhar "*Gran-more*"

Unlisted: Níl sí tarraingteach dom "*Neel she tarran-ta doom*" (Gryphon: *She is unattractive*)

7. Labhair ar do shon féin "*Lore dah hon feen*"

8. Dúr "*Do-er*"

9. Ní thuigim tú "*Nee heem too*"

10. A oinseach "*Oun-cha*"

Unlisted: Tá tú dom nimhe“Tah too doom niv-yah” (Gryphon: You infect me)

11. Gcroí agus Inní“Gree gus in-nee”

12. A chuisle mo chro.Mo Breátha“A hush-el ma-crow. Ma Brey-ha.”

1. It isn't

2. Your fault

3. Your son

4. Is this the girl?

5. It is

6. That's odd

7. Speak for yourself

8. Stupid

9. I do not understand you!

10. You fool

11. “Gizzards and gullets”

12. The beat of my heart. My Glory.

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