

HEATHER GUERRE



SPELL
BOUND

A WILD MAGIC STORY

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WILD MAGIC



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Spell Bound touches on topics that may be difficult for some readers, including emotional abuse (past, mostly off-page), child abuse (past, off-page), alcoholism (side character), death of family members (past, off-page), combat/weapons violence, and on-page death. *Spell Bound* contains explicit scenes of sexual intimacy.

CHAPTER 1



The wild magic had always tended to linger in Carr Tyl. The city had once been the royal seat of the kings of Urdivice. Later, it became the capital of the powerful Urdivicean principality in the Darshan Empire. Now it was a crumbling ruin. Once upon a time, it had been known for producing more mages for the Darshan court than any other place in the empire. Ailis remembered the days when the old city had thrived and bustled. The wild magic had been a blessing, the key to the city's prosperity and political significance.

But then the Darshan royal family were assassinated, the empire collapsed in on itself, and the magic... *changed*. Nothing flowed like it used to. Instead of gifting Carr Tyl with a steady, reliable flow of wild magic, it became a deluge. Instead of following magical currents through the city, it accumulated in the lowlands, pooling higher and higher, becoming more erratic and dangerous with each passing day. The city's mages couldn't keep up with the influx. The once-renowned mage Amus Cynnid was Fractured in the efforts to keep the wild magic at bay.

Even with the mages' efforts, significant portions of the city quickly became completely inaccessible because of the wild magic. The rest of the city was beset by dangerous uncertainty. The Talien Bridge—which spanned the River Arth to connect the two sides of the city—could no longer be crossed; anybody who set foot upon it lost their ability to speak. Spiders were to be avoided at all costs—those who were bitten slowly decorporealized over the span of a

fortnight. Cuith Mays, once the city's largest gathering space for festivals and markets and the like, was gone. The land, the air, that space in the world, simply no longer existed.

Every day had brought with it a new horror. Roads were blocked by shimmering pools of a mysterious substance that nobody dared touch. Trees assaulted anybody who stood in their shadow. Squirrels developed the ability to speak and said the most appalling things. Food that had just been bought turned into an inedible crystal imitation of itself on the walk home from the market. Individual cobbles sprang from the roads at random, sailing out of sight as though they'd been launched by a trebuchet. Massive, mysterious shadows lurked beneath the surface of the River Arth. Every night at midnight, a strange scream filled the air, jarring the entire city into heart-pounding wakefulness.

In short, Carr Tyl was no more. The wealthy and powerful had long since fled. The ordinary residents—those who didn't have another property to flee to—were slower to depart. The fortunate ones had family in other places who could take them in. Those who weren't so fortunate stayed longer, but eventually, they were left with no choice. A strange black fog rose up from the river one day, creeping its way through town, turning everything it touched into shiny obsidian—including the plants, and animals, and people. Ailis woke that morning in her room above her shop and found that the stairs had been turned to obsidian. When she ventured downstairs, the entire shop and everything in it was shiny, black glass.

On that day, the remaining few holdouts left. Ailis counted among their number. She'd been made a young widow nearly five years ago when her husband, Eian Rhis, the drunken sot, fell off the Talien Bridge and drowned in the Arth after a night of carousing. His death left her with no living family in the world. The old widow Linney had taken Ailis under her wing, given her steady work as a seamstress, and then left the shop to Ailis after her death a year ago.

And now Ailis had nothing at all. No shop to sleep in. No income to live off of. No family to depend upon. Her only hope was to find a city or town in need of a decent seamstress

and try to make a go of it there. She had no idea which town or city that may be, nor did she know how to get to any of them. Her only plan was to stay with the largest group of Carr Tyl refugees for as long as possible.

The open road was a dangerous place. There was no protection from the elements. Bandits and thieves were rampant in the wake of the empire's collapse. Wild magic could gather anywhere, creating strange and deadly interference. Their travel party of twenty-some people was an ill-fitted assemblage of Carr Tyl's last survivors—mostly the elderly and the impoverished who'd had nowhere else to go and no way to get there. As a woman of formerly modest means, capable of reading, and still hale in body, Ailis somehow became the unofficial leader of their party. She didn't immediately realize it had happened. She'd thought it was odd that the others kept requesting her permission to do things that were perfectly within their rights.

“Should we take our supper now, Mistress Rhis?”

“Do you think this is a good place to stop for the night, Ailis?”

“Ought we not collect some water soon, Mis'ss Ailis?”

“Is that a wild magic haze over there? Do you see? What should we do?”

And so on. Ailis found herself answering automatically, in the same way she'd taken over the running of the shop when Linney's health had begun to fade. If there was a job that needed doing, Ailis naturally tended to fall into doing it.

“How far d'you think to the next town, Miz Rhis?” Mern Parry, a man old enough to be her great-grandfather, asked as they reached a fork in the road.

Ailis glanced at the road markers. The nearest town, Mordley, was only twelve miles along the Imperial Trade Road. But somebody had scratched a message into the wood of Mordley's marker. *NOT SAFE*. No explanation, just the dire warning.

She sighed and turned to explain the situation to the group.

“What’s that mean, ‘not safe’?” Gwillan Jons demanded, crossing her bony arms impatiently.

“What’s it matter?” Artie Marik shot back. “Whatever it is, it’s bad enough someone thought to warn the rest of us.”

The argument went back and forth, new voices joining as it escalated. Ailis waited until they tired themselves out.

When a sullen silence had fallen, she spoke again. “The next nearest town, Penfrin, is thirty-seven miles that way.” She pointed to the road that turned off towards the Hullees. The jagged mountains were only a dark outline on the horizon, but the land leading up to them was steep and rough.

Another chorus of objections rose up.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Ginni Hems called out. At twenty-one, she was a decade younger than Ailis, but years of barely eking out a living as a rag and bottle girl had lent her a hardened air. “Let’s hear what Mistress Rhis has to say.”

Ailis tried not to let the mild shock she experienced every time the group wanted to defer to her show on her face. “What if Mordley’s ‘not safe’ because of wild magic?” she asked the group. “We didn’t uproot ourselves from Carr Tyl just to walk into another place with the same problem.”

Some of the resentful muttering died away.

“We’ll vote,” she decided. “We can go to Mordley or to Penfrin. Mordley has been declared ‘not safe.’ Penfrin is thirty-seven miles along the road to the Hullees.”

The discussion devolved into a heated debate as to whether Mordley’s unknown danger or the significantly more difficult journey to Penfrin was the bigger threat. After what felt like hours of bickering, Ailis called for the vote.

By a narrow margin, Penfrin won. For a fearful moment, Ailis was certain the dissenting voters would choose to break into their own traveling group. But after some heated grumbling, everyone seemed resigned to the thirty-seven-mile journey.



THE DAYS PASSED SLOWLY, PAINFULLY. THEIR TRAVEL PARTY was less than spry and could move no faster than the slowest person. The grassy hills slowly gave way to thick, close-growing forest and steeper inclines. They passed other signposts, indicating the distance to Penfrin, as well as the distances to further flung towns and cities.

On one post, Ailis realized a word had been roughly carved into the wood of Penfrin's marker. Ailis couldn't make heads or tails of it. It looked like *DRAKKIR*. The scratched-in word was weathered. Was it just old graffiti? Or was it a warning?

"Does anybody know what 'drakkir' means?" she asked.

"Maybe it's a Hullean word?" Ginni suggested.

They were still within Urdivice, where most everybody spoke Urdivicean and at least a little of the Imperial Common Tongue. The Hulleans were an insular, isolated people. Ailis found it unlikely one of them would have journeyed so far out of their mountain homelands just to scratch out a message in a language not spoken outside of the Hulles.

"No," a hoarse, old voice came softly from the crowd. "It's Frythan. A 'drakkir' is an animal—a foreign one. In Urdivicean, the word is *dragon*."

A stunned silence fell over the travelers.

"There are no dragons west of Kandor," Ginni said decisively. "We'd have heard about it by now."

Ailis wanted to agree with her. Dragons had been gone from Darsha for hundreds of years, and the wild magic hadn't managed to bring one back before. But with the strange fluctuations in the wake of the empire's collapse, she couldn't be so certain.

From then on, at every mile marker, Ailis found the word *DRAKKIR* roughly carved into the wood. Every time she saw it, her dread intensified. Too much was stacked against them.

They still hadn't encountered a single other traveler on the road since leaving Carr Tyl. Despite their slow ascent into the highlands that led to the Hulle, they had no view of their surroundings. Grassy hills had given way to densely forested ridges. Anything could hide in the cover of those trees. Their food stores were down to almost nothing, and they were not even halfway to Penfrin. None of them knew how to hunt, or even had the tools for it anyway. If they didn't find a town soon, they'd starve.

Ailis scanned the heavily forested roadsides as they marched on, desperate to spot something she recognized—a walnut tree, maybe? Were walnuts even ready to be picked this time of year? She had no idea. She was a city creature and had been for her entire life. In her experience, walnuts came from the market. What happened before they got there was beyond her awareness. She couldn't even remember rightly which months the walnuts started showing up. Midsummer? Early autumn?

“Lost in thought?” Ginni fell into step beside her, looking haggard. They all did. Nobody in their party was fit for this.

“Yes,” Ailis admitted. “Do you know when walnuts are harvested?”

Ginni blinked. “Can't say that I do.”

Ailis sighed. “Neither do I.”

The cry of a distant horn suddenly filled the air. Every head turned to look up, straining to see above the treetops to the limestone cliffs that striated the forest like pale gray ribbons. There was no telling where the sound had come from—only that it had come from somewhere up-road, above their heads.

The travelers moved on, unsettled.

They'd barely gone another quarter mile when the road began to tremble beneath their feet. A moment later, riders on horseback burst through the trees and onto the road, surrounding their group. There were at least twenty riders, and they all wore full armor—chest plates, pauldrons, vambraces,

and greaves—that appeared to be a hodgepodge of battered old iron pieces mixed with carved wood tied together with jute. They carried a mixture of weapons—some swords and lances, but also wooden spears with stone points affixed to the ends.

This is why the roads are empty, Ailis thought despairingly. Bandits.

“You trespass on the Drakkir’s territory!” one man boomed in tones of violent fury. He banged his spear shaft against his chest plate. The other bandits echoed him, drumming up a thunderous clamor that seemed to echo off the trees and make itself louder on the rebound. Horses reared and tossed their heads, hooves clopping against the road, equine screams adding to the cacophony.

Ailis clapped her hands over her ears.

When the noise died away, she looked up at the man who had first addressed them. He stared down at their group with a hard expression, cold eyes. After a moment, he guided his horse to step back a few paces, ceding the position of prominence to another rider.

“The Drakkir,” he announced.

So *this* was the dragon they’d been warned of—just a man.

But not *just* a man. He was as broad and strapping as any farmer or blacksmith, but he had the hardened gaze of a mercenary. His mere presence radiated an unsettling force. There was something about him that... wasn’t right. Ailis couldn’t quite put her finger on it. Unlike the other riders, he wore iron armor—all battered remnants of the long-gone Darshan military. His face was mostly concealed by the fit of his battered iron helmet, but she could see that he had a heavy, scowling brow and broad, harsh features.

“You have trespassed on my territory.” The man spoke in a voice that was as deep as thunder. Ailis felt the rumble of it in her bones. His accent was strange—it sounded Darshan, which she hadn’t heard in years, but touched with a hint of something else. “Pay a forfeit, and you will be left in peace.”

A nervous murmur arose from the travelers. They had less than nothing. Their eyes turned nervously to Ailis.

She clutched her hands together to hide the tremor in them. “We have nothing, sir. Please, let us turn back and you’ll never see us again. I swear it.”

“No.” The refusal hit like the beat of a war drum. “As you traveled our roads, you have hunted our forest and foraged our land. Payment will be made.”

“We’ve done none of that!” Ailis objected hotly. “We don’t know how!”

The man—the “dragon”—was silent for a moment. Ailis could almost think he was nonplussed, except that his expression of untempered ferocity did not change. Finally, he glanced at two of his men. “Search them.”

Two riders dismounted and waded into the tightly huddled group of frightened travelers, spears at the ready. One by one, they took bags and baskets and rucks and pawed through them. In Owain Timm’s pack, they found acorns wrapped in a handkerchief. In Merrie Liffin’s sling, some mushrooms. Person by person, they found evidence of foraging—evidence that the travelers protested had come from other places, but the Drakkir would not hear it.

“Payment is owed,” he said. “If you have nothing to offer, we will take something of our own choosing.”

“How can you take from *nothing*?” Ailis demanded, angry and despairing.

The Drakkir eyed her for another quiet, unnerving moment. Finally, he looked over to the man who had first pronounced them trespassers. “We’ll take the woman,” he growled.

Ailis’s horrified gaze flashed to Ginni. “You will *not*,” she all but snarled, positioning herself protectively in front of the pale, reedy girl.

The Drakkir’s eyes flickered to Ginni. “Not her,” he said dismissively. His gaze landed on Ailis with blade-sharp intensity. “*You*.”

CHAPTER 2



Ailis froze, stunned. “Me? I—what?” Ailis was on the wrong side of thirty, wary and beaten down by a disappointing life. In her younger days, she might have been something of a beauty. But years of a deeply unpleasant marriage followed by several more years of impoverished widowhood had chipped away at that youthful prettiness, leaving a cold-eyed, brittle-edged woman with a bold streak of prematurely white hair growing from her widow’s peak, tired hollows beneath too-severe cheekbones, and a resting expression that inadvertently conveyed constant disdain.

“This payment amounts to more than the cost of passage,” the Drakkir continued in his deep, rumbling voice. “In recompense, the rest of your party will be given provisions. They will pass safely through our territory.”

Several gasps went through the travelers—some stunned, some outraged, and some bordering on... relief.

Ailis squared her soldiers. “Give them enough food to reach Penfrin and an escort there, and we’ll have an agreement.”

“Ailis, no!” Ginni objected, grasping her sleeve.

An unnatural light flickered in the Drakkir’s eyes as he considered her. After a long, taut moment, he nodded. “Let it be done.”

“Ailis!” Ginni gasped, pulling on her arm. “You can’t do this!”

“See them safely to Penfrin,” she told the girl in a low voice. “If help can be sent for me, do so. Otherwise... I will bide my time to make my own escape.”

“But in the meantime, you’ll be prisoner to... *that*. What exactly do you think he wants you for?” Ginni demanded cynically.

“I’m a grown woman and a widow, Gin. I know what he wants me for.” It was nothing she hadn’t endured before. Her husband’s attentions had been unpleasant and unwelcome, and had shattered whatever girlish illusions she’d had about the pleasures of the marriage bed. Still, it hadn’t been anything beyond her ability to tolerate, and it hadn’t lasted terribly long besides. She could suffer it again if it would save lives.

Ginni regarded her solemnly.

“I’ll be fine. Go. The others will need you.” Ginni was young, but she was quick-witted and decisive. She had a strong enough personality to keep everyone together.

One of the riders dismounted and came to fetch Ailis.

“Get them to Penfrin,” Ailis said stoutly, looking away from Ginni’s troubled gaze, letting herself be led away.



RONAN STARED DOWN AT THE WOMAN HE’D JUST ACQUIRED. She looked Urdivicean, with her curling black hair and olive skin. Her belted tunic had probably once been quite fine—the elaborate embroidery at the cuffs and collar suggested as much—but was now frayed and stained. Instead of skirts, she wore billowing cuffed trousers tucked into tall, sturdy boots, as Urdivicean men and women alike often did. Her dark eyes regarded him flatly, almost sullenly. The fear that had first been there had burned out when her temper ignited.

Good. She’d need a backbone.

One of his sentinels, Loric, fetched her from her comrades and guided her over to Ronan. Another sentinel, Verne, sank to one knee so that she might use his leg as a mounting block, but

she only stared up at Ronan, those midnight eyes burning into him like a brand.

He held out a hand to her, curious as to how she would respond. To his immense gratification, she hesitated only a second before accepting it. Gripping her by the arm, he hauled her up onto his saddle. She let out a sharp exhalation of surprise but didn't flail or shriek. When he had her seated crosswise in front of him, he picked up the reins and began the journey back. The woman bowed her head and did not look back.

Her docility didn't fool Ronan.



AILIS HAD NEVER RIDDEN A HORSE BEFORE. SHARING A SADDLE with a hulking stranger while sitting sideways felt like an excessively challenging introduction. She tried to grip the pommel for balance, but it wasn't enough. Eventually, her pride had to bow out so she could loop one arm around the Drakkir's sturdy waist and lean against him. Caged between his arms, she wasn't exactly comfortable, but at least she didn't feel like she was going to tumble off.

The Drakkir and his men left the road almost immediately, plunging their horses into the thick growth of the forest. There must have been a track of some kind because Ailis didn't have to duck branches constantly, but she couldn't see one. They like were wraiths, moving through the forest, leaving no trace.

After a long ride that took them up and down forested ridges, over trickling streams, through an echoing and dripping limestone cave, along a towering cliff, they finally emerged into a broad clearing. Her whole body ached from trying to maintain her seat, but she forgot the pain momentarily as she took in the sight before her.

The clearing was big enough to occupy several city blocks in Carr Tyl. It was filled with small cottages with walls made of logs and steep roofs of... grass? With goats grazing on top of them? Ailis stared as they passed the nearest house. A goat

stared back at her from the edge of the roof, chewing in that belligerent way with which goats did everything.

Tearing her gaze away from that, she looked back over the rest of the clearing. It was a town, she realized with some shock. She'd been expecting tents, or maybe fortified caves at best, crudely outfitted to house only the riders who'd stopped them on the road. But this was a bustling town, filled with people. Smoke rose from the stacked stone chimneys. The roads were narrow but well worn, and filled with people and animals going about their days. A few chickens squawked indignantly as the horses passed by. Dogs barked at their arrival. Goats watched them from the rooftops. A woman crowed happily at the sight of their small caravan and bounded over to be hauled up onto one of the rider's saddles and soundly kissed.

Well. That put at least one fear to rest. Ailis hadn't bothered raising it with Ginni, but she'd suspected she'd be used by all the riders, not just the Drakkir. But maybe it was only the man behind her she had to worry about.

As the riders moved through town, one by one they peeled away from the group to turn down alleys until, at last, it was just Ailis and the Drakkir. The town watched as they passed, men and women with watchful eyes and uneasy postures. She would have assumed they were afraid of the Drakkir, but their gazes seemed to dart from her face to his as if seeking some kind of reassurance from him.

He said nothing to any of them.

At the other side of the settlement, the Drakkir finally halted the horse in front of a cottage that looked no different from the others, grazing roof goat included. He dismounted and then reached up to pull Ailis down. She stumbled as her knees buckled, her legs too sore and her weight too unexpected. The Drakkir caught her and without a word of warning, threw her over his shoulder like she was a sack of grain.

Ailis was too tired in every possible way. Too tired to fight. Too tired to be afraid. Too tired to care. Let this man do

what he would. She'd reckon with it some other day.

He gave the horse a pat on the rump that sent it trotting off and then carried Ailis into the cottage. It was dark, the shutters folded over the windows, and her face was pressed against his back, so she saw very little. Unsurprisingly, he brought her to a bed. He laid her upon it with all the tenderness of a laundress dumping a sack of dirty socks.

Then he left.

Ailis listened to the silence, heart in her throat, waiting for his return, waiting for the inevitable to happen. But the stillness remained, the cottage empty of anything but the ragged sound of her own breathing. Seconds stretched into minutes. And then, at some point, exhaustion overrode fear, and she lost the fight against sleep.



AILIS WOKE TO BRIGHT SUNLIGHT. SHE SAT UP SLOWLY, HER head throbbing. She looked around the small bedroom, taking in the whitewashed walls, the plain but sturdy furniture. Somebody had come in to open the window shutters while she slept, and the small square window offered a view of the neighboring cottage. Ailis stared at it, listening to the sounds of the town bustling outside.

The Drakkir had never returned for her.

Feeling as if she'd been rolled downhill in a barrel filled with rocks, she groaned as she slid out of the bed and hobbled to the bedroom door. She needed a privy. But as soon as she pulled the door open, she froze.

A man was seated at the small, rough-hewn kitchen table, quietly shelling peas. He looked up when she emerged, his expression remote. He looked Frythan. He had the light, golden skin and dark, rusty-red hair they commonly had, and eyes that seemed a halfway color between green and blue. His thick forearms, exposed by rolled-up sleeves, were covered in the intricate blue knotwork tattoos that both Frythans and Cothori were known for. He should have been pretty, being as

colorful as a handful of gems, but he had the blunt, harsh features of a brawler—heavy brow, crooked nose, thick neck. He wore a plain homespun tunic and woolen trousers. His fists were the size of hams, and yet he performed the fiddly work of shelling peas with adept finesse.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice emerging as a croak.

“Ronan,” he answered simply.

“Ronan who?”

“Ronan va Rieves.” Definitely Frythan with a name like that.

“Where’s the Drakkir?”

His brows raised, though his expression remained unreadable.

After a moment of silence, the size of him and the intensity of his gaze registered with her, and fear mingled with embarrassment. “You’re the Drakkir.”

He nodded wordlessly, jewel-bright gaze pinned on her.

She gripped the doorframe, keeping herself steady. “You gave my people provisions? And an escort?”

He nodded again. “They should reach Penfrin in three or four days.”

“What do you want from me?”

He dropped his gaze back down to the peas. He shelled for a while in contemplative silence, the only sound the soft clicking of peas falling into the bowl. Finally, he said, “You are here to appease the Drakkir.”

“But... *you*’re the Drakkir,” Ailis said, less certain this time.

He glanced up at her, then back down at the peas, saying nothing.

She didn’t understand. It was difficult to reconcile the hard-eyed, mounted warrior who’d taken her captive with the quiet man shelling peas in his cottage.

“What time is it?” she asked, giving up on making sense of him for the time being.

“Past midday. Nearly suppertime. Are you hungry?”

“I slept that long?”

“You were tired.” His focus remained on the peas, big hands working methodically, nimbly.

“I need the privy. Where is it?”

He lifted the basket of unshelled peas out of his lap and placed it on the table as he stood. “The latrines and the bathhouse are near the village square. Follow me.”

Out in the bright sunlight, the village was active and bustling. People passed by them on the narrow, hardpacked lanes, exchanging greetings with the Drakkir—with *Ronan*—and sparing guarded, curious glances for Ailis. The Drakkir was clearly Frythan, and most of the other villagers were as well, but there was a significant number of people who seemed to be from all over the empire. There was every shade of skin, every type of hair, every color of eyes represented among the Drakkir’s people. Hullean, Vosque, native Darshan, Thranes, other Frythans, and even a few Cothori with their shockingly white-blond hair and eerily pale blue eyes.

“The latrines,” Ronan—the Drakkir? Her mind couldn’t settle on an identity for him—pointed to one building. They were near the village’s central square, standing in a short alley where two large buildings sat opposite each other. Both were log-sided and sod-roofed like the rest of the village’s structures, but they were easily four times the size of the cottages. “The bathhouse,” he said, pointing to the other. “I’ll have someone bring you fresh clothing,” he added, before walking away.

She watched his broad back as he went, more and more confused by the man.

CHAPTER 3



When Ailis stepped into the shared latrines, she was grateful to find private stalls. She relieved herself and then crossed the lane to the bathhouse. It was steamy and dim inside. She was the only person there. Wooden benches lined the longer side walls with hooks mounted above them for hanging clothes and linens. Unlike the latrines, there didn't seem to be any privacy offered in the baths. Urdivice wasn't as prudish as some of the other parts of Darsha, but Ailis found herself faintly mortified at the thought of bathing in front of other people. Especially men.

Grateful she was currently alone, and desperate to be quick about it, she hurried over to one of the benches and started stripping out of her dirty, travel-worn clothes, looking around the bathhouse as she undressed.

Over a large central fire, multiple kettles were hung. At least six wooden tubs—each big enough for an entire family to soak in—ringed the fire at a safe distance. By the back wall, a large well pump had stacks of wooden buckets piled around it.

Ailis had never had to fill her own bath. Magic flowed so freely in Carr Tyl, even the most modest homes had self-pumping water systems and multiple spouts. But as she took in the bathhouse, she could figure out the way of it. She had to fill the tub with cold well water until mostly full, then warm it up to where she liked with hot water from the kettles.

Despite the low-magic setup, there was clearly some degree of magic at work. The fire maintained itself without dimming or burning too high. The filled buckets were

surprisingly easy to carry and lift. When she had a tub filled and suitably heated, she stepped into it with a grateful sigh. The heat soaked into her muscles and bones, easing a tension she'd been carrying since leaving Carr Tyl. The road dust and other filth that had adhered to her instantly turned the water brown. Disgusted, she scrubbed at herself. She had no soap and no brush, only her hands and the increasingly dirty water. She pulled the drain plug and watched the filth spiral away. Putting the plug back, she filled the tub again and began scrubbing at herself a second time.

The bathhouse door opened suddenly, and a young woman appeared silhouetted in the frame with a bundle of things in her arms.

Ailis instinctively shrank down in the water, hiding her nudity.

“Oh!” The woman looked at her in surprise. “You figured it out! Ronan said you were Urdivicean.”

Ailis struggled to understand what that had to do with taking a bath.

The girl came into the bathhouse, letting the door fall shut behind her, and approached Ailis's tub. “I assumed you'd be confused by the baths. Only the Vosque and the Cothori do public baths like this. The rest of us took some getting used to the idea.”

As the girl drew nearer, Ailis realized she had Urdivicean features—tan skin, curling dark hair, a narrow, aquiline nose. Her accent was a strange blend, too difficult to place.

“What's your name?” Ailis asked.

“Wynne.” An Urdivicean name.

“Where are you from?”

“My parents are from Carr Pen, but I was born in Frythe. That's where I was when the war began. I've lived in the Drakkir's village for almost a decade now.”

Since shortly after the empire fell, then.

“How old are you?”

She seemed to hesitate. “Nineteen. Anyways, I’ve got some things for you.” From her bundle, she handed Ailis a cake of soap and a square of rough linen. Ailis was used to using a brush, but a cloth would still serve better than her bare hands. “And here’s a drying linen for when you’re done, and some clean clothes that should fit you. I’ll set them on the bench.”

“Thank you,” Ailis said, losing some of her modesty in her eagerness over the soap. She quickly hunched back down to keep her breasts below the water.

Wynne laughed at her. “It’s so odd at first, a community bathhouse. But you get used to it.”

“Why are there so many different people here?”

Wynne’s open expression subtly shuttered. “All kinds of reasons,” she said evasively. “If you tip your head back, I’ll help you wash your hair.”

Ailis gave up on questions and did as suggested. After one more rinse with a fresh bucket of water, she was satisfyingly clean. Wynne handed her a folded linen and set a bottle of skin oil on the tub’s ledge before she departed, leaving Ailis alone again. Ailis made lavish use of the oil—the dusty roads had dried her skin to maddening itchiness—and combed through her curls with the wide-toothed wooden comb Wynne had left for her.

The clothing resembled Urdivicean styles, with loose, draping trousers that she could tuck into her boots and a tunic that belted snugly at her waist with a pretty red sash. The tunic was cut from a simple plain-woven linen, the trousers from a homespun wool, both obviously colored with botanical dyes rather than the super-saturated, colorfast pigments of large-scale dyers. The trousers were dark blue, the tunic a pale blue, both heathered from imperfections in the dyeing process. As a seamstress, Ailis often had to dye fabric to match, and she’d gotten relatively good at it. She wondered what whoever’d done these garments had used as a mordant.

“Not to your liking?” a deep voice inquired.

Ailis spun around in surprise and found the Drakkir leaning against the bathhouse door. How had he gotten in so silently? And how long had he been there?

“No. I mean—yes, it’s perfectly fine. I was just... I’m a seamstress,” she finished awkwardly.

He gave no reaction to that. His blue-green eyes watched her from across the bathhouse. It was odd how she could see the color in such low light, from such a distance.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She’d been hungry for days. “Is it suppertime?”

He nodded.

“I could eat.”

He pushed off of the door. “Come, then.”

He led her in silence through the village. Instead of taking her back to his cottage, he brought her to a different one in the center of the village. Inside, it was boiling hot, with a blazing fire in the hearth despite the fact that it was high summer. A woman on the grayer side of middle-aged sat next to the hearth—brown-and-silver hair, glass-green eyes, and freckled golden skin—comfortably nalbinding a sweater while a pot of something bubbled enthusiastically over the fire.

“Hello, Viera,” the Drakkir greeted her.

“Ronyit,” the woman greeted him with a fond smile. Her gaze flickered to Ailis, widening briefly. “*Oh*. You found one, I see. Bring her here. Let me have a closer look.”

He nudged Ailis forward, and though she didn’t want to get any closer to the fire, she knew there was no point in resisting. She stopped just in front of the old woman, perspiring, light-headed and nauseous from both her hunger and the heat.

“Give me your hand,” Viera commanded. Unlike the others, Viera’s accent was crisp and unmistakable—Frythan.

Ailis held out her hand, aware of the tremor but unable to suppress it.

“Hmm...” Viera took hold of Ailis’s hand like a courtier about to bestow a kiss on it. Instead of a kiss, she bent her head and brought Ailis’s knuckles lightly to her brow. It was so faint she could have easily imagined it, but Ailis thought she felt a slight tingle where their skin met. “Mm... yes, I think she’ll do.” She released Ailis’s hand with a cheerful pat. “Get her a chair, Ronyit. She’s fit to drop.”

Ailis dropped gratefully into the wooden seat that was pressed against the back of her legs.

“You don’t look well, dear,” Viera observed, resuming her nalbinding.

“It’s boiling in here,” Ailis admitted. Criticizing someone’s hospitality was one of the rudest things an Urdivicean could do, but she was too overheated to care.

Viera’s gaze sharpened, searching Ailis’s face intently. “*Oh*, yes, you will do, indeed, my dear. Here.” She reached over to the mantel to pluck something from a hanging bundle of dried herbs. She handed it to Ailis. “Eat that. It’ll help with the heat.”

It looked like a violet. Without thinking on it, Ailis did as she was told. Anything to alleviate the discomfort of the roasting fire. She chewed the papery little flower and swallowed. Almost immediately, the heat receded until she felt perfectly normal, except for her hunger.

Viera watched her with a knowing smile. “Better?”

“Yes,” Ailis said, surprised.

“I thought as much.” Viera held one hand out, sticking it directly into the fire.

Ailis gasped, shocked.

Viera chuckled, drawing her hand back. “It’s a witchfire, child. It doesn’t burn living flesh. Well... not for most of us. I’d advise *you* to keep your distance, though.” She turned to Ronan. “Fetch bowls and spoons? The stew’s ready, I should think.”

“Witchfire?” Ailis stared at the flames. Now that she concentrated, she could detect a slightly uncanny quality to the light it cast. There was a faintly purple hue to it that seemed to become more and more apparent the longer she stared.

Witchfire was a mild, commonplace sort of magic. Something even unschooled hedgewitches could cast. It was useful for mundane tasks like boiling water or lighting a candle, and very safe because it would not spread from where it was cast. But it was no good for giving heat in cold weather because, as Viera said, it didn’t burn living flesh—except for those who’d been touched by death.

“But I’ve never...” She’d never had the sort of near-death experience that made witchfire dangerous. One of her clients in Carr Tyl, Elim Tooms, had nearly drowned as a child—stopped breathing, heart stopped beating even—and they managed to bring him back. But ever after, he had to be wary of witchfire. Wild magic seemed drawn to him as well, in a more benevolent way than was usual, though completely outside his control. He was no mage, but he often had some fortunate little turn when the wild magic was high.

Viera regarded Ailis contemplatively. She reached forward to tuck the silver-white streak of hair behind one of Ailis’s ears, calling attention to that stark line of colorlessness. It reminded Ailis of Elim’s eyes—the usual dark brown of most Urdiviceans, except for the outer half of his left iris, which was a ghostly silver, even paler than Cothori eyes. Supposedly, it hadn’t been like that before his accident.

“Are you sure about that?” Viera asked.

She searched her memories. The only thing she could think of was the night before she left Carr Tyl, when the strange fog had turned her shop to obsidian but spared the little attic room where she slept. But that wasn’t so much a near-death experience as it was a simple trick of fate. It felt more like dumb luck than actual survival, and not totally unexpected, either. Though not a mage, she’d been lucky with wild magic ever since her husband’s death—just little things like her sewing notions never running out, the roses outside her shop door blooming in unnaturally vibrant shades of purple and

blue and pink, her purse never without enough coins to buy a loaf of bread even when she was certain she'd spent the last she had.

“It doesn't have to be *your* death,” Viera said gently. “If you've lost too many people, death has a way of clinging to the survivors.”

Ailis's hands clenched in the wool of her trousers. She stared at the fire. “My whole family's gone.”

Her mother had died giving birth to Ailis. Her father had died by the bottle several years later. Her eldest two brothers had died in the Darshan war. Her only sister had died just as their mother had, with her first child. Her husband's family all had died, too, right after she and Eian were married. A house fire. And then, a few years later, her husband had died by his own stupidity. And finally, Linney, who'd taken her in, had died in the night while Ailis slept just on the other side of the small room they shared.

Ailis had started to believe she was cursed—and now, it turned out, she was.

Touched by death.

Viera's hand descended on hers, giving Ailis a comforting squeeze. “It's not your fault, dear. You don't bring death to others—they brought it to you. And fate brought you to us.”

Ailis shook her head tiredly. “I don't know what you want from me.”

“I'm sure you'll figure it out,” Viera said confidently.

Ronan had filled a bowl with stew and pushed it into her hands. She accepted it absently, setting it in her lap, ignoring the spoon he plunked into the bowl.

“Why don't you just tell me?”

“Wouldn't that be much simpler?” Viera agreed unhelpfully.

So, was she here to fuck the Drakkir, or not? She was starting to think not. It was oddly disappointing. Not because she was eager to suffer a man's amorous attentions again, but

because it would have at least been fairly straightforward. It would have been simple, if not necessarily easy. She glanced at him sidelong as he ladled another bowl full of stew. He was a much bigger man than her husband had been.

When she looked back at Viera, she found the woman observing her with raised eyebrows. Mortified, Ailis looked down at her bowl, finally picking up the spoon and pretending to be wholly occupied in eating.

She got halfway through her bowl of stew, thoughts revolving uselessly around it all, when she realized she was full to the point of discomfort. Her rations had been small since leaving Carr Tyl and had only gotten smaller as they went on. This much food was more than she'd seen in over a fortnight.

“Take her bowl,” Viera directed Ronan. “And put her to bed. She’s exhausted.”

A second later, his big hand was lifting the bowl from her lap. He set it on the floor, and three cats Ailis hadn't noticed before suddenly materialized, purring as they raced for the leftovers.

“Come,” he said, his deep voice oddly gentle as he took her arm and helped her from the chair.

Halfway back to his cottage, he seemed to realize she was practically asleep on her feet and scooped her over his shoulder again.

“There are nicer ways to carry someone,” she muttered against his back, arms dangling carelessly.

She didn't think he'd even heard her, but then suddenly she felt herself being hefted, then shifted, and then she was cradled in his arms. Grateful for the more comfortable position, she looped an arm around his neck, leaned against his broad chest, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 4



When Ailis woke the next morning, the cottage was still dark. Faint, gray light bled in around the edges of the window shutters. Outside, the village was quiet. Very suddenly, she realized she wasn't alone in the bed. A big, warm body lay beside her, breathing with the slow, steady rhythm of deep sleep.

For the space of a single heartbeat, Ailis thought it was her husband. Then she remembered that Eian was dead and her bed in Carr Tyl had likely been turned to obsidian by now, if not something far worse.

Shifting slowly, carefully, she looked over at her bedmate. The Drakkir. Ronan.

Unconscious, he didn't look so brutish. The harsh lines of his face were softened by the vulnerability of sleep. This close, she could see a gentle constellation of freckles scattered over the bridge of his crooked nose and his cheekbones. His lips, slightly parted, were fuller, softer-looking than she'd initially realized. She felt an inexplicable impulse to skim her fingertips along the edge of his jaw, but stopped herself. She'd never engaged in that kind of intimacy even with her late husband; if she'd ever tried, he would have laughed at her. An absolute stranger's reaction to such an unwarranted touch would be even more mortifying.

She let her gaze wander over the exposed parts of his body instead. He'd thrown the blankets off somewhere in the night, revealing that he slept in only his smalls, and that one part of his body had awoken before the rest of him. Not such an

unusual sight for Ailis. She'd woken to a similar sight most mornings during her marriage, although Eian had had a shopkeeper's physique—and a drunk's—whereas this man looked like he could be hitched to a plow and still outrun a draft horse. He was big and ... just *sturdy*. Hairy, too. Dark russet hair covered his chest and ran in a thick line down his belly, disappearing into the band of his smalls. The ruddy color contrasted against his pale golden skin and the blue tattoos that covered his arms, chest, and thighs. She suspected they were on his back as well, but she couldn't be sure unless he turned over.

She leaned closer, peering at the intricate knots. They all tied into each other in irregular looping patterns that seemed to create images of something *more* than just interlocking lines. If she didn't look too hard, she could almost see a great bird, enormous wings outstretched against a stormy sky on his chest. And, here, on his shoulder, strange trees? And then, below the trees, maybe—

“What are you doing?”

Ailis nearly screamed but managed to limit herself to a sharply indrawn breath. She looked up at Ronan's face and found him watching her with a frown.

“Like what you see?” he grumbled, sitting up and pulling the bed covers over his groin.

“A strange man in my bed? I can't say that I do.”

“*Your* bed, is it?”

Her cheeks warmed. “Well, what else am I supposed to think when I've been dumped in it every night?”

“That I'm a generous host?” he offered, raising one thick ruddy brow.

“*Host?*” she scoffed. “You took me hostage.”

He scrubbed at his face, seeming to brush the last bit of sleep away. The softness was gone, and the hard-faced Drakkir was back. “There are only so many beds in this village. Either we share, or one of us sleeps on the floor—and I don't intend to sleep on the floor.”

Neither did she. “Fine,” she said, giving up. Her gaze was drawn, irresistibly, back to the blue ink swirling over his skin. “Is it common for Frythans to have so many tattoos?”

He looked down at himself. “No,” he said flatly.

“Why do you have so many, then?”

He looked at her but said nothing. It stung, having her bids at conversation ignored so blatantly. She hadn’t had to put up with it since Eian’s death. Linney had always been happy to talk about anything and everything. Trying not to let the hurt show on her face, Ailis flipped the blankets off of herself.

“I was asking because in Urdivice, only convicts are tattooed.” She slipped out of bed and searched for her boots. “I’m going to the bathhouse,” she announced, gathering her things and walking out.

There was a loud bang as she closed the cottage door behind her, as if something had been thrown against the wall. She wasn’t sure her snide little comment about convicts had been wise, but she knew better than to try to apologize now. Years of marriage to a temperamental drunk had taught her to make herself scarce once his mood turned. She’d take a long bath, see if she remembered the way to Viera’s cottage, and perhaps break her fast with the older woman. Afterwards, maybe she’d figure out how the goats got on the roofs. Hopefully by midday his temper would have cooled and she could ask for any news of her former traveling party.

To her utter dismay, the bathhouse was quite crowded first thing in the morning. She started to back out, but Wynne, in one of the tubs with two other young women, caught sight of her and waved her over.

“Join us,” she said brightly.

Bathe... *naked*... with three strangers? Her pride and good sense wouldn’t allow her to return to Ronan’s cottage, so she pretended at nonchalance while she undressed, praying the entire bathhouse didn’t have their eyes fastened on her in curiosity. They had certainly stared in the streets. But when she turned back around—with a concerted effort not to cover

herself awkwardly with her hands—nobody was even glancing towards her. The conversation at the other tubs never wavered.

She slipped into the tub with Wynne and the other two young women, trying to get in gracefully without exposing too much of herself. It was a fruitless endeavor. Plunking down in the water, she set to washing herself with studied efficiency.

“—come from?”

After a prolonged silence, Ailis realized she'd been asked a question. She looked up from the foot she'd been methodically cleaning. “What?”

“Where do you come from?” The girl who'd been introduced as Shanna repeated herself.

“Urdivice,” Ailis answered. “And you're... Frythan?” She had the same dark red hair as Ronan, though her eyes were a golden hazel and her features were much softer.

Shanna nodded.

“How long have you been here?” Ailis resumed cleaning herself, if only to demonstrate that she was not staring at the other women's nakedness.

“Ten years.”

“Oh, like Wynne. And you?” she asked the other girl, Halle, whose deep brown skin and silky black hair marked her as Vosque. She was the woman who'd kissed her sweetheart when Ailis had first been brought to the village.

“Ten years,” she answered.

They'd all come as children then; they would have been eight or nine at the time. “Were your families displaced by the Darshan war?”

“No,” Wynne answered, her expression becoming suddenly very intent.

“What motivated your families to leave their homelands and settle... here?” In a nowhere village in the middle of the forest.

“Our families didn’t leave,” Wynne said, expression remaining intent.

“You came here alone?” She couldn’t imagine three young girls from separate far-flung regions traveling all the way to a remote edge of the Hulleles on their own. “As *children*?”

“No.” Wynne stared at her with an expression of such pleading intensity—begging her to... what?

“Who did you come with?”

Wynne shook her head, frustrated, and looked down at the water. It was the same irritated silence Ronan had treated her to. But with Wynne, it didn’t feel dismissive or rude. Ailis felt like she’d failed her somehow, but she couldn’t figure out where she’d stepped wrong. She retraced her words.

“You came here... as children...”

There was a palpable shift of energy as Wynne, Shanna, and Halle focused on her with what felt like critical anticipation.

“Not as children?” Ailis corrected herself uncertainly. That made no sense. They came here ten years ago, and they couldn’t be older than nineteen or twenty now.

But all three of them suddenly beamed at her with exultant joy.

“Yes,” Wynne said, looking on the verge of tears. “Yes. Keep going.”

Ailis realized the entire bathhouse had gone silent. The only sound was the drip of water and the fire crackling beneath the kettles.

“Ten years ago...” Ailis began questioningly. The desperation in their eyes spurred her on. “Ten years ago, you came here, and you... *weren’t* children.”

An excited murmur rippled through the large space. Just as quickly as it rose up, it faded away. It seemed like everyone present was holding their breath.

“How old are you?” she asked Wynne.

“Nineteen.” The same answer she’d given yesterday when Ailis had asked.

Her next question was going to sound odd, she knew. But with the wild magic behaving the way it was, she didn’t think anyone would laugh.

“Were you nineteen when you came here?”

That desperate, pleading intensity was back in Wynne’s eyes as she met Ailis’s gaze and said nothing.

“Just say it!” Ailis begged, her voice raw with frustration. It was one cryptic puzzle after another in this village. Ronan so rarely answered her questions. Viera delighted in avoiding them. *Wouldn’t that be much simpler?* And now Wynne was—

Viera’s words echoed in her mind once more. *Wouldn’t that be much simpler?*

What if Viera hadn’t been jesting with her? What if she’d truly been commiserating?

Why don’t you just tell me?

Wouldn’t that be much simpler?

“You can’t,” she realized aloud. “You *can’t* tell me, because...” It had to be magic. And while losing the ability to speak had certainly been caused by wild magic in the past, losing the ability to explain what had happened or why help was needed was too convenient. Wild magic was chaotic, but not deliberate. There was a degree of intentional malice in silencing victims that wild magic just didn’t possess. “Is it because of a curse?”

Wynne’s pleading expression turned into one of abject relief. She launched herself across the tub, throwing her arms around Ailis, splashing water everywhere. She hugged her so tightly, Ailis couldn’t even feel awkward about their nakedness because Wynne just felt like one giant vise clamped around her. The bathhouse broke into a hectic flurry of stilted, cut-off conversations. People kept trying to say things but found themselves unable to form the words.

A resigned silence followed.

“I don’t have any skill or schooling in magic,” she told Wynne, though her words were meant for the entire bathhouse. “But I will do what I can to help you.”

Wynne squeezed her more tightly before finally releasing her.

WHEN AILIS LEFT THE BATHS, SHE TRIED TO RETRACE yesterday’s steps to Viera’s cottage. She knocked on the wrong door, got new directions, and finally found the right place. She knew, because she could hear Viera’s voice drifting out the open windows.

“...don’t know how long we can—*oh!* I think our girl is near. I can’t say what I wanted to.”

Ailis pushed the door open. Viera was sitting at her kitchen table, braiding onions together. Ronan sat across from her, doing something with an awl, some string, and a bit of leather. Mercifully, there was no fire in the grate, witchly or otherwise.

“Hello, Ailis,” Viera greeted her warmly. “Ronyit and I were just talking about you.”

Standing in the doorway, Ailis crossed her arms. “You can’t tell me why you brought me here because you’re cursed.”

Ronan’s brows shot up.

After a beat of shocked silence, Viera grinned at her. “Hmm,” was all she said. Probably all she could say.

But Ailis wasn’t done. She turned her attention on Ronan. “Your tattoos have something to do with it.”

He stared at her silently.

Summoning the nerve, she added, “Don’t throw things when you’re frustrated. It scares me.”

Viera gave Ronan a dark look. “Doing what now?”

To be honest, she could almost forgive his frustration. It must have been torture, having her so close to an important piece of the puzzle and totally oblivious to it. But she’d told

herself a long time ago she wouldn't put up with angry men ever again, and she'd held to it.

"I'm sorry," Ronan said, sounding sincere as he met her gaze. "I won't do it again."

Eian had always refused to apologize, instead trying to convince Ailis that *she* was the one who'd caused it all and that *she* was the reason he acted the way he did, and that she was a hypersensitive, overdemanding shrew whose irrational feelings would drive any man to far worse behavior than his. Getting an apology so readily from a man was confusing. She wasn't sure how to respond to it.

"Er... yes. Well. Alright, then. Um, thank you," she said awkwardly, suddenly not able to meet his gaze.

"Hungry?" Viera said, apparently satisfied by the exchange. "There's cheese and bread."

Ailis went to the table and helped herself to a thick slice of brown bread spread with herbed goat cheese and drizzled with honey. She sat in the empty chair next to Viera and watched her braid the onions together.

"Why are you called the Drakkir?" she asked Ronan.

Ronan didn't answer, pursing his lips together.

"Can't say?"

His jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in this cheek. "I—"

Ailis waited, hoping he'd find a way around whatever he was struggling to say.

CHAPTER 5



“I was in the army,” Ronan finally managed, looking frustrated and disappointed.

“The Darshan army?” she asked. A lot of Frythans had sided with Baltans in the war, and for some reason, Ailis didn’t want Ronan to be one of them. It was one thing to be a separatist under an imperial superpower, but it was quite another to want to depose that superpower in order to install a more brutally oppressive, autocratic theocracy. She also didn’t want to know that he had potentially fought against her brothers in the war—had maybe even been the enemy soldier who’d killed either of them.

“Yes,” he answered, to her relief. “I was—” he cut off abruptly, a scowl on his face. “—a commander,” he amended with an annoyed sigh. “The commander for my thema.”

The commander of a whole thema’s soldiers? Ailis’s brows rose incredulously. He didn’t look old enough to have been a commander in the Darshan war. The worst of it had ended ten years ago. He didn’t look older than late thirties, which would have made him only in his early twenties when the war kicked off. He would have been just a grunt, like her brothers had been.

Except Wynne looked nineteen, and said she had *not* been a child when she came to this village ten years ago.

What had Ronan been? Still the same age as he appeared now? And Viera, also no younger than she currently was? Many years ago, when Ailis had been a young child, she’d

heard a story of a town where time had stopped for a while. Strange weather had caused the wild magic to pool in that valley for months—at least, it had been months in the outside world. When a tornado finally swept through, clearing the accumulated wild magic away, the townspeople were shocked to realize an entire season had passed.

As Ailis gazed at them both, Viera looked up from her onions. “The gears are turning, I see.”

Ronan stared back at her, a hint of the same pleading desperation in his eyes as she’d seen in Wynne’s and the others’ at the bathhouse.

“I’m trying,” she told him quietly.

He looked away, hand curling into a fist on the table. “I know.”

A tense silence lapsed.

Viera broke it with a chuckle. “He doesn’t like relying on someone else to solve problems.”

Ronan shot her a scowl.

“It’s true,” Viera told him with an unrepentant smile. “You’re used to everyone relying on you.”

Ronan grumbled something in Frythan and pushed up from the table. “I’m going to do rounds,” he said in Darshan. He looked at Ailis. “Come with?”

She hastily spread soft goat cheese on another slice of bread and followed him out of Viera’s cottage. He walked in silence, basically ignoring her except to grab her arm and pull her to the side so that she didn’t step into a pile of goat droppings. She shouldn’t have found that one miserly gesture so courtly, but apparently the fact that he hadn’t taken her hostage to be his sex slave and that he didn’t want to watch her scrape shit off her heel was where she set the bar. Eian had once purposely guided her to walk into a pool of someone else’s vomit when she was distracted with her overfull market basket, and then he’d laughed uproariously at her disgust and anger. So, at least her standards were improving.

Ronan led her to a different cottage with an old woman inside. She had deep brown skin and greenish-brown eyes, and though her hair was gray with age, she likely had once had the raven black hair that so many of the Vosque did. She regarded Ailis with a grimace of displeasure.

“You brought *her*?” the woman asked in a creaky old voice that cracked on the last word and descended into a barking cough.

Ronan ignored the question. “How’s the lungs, then? Still troubling you?”

“No,” the old woman said acidly, her croaky voice little more than a whisper. “They’re grand. Didn’t you hear me singing all sixteen verses of *Hail to Darsha*?”

Ronan cracked a faint smile at that, which he hid from the old woman by pretending to examine the shelves beside her hearth.

“Has Nilime been to see you yet today?” he asked.

“Ha! As if that lazy slattern has ever risen from bed before midday.”

“She’s got other patients,” Ronan said mildly. “Just because she’s not at your house at the crack of dawn—”

“Don’t defend her. I know how she carries on with you, but if you were serious about the girl, you’d have laid some kind of claim by now. No sense sticking your neck out for a bit of—”

“*Mirni*,” Ronan said softly. The warning in his voice was unmistakable.

The old woman pressed her lips together, casting a sullen look at Ronan’s back.

He turned to face her. “When I see Nilime, I’ll tell her you’re out of silwort.”

“You do that,” Mirni said snidely.

Ailis followed Ronan out of the old woman’s cottage, feeling a strange sense of... jealousy?

“Who’s Nilime?” she asked as casually as possible.

“The village’s healer.”

“And she’s your... sweetheart?” How did Nilime feel about her man sharing his bed with a strange woman he’d taken hostage?

Ronan glanced sidelong at Ailis. For a moment, she thought he wasn’t going to answer, and wondered if it was reticence or the curse. But then he said, “No. She’s a young girl with a silly infatuation. Mirni’s interpretation of the world is... cynical. I wouldn’t put much stock in anything she tells you about the villagers.”

It wouldn’t be a concern, since Ailis had no desire to spend any unnecessary time in the woman’s company.

But forefront in her mind wasn’t Mirni’s sourness. It was the unwarranted relief at knowing that this Nilime wasn’t sharing Ronan’s bed when Ailis wasn’t in it. She wasn’t sure what it was about sleeping with him—literally, *sleeping*—that made her feel possessive. Maybe it was the vulnerability of it. There was a certain intimacy in trusting someone enough to fall asleep in their presence. It had taken weeks after initially marrying Eian before she could fall asleep by a decent hour. And it wasn’t until after his death that she’d finally slept fully and peacefully through the night.

“Mirni’s not the only one,” Ronan said, interrupting her uncomfortable musings. “There are several people in the village who believe that you being here will...” His brow furrowed as he fought to speak past the curse. “...Will make things worse,” he finally said, obviously unsatisfied with the vagueness of it.

“Why?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it, shaking his head. He couldn’t say it.

Ailis tried to think of an indirect way of asking that would allow him to give her at least a little hint. Before she could think of anything, he stopped outside a log-sided building that was bigger than the cottages but smaller than the bathhouse.

“This is a Kandorrian temple. You’ll need to take off your shoes and cover your head.” He pulled two plain linen handkerchiefs from his pockets, one dyed a faded, dusky blue, the other a dull red. Ailis knew very little about the Kandorrians except that they worshipped the twin gods of Life and Death, and that blue and red were sacred colors for them, though their vestments were usually more richly dyed than the cloths in Ronan’s hands. He gave her one kerchief and placed the other on his own head, tying the corners beneath his chin to keep it in place. It was a far cry from the elaborate veils Kandorrian worshippers usually wore, but Ailis supposed it met the requirements, strictly speaking.

She tied the handkerchief on and toed her boots off. Inside the windowless structure, a small wooden tub was filled with dark water next to the door. The walls were lined with benches. At the center, an altar made of stacked stones glowed with the light of dozens of candles. Ronan stepped into the tub, swishing his feet through the water.

“Always wash your feet when you enter the temple,” he explained quietly before walking over to the altar. Ailis followed suit.

As soon as she was within arm’s reach of the altar, though, she had to step back.

“Too warm,” she explained at Ronan’s questioning glance.

He looked at the many candles. “Witchfire.”

“You pray,” she said, backing away. “I’ll wait outside.”

“I’m not here to pray.”

As if summoned by those words, an old man seemed to materialize out of the darkness from the other side of the altar. He wore robes dyed the same dusty red as the kerchief on Ronan’s head, though the construction was at least a little more elegant, draping over his shoulders and flowing to the floor with an appropriate degree of ecclesiastical dignity. Even so, Ailis’s seamstress senses were itching to fix the poorly set armholes and to resew the hem, collar, and cuffs with a blind

stitch rather than the extremely visible running stitch that had been used.

“I know you’re not here for blessings,” the priest said to Ronan, “so what can I help you with? If you’re worried about the—” His words choked off suddenly. He frowned as he tried and failed again to speak.

“Have you met Ailis?” Ronan asked.

The old man’s bushy brows rose up. “Ah. I’d heard you brought one in.” As he drew nearer, the witchfire candles illuminated his wizened face, revealing Thrane features—medium tan skin, a small, almost delicate nose, and heavily lidded eyes that tilted up at the corners in a cat-like fashion. At his age, his hair had gone snowy white, but in his youth, Ailis would guess he’d had some middling shade of brown, as most Thrane tended to.

If it was odd to see a Kandorrian temple in the remote forest between Urdivice and the Hulle, it was perhaps even odder to see a Thrane priest serving at a Kandorrian temple. Regardless, Ailis kept that thought to herself. She’d never been anything more than a casual observer of the Urdivicean gods, but she knew that the devout bristled when you questioned their reasons for their particular allegiance.

“Ailis, this is Timir—Brother Timir,” Ronan corrected himself quickly, adding the priest’s honorific.

The priest turned an assessing gaze on Ailis. After a moment, his expression softened. “Ah,” he said faintly. “Oh, yes. You’ve looked directly into the face of Death, haven’t you, my dear?”

Ailis was sweating in the intolerable heat of the witchfire candles, her stomach churning with discomfort as every loved one (and not-so-loved one) she’d ever buried passed before her mind’s eye. Her mother had died birthing her, and though Ailis should have no memory of her face, she could picture the woman with perfect clarity. Her brothers, so much older than her when they’d died, were preserved forever in her mind at twenty-four and twenty-six. Her father, once a handsome man, had died red-faced and bloated from drink. Her sister, gone,

along with her first and only child. Her husband's family, who were meant to be her own, lost to fire. And then finally, her husband, lost to his own stupidity.

Her vision suddenly swam back to the present, to the priest nodding knowingly at her, his papery cool hands gripping her sweating, trembling ones. Ronan stood just behind him, his features stark in the flickering, surreal glow of the witchfire.

"Yes, you know Aeturn well, it would seem." The priest released her hands. "I am pledged to Life-Giving Limna, but even I can see that Aeturn has shielded you as you walk in His Sister's light. May He grant us His favor through you."

"Isn't Aeturn the Kandorrian death god?" Ailis asked, wiping at her sweating face.

The priest nodded.

Ailis froze. Did he... did he *want* to die? Her gaze flashed to Ronan's. Is that what this was? They were frozen in time, unable to die—and he wanted Ailis to free them from their mortality? Was that why it was so important that she was death-touched?

He read the shock in her expression.

"Thank you, Brother," Ronan said to the priest, bowing perfunctorily. He caught Ailis's arm and guided her out of the temple.

In the fresh air and morning light, Ailis's stomach settled and her skin cooled. She pulled out of Ronan's grasp. "Do you want to *die*?" she demanded of him as she tore the veil off her head. "Is that why I'm here? To kill you all?"

"No." His denial was quiet, but spoken with the weight of a man who carried everyone else's burdens. "We want to live, Ailis."

The sound of her name in his deep, rumbling voice tore her out of the shocked anger. The painful longing as he gazed at her tripped something in her chest. She had to look away.

"I want to help," she said softly.

“You will.” It sounded more like a command than encouragement, but it bolstered Ailis nonetheless.

CHAPTER 6



They spent the rest of the day making a circuit of the village, where Ronan checked in on various villagers and introduced Ailis to them. He left Ailis to chat while he assisted with tasks ranging from chopping wood, to delivering a pair of goat kids, to fixing a damaged roof, to applying a splint made of grass and a twig to an “injured” doll.

“There,” he said, handing the bandaged doll back to the bright-eyed child. “She’s not to do any heavy lifting until the bones knit.”

Ailis had never particularly yearned for children, for a whole host of reasons, but watching a brutish-looking former warrior play so unself-consciously with a little girl and her dolls was doing strange things to her heart.

Supper was had at yet another cottage, crowded with neighbors who introduced themselves to Ailis with a mixture of wariness and hope. There was a whole host of foods, different dishes brought by all the attendees. It had the feeling of a holiday. But, though she was an object of interest, Ailis wasn’t the object of celebration.

Ronan’s mood seemed both anticipatory and a bit somber. He kept casting his gaze to the moonless sky, saying nothing to Ailis, but looking at his people with something akin to grief. When she asked about it, he couldn’t speak of it to her.

It was dark when Ronan led her back to his cottage.

“It seems like you *are* living,” Ailis observed as they walked. “You have a community. You care for each other. You

eat. You work. You play. That's life."

Ronan glanced up at the sky. There was nothing to see but glittering stars. "In a way."

"Something's going to happen tonight." Ailis followed his gaze, seeking... what?

Ronan nodded, though he could say no more to her.

"It's because of the moon?" She was learning that if she guessed at the things he couldn't say, he could at least confirm or deny.

He shook his head. "I don't know." After a pause, he said, "Petr returned today."

"Who?"

"The man who escorted your people to Penfrin."

"They're safe? Everyone made it?"

"Yes. As safe as they can be, anyway, in this world."

They reached his cottage. Ronan closed the door and then went to sit at the table, not bothering to light any candles. The shutters were open, but the sky was moonless, leaving everything dark. Ailis stood by the door, only able to make out the shadowy silhouettes of the room.

"You care about your people," Ronan said, sounding contemplative, resigned.

"Yes, of course I do."

There was a heavy silence. Finally, "I should have left you with them."

While she didn't wholly disagree, what was done, was done, and Ailis didn't see any point in agonizing over it. But then, she'd always been pragmatic to the point of, arguably, coldness.

"When this curse is broken, you can take me to Penfrin. Then we'll be even."

A puff of laughter escaped him on an incredulous breath. "A ride to Penfrin in exchange for—" He cut off abruptly, as if

his voice had been ripped out of him. A frustrated growl resonated in his chest.

“Don’t throw things,” Ailis said quickly, unable to hide the panicky note in her voice.

Another beat of silence. “I wasn’t going to,” he said, voice more measured. “I told you I wouldn’t.”

Ailis clutched her hands together, nodding, though he wouldn’t have been able to see it in the dark.

“Who threw things?” His voice was softer now. Careful.

“My husband.”

A pause. “You’re married?”

“Widowed.”

“Ah. Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

She could *feel* him in the dark—turned towards her, thinking about her. Just like when he’d first taken her, his presence radiated with palpable force.

“My Da died when I was a boy. Didn’t miss him for a second.”

A strange relief washed over Ailis. Something about the cover of the darkness made her blurt thoughtless things to him. But he understood. It made her want to say more things. It made her want to step closer to him—to feel that forcible presence enveloping her like a shield. Like an embrace.

“He was cruel?”

“A violent brute. Your husband?”

“Not violent. Just cruel.”

“*Just.*”

Ailis laughed dryly. “Precisely.”

“Threw things?”

“When he was drunk. Which was most of the time.” He’d destroyed her only memento of her late sister—a ceramic icon

of Cyrne, the Urdivicean goddess of good fortune, that Brynne had given her when they were children—by smashing it against the hearth.

“Bet you heard his footsteps before you even knew you were listening for them.”

Of course she did. “Did you?”

“Had to. Only way to avoid a beating.”

She couldn’t imagine anyone getting the upper hand on such a powerful man—but then, all powerful men were once little boys.

“What a miserable conversation,” Ronan said. “Tell me something good about your life, Ailis.” He said her name so warmly, she felt the sound of it curl around her.

“Are you drunk?” she asked uncertainly.

There was a small breath of rueful laughter. “I don’t drink on new moon nights. I won’t drink at all while you’re here.”

“You don’t have to do that on my account.”

A soft shifting sound—a shrug? “Never got much from it anyway. Mostly just puts me to sleep.”

Which reminded her—would this be the first night she knowingly got into bed with him?

“You’re quiet,” Ronan said.

“You should let me see your tattoos.”

Now *he* was quiet. She wondered if it was the curse silencing him, or reticence.

But then there was a creak, a shuffling sound, and the *snick* of a flint-striker. White-hot sparks blinded her and then died away to the soft glow of candlelight. Ronan placed the candle on the table and glanced up at her.

“You going to look at them from across the room?”

Now that the dark was gone, so was her bravery. She swallowed against a suddenly dry mouth. “No,” she said,

trying to sound nonchalant. “I thought I’d offended your virtue.”

As she approached the table, Ronan grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled it over his head, casting the linen aside to reveal that broad, thick torso covered in ruddy hair and blue tattoos and the silvery marks of a few scars.

She’d been staring for some time when it crossed her mind that she was meant to be examining his tattoos, not his body. Her cheeks heated, and she redirected her focus.

Blue lines of varying thickness looped together, tangling in on themselves in dizzying combinations that, if seen just right, became more than what they appeared. She recognized the wings stretched across his chest fairly quickly, but in the flickering candlelight, she suddenly realized it wasn’t a great bird—it was a *dragon*.

Her gaze flew up to his.

“What do you see?” he asked, voice rough and deep.

“A dragon.”

He nodded. “And?”

She looked back at the tattoos, following the lines wherever they drew her eye. His shoulder again—the trees. But they weren’t trees. They were standards, hoisted on poles, held above an army of horseback warriors.

“Mounted soldiers,” she said slowly, as if speaking in a dream. She was afraid to be too loud, too direct—it might shatter the fragile clarity she currently held. Her hand landed gently on his arm, tracing the lines that formed the soldiers up to the standards that fluttered over their heads. She trailed around to his back, the whole expanse of it covered in tattoos. Here, the war raged. She saw it not as an assemblage of blue ink, but as if it were her own memory, playing in her mind’s eye. So much death, so much suffering. A field turned to mud and blood. Ravens watching from the tree branches, waiting to scavenge the dead. Gray skies threatening an oncoming storm.

And over it all, a crown. *The* crown. The Darshan Emperor’s Imperial Crown of Office, with its distinctive

golden falcon's wings on either side of the band and the chains of rubies that hung down on each side of the wearer's face, like beautiful drops of blood. It was said to have been smuggled out of the castle before the rebels assassinated the royal family—along with the missing princess, who was waiting until she came of age to return and claim the throne and restore Darsha to peace and order. But the princess would have come of age seven years ago, and neither she nor the crown had been seen since the Emperor died.

The tattooed crown on Ronan's back was engulfed in flames. Ailis peered at it for a moment, then kept moving, trailing her fingers over his tattoos as she followed them to his other arm, where she found cavalry and raised standards again. She stared hard at the tangled blue lines, trailing her fingertips along one, following it through every knot and whorl, amazed by the elaborate—

“Ailis.” Ronan's big hand closed over hers, pinning her fingers against the line she'd been tracing. “Can't—can't do that to me now.”

Ailis's gaze clashed with his, those aquamarine eyes burning into hers. “Do what?” She knew. She knew, but she need to hear him say it.

His grip tightened on her hand. “I haven't— It's... it's been a long time since...”

“Yes?” It had been a long time for Ailis, too. But she had *never* felt this weighty, buzzing hunger for it. It was almost dizzying, the want.

“I didn't bring you here for this,” he said hoarsely.

“I know.” Not at first, but now she did. The man who braided onions with his elders, and who soothingly petted a laboring goat's flanks as she delivered kids, and who rolled up his sleeves and chopped wood like any other villager, and who played dollies with the children of his village... that man was good. He was safe, and dependable, and honest. He was the knight in shining armor Ailis had dreamed of as a girl, except this knight's armor was a bit rusty and his handsome estate

was a mysteriously cursed village in the hinterlands between the Hulle and Urdivice.

“Ailis—”

She leaned down, hand still trapped against the burning heat of his skin, and pressed her lips to his. Her name turned into a groan in his throat. His other arm circled her waist, hauling her into his lap, crushing her tightly against his body as he took her daring kiss and turned it into a conquest. There was no finesse, no subtlety, no teasing in this kiss. It was raw hunger, desperate and wild.

Ailis had never been kissed like this. She hadn't realized a kiss could be this dangerously all-consuming. She twisted in Ronan's arms, shifting so that she sat astride his big thighs, wrapping her arms around his neck and meeting his powerful need with the force of her own. He was hard, his cock an iron brand against her inner thigh. Gods, how she wanted it—wanted to see it, taste it, feel it inside her. She actually *wanted* those things. She hadn't wanted like this since she'd been a naive virgin.

Was she still naive? She didn't care. For now, she needed this man who held onto her like a raft in a stormy sea. Or was he the raft, and she was the one holding on?

Maybe they were both lost at sea.

Ronan made a growling sound, deep in his throat, as he rocked his hips against hers, pulling her out of her head and back into the moment. Stomach-clenching sensation sparked between her thighs where the rampant jut of his erection pressed against her, pulling a soft moan from her. She tightened her thighs on his hips and ground down against him, working that sensitive pearl of flesh along the hard ridge of his shaft.

Ronan groaned a string of what could only be curse words in Frythan, his mouth moving restlessly over hers. His big hands slid to her hips, gripping her roughly and urging her along, helping her rock herself against him until the sparks of sensation coalesced and exploded outward, locking her limbs and tossing her head back. She cried out with each crashing

wave of pleasure, enhanced by the feel of Ronan's hands on her thighs, still rocking her against him, his lips sucking hungrily at her jaw and throat. He muttered against her skin, Frythan words that had no meaning for her but landed with the softness of endearments.

When the climax receded, Ailis was still restless and feverish with want. That taste of ecstasy had only whetted her appetite for more. There were too many layers of fabric between them when she desperately needed to know the feeling of his cock inside her. She needed to see his face when he was fucking her, needed to see his expression when he came.

He must have been thinking along the same lines because he stood suddenly, lifting Ailis with one arm, taking the candle with the other hand, and carried her to the bedroom. He set the candle on the little bedside table and tossed Ailis onto the bed before descending on her like a ravening wolf. They ripped clothes away from each other in a chaos of limbs until there was only bare skin pressed against bare skin. Ronan's cock was a burning hot weight pulsing against her belly. He let the full weight of his body sink down over her, pinning her to the mattress.

"Don't want to put a babe in you," he said gruffly. "But if you press your thighs together—"

"I've got the preventative charm." She'd had it cast right before her marriage, reasoning that she didn't want children right away, and that she'd have it revoked in a year or so. But then, when the reality of her new husband dawned on her, she'd left it. Even after he died, she'd left the charm in place, just to be safe.

"Ah, thank the fucking gods," he said, dropping his head to kiss her deeply, roughly, hungrily.

His weight lifted off of her as he pressed hot, wet kisses down her throat, her collarbones, her sternum. The rough scrape of his stubble against the tender skin of her breasts awakened her nerve endings with a delicious burn. He dragged his mouth along the slope of one breast, following the soft

curve to its peak, closing his lips over her nipple and gently sucking.

Her back arched, a stunned gasp escaping her as her hand flew to the back of his head, fingers tangling in his thick hair to keep him in place. He groaned against her, sending vibrations humming through her skin. His hips rocked compulsively, working his cock against her thigh.

She wanted that heavy heat inside of her. She spread her legs, wrapping them around his torso, her whole body undulating beneath his.

He cursed in his native language, and she recognized a few of the Frythan gods' names. "Trying to finish me early?" he demanded, both gruff and teasing.

"No," she breathed, still writhing restlessly. "Need you inside me."

"Ah, fuck, Lisaya, you're a loaded spring, aren't you?"

Ailis stiffened beneath him, going cold. "Who's Lisaya?"

Instead of showing any shame or defensiveness, Ronan laughed. "*You* are. Ailis. Lis. Lisaya. It's how we do pet names in Frythe. My ma always called me Ronyit. Viera still does. I won't call you Lisaya if you don't like it."

She softened against him. "No, I like it."

"Good. I'm about to have a hard time controlling what comes out of my mouth." He rocked against her for emphasis, cock pressing into her thigh.

And just like that, the heat and hunger were back.

Sliding an arm beneath her, Ronan rolled them both until he was sitting on the mattress, his back against the wall and Ailis was astride his lap, his cock pressed between them. She stared at him breathlessly, her hands braced on his broad chest.

"You do the honors, Lisaya. It's been a while, and I don't want to hurt you."

She shouldn't find it so touching to be told to hop on his cock, but gods help her, she did. Ailis knew she wasn't easily

romanced. It had everything to do with the man saying those words to her. She knew that he was kind. Steady. Honest. She knew the words came from a place of caretaking, not entitlement.

“I don’t think you would,” she said, rising up on one knee, bracing the other foot against the bed, clinging to his shoulders for support. “You’re a big man, but you’re careful.”

He gripped his shaft, holding himself in place, stroking the head of his cock against the swollen, tender flesh between her thighs.

“So careful,” she sighed, sinking down.

Ronan made a choked sound as the head of his cock slid inside her. She paused there, feeling the stretch of him, letting her body adjust. Slowly, gently, her inner muscles relaxed, allowing her to sink deeper and deeper in slick, teasing increments that made them both pant and gasp, until she was fully seated on Ronan’s lap, his cock buried deep inside her. The gentle but insistent burn of the stretch, the gratifying pressure, the fullness—it was everything she needed. She collapsed against his chest with a soft moan, hips rocking subtly as her body continued to learn the shape of his.

Ronan panted in ragged breaths, chest rising and falling beneath her. “Gods, Lisaya, the way you take me,” he groaned. “Are you hurting?”

“No,” she breathed, arms looping around his neck. “No, you feel so... so... *good*.” Rather than an intrusion, he felt like a missing piece being fitted into place.

“Good,” he said on a strained breath. “Good. Where’s your —” One hand strayed from her hip down to where they were joined. His thumb slid over that peaked little bundle of nerves, making her writhe against him. “I want to feel you come around my cock. Can you give me another one?”

“*Ronan*,” she moaned, hips undulating to the rhythm of his stroking thumb.

“That sounded like yes,” he said, his deep voice rumbling with pleasure.

His thumb traced circles around that maddening little peak, gradually getting faster, harder, until she was sobbing out each breath, grinding desperately against him.

“Come for me, Lisaya,” he breathed against her ear. “Let me feel you.”

“I’m so close,” she gasped. “So—”

His other hand gently pinched her nipple and tugged. “Come for me, safisa.”

The climax broke upon her like a lightning strike. She cried his name as she came, spine arched, fingernails digging into the back of his neck, her whole body seized by tremors. She felt the clasp and squeeze of her inner muscles pulling on his cock, felt the hot press of his lips against her temple, the iron embrace of his arms, the tense tremor in his muscles.

She was still riding the nearly painful waves of pleasure when he flipped her onto her back and drove into her with deep, powerful strokes. He grunted with each thrust, his body slamming into hers with brutal need, filling her with that thick, hard shaft again and again, until his own climax seized him. He plunged deep, groaning brokenly as his cock pulsed inside her.

“Ah, Lisaya, safisa,” Ronan gasped, descending into incomprehensible Frythan muttering as he sagged on top of her.

She gasped at the feeling of loss as he pulled out of her. He hummed deep in his throat as he pressed a long hard kiss to her mouth. “Stay here,” he said briskly, rolling off of her and getting out of bed.

He returned a moment later with a pitcher and a cloth. He wetted the cloth and handed it to her, setting the pitcher on the bedside table.

“Thank you,” she said, shy now, as she swiped away his leavings. She’d never been catered to like this after coupling. It’d always been on her to clean up if she didn’t want to wake up sticky and uncomfortable.

He took the used rag and tossed it wherever he kept dirty linens, then returned to crawl into bed with her, pulling her into his arms and inhaling deeply of her hair.

“You could wring a man out,” he murmured against the top of her head. “Had me seeing gods I don’t even believe in.”

She giggled, a silly, girlish sound that hadn’t escaped her lips in at least a decade. As she lay in his arms, awash in contentment, she realized that *this* was the intimacy she’d dreamt of when she was young. It did exist. So she hadn’t been naive—just ill-used.

CHAPTER 7



The next morning dawned bright and lovely, with the trill of birds and the buzz of insects. Last night's candle had long since guttered out, but early golden sunlight filtered through the shutters, filling the room with a gentle glow.

Ailis awoke in Ronan's embrace, peaceful and well rested in a way she hadn't felt in eons, if ever. As she stirred in his arms, Ronan's eyes blinked open. He met her gaze, and a lazy, sleepy smile spread over his face, turning his stern features sweet.

"Good morning," Ailis said shyly, her voice froggy with sleep.

"It is," Ronan agreed, drawing her against him until she felt the hard jut of his erection. "Care to make it even better?"

Her whole body went warm and languid at the growling invitation. "Yes," she breathed, hardly daring to say it out loud. Last night she'd been moved to boldness by the dark and the quiet and the hypnotic mystery of his tattoos in the flickering candlelight. Now, there was no excuse to be made. She wanted him.

Ronan reached down to stroke between her thighs, cupping her whole mons and grinding the heel of his hand in slow circles over that particular sweet spot. His other hand slid up to cup one breast, teasing her nipple to a sensitive peak, pinching it lightly. He kept his hands busy until she was

drawing in gasping breaths, hips arching back against the press of his cock.

“Are you ready for me, Lisaya?”

“Yes!”

He slid his hand a little deeper between her thighs, slipping two fingers into her entrance, sinking them in deep. An appreciative growl rumbled in his throat.

“So wet. You’ll take me so sweetly in that slick, hot cunt.”

“*Ronan*,” she pleaded breathlessly.

He thrust his fingers into her slowly, teasingly, spreading them to give her a shallow imitation of what his thick cock would do.

“Please, *Ronan*,” she nearly whimpered his name as she arched against him. “Don’t tease. I need you.”

Ronan made a nearly vicious sound behind her. He pushed her onto her stomach and pulled her hips up until she was on her knees, face down, ass up.

“*Ronan*...” she said uncertainly.

He crawled over her until her whole body was caged beneath his, his chest pressed to her back, his hips to her ass. His hands were planted in the mattress on either side of her head. He leaned down to nuzzle the back of her neck, nipping lightly.

“Need me, Lisaya? Then have me.”

She felt the head of his cock nudging against her entrance, pressing, parting her wet, swollen flesh and sinking in deep. His thick shaft stretched her open, filled her, while his body covered hers, his lips ghosting sweetly against the back of her neck.

She’d always thought this position degrading. But with *Ronan*, it wasn’t. He was so close like this. She felt him everywhere, felt completely enveloped and embraced by him. The rest of her relaxed as her hips canted upward, thighs spreading wider for him.

“Yes, like that.” He drew back and thrust back in with a long, slow stroke that made Ailis’s toes curl and her back bow.

“*Ronan.*”

“Mmm?”

“More—please, I—*ah!*”

He pounded into her with fast, fierce thrusts that seemed to reverberate up and down her whole body. “Like this?”

“Ooooh, *yes,*” she moaned, eyes closed, cheek pressed to the bed. She closed her eyes and let herself just *feel*. Feel the slap of Ronan’s hips against her ass. Feel the plunging strokes of his cock. Feel the shockwave of it ripple through her body. Feel the rising tension, spooling tighter and tighter deep in her core, intensifying until it became too much to bear.

With a sharp cry, she stiffened, muscles locked, body trembling, as white-hot ecstasy rolled through her, again and again.

Ronan fucked her through it, cursing and blessing her in Frythan. Her trembling legs gave out, and Ronan simply pressed her flat against the mattress and kept going. When he finally lost control, he bit off her name like an accusation. He groaned as he emptied himself into her with staggered, pulsing thrusts.

“Ah, fuck,” he muttered breathlessly as he sagged over her. “You’re a wicked temptress, trying to keep me in bed all day.”

Ailis had never in her life been accused of being overly tempting. She found she rather liked the thought of herself as a conniving seducer. She also liked the thought of lazing abed with Ronan all day.

He sighed as he pulled out of her and pressed soft kisses down her spine. “Wake up, Lisaya,” he muttered against her skin. “Or I’ll fuck you again, and then I’ll never get anything done.”

Ailis pretended to snore.

Ronan chuckled. His kisses drifted lower. When he reached the curve of her ass, he pulled away. A second later,

she felt *teeth* sinking into her butt cheek.

“Ah!” She jolted upright. It hadn’t hurt so much as it had shocked her.

Ronan laughed at her stunned expression. “That lush ass was begging for a little nibble.”

And there—another first for her. Had a lush ass, did she? Eian had always lamented the fleshiness of it. Told her she jiggled like custard when she walked.

She cupped the bitten cheek a little protectively, a little thoughtfully. “Do Frythans prefer bigger bottoms?”

“*This* Frythan likes *your* bottom. Who—” He paused as the sound of voices and movement from outside drifted through the walls. He sighed, and instantly, the playfulness vanished from his demeanor. “We should dress. Today is—” He cut off abruptly, the words he wanted to say choked off by the curse. He shook his head, his features gone harsh with frustration. “We should dress,” he finally said quietly.

He got Ailis a wet cloth to clean up with, and then both of them pulled on fresh clothes. She was desperate to ask him what was happening, what had soured his mood so quickly, but she kept the words back. His inability to answer would only frustrate him more.

When they stepped outside together, the first person they saw was Wynne, carrying a sack of laundry over her shoulder, gaze trained ahead. When she spotted Ronan and Ailis, her eyes went wide.

“Drakkir,” she said, using the strange formal title that had never been fully explained. “Good morning. Who is your guest?”

Ailis blinked at her.

“Wynne, this is Ailis.”

It had become strange to hear him call her “Ailis” instead of Lisaya. But even stranger was the fact that he was introducing her to someone that he was well aware she’d already been introduced to.

Wynne's eyes went wide. For a moment, Ailis thought the girl would tell Ronan that they'd already met. But no. She gazed at Ailis with unfamiliar excitement.

"*Oh*. Is she—" Her words cut off.

Beside Ailis, Ronan nodded.

Wynne looked to Ailis, bright with hope. "Welcome to our village, Ailis."

"Thank you," Ailis said faintly.

The girl gave her a parting smile and continued on her way.

"She doesn't know me," Ailis said to Ronan.

"No."

Someone else passed by—one of the riders who'd been with Ronan when he'd taken her from the road. She hadn't spoken to him much, but he would most certainly remember her.

"Loric," Ronan called, waving him over.

The man took in the sight of Ailis, brows rising. "Drakkir?" he greeted Ronan respectfully, questioningly.

"This is Ailis. She was taken from her traveling party in payment for their passage."

Loric's brows rose even higher. "You should have brought me and the other sentinels," he said, faintly admonishing. "No disrespect, Drakkir, but one man against an entire group—"

"You're right," Ronan agreed. "Circumstances were what they were. I'll bring sentinels in the future."

Loric nodded, appeased. He cast a curious glance at Ailis. "Is she..." He trailed off, either unable or unwilling to say the rest.

Ronan nodded.

Loric closed his eyes briefly. "I'll pray she is successful."

"I'll leave you to your duties, then."

Loric bid them both goodbye and carried on wherever he'd been headed.

Ronan looked down at Ailis.

She was quiet for a moment, thinking. "Last night... you said something would happen. Something to do with the moon."

He nodded, his expression grave.

"*This* is what happens? The forgetting?"

He nodded, expression bleak, but a hint of relief in his eyes.

"But you don't forget."

"No."

"How many people do?"

He couldn't answer her.

"Is it everybody except you?" she asked, guessing the worst.

"Yes."

"At every new moon?"

"Yes."

She stared at him, appalled. Gods, what a lonely existence. Impulsively, she stepped toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He started a little at the contact, but after a second, he folded his arms around her as well.

She never would've been able to offer such simple comfort if it hadn't been for Linney's caretaking after Eian died. She'd helped Ailis chip away a little bit of the hard, brittle shell she'd encased herself in. She'd taught her that affection didn't have to be transactional—that offering it wasn't manipulation and accepting it wasn't surrender.

"Why don't you leave?" she asked when he released her. She stepped back, tilting her head up to meet his gaze.

His expression hardened as he gazed out over the village. "I wouldn't, not if—" He cut off abruptly with a soft grunt of

frustration.

“Not if... it would harm the village in some way?” she guessed.

He made an uncertain gesture. She wasn't quite right, but she was on the right track.

“Will something happen if you leave?”

He hesitated. “I don't know.”

She thought about the others, how they had forgotten Ailis but Ronan hadn't. “The others are stuck here,” she guessed. “Does it have to do with the new moon?”

Ronan sighed, relief and despair in one breath. “Yes. With their memories resetting, travel's impossible.”

Of course Ronan wouldn't leave the village, then. He wouldn't abandon the people who relied on him.

“So you can't leave.”

“No.”

She didn't really know what to do with the knowledge, but she tucked it away nonetheless.

When she didn't voice any more questions, Ronan sighed. “I should introduce you to Viera right away so she doesn't torture you with witchfire again.”

ON THE WALK TO VIERA'S COTTAGE, A YOUNG WOMAN WHO Ailis had not yet met stopped them. Or, rather, she stopped Ronan—completely ignoring Ailis's presence.

“Hello, Drakkir,” she said with a playful smile and wide, doe-like eyes. She had pale Cothori features, though her hair was more of a flaxen color than the shocking silver-white they were known for. “Are you going to the bathhouse?” There was a coy implication in the question that Ailis couldn't help but notice with just the tiniest frisson of discomfort. The girl had to be close to twenty years younger than Ronan.

“No. I’m bringing Ailis to meet Viera.” He put a big hand on the small of her back, guiding her forward. “Ailis, this is Nilime, the village’s healer.”

Ah. This was the girl Mirni had accused him of dallying with.

“Hello,” Ailis said stoutly, putting on what she hoped was a polite smile.

Nilime’s gaze flickered to Ailis with a sort of sullen indifference, before going wide with surprise. “Oh—*oh.* She’s... she’s...”

“Yes,” Ronan confirmed. “Have you been to see Mirni? Her cough seems worse.”

Nilime’s hopeful expression dropped into a barely suppressed grimace. After having met Mirni, Ailis couldn’t blame the girl.

“I’ll see to her,” Nilime said reluctantly.

“Thank you,” Ronan told her before sweeping Ailis onward.

“She’s young for a healer,” Ailis observed after a moment.

Ronan nodded. “Her mother was our healer, but she—” His voice cut off. With a frustrated scowl, he said, “She didn’t make it here with us. But she taught Nilime a great deal. And some of our elders, though not trained healers, have been able to teach her a thing or two as well.”

“She obviously wants you,” Ailis observed quietly.

“A child’s infatuation,” he said, shrugging.

“She looks of age.”

Ronan gave her a searching look, a faint smile curling one corner of his mouth. “Are you jealous, Lisaya?”

No. Maybe? She had several feelings about it. “You said it’s been a long time for you—but you have someone here, obviously willing—”

Ronan looked appalled. “No. She may be of age, but she’s only just barely left childhood. And besides...” He trailed off, but Ailis got the sense it wasn’t the curse silencing him.

“Yes?”

“No matter their age, I couldn’t do that with anyone here. They depend on me in ways they don’t even realize. It would be... unfair.”

“I’m dependent on you,” Ailis pointed out.

He shook his head, his harsh features gravely serious. “No, I’m the dependent here. The supplicant. My entire fate is in your hands, Lisaya. The entire village’s fate.”

“So I’m the one taking advantage?” Ailis teased, trying to lighten the mood.

It worked. He cast her a brief, roguish grin. “Yes. And I hope you’ll continue to do so.”

They reached Viera’s cottage and found her at her kitchen table, shaping dough.

“Ronyit,” she greeted him cheerfully before her gaze landed on Ailis. For a split second, Ailis thought Viera recognized her, but then she tilted her head and asked, “And who is this, then?”

“Is that a witchfire?” he asked, nodding at the flames burning in her hearth.

Viera’s eyes went wide. “Can’t handle witchfire, our new guest?”

“Viera, this is Ailis,” Ronan said by way of confirmation.

“Well, then.” Viera briefly paused in the elaborate braid she was making of the dough to take Ailis in. “Well, this is interesting. And, no, no, just an ordinary fire for baking bread. Come in, come sit.”

“I have to explain Ailis’s presence to the others. Can you see she gets breakfast?”

“Of course. Come sit, dear. There’s fresh curds and whey and fruit. The berries are perfect, though the peaches are just a

touch green, yet.”

Ronan ducked out, and Ailis was left alone with a woman who didn't know her. She didn't quite know how to act. She was already fond of Viera, but behaving overly familiarly would be odd from the other woman's point of view.

“Thank you for breakfast,” she said awkwardly, taking the proffered chair.

Viera gave her a motherly smile. “Of course. Now, forgive my bluntness, but am I right in assuming you're death-touched?”

“Um, yes. I suppose I am.”

Viera shook her head in disbelief. “I never thought we'd see the day. What are the odds, when we can't—” She cut off abruptly. Silenced.

Ailis gave her a sympathetic look. “I know you can't speak of whatever curse you're under,” she said.

Viera looked surprised. “Not even a day here, and you've already figured that out?”

“No, I was here—” Ailis cut herself off. With everyone they'd run into, Ronan hadn't bothered explaining that she'd been here for several days already. Should she not do so? “—last night,” she amended weakly. Strictly speaking, she was telling the truth.

“*Oh.*” Viera gave her a knowing look. “I see.”

Ailis flushed, suddenly unable to meet the older woman's gaze. She couldn't even truthfully deny Viera's implication.

“Be careful with that one,” Viera said gently. “He's a good man to his people. He'd do whatever it takes to secure your cooperation.”

It took a second for Viera's implication to sink in. When it did, Ailis's flush immediately faded. She was suddenly terribly cold. Her stomach pitched unevenly.

Had he fucked her last night just to keep her agreeable?

When she thought back on it, *she* was the one who'd initiated it. And he had been far more generous than she'd expected any man to be.

“Oh.” The sound escaped her like she'd been punched.

“Ah, lamb.” Viera patted her hand. “He's not a bad man. You could have been taken in by far worse. Just—guard your heart, hm?”

Ailis nodded stiffly. She stared down at the bowl of goat cheese curds and fresh berries, unable to stomach any of it.

“I've put you in a low mood, haven't I?” Viera said apologetically. “Don't worry. These things pass. They always do.”

CHAPTER 8



When Ronan returned, Ailis had managed to ball up her feelings and cram them somewhere she didn't have to deal with them. She greeted him with a mild expression and got up to follow him out of the cottage when he asked her to come with him.

They did rounds again, just like the day before, in which Ailis was meant to talk to the villagers, glean what information she could, while Ronan helped with things like mending fences and clearing blocked chimney flues and catching lost goats and wrestling with shrieking children.

Viera was right. He *was* a good man.

But that just made his manipulation hurt more. He'd fucked her out of noble duty to his people. How pathetic and mortifying. She wanted to dig a hole and bury herself in it. The worst part was, she couldn't even leave. Not because she couldn't manage to run off, but because she couldn't abandon these people to this curse.

"Why the sourpuss?" Mirni demanded.

Ronan was outside with a few others, re-mortaring the gaps between logs in the walls. Ailis was inside with Mirni, ostensibly to keep the woman company, but really to pick her brain for any information that would help her unravel the curse.

"I don't have a sourpuss."

"Look like you've been sucking lemons."

Ailis shot her a quelling look. "I'm fine."

Mirni laughed, and the laugh turned into a hacking cough. When she got her breath back, she laughed again. "What a terrible liar," she croaked. "Fetch me some water, sourpuss, before I choke on my own lungs."

Ailis half wished she could go back to Viera's motherly sympathy, but in a way, Mirni's insensitivity was a relief. She didn't have to pretend to be comforted when she was actually wounded to her core.

She poured water into a mug and brought it over to the old woman.

"Bless," Mirni said dismissively, taking the mug and drinking. She eyed Ailis as she sat back down. Something about her was very birdlike. Not a songbird—a raptor.

"So, you're Vosque," Ailis said, doing her duty by trying to make conversation with the prickly old bird. "I've heard Vosque is lovely. Beautiful weather, beaches, mountains, rain forests. Why on earth did you come here?"

Mirni gave her an assessing, dubious appraisal. "Why do you care?"

I don't, she was tempted to answer. Instead, she said, "I'm curious. I had to leave Carr Tyl because the wild magic was out of control. Otherwise, I would've stayed."

"Stayed for what?" Mirni asked in her raspy, papery voice. She took another drink of water.

Ailis opened her mouth to answer and found she didn't have one. After a faltering moment, she said, "It's my home."

Mirni shrugged. "Vosque was never my home. I was born in Tleali, but my father was in the army. I lived most my life amongst the Corthori while the empire was annexing their territories."

"Really?"

Mirni scowled at her. "Why would I lie?"

“I didn’t mean—” Ailis scrubbed at her face. “Never mind. So, how’d you end up here?”

Mirni’s scowl was slow to fade. Eventually, she shrugged. “Married a Frythan girl. An army healer. She was stationed in Frythe during the uprising.”

The “uprising” was how some people referred to the assassination of the royal family and the collapse of the empire. Those people tended to be separatists. And while they may have welcomed the collapse of the Darshan empire, they weren’t Baltan sympathizers. Ailis tended to hold the view that it was safer to be part of a powerful empire than to be a small principality pitted against would-be conquerors, but she could still respect the separatists. It was the Baltan supporters who put her back up, with their vicious, destructive fire god and their determination to impose his will onto the world.

“You married a *Frythan* girl?” Ailis clarified. Frythe was notoriously rigid when it came to gender norms. It wasn’t quite as bad as the Hules, but those isolated mountain yokels didn’t have nearly as much influence in the empire as Frythe did.

Mirni chuckled, the first sign of genuine humor that she’d shown. Ailis was surprised to learn she was capable of it.

“Caused quite a stir. But we were wed in the military court. Frythe doesn’t have to acknowledge marriages from other principalities, but they do have to acknowledge anything with an Imperial Seal on it.”

Did, Ailis almost corrected. *Past tense*. The Imperial Seal was meaningless now.

“Does that shock you, little Urdivicean?”

“Urdivice has the same marriage laws as Vosque,” Ailis said defensively.

“Doesn’t mean they have the same attitudes.”

That was true. But while Urdivice was conservative in some regards when it came to sexual morality, the gender of lovers wasn’t one of their quibbles.

“Anyway,” Mirni went on, “I ended up trapped in Frythe during the war. Lost Celain in the Battle of Murrtag.” She breezed past the death of her wife so quickly, Ailis almost could have missed the pain in her eyes. “Picked up this lung damage as a souvenir,” she thumped her thin, bony chest. “And then your fella comes along, tells us we have to ship out.”

“Why?”

“War was a lost cause, wasn’t it? He was going against orders. *Deserting*.” She relayed that salacious bit of news with a waggle of her eyebrows.

Ailis was unmoved. She’d known Ronan for a short while, but in that time, she’d learned exactly who he was. If he did something that seemed on the surface to be dishonorable, he most certainly had honorable reasons for it. Like using sex to secure the affections of a lonely, foolish widow who might be the key to releasing his people from a curse.

“Ah, there goes the sourpuss again,” Mirni observed.

Before Ailis could say anything, Ronan was in the doorway. Her heart lurched painfully at the sight of him.

“Walls are all sealed,” he told the old woman. “You’re set for when the colder weather comes.” He turned his attention to Ailis. “I’m off to Tam and Halle’s cottage to help with the chimney. Coming with?”

Might as well. Her mood wasn’t going to improve in Mirni’s company.

LATER, AS THEY SAT DOWN TO A MIDDAY MEAL WITH EVERYONE who’d helped locate three missing goats, Ronan took the seat beside Ailis. He was quiet as he ate, listening to the others talk, laughing at their jokes, but offering little of his own.

Halfway through the meal, he glanced at her untouched bowl. “You’re not hungry?”

“No.”

He regarded her for a long, quiet moment. She couldn't meet his gaze. She stared down at her stew, stirring it indifferently.

“Something's upset you.”

“I'm fine,” she said, trying to sound like she meant it. She failed.

“What happened, Lisaya?”

“Don't call me that.”

He was quiet again. After a moment, he said, “It's me. I've upset you.”

She couldn't answer him.

“Will you tell me what I did?”

You made me believe in fairytales and romance again, and then ripped it away.

When she said nothing, he got up from the bench and waited for her to do the same. She followed blindly to whatever the next stop on their rounds was supposed to be.

But he took her back to his own cottage. She only realized it as she was stepping across the threshold. Before she could back out, he pushed the door shut and stepped in front of it.

“We're alone now,” he said, the harsh lines of his face cast into a resolute mask. “Tell me what I've done.”

She stared at him. She didn't want to be the sort of contrary shrew who punished people with cold shoulders and silence instead of telling them why she was angry. But to have to spell her mortification out for him was too much.

“I would've helped, no matter what,” she managed to say, feeling her throat tighten. “I would've stayed. You didn't have to... you didn't—” She couldn't bring herself to finish the thought. She swallowed hard to keep the lump in her throat from rising, escaping as a sob.

Ronan's brow furrowed. “Lis—*Ailis*,” he corrected himself, “I haven't got a single clue what you're talking about.”

“You didn’t have to fuck me,” she burst out angrily. There. She’d said it. “I’m not some silly girl who can be led around with hearts in her eyes because you’ve stuck your—”

“What in the high hell are you going on about?” he demanded, the burst of outrage making him look bigger, meaner. His accent, which usually leaned more Darshan, became decidedly more Frythan. “I fucked you because I wanted to!”

“Well, you obviously managed to make the best of the experience, but I’m aware that I’m not exactly—”

“Stop right fucking there,” he snarled, pointing an accusatory finger at her. “If you’re implying that I had some other motive for—”

“Well, of course I am!” she said impatiently, backing away from the anger radiating off of him. “You all but told me as much this morning!” She might not have connected the dots without Viera’s help, but now that it had been pointed out to her, it was impossible not to see.

His anger deflated briefly, replaced by complete and utter confusion. “What? *What* did I tell you?”

“That you were dependent on me. A supplicant. That *I* was the one taking advantage.”

He stared at her, speechless. No denial.

And then he started towards her.

“Ronan,” she said imploringly, backing away as she tried to reason with him. “I’m not—”

“You’re not right in the head is what you’re not,” he said, grabbing her and tossing her over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

“Ronan!”

“You think you were screaming my name when you came because I was fucking out of *duty*?” He kicked the bedroom door wide and carried her over the threshold. “I was *ruining* you, Lisaya. I was giving it to you hard and long and deep, so you’d never forget the feel of me. So nobody else would ever

live up to me. But maybe I've lost my touch. Guess I'll have to try again."

"Ronan—"

He flung her down on the bed and immediately reached for her belt. He stripped it away, loosening her tunic, pushing it up to reveal the waistband of her trousers. "This isn't service, safisa, this is ownership." He untied the laces and dragged her trousers down, ripping them off her legs along with her boots and tossing them aside, leaving her bare. He sank to his knees between her parted thighs, and before she could say a word, his mouth was on her.

She jolted in shock. "*Ronan!*"

His mouth was hot on her sensitive skin. His tongue swept through her cleft, parting her, skating over the sensitive little peak. He growled as he tasted her, the reverberations humming through her flesh.

"Holy Cerith," she breathed, invoking the Urdivicean mother goddess as her hips rose involuntarily up to meet the pressure of his mouth.

He pulled back for a moment, fierce gaze burning into her. "*My name,*" he growled. "*You say my name.*"

And then he pushed her thighs wider, higher, and brought his mouth back to her slick, tender core. He feasted on her with sucking kisses and long, lewd strokes of his tongue. When she cried out another breathless blasphemy, he bit the inside of her thigh.

"Ronan!" she gasped, back arching as an unexpected jolt of pleasure accompanied the pain.

"Remember that name, safisa," he growled before his mouth was on her again.

She came in a trembling, keening, helpless burst of pleasure.

She must have cried Ronan's name because, through the haze of ecstasy, she heard his deep voice rumble, "That's right. You know who makes you scream."

Ailis lay splayed on the bed as the last trembling wave rolled through her.

“I think you can give me another,” Ronan mused.

“Another...?”

And then his mouth was on her again. It was too intense. She was too sensitive immediately after climax. The feeling that jolted through her was too overwhelming. Ronan gentled his touch at her pained cry, circling his tongue lightly around her peak, keeping her stimulated without hurting.

“Ronan,” she pleaded, not entirely sure what she was pleading for.

He groaned against her flesh, pleased by his name, pleased by her. One big hand slid from her thigh, down, down, down, and then he was pushing two thick fingers inside of her wet, dripping core, fucking her with them while his tongue traced maddening shapes around her peak. It seemed like she had barely come down from the first climax before she was shattering apart again, fists clutched in the blankets, gasping Ronan’s name over and over.

She was still trembling through the aftershocks when Ronan pulled away from her. He stood up, wrenching his trousers down to free his cock. Thin seed beaded at the tip, already weeping for her. Gripping the back of her thigh, he pushed her knee back, pinning it to her chest, spreading her lewdly for his perusal. He lined up his cock and pushed into her with no ado, burying himself to the hilt. The stretch was instant and rough, but with it came another hot bloom of pleasure.

“This feel like a dutiful fuck to you, Lisaya?”

“Ronan!” It was all she could seem to say.

She threw her hands over her head, gripping the bedding above her, back arching as she yielded to his ferocious conquest. He fucked her hard and deep, leaning down on the leg he had pinned back so that they were face to face as he drove into her.

“You feel me?” he growled. “Feel me stretching that sweet cunt? I was nice last night, but I can be a selfish prick, too, safisa. I’ll fuck you until you can’t walk straight. I’ll leave my come dripping out of you so you can’t forget who was here, filling you, owning you.”

She came apart again on those filthy words. They should have been insulting, cruel. But they weren’t. The desperate need in those sea glass eyes couldn’t be faked. The depth of his want was like the ocean, swallowing her, dragging her down. She was drowning in him, and she *wanted* to. Every muscle in her body was drawn tight. She couldn’t call his name—only wordless cries escaped her with each gasping breath. Her inner muscles clenched down on him, trying to pull him in, make him drown with her.

And he did. He growled her name as he slammed into her, his whole body shuddering as his cock pulsed hotly inside her, over and over again. He released her leg and collapsed on top of her, face buried against her neck, hot breaths gusting over her skin.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment, his cock still twitching inside her. “I’m sorry if I made you feel used, Lisaya. Telling you that I was dependent on you was only meant to explain how important you are. But that has nothing to do with how badly I wanted to fuck you.”

She believed him. And she felt a little silly for thinking otherwise. He was a good man. An honorable man. And as much as she had grown stronger since her husband’s death, there was apparently still a fragile part of her that could believe a good man would be justified in using her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I didn’t... it wasn’t because I think you’re that callous. It was... a lack of regard for myself, I suppose.”

Ronan pushed up onto his elbows so that he could gaze down at her. He cupped her cheek. “Then let me be clear that I hold you in extremely high regard.” He kissed her forehead, then gently pulled out of her. She felt the wet slide of his seed seeping from her as she sat up.

“We should get back out there. I’m supposed to help cut sod for roof repairs.” He handed her trousers and belt over to her. “Here. Get dressed. But don’t clean yourself up, Lisaya. I meant what I said. You’re going to feel me dripping out of you all day.”

“*What?*” she demanded.

He grinned at her, a rakish, leonine flash of teeth. He crossed over to her to grip her chin, tilting her face up to his. “So you don’t forget my extremely high regard.” He dropped a brief kiss on her parted, stunned lips, then casually resumed fastening his trousers.

Ailis stared at him, a hot flush chasing over her skin.

“Hurry, safisa. There are people waiting on us.”

CHAPTER 9



“**H**ave Loric and Halle been betrothed since you first came here?” Ailis asked Ronan as they walked back to his cottage that night. She’d been acutely conscious of her quim all day, the stickiness of Ronan’s leavings marking her like a brand. Every step she took was like a teasing stroke against tender, sensitized flesh. It was no different now, but over the course of several hours, she’d managed to corral her wits well enough to string sentences together.

“Yes.”

“Why haven’t they wed?”

Ronan didn’t answer.

“If they did, that would be a change,” Ailis surmised. “Would they forget their marriage as soon as the next new moon?”

“Perhaps,” Ronan said.

“Have any babies been born since you came here?”

“No.”

So nothing had changed. Not their ages, not their relationships, not their lives. Ailis had more or less gleaned that already, but it was strange to see very normal lives being lived every day, responding to changes in the weather and the seasons, and knowing that nothing really ever changed for them.

“How have you not gone mad?” Ailis asked him. How could he live every day as the only person who remembered the past, surrounded by friends and loved ones who did not?

“Who says I haven’t?” he asked.

Ailis reached for his hand without thinking. He accepted it, lifting it to his lips and kissing her knuckles.

“Having you here has been...” He trailed off, but Ailis got the sense he wasn’t being prevented from speaking. He was just searching for the right words. “It’s like I’ve been trapped in a pit, and somebody finally lowered a rope.”

She squeezed his hand. She could only imagine.

“Having somebody who sees what I see—who *remembers* it... I didn’t realize how isolated I’d been until I found you. It was torture. Slow, quiet torture.” He looked over to her, a long, intense, searching look. “I hope you’ll break the curse. But I also hope you know that you’re... you’re becoming more than that to me.”

“Ronan,” she said softly, bashful and awkward. She wasn’t used to earnestness or sincerity in men. She wasn’t entirely sure what to do with it.

“I wish we had met under different circumstances. I could have courted you properly. You would never have doubted whether I wanted you, or how badly I did.”

“I don’t doubt you,” she said truthfully. She might doubt whether he would have any interest in her in a life where he wasn’t trapped and she wasn’t his only source of outside companionship. But she didn’t doubt that he appreciated her presence for more than just the possibility of breaking the curse.

He glanced down at her. “You sound like you need more convincing.”

“No—”

“Did I not mark you thoroughly enough this afternoon? Maybe I need to cover you in my seed.”

Her hand clenched in his as a bolt of heat shot straight to her core. “*Ronan.*”

“I’ll come on your belly first. Then your back. Your ass. Your tits.”

“Ronan!”

“Your pretty face.”

He was appalling, but he made her weak with desire. She wanted it, all of it. She wanted his primitive claims. She wanted to be entirely his.

They reached the cottage and as soon as they were inside, he shoved her against the door, bending down to take her mouth in a brutal, hungry kiss. “You’re mine now, safisa. I’ll show you.”

They didn’t make it to the bedroom. He bent her roughly over the kitchen table and stripped her trousers down her legs.

“Keep those knees together like a good girl,” Ronan growled, gripping her ankle and placing it against her other one.

She startled as she felt his face press against the curve of her ass, his tongue stroking her quim from behind. “Oh!”

His hand landed on her ass with a slap. “Knees together.”

She moved unsteadily to obey, and then he was standing behind her, his hard cock probing against her wet, needy core.

“Ah, my poor Lisaya’s been wanting all day,” he groaned, stroking his cockhead through her folds. “Can’t have that.” He pushed into her with a firm, swift plunge, stretching her open and sinking all the way in until his hips were pressed to her ass.

“Ah, gods!” Ailis cried.

Ronan’s hand landed on her ass again. “That’s not my name, is it, safisa?”

“*Ronan,*” she gasped, hips rocking up helplessly, knees trembling as she fought to keep her thighs from spreading wide for him.

“Just like that,” he growled approvingly, thrusting into her with powerful strokes that rocked her body across the surface of the table. He gripped her shoulders, giving himself more leverage to pound into her.

Ailis couldn't think. Each slamming thrust sent a shockwave of electric-hot pleasure sparking through her nerves. Her thighs parted instinctively, but Ronan corrected her with another slap on the ass.

“Behave, safisa. Knees together.”

He adjusted his stance so that his feet bracketed hers, keeping hers pinned together. His big body covered her, pinned her, filled her, consumed her. She came apart with a gasping, shattered cry, face pressed to the table, nails scrabbling against the wood. Ronan gave a choked shout, shoving his cock in deep and shuddering as he came. His seed spilled into her in hot pulses, joining the afternoon's remnants, filling her channel so that no single bit of her was unmarked by him.

When he pulled out, his hand was there, cupping her, catching the seed dripping from her. He took his wet, sticky palm and slapped it on her ass one final time.

Ailis groaned, unable to do anything but tip her ass up to him. Ronan bent over her once more, sweeping her hair aside and pressing a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the back of her neck.

“Take a breath, safisa,” he whispered against her skin. “I've got much more of you to claim.”

HOURS LATER, AILIS WAS STREAKED WITH RONAN'S COME. Her muscles were jelly, her bones useless accessories. They'd made it to the bed eventually, and they both lay there now, sprawled gracelessly, gasping for breath.

“Tiane's mercy,” Ronan gasped, invoking a Frythan goddess Ailis only vaguely recognized. “You're impossible, Lisaya. I don't think I've come this much in one night since I reached maturity.”

In just a few days in Ronan's bed, she'd come more than she had in her entire marriage. But she didn't want memories of Eian sullyng the present, so she brushed the thought away. "I just assumed you were always like this."

"No," Ronan assured her, shifting closer and pulling her into his arms. "It's never been like this." A moment later, he said, "I'd get a pitcher and rag for you, but I think this level of depravity calls for an entire bath."

"Yes," she agreed immediately.

The bathhouse was empty when they reached it—no surprise considering the late hour. Ronan filled a tub quickly, then heated it with one of the kettles. Ailis stripped her hastily donned clothing and slipped into the hot water with a satisfied sigh. A moment later, Ronan joined her. They sat across from each other, soaking in contented silence.

As Ronan cleaned himself, Ailis let her gaze wander over the broad expanse of his chest, his torso, his arms, his back. That tattoos seemed to shift in the low light of the bathhouse—making the soldiers move, the standards flutter, the dragon soar.

Ronan suddenly broke the quiet. "Lisaya... would you ever consider staying with me?"

Her gaze flashed up to his, wide with surprise. "Stay?"

"I would go with you to your people, if you wanted, if I could. But—"

"But you can't leave here. I understand." She considered him for a moment, watching her so gravely in the dim, peaceful quiet of the bathhouse. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire, the gentle drip and ripple of bathwater. "I would stay with you, Ronan."

He surged across the bath to pin her to its sidewall. He stared down at her. "Truly?"

"You're the best thing that's happened to me in a very long time," she told him, mortified to be so openly sentimental, but determined to do it for him. "Maybe in my whole life. I won't be giving you up if I don't have to."

“Ah, safisa.” He lowered his head and kissed her.

An unfamiliar lightness settled over Ailis. Despite the dire circumstances that had brought them together, this all felt too good to be true. A man like Ronan wanted *her*?

I hold you in extremely high regard.

She clutched the memory of those words tightly in her heart and willed the insecurity away.

Her thoughts drifted to their first meeting, when she’d thought he was the leader of a gang of bandits.

“Do your people always patrol that road?” Ailis asked as Ronan drifted back and resumed his bathing.

“Yes. We have to. I have scouts positioned at two points along the road to alert the rest of us when there are any passing travelers. When they sound the horn, the rest of us ride out to intercept the travelers.”

“Why? Do you really take provisions from people who can hardly afford to give anything up?” She couldn’t believe that, not now that she knew him.

He cast her a bemused glance. “We’re not looking for provisions, Lisaya. We’ve been looking for *you*.”

“Me?” she said skeptically.

“Well, someone like you.”

“Death-touched.”

He nodded. “Or even—” He cut off abruptly, unable to complete the thought. A brief flash of frustration passed over his face.

“Or even...” She echoed him, thinking for a second. What else would be helpful to a cursed village? “...a mage?” she guessed.

He nodded gratefully. “Yes.”

“Am I the first person you’ve ever taken?”

“Yes.”

“No mages ever passed by?” Before the wild magic had gotten too out of control, several itinerant mages passed through Carr Tyl on a regular basis, peddling their services.

“No. We kept hoping, but the road here has been more or less abandoned. We think something happened a bit to the southeast that’s keeping people away, but we can’t investigate because we can’t—”

Can’t what? She turned her mind over, trying to find the words he was trying to say. “You can’t... leave?”

He tilted his head in an ambiguous gesture. That wasn’t right, was it? Because he’d sent one of his men to escort her people to Penfrin.

“The other villagers can’t leave?”

“Yes,” he said. “They can’t get more than a few miles from here. Petr, who escorted your people to Penfrin, had to stop about three miles away from Penfrin. It’s as far as he can go.” He gazed at her with an expression of stunned relief.

She looked down, bashful at his open admiration, and pretended to be deeply focused on cleaning under her fingernails.

Meanwhile, her mind was turning over what she knew about the villagers’ constrictions under the curse. They couldn’t go too far from the village. They hadn’t aged since they’d come here—or, at least, shortly after it. They lost their memories after every new moon.

But that last one didn’t sit quite right in her mental tally. She poked at it for a moment, considering it from different angles.

Suddenly, she sat bolt upright. “I’ve just thought of something.”

Ronan watched her, waiting, a small, appreciative tilt to his mouth.

“They forget everything with the new moon. But they know they’ve been here for ten years. So... they’re not forgetting *everything*.”

He was silent, his gaze burning into her.

“Do they only forget anything that’s *new* to the village since their arrival?”

Ronan grabbed her suddenly by the shoulders and pulled her towards him to lay a hard, fierce kiss on her lips. He stared at her with wide eyes.

“Clever, clever Lisaya,” he said fervently. “You’re raising my hopes too high. I’m terrified of the fall.”

Except she still had no idea what being death-touched had to do with any of it. She might be learning the contours of the curse, but that didn’t mean she knew how to break it. Still, she gave Ronan a hopeful smile and leaned into his embrace.

CHAPTER 10



“S tole the Drakkir out from under pretty little Nilime, I see,” Mirni sniffed.

“I didn’t—you can’t *steal* a person.”

“That’s not a ‘no’,” Mirni observed with a smirk.

“I didn’t steal him.”

“Just taking him for a ride before you buy, then?” Mirni sneered. “Well, check his teeth and make sure they didn’t dye his coat.”

“Sweet Cerith,” Ailis swore mildly, exasperated. She returned her attention to grinding up the dried silwort with a mortar and pestle. The herb was incredibly tough and didn’t grind easily. It also had one of the most distinctively unpleasant smells Ailis had ever encountered—like the sharpest possible mint in the world. Grinding it made Ailis’s eyes water. But she kept at it, because Mirni needed it to treat her lungs.

“Mind you don’t put get hands near your mouth until after you’re done and washed,” Mirni cautioned in an acerbic tone. The silwort was helpful for lung ailments if one inhaled its smoke, but deadly if the plant itself was swallowed. “I don’t have the strength to haul your corpse out of here.”

The cantankerous old bird was, oddly, starting to grow on Ailis. It was somewhat liberating to have such baldly antagonistic conversations. Mirni clearly hated living in this village, she didn’t have high opinions of most of her neighbors, and she didn’t care about hurting feelings. But, in

fairness, she didn't seem to expect any better from anyone else.

On that thought, a question occurred to Ailis that she'd been avoiding out of delicacy. Mirni would have never held back for such a soft-hearted reason, so Ailis decided not to, either. "You said your lungs were damaged during the war. How?"

Mirni's expression turned to cold fury. "Those crazy godsdamned Baltans and their godfire. Inhaled the smoke when they were launching it at Murrtag."

"I'm sorry," Ailis said. She'd heard horrible tales about the stuff the Baltans called godfire. Depending on who you spoke to, it was also called and hellfire, death rain, or dragon's breath. It was a horrible kind of magic—a fire that couldn't be put out but burned its victims to death very slowly. The fumes alone often killed those who got too near it.

Mirni shook off her sympathy with a sneer. "I lived, didn't I? Not so many who've seen the Baltan army up close can say that."

Ailis considered that. She was right. Their godfire decimated opposing armies almost immediately. It spread, multiplied, almost instantaneously. And Ronan had faced them? And survived?

"You said Ronan deserted from the Darshan military?" She'd been meaning to ask him about it in private, but she'd been too distracted by the other things they got up to in their private time.

"Ooh, yes. Yon lord Commander, hero of the Battle of Murrtag, decided to show his back to the empire that made him what he was. He turned tail and ran to where there was no fighting—took all his best warriors with him, too."

Reading between Mirni's cynical lines, Ailis deduced that in the last, bitter dregs of the war, Ronan had seen the writing on the wall and decided to get his people to safety.

"So the people here, they're the remnants of his thema?" The soldiers and healers and other military personnel, along

with their families.

“More or less,” Mirni said dismissively.

“Why’d you come? You’re not military. And you seem like you hate it here.”

She bristled. “He might’ve left the choice to us, but it’s not much a choice between hiding in the woods like scared animals or being burned alive by the Baltans.”

“Did everybody choose to come?” The village was crowded, but not crowded enough to supply an entire thema with soldiers.

“Ah, no. There were the naive idealists, of course. I’m sure their skulls have all been torched on Baltan pikes.”

Every thema had battle-trained mages. But there was nobody in the village who could do more than the simplest hedgewitchery. Viera could cast witchfire, though that was all Ailis had ever seen her do. The Kandorrian Priest, Timir, had some minor abilities as well. And Nilime had healing skills, though some would argue that those weren’t magic, exactly. Either way, those three seemed to be the extent of the village’s magic.

“What happened to the mages?” Ailis asked.

“The fools,” Mirni said bitterly. “They—” her voice choked off abruptly. She scowled fiercely.

“They were idealists?” Ailis guessed.

Mirni scoffed. “Worse.”

What could be worse than an idealist in Mirni’s mind?

“Cowards,” she spat. “Fled as soon as they saw the Baltans had firecasters. Left the rest of us to die.”

“Oh.” She took a moment to feel the fear that must have filled them all when they realized they were surrounded by Baltans with godfire and their mages had abandoned them. “That’s horrible.”

Mirni uttered a wordless, guttural, phlegmatic sound of utter derision.

“Hungry, *safisa*?” Ronan asked, appearing in the doorway, bits of straw stuck in his hair.

The scorn vanished from Mirni’s expression and her eyebrows slowly rose as she looked from Ronan to Ailis. “Hmm. You say you didn’t steal him, *safisa*?”

“Be nice, Mirni,” Ronan admonished her dryly.

Ailis ignored Mirni’s jab. “Thank you for the tea.” She got up to follow Ronan back to the cottage she was beginning to think of as *theirs*, to satisfy two appetites.



“VIERA, YOU’RE FRYTHAN, RIGHT?” AILIS SAT AT THE TABLE, absently picking stones from a basket of dried beans while part of her mind was focused on the curse, and yet another part was focused on Mirni’s mocking repetition of the Frythan word Ronan often called her by.

Viera smiled indulgently. “I am.”

“Can you tell me what *’safisa*’ means?”

The old woman’s expression dropped into a severe frown. “Who called you that?” she demanded.

“Nobody,” she lied. “I... heard it at the bathhouse.”

Viera regarded her skeptically, “It’s a vulgar word.”

Well, that was not what she expected, but also not a surprise.

“For a—” Viera hesitated. “For a woman of... low morals.”

It was obvious Viera was trying to be diplomatic, which made Ailis think it must be more than just merely vulgar—it was probably a wildly offensive word. She sat with that information for a moment, feeling an odd mixture of sadness, shock, numbness, and juvenile amusement. She wasn’t going to let herself jump to the conclusion that Ronan secretly loathed her. He said such filthy things to her in bed all the

time, he probably didn't mean it as an insult. She liked the filthy things he said to her. She could probably come around to liking an obscene pet name. She just had to remember not to flinch the next time she heard him say it.

"Anyone who calls you that word does *not* respect you," Viera said flatly, maternal outrage in her eyes.

There was a tap at the door. Viera looked up, and the anger was immediately replaced by a fond smile. "Ah, Niliya," she said happily. "Come sit. Have some tea."

Nilime came in, a basket of freshly picked herbs over her arm. She sat next to Viera, casting a brief, guarded glance at Ailis.

"Hello, Ailis," she said flatly, turning her gaze down to her basket. "Didn't realize you'd be here."

"I was just asking Viera about the time before you all settled in this village. When you were still in Frythe and the war was still going on."

Nilime shot a startled gaze at Viera. "*Why?*"

"I'm just gathering what knowledge I can. Anything that'll help me figure out this curse."

Nilime took that in. Her startled expression smoothed back to the flat, guarded one with which she'd greeted Ailis. She returned her attention to her basket and began sorting the gathered herbs.

After a few moments of silence, Nilime said with studied casualness, "I heard you've taken up with the Drakkir."

Ailis dropped the stone she'd just picked out of the beans. "Oh. Um. I..." She didn't think Ronan had wanted to keep her a secret. But there also seemed no sense in announcing their relationship when everyone would forget in a few days. The next new moon was only a week away.

"He's never married, just so you know," Nilime said, almost defensively. "He's never even taken a consort from the thema. So, don't get too attached. He's not the settling type."

Ailis blinked, at a lost for what to say. The younger woman stared at her, spots of color high on her cheeks.

“Ah, now, don’t worry about the Drakkir’s goings on,” Viera said, patting the girl’s arm. “Nothing has any meaning while we’re stuck in this purgatory.”

Ailis felt that one like a knife to the heart. The insecure part of her had worried that Ronan only wanted her because she was the only viable choice. And that, once he was freed of the curse, his interest in her would fade.

It would be too obvious if she jumped up from the table and immediately made excuses to leave. Ailis forced herself to take her time finishing her tea. When she emptied her mug and Viera reached for the kettle, Ailis stayed her with a shake of her head.

“Thank you, but I should go see Wynne. I promised her I’d stop in today,” she lied.

She bumped into Ronan as she meandered aimlessly along the outer lanes of the village.

“There you are, safisa. I was just at Viera’s looking for you.”

Ailis glanced around, wondering if anyone had overheard him call her that. Even if he said filthy things to her in private, surely he wouldn’t embarrass her in public with them. There was nobody around to hear, and she relaxed.

Ronan frowned. “Something is wrong.”

“No,” Ailis said, managing to sound sincere. “Just thinking.”

He regarded her intently. “Thinking about what?”

“Who you were before the war.” Not entirely untrue.

“Ah.” The worry in his eyes seemed to translate into a new, different worry. “What do you want to know?”

She thought of something she’d meant to ask Viera before awkwardness and insecurity had driven her off. “Everyone calls you ‘Drakkir.’ You said before it has to do with the

military. But ‘dragon’ isn’t a rank. So, why? Why are you called ‘drakkir’?”

He regarded her in helpless silence. He couldn’t answer. Which meant it had to do with the curse.

“What about the mages?” she asked, moving on. “Not a single one of the mages in your thema came to this village with you?”

Again, he was silent.

“I feel like I’m *so* close to getting it,” she said, spearing her fingers into her hair and tugging in frustration.

Ronan reached out, gently disentangling her fists from her hair. He brushed the disturbed strands out of her face, lingering on the white streak, rubbing it gently between his fingers.

“Like a moonbeam,” he told her quietly, smiling as he tucked it behind her ear.

Ailis threw herself against him, hugging him fiercely. “I want to break this curse so badly. I want you free.” Free to do as he wished—to choose who he wished.

He pressed his lips to the top of her head. “I know.”

CHAPTER 11



The new moon came and went, and Ailis had to be reintroduced to the entire town again. Mirni's prickly disdain was actually a welcome bit of familiarity after a day spent being treated to the distant politeness of strangers from people she'd started to think of as friends.

"Wasted no time getting your claws into the Drakkir, did you?" Mirni observed over tea.

"I like to be efficient," Ailis said dryly, not in the mood to prevaricate.

Mirni's brows shot up, and Ailis had to hide her smile in her mug. After a moment, Mirni seemed to get a handle on her surprise and resumed her usual scowl.

"So, what does our noble commander expect you to do?" she demanded sulkily. "Fuck the curse out of him?"

Ailis choked on her tea, a hysterical giggle turning into a hacking cough. When she could breathe again, she wiped the tea off of her chin and tried to meet Mirni's eyes without bursting into appalled laughter. The old bird didn't appear to appreciate Ailis's amusement.

"Why is he called the 'Drakkir'?" she asked, managing a serious tone.

Mirni rolled her eyes. "Because idealistic idiots are easily impressed."

That gave Ailis pause. "How so?"

“Have you ever seen—” Mirni’s voice cut off abruptly. Her frown deepened when she realized she couldn’t say what she wanted to. After casting about wordlessly for a moment, she finally clamped her mouth together, giving up on speech altogether.

Ailis tried to think of pertinent questions. She knew very little about dragons.

“He breathes fire?” she guessed sheepishly, knowing it was foolish even as the words left her mouth.

But to her shock, instead of ruthlessly ridiculing her, Mirni simply said, “No,” then tilted her head expectantly, as if to say, *Go on.*

Under that unblinking, raptorial gaze, Ailis guessed, “He flies?”

Her expression flattened. “No.”

“He has a hoard of treasure?”

Mirni scoffed as if that were the most ridiculous one. So Ailis circled back to the fire. “He... uses fire as a weapon in battle?”

Mirni paused, then shook her head slowly.

“It’s something to do with fire, though?”

“Yes!” the old woman said impatiently.

Ailis focused on what she knew so far, desperate to find an answer. “So he doesn’t use fire as a weapon...” she mused. Her brows drew together as she considered. “Is he impervious to fire?”

Mirni nearly leapt out of her seat, gripping Ailis’s forearm, looking more earnest than Ailis had yet seen her. “By the Lord Girana, that optimistic fool might be right about you!”

Mirni’s excitement was contagious. But she hadn’t said yes, so Ailis knew she was close, but not quite right.

He was a military commander. A warrior. Warriors used weapons to attack, yes. But they also needed shields and armor to defend—to defend not just themselves, but their people.

“He can shield his army from fire?”

Mirni gestured frantically, still not able to give her a definitive *yes*.

“He can shield his army from... magefire?”

Mirni shook her head, still urgent with excitement.

Not ordinary fire, not magefire. She'd never heard of witchfire having any battle applications.

“Godfire?” she asked, disbelieving.

“*Yes*,” Mirni breathed the word in a stunned rasp. “He stood against godfire. And *won*.”

Ailis stared in disbelief. “*How?*” She'd never witnessed it in person, but the way others spoke of godfire, it was a horrific weapon, impossible to fight. The Baltans had stopped using it when they realized even their own armies were succumbing to its vicious, rapid, indiscriminate spread. Battles that should have been an overwhelming victory for the Baltans ended as draws because everyone on both sides was dead.

Mirni shook her head, spreading her hands helplessly. “Damned if I know. He rode directly into enemy ranks—thought it was a suicide mission, to be honest—and struck down their firecasters. One by one, he put them to the sword. The Baltans retreated after that—they didn't have the manpower to face us without their firecasters. Your man came back from behind enemy lines, covered in godfire, his armor glowing red-hot with it. He took his armor off, left it on the battlefield. Not a single burn on him.” Mirni seemed to realize that her tone had become something bordering on reverent. She cleared her throat and slumped back in her seat. “Anyway, he lost his nerve for war after that and took us all here to hide.”

“But *how* did he survive the godfire?”

“I'm inclined to think it was a lucky trick of fate. But the others...” Mirni rolled her eyes. “Some of them would make a god of him.”

“He survived godfire,” Ailis said faintly. “I’d say they’ve got a fair case for it.”

Mirni scoffed. “Never put a man on a pedestal. Especially not one you’re fucking.”

“*Mirni*,” Ronan sighed from the doorway.

Both women startled at the sound of his voice.

“Warn an old woman before you sneak up on her!” Mirni snapped, clutching her chest.

“Viera has lunch,” Ronan told Ailis, ignoring Mirni’s waspishness. “She’d like to ‘meet’ you.”

After re-meeting so much of the village today, she’d forgotten that she hadn’t been reintroduced to Viera yet.

“Does she know not to use witchfire?” Ailis asked, rising from her seat.

“Yes. I’ve told her.”

“Thank you for the tea,” Ailis told Mirni, rinsing her mug over the waste water bowl and placing it on the sideboard to dry. “And thank you for the stories.”

Mirni *harrumphed*, but Ailis thought she detected the faintest hint of a smile on her face.

“She told me about the godfire,” Ailis said as they walked to Viera’s.

Ronan turned to her in surprise. “Really?”

“That you survived it. That you saved your army from it.”

He nodded. “Did she tell you anything else?”

“About what?”

He opened his mouth, but no words emerged.

“Can’t say?”

He shook his head. “We’ll discuss it later. Let’s see what Viera has to say.”

“DEATH-TOUCHED, HM?” VIERA ASKED AS RONAN PRESENTED her.

“Yes,” Ailis said. “Apparently.”

Viera nodded, her warm gaze tracking over Ailis’s face. “Welcome, dear. We’re grateful to have you. Come, sit. I have a nice spread for us.”

“I’ll be back,” Ronan said, turning to the door. “I have to speak to the hunters about something.”

Viera watched him go. As soon as the door was shut, she turned to Ailis with bright, hopeful eyes. “The Drakkir tells me you’ve figured out so much already. What do you know? What questions do you have? Ask me anything.”

Ailis’s mind was still spinning from the revelation about the godfire. It was hard to pin down a single question long enough to shape it into words. “How...” she began haltingly. “How did he survive the godfire?”

Viera did a double-take. “Well, you’re further along the chain of events than I even dared hope. I think the Drakkir was understating it when he said you’d figured out ‘much.’” She blinked as if clearing away the disbelief. “Anyways, as to your question—I only *wish* I knew. It was a miracle beyond anyone’s reckoning. It should not have been possible. It makes no sense!” She sounded almost angry as she said it. She met Ailis’s gaze and slumped sheepishly. “Forgive my vehemence. I just can’t help but think—” Her words cut off abruptly. With a rueful shake of her head, she looked apologetically to Ailis. She couldn’t say what she thought.

“It’s alright,” Ailis said.

Viera heaved a sigh. “So, tell me, what else do you know?”

Ailis was halfway through explaining her theory that the curse had been intentionally cast and was not a fluke of wild magic—owed to the fact that all the victims couldn’t talk about it—when Ronan returned. He laid a wrapped bundle on Viera’s kitchen bench before sitting next to Ailis on the bench.

“Pheasant for you,” Ronan told Viera, nodding at the bundle.

“Thank you, dear.” Viera gave him a fond smile, patting his hand.

“What’s in your hair?” Ronan asked Ailis suddenly, brushing his fingers gently through her curls.

She sensed the movement of something foreign, then startled as something fluttered erratically past the corner of her eye. She batted frantically at her hair. “Get it out!”

“It’s just a little moth,” Ronan teased. “Like a living hair bauble.”

“I like my hair baubles inanimate,” Ailis grouched, still feeling her hair for any other trespassers.

Ronan sifted his fingers through her hair. “No other visitors,” he confirmed.

Viera watched it all with an indulgent smile, though the smile faltered a bit as Ronan draped his arm over Ailis’s shoulders. Her expression turned contemplative as she surveyed the two of them. “Well, don’t you two seem cozy?”

Before either Ailis or Ronan could respond, there was a knock at the door—Nilime came in. She startled at the sight of Ronan and Ailis, her gaze going to Ronan’s arm around Ailis’s shoulders and freezing there.

“Niliya,” Viera said gently. “Come in, dear. Come eat with us.”

“Oh, no,” Nilime said uncomfortably, unable to look away from Ronan and Ailis. “I just came to give you this.” She set a small pouch on the kitchen table. “Just some ordinary kitchen herbs. I found a large patch of wild sage in the forest—I know how you like sage.” She fumbled with a second pouch from her basket. “And for you, Drakkir.”

“Thank you, Nilime,” Ronan said.

Flushed, she darted a quick, pained look at Ailis before she left.

“Poor thing,” Viera clucked. “But she’s young. She’ll get past it. So...” Her gaze lit with curiosity. “When did... *this* happen?” She gestured at the two of them.

“Never you mind,” Ronan told her with a good-natured smile. “Ailis is the one asking questions.”



THAT NIGHT, WHEN THEY MADE THEIR WAY BACK TO THE cottage, Ronan stopped at the Kandorrian temple again.

“I asked Timir not to light any witchfire in the temple while you’re here,” he explained as he handed her a kerchief to cover her head.

She tied the faded bit of blue linen beneath her chin and stepped out of her boots before following Ronan inside. The central altar was covered in ordinary candles, their yellow-bright glow illuminating the temple walls more than the witchfire had. For the first time, Ailis realized the walls were covered in painted murals, splitting the temple evenly into two sides—a Linnal side, filled with symbols of birth and creation and sunlight, and an Aeturnal side, filled with symbols of death and slumber and passage and night.

Timir looked up from carefully sweeping around the altar. “Ah, my brother in Limna’s light,” he greeted Ronan mildly. His attention turned to Ailis, and excitement gleamed in his eyes as he approached her. “And who is this? A newcomer? And—” He froze suddenly in place. “Ah. You’re death-touched?”

“She is,” Ronan confirmed. “This is Ailis.”

“Welcome, my sister in Aeturn’s mysteries,” he greeted her solemnly. “Have you come to pray?”

Ailis wouldn’t even know how. The Urdivicean gods were a very laissez-faire pantheon. Worship tended towards icons and altar offerings. The hours of deep religious contemplation and ecstatically divine revelations of other faiths was foreign to her—especially the punishing years-long trials of devotion that Kandorrians were rumored to undergo.

“Ailis knows very little about Kandorrian practices,” Ronan said, sparing her from having to pretend.

“Ah!” Timir’s eyes widened, sparkling eagerly in the candlelight. “Have you come to learn? As a death-touched soul, you’ve already begun down the path to becoming one of Aeturn’s Anointed.”

Ailis had no idea what that meant, but she was fairly certain she had no interest in being “anointed” by a death god. In the Urdivicean pantheon, Thyllyn, the shadowy ruler of the underworld, was spoken of nervously, in low voices. Hearing them invoked had most people quickly making the sign of Llunoc—the benevolent patron goddess of spring, warmth, and growing things—to ward off Death’s attention. Though Ailis had already failed in that regard, it didn’t mean she wanted to court further interest from Death.

“I…”

“Start at the very beginning,” Ronan told the priest. “Assume she knows as little as I did.”

Timir looked mildly put out by that, but he inclined his head in acknowledgment. “The world is ruled by two gods,” he began. “Life-Giving Limna, and Deathly Aeturn. They are the twin gods, siblings, consorts, and two faces of the same coin. Life and death. Inextricably intertwined.”

Ailis nodded to indicate her understanding.

“The laity are ruled by and serve both faces of life and death. But avowed servants—priests, guardians, the Blessed and the Anointed—are chosen by one facet or the other. For myself, I am a priest of Limna and endowed with her Blessings. Ronan, though not a devotee, has been marked by Limna as one of Her own. And you, dear, have been claimed by Aeturn. It is why you wear His color.” He touched briefly on one of the hanging corners of the blue kerchief on her head.

Ailis glanced at Ronan with some surprise. She could understand, theoretically, how being death-touched might align her with a foreign death god. But how could a former war commander be aligned to a goddess of life and creation?

Ronan met her gaze and easily read the question in her eyes. “There is a great deal of death on a battlefield,” he

acknowledged. “But there is also the opportunity to preserve and restore life.”

Ailis frowned, not convinced. “How could the sum total of your battlefield actions tip the scale in favor of *life*?”

Timir cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Ronan looked wry. “Sometimes, Lisaya, fighting against those with ill intent saves more lives than it costs.”

“Well, and then there was the matter of the resurrection...” Timir said.

“The *what*?” Surely she hadn’t heard that correctly.

“I witnessed it myself,” Timir said. “A young soldier, dead on the ground. Ronan—the commander—ordered him to live, and the boy... he rose again.”

Ronan’s gaze had turned distant, his expression bleak. “Falon,” he said quietly. “I’d promised his mother...” He shook his head. “Little good it did, bringing him back. He was captured by the Baltans at Murrtag. He would have been better off dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Ailis said gently, laying a hand on his arm.

He shifted, taking hold of her hand. “It’s long past.”

“But... how did you do it? Revive a dead man?”

Ronan shrugged. “I couldn’t accept that he was gone.”

“I think it likely that you already had a small measure of Limna’s favor at that point. Using it to revive the fallen only cemented your position among the Blessed,” Tirim explained.

“So *you* belong to the goddess of life,” Ailis recounted somewhat enviously, “and *I* am claimed by Death.”

“Yes,” Ronan said emphatically, holding her gaze, trying to communicate something he couldn’t say in words.

Ronan was life. Ailis was death. Somewhere in there was the key to the curse. It felt so close, as if she could graze it with her fingertips. But, try as she might, the answer wouldn’t come to her.

“I’m sorry. I need time,” she said regretfully. “Just a little time to think.”

“Of course you do,” Ronan said, easing the intensity in his eyes with obvious effort. He turned to the priest. “Thank you, Brother, for your teaching.”

“I’ve hardly even scratched the surface,” Tirim objected mildly.

“Another day.” Ronan promised. He tugged on Ailis’s hand, still clasped in his. “We’re for bed.”

CHAPTER 12



Back at Ronan's cottage, Ailis had just crossed the threshold when she spun around, staying Ronan with a hand on his chest.

"Being blessed by Limna has something to do with your ability to survive the godfire."

Ronan smiled. "Clever Lisaya. Go on."

"Did you know you would survive the godfire?"

His smile faltered, his expression sobering. "I thought I might."

"Ronan!" she objected, aware that it was unreasonable to be angry at him for a risk he'd taken a decade ago before she'd even known of his existence. "You weren't certain? You could have been riding to a gruesome death!"

She drew her hand back, but Ronan caught her wrist and pulled her close. "It was already going to be a gruesome death. The Baltans had us surrounded in a narrow valley that forced our entire army into a bottleneck. I was taking a chance on survival, Lisaya, not death."

"Why did you think you could possibly survive?" She shook her head incredulously. "Nobody and *nothing* can survive godfire."

"When we were on the march, we passed through a city that had been leveled by godfire. Everything was destroyed. Just heaps of char and ash. *Except* the Linnal obelisk outside what had probably once been a Kandorrian temple. At first, we

thought maybe we'd found a material that could withstand godfire. But when the mages examined it, they determined that it was just ordinary marble. They could detect the infusion of divine energy, but that was it. No different from any other religious artefact—all of which had been destroyed by the godfire.”

Kandorrian temples were rare in Darsha. Ailis didn't even know what a Linnal obelisk looked like. But she listened in silence as Ronan told his story.

“The survival of the obelisk was assumed to be just a matter of pure chance,” Ronan explained. “We moved on. But it wasn't that long before that I'd accidentally brought Falon back, and so the Twin Gods were fresh and ever present in my mind. I had been hoping to get a Linnal charm from Timir to test the theory at our next battle—we were marching to relieve a siege in Avier. But then the Baltans caught us while we were going through Lannon Valley, and there was no time to test anything. I could only hope my theory was right.”

“And it was,” Ailis said softly, astounded by both his bravery and his recklessness.

“It was.”

“Surviving the godfire isn't what cursed you though.”

“No.”

“But it's related in some way.”

He made an uncertain gesture, but whatever his thoughts were, the curse wouldn't allow him to articulate them.

Ailis concentrated, willing the answer to come to her. Ronan survived the godfire because he was Blessed by Limna. They needed Ailis to break the curse because she was death-touched.

But *who* cursed them? And *why*?

The Baltans, for what Ronan did to their firecasters? But why wait until he'd gotten his people so far away from the battlefield?

The goddess, Limna, because Ronan used her Blessing in order to kill? But he had told her that battles that saved lives weighted the scales in favor of life.

“Think out loud,” Ronan prompted.

“Do you know who cast the curse?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know I can break it?”

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Frustration creased his brow.

“It’s alright,” Ailis said. “I’ll figure it out. I’ll get there. I know I will.”

Her thoughts circled around and around. *Life and death. The Twin Gods. The Baltans and their godfire. Ronan at the center of it all.*

She stared at him, searching his face as if she might find the answers there.

Ronan’s expression softened as he gazed back at her. “You don’t have to get there tonight. There’s time.”

“I know. I just...” She sighed. She just wanted to fix it. Solve it. Let everyone get on with their lives. *Real* lives.

“Don’t carry everything on your shoulders,” Ronan told her. “I need your help, Lisaya, but I’m not asking you to do it alone.”

It was like asking her not to think. If ever there was a problem, Ailis could focus on nothing else until it was resolved. She chewed at her lip as she continued to turn it over in her mind. Unbidden, images of witchfire, flickering with its slightly surreal glow, came to her mind. Night insects circled its periphery, darting and fluttering.

Useless. Useless thoughts that took her nowhere and helped nobody.

Suddenly, Ronan’s big body was crowding hers, his hands sliding down her sides. She knew where this was going—he was going to sling her over his shoulder. An impish impulse

had her laughing as she twisted out of his hold. He grinned, reaching for her as she darted away, but she managed to dance out of his grasp again.

“Slippery Lisaya.” He turned and lunged for her.

His big body was much more agile than she’d anticipated. Ailis shrieked as she ran around the kitchen table, flinging a chair in his way. He cursed, laughing, as he hurdled it. Ailis had just made it to the bedroom and was trying to fling the door shut, but Ronan caught it and braced his shoulder against it, easily forcing it open.

“You ran for the wrong door, safisa,” Ronan said with false pity. “If you’d gone for the exterior door, you could’ve fled to the neighbors for help. But you trapped yourself in here instead.”

“Maybe it was a tactical decision,” Ailis blustered.

Ronan’s eyes lit with amusement. “I think you *wanted* to be trapped with me.”

She scoffed, gaze darting around the room as she tried to formulate a plan. It was such a small space, dominated entirely by the bed, there’d be no maneuvering around Ronan.

While she calculated possibilities, Ronan pounced. He caught her around the waist and slung her onto the bed, bringing his solid bulk down on top of her.

“Nowhere to run now,” he growled playfully.

She squirmed, trying to escape anyway—more for the thrill of it than any actual desire to succeed. Ronan laughed as he struggled to contain her without hurting her. He managed to catch her wrists and pin them over her head with one big hand.

“Now what?” he taunted.

Ailis panted as she twisted her hips, trying to slither out from under him, but only succeeding in grinding against him. Ronan’s laughter sputtered into a choked groan.

“*Ahh*, safisa,” he whispered, his grip tightening on her wrists as he rocked his hips against hers, the hard length of his cock pressed against her thigh.

She knew that word was filthy, but he said it with such breathless tenderness, she couldn't be upset by it. She didn't mind being filthy with Ronan, here in the privacy of the bedroom. The things they did together might be obscene to some, but Ailis didn't care. It didn't feel like filth with him. It felt like joy and freedom and care.

"I want to taste you," she said.

Ronan went very still above her. "Oh? What part of me did you have in mind?"

Ailis grinned. "Your elbows."

"Ah, yes. Many women have admired my delectable elbows. Should I roll up my sleeves for you?"

"You should probably take the whole shirt off. And then your trousers, too."

"Take off my trousers for elbow-play?"

Ailis buried her face in his shoulder, stifling a laugh, hiding her embarrassment at her own audacity. "I might want to taste your knees, too."

"Well, who could blame you? They're magnificent." He rolled off of her and sat up, pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it aside, then reaching for his belt. "You're overdressed," he observed.

Ailis slid off the bed and reached for her own belt. She undressed without self-consciousness, skin heating under Ronan's hungry gaze. He toed off his boots slowly, eyes fastened on her.

"You need to get your trousers off if I'm going to give your knees their due," she said when he'd gone utterly still.

He smiled ruefully, jarring back into motion as he pushed his trousers down and kicked them away. He was a bear of a man, and the sight of his body was just as arresting to Ailis as hers apparently was to him. His cock was a rampant pike, straining upward, almost visibly throbbing. Ailis moved forward as if in a trance, sinking down to kneel at his feet.

“Lisaya,” he said gruffly, fingers threading through her hair.

She looked up at him as she smoothed her palms up the front of his thighs.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said, his voice almost a whisper, tender and awed. “I can’t believe I found *you*.”

She was naked and on her knees, and she’d never felt so revered. Fingers curling gently into his skin, she leaned in and took the tip of his cock into her mouth.

Ronan stiffened, swearing in Frythan.

She let her tongue circle the smooth, slick crown, stroking over his slit, pulling more gasping foreign profanity from him. She took him deeper into her mouth, then deeper yet, letting his rigid length slide over her tongue in slow, savoring strokes.

“*Ahh*, Lisaya, ni safisa,” he groaned. “Ni telle, sulle safisa.” His grip tightened in her hair, but he didn’t control her movement. He simply held on, desperately, as she worked her mouth up and down his cock. “I’m going to spill,” he warned her hoarsely.

She sucked him harder, pulling him as far back in her mouth as she could take him.

With a shuddering groan, Ronan came down her throat in hot pulses, body rigid, thighs trembling. Ailis swallowed him down. When he was done, she eased back, letting his cock slip from between her lips.

Still breathing raggedly, Ronan reached down, hauling her up to her feet. He sat on the edge of the bed and laid her across his lap, facedown. His cock was still half-hard, pressing against her belly.

“Ronan, what—”

“Shh, you’re going to come for me now, safisa.” One hand gripped the back of her neck, pinning her in place, while the other slid down her back, over the curve of her ass, slipping between her thighs. With the heel of his hand resting against

her ass, he slipped two fingers into her cunt from behind. She was slick and needy, and he slid in with little effort.

“My sweet Lisaya,” Ronan said gruffly. “Sucking my cock makes you wet?”

“Yes,” she gasped, hands fisting in the blankets, hips tilting up as he slid a third finger inside her. He slid them in and out in a steady rhythm.

“You like the taste of me that much, safisa?”

“Yes,” she panted, eyes closing, hips rocking helplessly in time to the steady thrust of his fingers.

“So needy for me,” Ronan all but purred. He slipped his middle finger out of her cunt, letting it glide between her folds, gliding over her clit with the same steady rhythm as his other two fingers thrust into her.

“Ah! Please, Ronan, *please*, I need—I need—”

His grip tightened on the back of her neck. “I know what you need,” he assured her in a low rumble. He worked his fingers in and out of her, faster, harder, strumming her clit with each plunging stroke. “You can come for me, safisa. Let me feel it.”

She couldn't do anything other than obey. She shattered apart with a gasping cry, her pussy clenching down on his fingers, wetness soaking her thighs and his hand. Ronan crooned gently as he guided her through the climax, masterful fingers drawing it out until it was almost painful in its intensity.

“No more,” she gasped. “Too much.”

“Shhh,” he soothed, gently easing his fingers out of her, then cupping his big hand over her entire mons. Her clit pulsed against his firm pressure, her pussy clenching with powerful aftershocks. It was like she was still coming, but it was softer, more drawn out. Her mind blanked out as she drifted in that gentle, endless bliss. She slumped limply over his lap and the bed, completely surrendering to whatever Ronan was doing to her. His grip remained firm on the back of her neck, the press of his palm unyielding against her cunt.

When, at last, even that hypnotic pleasure began to ebb, Ronan eased his grip on her neck and gently pulled his hand from between her thighs. He smoothed his palm over her back in soothing circles, seeming content to simply pet her while she lazed over his thighs.

“Holy Cyrne,” she breathed, still dazed, but finally able to form words again.

Ronan made a deep rumbling sound of satisfaction. He gently lifted her from his lap, rolling her over to lay on her back, then stretched out beside her.

“I love how you lose yourself in pleasure,” Ronan said, stroking her hair. “I could come just from making you come.”

“It’s never been like this before,” she said, still feeling a little lobotomized. “Not until you.”

Ronan was quiet for a moment, taking that in. “So how’d you come to be married to a drunken brute, then?” he asked cautiously. “You’re too clever to be taken in by a smooth talker.”

Ailis stared up at the ceiling as she reflected back. “It was towards the end of the war. Or, towards the end of the worst of it. I had no family and nobody to look out for me. I was of marrying age, so a husband or wife seemed like... a necessity, I suppose. Eian had his own shop. He was a tanner, so he’d been spared conscription, and that had seemed like a good thing. I’d never have to worry about him dying at war. And, well...” She sighed. “I may be too clever for smooth talkers now, but I was younger then, and he was very charming at first.”

“I’m sorry, safisa.” Ronan toyed with the ends of her hair, twining it around his fingers. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s alright,” she said, meaning it. “I’ve gotten past it.” For the most part.

Ronan was quiet, still playing with her hair. He sorted the white streak away from the dark strands, holding it up so that the moonlight glanced over it, making it glitter like platinum.

It was hard to believe this quiet, gentle, peaceful man had once been a war commander.

“What made you walk away from the war?” she asked, breaking the contented silence.

He went still for a moment, still holding her hair. It was a thoughtful stillness, and she waited while he came to whatever conclusion he needed to.

“My family had two trades,” he finally said. “Farming and soldiering. The eldest son always inherited the farm. The spares joined the army. I was the second eldest. So, I did my duty and joined the army.”

“You didn’t want to?”

He looped her hair over his finger and smoothed it against his cheek. “No. I wanted to be a farmer. I wanted to spend my days growing things. I wanted a peaceful, quiet life.”

“You rose to an incredibly high rank for a man who didn’t want to be there.” In the days before the empire collapsed, the commander of an entire thema was only just below the chief commander of the entire army, who stood only below the emperor in wartime authority.

He puffed out a soft, self-recriminating laugh. “I had intended to serve my twelve years and use the decommissioning payment to buy my own farm. The higher your rank when you retire, the higher your payout. So I was determined to climb high in those twelve years.”

“You didn’t retire.”

“No. I’d expected to *maybe* achieve captaincy of my own cavalry unit. But, by year twelve, I’d been made brigadier.”

“How old were you?” Ailis asked. Each thema had only four brigadiers, a prestigious rank in its own right.

“Twenty-eight.”

“So young.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “When I’d decided to climb the ranks as high as I could for my imaginary farm, that’s exactly what I

did. I had a stroke of luck here and there—the untimely loss of some senior ranks gave me opportunities that weren't normally available. But I seized every one of them. And before I knew it, I'd climbed too high. Brigadiers don't get to retire until the emperor releases them from service. Commanders die in their armor.”

Ailis shifted onto her side, resting her head on his chest. “And you wanted to die an old man on your quiet little farm.”

“Holding my wife's hand. Surrounded by my family.”

“You could have married as a commander.” Lower military ranks weren't allowed to marry, but from captain up, marriage was permitted.

“It wouldn't have been fair to take a wife when I'd always be on the move with the army—visiting her a few days of the year to get a babe on her, but never there for the births of our children. Never there to raise them.”

“Do you want children?” Ailis asked, finding herself less terrified of the idea than she usually was.

“I want peace. I want freedom from this curse. If I can have those things... asking for a wife and children, too, would be getting greedy.”

“That's not greedy,” Ailis objected. “All kinds of horrible people get married and have children.”

Ronan chuckled dryly. “Your husband?”

“We never had children, but otherwise, yes. Truthfully, though, I was thinking of what you told me of your father.”

“Ah. Yes.”

Ailis traced her fingertips idly along his tattoos as they lay in drowsy silence. She was skirting along the edge of one of the dragon's wings when something occurred to her. She sat up to look down at him.

“Are *you* the dragon in your tattoos?”

He shrugged. “Possibly.”

“Did you have these tattoos before the curse?”

“I had tattoos.”

It was a strange, sideways answer. “You had tattoos... but not *these* tattoos?”

He flashed her an appreciative smile. “I woke up one morning, and they’d rearranged themselves into... this.”

“What did you have before?”

“The usual soldier’s tattoos—protection charms, strength charms, good fortune charms.”

“Frythan tattoos are charmed?”

He regarded her bemusedly. “You didn’t know? Did you think we just wanted to look pretty?”

“Well... yes.” Truth be told, Ailis thought they were pretty.

“A real Frythan tattoo has to be done by an encriste—a hedgewitch who casts through drawing and writing. They infuse the magic as they ink the tattoos.” He lifted his arm, surveying the twisting blue knots. “Viera did most of my original tattoos. My family mark and village symbol. My soldier’s marks, just before I went off to the army.”

Ailis frowned. “You knew her before you were in the military? Why did she follow you from your home village to this cursed one, then?”

She felt him stiffen. “Her son joined the army—assigned to my thema. During the war, she followed the thema as a camp worker, doing odd jobs like laundry and minor healing. Her son was her only remaining family.” His voice was flat, hard.

“What happened to him?” She already knew it wasn’t going to be a happy answer.

“He died.” Ronan breathed out heavily. “Then he was resurrected.”

Ailis’s eyes widened.

“Then he was captured by the Baltans.”

“That boy—the one you resurrected—was *Viera’s* son?”

“She never quite recovered from the loss,” Ronan said quietly. “And it’s my fault.”

“She doesn’t seem like she holds it against you.”

“She wouldn’t. But that doesn’t mean she’s not suffering. Her ability to cast magic has nearly depleted. She can’t bear to visit with any of the children in the village. She never leaves her cottage.”

“That’s why you visit her every day?”

He nodded. “I can’t figure out if I’m helping her or hurting her by making her see my face every day.”

“You’re taking care of her,” Ailis said after a moment of thought. “I think that’s what her son would want.”

Ronan went still. A moment later, he leaned over, kissing her brow.



THAT NIGHT AILIS SLEPT RESTLESSLY FOR THE FIRST TIME since sharing a bed with Ronan. She dreamt in a confusing kaleidoscope of images. A dark cave, the waning moon, moths fluttering around flickering candlelight, deep water, sun-bleached bones, the flapping wings of many crows. And the villagers, one after another, ending with Ronan, whose face slowly shifted into the featureless visage of the Kandorrian death god.

CHAPTER 13



The day after the next new moon, Ailis wandered around the village on her own while Ronan and some others went out in the woods to harvest timber for repairs. Reintroducing herself to everyone was gradually becoming routine. She front-loaded her introductions with all the pertinent information—*I know about the curse, I'm death-touched, I'm doing what I can to help*—and then rebuilt the same friendships over and over again.

She was at Clea va Larat's cottage—a Frythan woman with the typical rusty brown-red hair and colorful eyes—helping to split firewood for the coming cooler weather. Being an urban seamstress, she'd never so much as held an axe before. But Clea taught her how to do it, and once Ailis was sure she wasn't going to chop her toes off, she found she quite enjoyed the controlled aggression of it all.

"Do you want me to take a turn?" Clea asked, doing the lighter work of picking up split pieces and stacking them.

"No, I'll keep going." Ailis was sweating and breathing hard, but she was enjoying herself.

"*Oh!*" Clea gasped suddenly.

Ailis aborted the swing she'd been about to complete and spun around to find Clea grasping her toddler daughter, Livie, by the arm. The little girl's gaze was fixed on the chopping block, one chubby hand extended determinedly towards it.

"*Livie!*" Clea scolded. "No! Do you want to give me a heart attack, safisa?"

Ailis stared in shock at Clea. Had she really just called her daughter... *that*?

“I didn’t even know you were awake, you little sneak. Come over here, where it’s safe. Play with your toys.” Clea carried Livie over to a small wooden playpen and set her inside where some carved wooden toys awaited her. “Be good, *safisa*, and you can help Mama in the garden later, hm?”

Ailis’s ears did not deceive her. Clea was definitely calling her child *safisa*.

“Clea,” Ailis said in a low, guarded tone when the woman returned to continue picking up split wood. “What were you calling Livie?”

“Hm?”

“You called her something in Frythan.”

“*Safisa*?” Her expression betrayed nothing to indicate she found anything wrong with it.

“Yes, that. Isn’t... isn’t it a rude word?”

“*Safisa*?” Clea frowned, confused. “No?”

Now Ailis was confused. “It’s not?”

Clea regarded her dubiously. “In the common tongue, it translates to something like ‘darling.’ Or ‘beloved.’”

Ailis let the axe head thunk down onto the chopping block.

“Is everything alright?”

“I—I have to—”

“Ailis?”

She’d started walking without really even meaning to. “I have to go. I—I’ll be right back,” she said, filled with anger and confusion.

Why would Viera lie to her?

“Viera!” Ailis gave one cursory thump on the door before she threw it open. She made it one step into the cottage before she stopped dead.

Viera, standing before the hearth, held a blood-red cabochon jewel in her hands. It was the size of a quail's egg and set in an aged gold fitting. She stiffened at Ailis's sudden appearance and hastily dropped the gem into the pocket of her apron. "Good morning, dear. What can I help you with?"

"Um..." Ailis stared at the sagging apron pocket. Why on earth did Viera have such a massive jewel?

"You must be the newcomer I've heard so much about," Viera said, giving her a friendly but impersonal smile. That benign affect reminded Ailis why she'd come here in the first place.

"*You*—" She cut herself off, deflating as she realized she couldn't even confront Viera about the lie, couldn't get an explanation for it, because she'd have no memory of it.

"Is everything alright, dear?" Viera went to the hearth, reaching for the tea kettle. "Come in. Sit. Tell me about yourself."

Resigned but wary, Ailis stepped into the cottage, letting the door fall shut. A moth fluttered in with her, landing on her shoulder. She brushed it away and crossed the room to sink down onto the bench across from Viera at the kitchen table.

"I'm Ailis," she introduced herself flatly. "I know about the curse. I'm death-touched. I'm doing what I can to help."

Viera regarded her with raised brows. "Well. It sounds like you've had to repeat all that a time or two. I suppose I'm not the first person you've introduced yourself to today."

"No," Ailis sighed. She accepted a cup of tea from Viera and blew across the steaming surface moodily.

"Do you know how to mend?" Viera asked, holding up several stockings in need of darning.

"I'm a seamstress." Ailis held a hand out for the mending and some supplies.

She concentrated on the work in her hands. Darning socks wasn't something she'd done much of professionally, as she'd mostly been employed in the construction of new garments.

But it was something she'd had to do for herself since childhood, and she was well used to it. She fitted the wooden darning egg into the sock's heel and began threading her needle.

While she stewed on the cruel lie Viera had told her, Viera chattered on about the village, telling Ailis things she already knew. She explained how the bathhouse worked and where all the wells were in the village. She talked about the sod roofs and the goats. She described the early days of arriving, when the whole place had been nothing more than abandoned ruins that they'd spent months repairing to habitability.

"You're Frythan," Ailis said abruptly, interrupting an explanation of the wheel-and-spoke layout of the village's pathways.

Viera looked briefly taken aback. "I... yes. I am. Why do you ask?"

"What does the word 'safisa' mean?"

Viera blinked and her expression shifted guiltily. "Ah, yes, I knew that would be a mistake."

Ailis stared at her, confused and shocked.

"I was only trying to protect you." She puffed out a heavy sigh. "The Drakkir's loyalty in personal relationships is... unreliable. I suppose I thought to spare you without making myself into the villain, but look what I've done."

It took Ailis a few seconds to find the ability to speak. "How—" She swallowed past a dry throat, wetted her lips. "*How* do you remember that? That happened before the last new moon."

Viera blinked. For a split second, her face was a rigid mask of some unreadable emotion. Then it was gone, and she simply frowned. "What does the moon have to do with anything?"

A moth fluttered over to land on Ailis's hand. She didn't react to it. As Viera continued to look askance at her, Ailis's shock slowly turned into awe, then excitement. She jumped up, dropping the mending, nearly upending her mug of tea. The moth fluttered up, circling hectically.

“People are starting to remember,” Ailis said, filled with an overwhelming rush of hope. She clutched Viera by the shoulders and laughed giddily. “Holy Cyrne, I have to find Ronan.”

She ran to the door, but when she pulled the handle, it wouldn't open.

“No, dear, I don't think you do.”

Ailis spun to face Viera, stunned. “What? Why—”

Viera stood with one hand outstretched as if she were holding the door closed, though she stood on the other side of the room. She made a twisting gesture, and the door clunked softly in its frame. “There. That'll keep you.”

Ashlyn couldn't help trying the door one more time. It wouldn't budge. “Viera, what is—”

“I don't blame you for not putting it together.” Viera's expression was one of mingled grief and self-recrimination. She sat down at the kitchen table, pulling the jewel from her apron and laying it down in front of herself. “But if you told Ronan, he'd certainly figure it out.”

“I don't understand.” Instinctively, Ailis knew what was happening. Viera was confessing. But she couldn't reconcile that reality with her understanding of the motherly, caring woman she'd met and met again at every new moon.

“No, it's a bit convoluted for someone who was just dropped into it. Too many muddy histories. Too much pain in every quarter.” She traced a fingertip idly over the jewel. Its massive, teardrop shape was vaguely familiar, but Ailis couldn't say why.

“Viera, did you... Are you responsible for this curse?”

Viera sighed, meeting Ailis's gaze with bleak resignation. “Yes and no.”

They regarded each other in tense silence.

“So... what happens now?” Ailis asked.

Viera gave the gem a little spin, watching its wobbly orbit with a distant, contemplative expression. “The way I see it, there are two paths. The first path is that I come clean to Ronan. Confess.”

Ailis’s heart thumped unsteadily at the darkness in her voice. The moth settled on her shoulder again. Another landed on her hand. “And the other?”

Viera’s gaze returned to her. “I remove you from consideration.”

Ailis swallowed hard. “Viera—”

“It’d be easy. Most of my abilities have left me, but I can still cast witchfire. You’re vulnerable to it. But how could I know that? It’s the day after the new moon, after all. It would be a tragedy—but an accident. Nobody could blame me for not knowing.”

Ailis began to sweat. “You would kill me?”

The older woman’s expression was hard as stone. “I would do *anything* to get my son back.”

Another brittle silence descended.

Ailis broke it hesitantly, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Falon? I thought he was killed at Murrtag.”

“He was captured alive,” she said darkly.

“You can’t believe he’s still—”

Viera silenced Ailis by slapping her hand on the tabletop, making the jewel jump. “I *know* he’s still alive.”

Ailis flinched back. “How? How could you know that?”

“Because I have two things the Baltans desperately need.” She plucked up the cabochon jewel, holding it aloft for Ailis to see. “If I can deliver them both, they will return my son to me.”

“They want the jewel? What’s the other?”

“Given enough time, I’m sure you’d figure it out.” Viera smiled mirthlessly at her, pocketing the gem. The smile faded

into an expression of grim resolve. “I truly am sorry it had to come to this. I tried to drive you away. I was hoping you’d run off before you became a problem.”

“Please,” Ailis said faintly, heart hammering in her chest. “Don’t do this.”

Viera lifted one hand and a small flame flickered to life in her cupped palm. “It’s either witchfire or silwort,” she said apologetically. “I think fire will be faster. Less painful.”

Ailis scrambled for cover, knocking over a chair and nearly tripping over it. The moths fluttered up around her, several of them now.

Viera’s face hardened. She threw the mass of flames at Ailis.

Ailis ducked, crashing into a rack of drying herbs, knocking it over. A chaotic brown flurry of moths burst up from it, joining the others in circling Ailis. She scrambled to her feet just in time to dodge another mass of witchfire. It hit the wall of the cottage, dissolving harmlessly into a puff of smoke.

“Stop running,” Viera pleaded, agony in her voice.

“Don’t do this,” Ailis pleaded in return. “We can talk. We can—”

Viera lobbed another handful of witchfire at her.

Ailis grabbed the heavy iron lid from an empty kettle, bringing it up just in time to deflect another hit.

“Would your son want this?” Ailis demanded breathlessly, her whole body slick with sweat, her heart hammering in her throat. “Would he want an innocent person to die for him?”

Viera hesitated, glowing witchfire cupped in her palm.

“Would he want his mother to commit murder for him?”

Viera’s hand shook. She looked at the flickering flames, her expression bleak. She turned her gaze to Ailis, wounded but resolute. “He’ll never need to know.” She cocked her hand back for another throw.

“AILIS!” A distant voice thundered through the village.

Ronan.

Fear overwhelmed her. Viera was cornered. Desperate. There was no telling what she'd do.

She lunged at Ailis, her outstretched hand engulfed in witchfire. Ailis caught her forearm, hoisting her hand high as Viera's momentum crashed into her. Together, they slammed against the wall, then fell to the floor.

“AILIS!” Ronan's desperate bellow echoed down the lane outside Viera's cottage. He was close.

Ailis and Viera grappled on the floor. Ailis held Viera's casting arm with both hands, keeping it as far from her own body as possible. But it left Viera's other hand free to snatch Ailis's hair, jerking her head back painfully. Dozens of moths flitted chaotically around them.

“Let go,” Viera snarled.

“AILIS!” The door rattled in the frame as something heavy—likely Ronan himself—crashed into it.

“Ronan!” she screamed back. “Help!”

Viera swore in Frythan, jerking on Ailis's hair with renewed fury. Ailis almost lost her grip on Viera's casting arm. She managed to keep hold though, as tears of pain blinded her.

“AILIS!” Another crashing blow against the door.

“Ronan!”

Another blow, and then another, and then at blessed last, the door crashed open. Ronan surged through the opening like an enraged bull. The moths scattered, seeming to disappear into the daylight.

Ronan threw himself at both women, catching Viera's casting arm and forcing it behind her back.

“Stop!” he barked, shock and anger in his voice. “Let go of her!”

Seeming to recognize that the fight was lost, Viera released her hold on Ailis's hair. "Let me up, Ronyit," she said, panting heavily. "You're hurting my shoulder."

"She tried to kill me with witchfire!" Ailis gasped, scrambling away.

"No, she's lying," Viera objected. "She's the one who attacked *me*."

Ronan gazed down at Viera, something almost like grief in his eyes. "I know she didn't," he said softly. "I can feel her."

"Ah." Viera's expression flattened. "I'd hoped it hadn't gotten that far."

"Ronan!" Ailis gasped, her back pressed against the wall, kettle lid recovered as a shield. "She remembers what happened before the new moon! She's—"

"I'll tell him," Viera interrupted her, sounding tired and resigned. "Calm yourself."

Ailis stiffened with outrage. "*Calm* myself?"

Ronan looked between the two of them, brow furrowed. "I'll let you up, Viera, but you'll have to let me tie your hand down."

She shot him a sulky smile. "Twenty years ago, Ronyit, your tattoos were the first I ever cast. Now you're hobbling my power?"

"Do you blame me?" he asked.

She puffed out a bitter laugh. "I can't say that I do. Alright then, tell your little anchor to offer up her belt."

Ronan nodded to Ailis. "I need to immobilize her casting arm."

Ailis got up warily, slowly removing her belt and handing it to Ronan from as great a distance as she could manage. Ronan looped the tail through the buckle, looped it around Viera's wrist and cinched it tight. Keeping her arm behind her back, he helped her to sit up, and then he secured the belt tightly around her waist, effectively locking her arm in place.

He checked the security of the belt, then got to his feet and extended his hand to Viera's free hand, helping her to her feet as well.

"Sit," he said, pointing to the kitchen table.

Viera did so without argument. Ronan crossed the kitchen to close the door he'd busted open, then took the seat opposite of Viera at the table. Ailis hovered nervously behind him, her gaze fixed on Viera's tied arm.

"What's going on here?" Ronan demanded. Something about his tone made Ailis want to stand at attention. This wasn't her sweet Ronan speaking—this was the Drakkir.

With her free hand, Viera reached into her apron pocket and pulled out the large jewel Ailis had seen earlier. She laid it on the table in front of Ronan, watching his face expectantly. Ronan stared down at the gem, utterly still. A strange tension seemed to stretch between the two of them.

And then, suddenly, Ailis realized why the gem had seemed vaguely familiar.

"You have one of the Imperial Tears," Ronan said, almost conversationally. "Why, Viera?"

The teardrop-shaped gem was one of six identical rubies that hung from the temples of the Darshan Imperial Crown of Office. The crown that was tattooed on Ronan's back. Ailis stared at it in renewed shock.

"It was given to me as collateral."

"Collateral for what?"

"My son's life."

Another stretch of taut silence. Ailis was a forgotten figure in the background, a silent audience member to the quiet tragedy playing out in front of her.

Finally, Ronan sighed. "What was the bargain?"

"You," Viera said plainly, regretfully. "Alive."

Ronan nodded as if it were a matter of course. "And after all these years?"

“The deal still stands.”

“You should have told me. How much time has been lost because of this?”

Viera’s expression twisted unpleasantly. “I should have told you that I’d made a deal to sacrifice you for my son? Why? Would you have willingly skipped to your doom?”

Ronan looked tired. Defeated. “I don’t know what I would have done then. But if you can lift this curse, I will go with you now.”

“Ronan, *what?*” Ailis said, wrenched out of her observer role. “No!”

“You’ll let me hand you over to the Baltans?” Viera asked skeptically.

Ronan nodded. “If the curse is lifted. Yes. I will let you hand me over to the Baltans.”

CHAPTER 14



Viera stared down at the ruby, her eyes hollow, face tense. “I’ve been trying to lift this curse since it was cast. It was meant to...” She trailed off tiredly, shaking her head in quiet dismay. “It was meant to put you into an enchanted sleep and make the rest of the village forget about you so that I could take you back to the Baltans without issue. I wanted the village safely settled before I handed you over, so they wouldn’t suffer without you. Perhaps that was my mistake. Or maybe I underestimated the influence of that Kandorrian goddess’s claim on you.” She shrugged, meeting his gaze ruefully. “In any case, the curse didn’t land properly. I’ve tried everything since then. I haven’t been able to unravel it.”

Ronan was silent for a moment, arms crossed as he stared down at the tabletop, contemplating. “That’s big magic,” he said finally. “Bigger than I would’ve expected from... well, from a village hedgewitch.”

Ailis stood fretfully at his back, gripping his shoulder as if she could keep him in place through sheer force of will. “Then there’s no point in handing yourself over to the Baltans,” she said anxiously. “It won’t lift the curse.”

“It will, though,” Viera said softly. “This curse *is* big magic. It was given to me to cast when the time was right. It’s not my own casting.” Her gaze fell to the ruby.

“The curse was bound in the Imperial Tear?” Ronan asked.

Viera nodded.

He let out a resigned breath. “They were serious about getting hold of me.”

“You defied their godfire, Ronan.” Viera regarded him apologetically.

Ailis looked between the two of them, frantically sorting through all the new information. “They need to figure out how he did it,” she said, shocked by the sudden revelation. “If they can figure out how to protect their army from godfire, they can go back to using it against the rest of us.”

“Yes,” Viera confirmed.

Ailis stared at her, appalled. “You would let the whole world burn and suffer for the sake of *one* man?”

“For my child?” Viera was unmoved by Ailis’s outrage. “Of course I would.”

A long, tense silence descended.

Ronan finally broke it. “If the Baltans will agree to lift the curse, then I will turn myself over to them.”

Ailis’s hand tightened, fingertips digging into his shoulder. “No! You can’t! Ronan—”

“I promised my people I would lift this curse.” He reached up to lay his hand over hers. “I promised them, Ailis.”

“You can’t,” she pleaded, moving around his shoulder so she could look him in the eye. “You asked me to stay with you. We said we’d—”

Ronan’s expression turned bleak before hardening into an unreadable mask. “I release you from that obligation. I’ll have Loric escort you to Penfrin to join your people.”

“I don’t want to be released!” She cupped his face, forcing him to meet her gaze as she pleaded with him. “I want to stay with you.”

He shook his head. “It’s not possible. I’m sorry, safisa. I made a promise to this village long before we met. I can’t sacrifice them for my own selfish wants.”

“You’ll be sacrificing them anyway when you hand yourself over to the Baltans!” she argued desperately. “Once the Baltans start using godfire again—”

“They won’t. They’d have to acknowledge the existence of other gods to make it work.”

“You don’t know that! It might have nothing to do with—”

“I do know,” Ronan said quietly, resigned. “I *know*, Lisaya.”

She crumpled against him, her forehead pressed to his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her. “Don’t do this,” she begged.

“I have to,” he whispered against her hair. “I’m sorry. I have to. I only wish I hadn’t dragged you into this.”

Ailis clung to him, squeezing her eyes tightly against welling tears. “They’ll torture you, Ronan. They’ll kill you.”

His arms tightened around her, but he said nothing.



VIERA AND RONAN DECIDED TO LEAVE THAT NIGHT, AFTER THE rest of the village had gone to sleep. As Ailis and Ronan walked back to his cottage, they spoke in low voices.

“What did you mean when you told Viera you knew she was lying because you *felt* me?”

He was quiet for a moment. “Timir could explain it better,” he finally said. “But those marked by Limna and those marked by Aeturn have a certain attunement to each other. Especially when they form... an emotional attachment.”

Despite the current circumstances, she felt a small flutter at his acknowledgment of their relationship. “You can ‘feel’ me? I don’t ‘feel’ you.”

“You wouldn’t, being one of Aeturn’s. But with Limna’s blessing, I can sense you in a distant kind of way. When you feel something intensely, I get this... I don’t know. I feel it in

my chest. I could feel your terror—” his voice flattened to a near-growl “—and I knew you were in danger.”

Ailis took that in, staring distantly at the darkening sky as they walked. If Limna gave Ronan the ability to sense Ailis’s... what? Vitality? Her heart? She wasn’t sure. But if Ronan could sense that, what was Aeturn’s gift to Ailis? Would she sense Ronan’s suffering as the Baltans tortured him? Would she feel his death when they finally killed him? Her stomach twisted painfully. Her whole chest tightened.

“Lisaya,” Ronan whispered apologetically, reaching to take her hand.

She held on desperately. “I’m going with you.”

“You can’t,” Ronan said heavily. “It’s not safe.”

“I don’t care.”

“Safisa.” He stopped walking to pull her into his arms. “Having you with me will only make this harder.”

“Good,” she snapped, pushing out of his embrace. “Maybe you’ll come to your senses before we reach the Baltans.”

Ronan regarded her warily. “There is no ‘we.’ *You* are returning to your people, where you’ll be safe.”

“What are you going to do, Drakkir?” Ailis demanded. “Chain me to a post in Penfrin? I’ll just follow you. And I’ll be on my own while I do, which I’m sure you wouldn’t want.”

He eyed her with the betrayed air of someone who’d just discovered that puppies have sharp teeth.

“There’s still a chance that *I* can break the curse, isn’t there?” Ailis pressed. “If I can do that, then you don’t have to give yourself up to the Baltans.”

Ronan sighed. “If Viera cast it, but can’t break it, I don’t think it can be broken by anyone except the mage who created it.”

“But I’m death-touched, and Viera’s not. You said that was important.”

“That was when I thought the curse was tied to me in particular—to my life force. That’s what Viera told me was usually the case with curses.” He laughed humorlessly. “Clever of her to send me barking up the wrong tree for a fucking decade.” He trailed into angry silence. Breathing out heavily, he shook his head. “But it doesn’t matter. This curse was bound in an inanimate object—the Tear. It’s effectively immortal. Aeturn’s ability to manipulate mortal attachments has no power here.”

Ailis stepped close again, wrapping her arms around his waist, pressing her face into the crook of his neck. “I can still *try*.”

Ronan’s arms encircled her. He closed his eyes and rested his cheek against her temple. “Lisaya...”

“You’re taking me with you, Ronan.”

He sighed. But he didn’t argue.



IT WAS STRANGE TO BE ON THE ROAD AGAIN. IT WAS EVEN stranger to be there with Ronan and Viera. Neither one of them seemed to belong in the outside world. Viera seemed as much a part of her cottage as the walls were. Ronan belonged to his people in a way that was difficult to cleave. He seemed almost naked without his human flock to tend.

They traveled through Urdivice to the Frythan border in seven days. None of them spoke much. They avoided other travelers, partly out of concern that Ronan could be recognized, but largely because they couldn’t risk thieves getting ahold of the Imperial Tear.

Ailis spent every waking minute trying to unravel the mystery of the curse, playing over every scrap of information she’d ever gleaned from the villagers. At night, she slept fitfully beside Ronan, her dreams filled with Aeturn and his many avatars. Wings and more wings—ravens, moths, bats, dragons. The dragon glared at her from eyes made of rubies. When he opened his mouth, he blew shimmering black

godfire. Ronan appeared from the flames as if emerging from a chrysalis, reaching for her—only to succumb to the flames, his body dispersing into ash and embers.

She woke every morning with a startled jerk. Insects settled on her while she slept and burst into the air in a flurry.

“Good morning, Lisaya,” Ronan greeted her, as he always did.

The early morning sun turned his hair to coppery fire, gilded the edges of his golden skin, made his eyes shine like polished sea glass. Ailis stared at him, overwhelmed by the fear of losing him. She couldn't speak.

Ronan gave her a small, rueful smile, glancing away at the horizon. “Don't look at me like that. I'm not dead yet.”

But you will be. The voice that spoke in her mind didn't belong to her. It was as deep as an abyss, as cold as a winter night. It spoke with the certainty of eternity.

Ailis's heart seemed to shrivel in her chest. She turned away from Ronan, both of them staring in different directions.

“I used to dream about my late husband all the time. After he died, he haunted me. I couldn't get away. Do you know when it stopped?”

“When?” Ronan asked quietly.

“When I met you. The first night I spent in your bed, I slept without dreaming. It was so peaceful.” She fell silent for a moment, picking at the hem of her tunic. “But I've been dreaming again. More and more with each passing night.”

“I'm sorry, Lisaya,” Ronan said regretfully.

“I dream of you. Surrounded by death. Just like I did with Eian. But you're not dead. You're with me. Why...” She trailed off. She didn't want to voice the question. She was afraid she knew the answer.

“We should get going,” Viera said from her position nearby, sitting on a rock as she checked the hidden pocket in her skirts where the Imperial Tear was stored.

Ailis glanced at her but said nothing. She'd expected Viera to start showing at least a hint of remorse as they got closer to handing Ronan over to the Baltans. Instead, she seemed increasingly impatient and single-minded. It was like Ailis and Ronan weren't even people to her—just dead weight she was forced to drag along.

“I suppose we should,” Ronan said, getting to his feet.

Ailis followed numbly behind, losing a little more hope with every step.

They journeyed for another ten days, and in that time, Ailis came up with no solutions to the curse. Her dreams became increasingly more disturbing—filled with dead things and empty, cold voids and godfire and Ronan's death. Over, and over, and over again, she watched Ronan die, only to startle awake and find him still alive beside her.

But for how much longer?

CHAPTER 15



It was obvious when they crossed into Baltan territory. The land was scorched into lifeless ash by godfire. The minor wild magic they'd contended with along their journey vanished at the Baltan border. Effigies of the Baltan fire god lined the road. Faceless, black-robed figures constructed of straw and pitch were mounted high on pikes so that they stared sightlessly down at all the road's travelers.

Carrion crows sat in the branches of fire-blackened trees, hopping from tree to tree to follow their progress. Insects swarmed them as they walked. Ailis gave up batting them away from her face. Moths and beetles landed on her hair and settled on her shoulders. She ignored them, her mind turned to the inevitable—handing Ronan over to his would-be killers.

The Baltans had captured the western half of Frythe more than a decade ago and had run the land to ruin since then. Western Frythe had been known for its rolling hills and vineyards and old-growth forests. Now it was a blackened husk of scorched earth, the land still deeply scarred from the trenched battles that had secured its conquest. Not a single spot of green marred the ashen ruins. Most animals had gone, except for scavenging creatures and those who could prey upon them.

The desolation spoke to Ailis in a strange, discomfiting way. The bleakness seemed to call to her, asking something of her. But she didn't know what. The question was asked not in words, but in a soft, stifled yearning that seemed to pull at her feet and grasp at her hands. The fluttering insects that haloed

her were a constant, whispering plea. The cold, listless wind was a long sigh. The strike of her heels against the cobbled road was the staggered beat of a failing heart. She felt Ronan at her side like a glowing light, the only spot of brightness in an otherwise dark and empty world.

“Turn back,” Ronan begged Ailis at the crossroad that would take them to the fort. “There’s nothing to be done, safisa. At least grant me the peace of knowing I’m not leaving you in the hands of the Baltans.”

“You’ve granted me no peace with this,” Ailis said tiredly. “Why am I the one who has to be merciful?”

He had no answer.

For his part, Ronan marched onward as if he weren’t going to his death. He spoke less and less to Ailis, but his shoulders remained square, his expression unreadable. Viera stopped speaking to them entirely. Instead, her gaze scanned their surroundings in a constant sweep, as if she might find her son beneath one of the scorched and twisted trees, just waiting for her.

“We’re getting close to the fort,” Ronan said, breaking what had been a full day’s silence. “We’ll likely encounter sentries soon. Do you know how you want to handle them, Viera?”

“Yes,” she said flatly. “I’ll be the one to speak to them.”

Ronan’s prediction came true within an hour. Two armed Baltans, wearing shining metal armor over stark black surcoats, approached on horseback, swords drawn. They both had the look of native-born Baltans. Skin that was darker than a Frythan’s, lighter than a Vosque’s, cooler than an Urdivicean’s. Colored eyes like the Frythans and Cothori, but tilted at the corners like the Thranes. One man was clearly the elder, by perhaps twenty years, the other barely out of his youth.

“Get behind me,” Ronan said, stepping in front of Ailis.

“You trespass upon the domain of the Exalted Flame,” the elder one barked at them in the Common Tongue, his words

heavily marked by the tapped Rs and clipped vowels of a Baltan accent. “Explain yourselves.”

He’d looked to Ronan, but Viera was the one who spoke. She said something in careful, halting Baltan, her words obviously inflected with Frythan. But when she finished speaking, the sentries’ demeanors had changed from hostility to sharp interest.

The sentry asked her something in Baltan, and when she shook her head apologetically, he switched to the Common Tongue. “You do not speak Baltan?”

“No. Those words were given to me by the one who sent me.”

The sentry considered her for a long moment. Finally, he nodded. “We will escort you to the fort.”



THE BALTAN FORT WAS THE FORMER CASTLE HOULTE, ONCE the ruling seat of western Frythe. The white lime plaster exterior had fallen away in most places, revealing the heavy gray stones of the castle walls. The stones were scorched and gouged from the war, crumbling away in some places. Torches lined the battlements, burning white-hot with a kind of magic Ailis had never witnessed before.

“That’s not godfire,” she murmured quietly to Ronan.

“They call it ‘the Spirit,’” Ronan answered just as quietly. “Don’t get too near it. It doesn’t harm them, but it will burn us.”

At the first gate, their Baltan escorts conversed with the guards there for a few moments before gesturing Viera forward.

“Tell them,” the elder sentry commanded.

Viera repeated the Baltan phrase she’d been given. The guards’ brows rose, disappearing beneath their helms, but they raised the gate and waved the party onward. At the second

gate, they had to repeat the process. Finally in the castle bailey, they encountered no more resistance as the sentries dismounted and led them to the castle doors.

Inside, the castle was lit by more of the white-hot Spirit torches. They filled the interior with a painfully bright light, casting long, stark shadows and flickering rapidly. Ailis blinked against the uncomfortable strobing effect as they were led through the great hall, down a narrow corridor, up a twisting flight of stairs, along another corridor, and into a room that had probably been a library in the Castle Houlte's days. Under Baltan control, the books and codices had all been removed, and all that remained were war maps and symbols of their fire god: a watchful eye encased in flame, the stacked wooden stakes of a pyre, the ironshell beetles who only hatch in places where fire has swept the land, a white flame cupped in the palm of a red hand, and the faceless black-shrouded icons made of pitch and sawdust.

There was a large table with a single, massive map of Darsha laid across it. Portions of the map had been burnt away, leaving scorched edges. Points of significance were marked by iron nails, the nailheads daubed with paint for some sort of color-coding system Ailis couldn't begin to understand.

"*You* will wait here," the bearded sentry told Viera. "You and you"—He gestured to Ailis and Ronan—"come with me."

"No," Viera said harshly.

For a brief moment, Ailis's hopes lifted—had Viera finally found her conscience? Was there a way out of this? But they were quickly dashed.

"You won't be taking anybody until I see my son."

The sentries laughed. "Do you think you have any control here, heretic?" the younger sentry asked smugly.

"Those were the terms that were sworn to, in full view of your god," Viera replied, voice flat, eyes hard. "Are you an oathbreaker?"

The sentries' laughter died, replaced by cold, quiet fury.

“Watch your words,” the elder sentry said darkly. He glanced at his younger partner. After a moment, they traded nods. His partner left the room, leaving only the elder guarding the door.

“Is he going to fetch my son?” Viera asked, unable to disguise the fraught hope in her voice.

“I don’t know who your son is or where he’s been stashed,” the sentry said coldly. “He’s going to fetch the commander.”

Ronan didn’t so much as flick an eyelash, but Ailis sensed an increase in the intensity rolling off of him. Did he *know* the commander here? Would that make things better or worse?

They waited in silence for what felt like hours. Ailis wanted to cling to Ronan. She wanted to scream. She wanted to go for the sentry’s sword. She wanted to tip over the Spirit torches and watch the whole place go up in flames. Her heart pounded in her chest, the echo thudding in her ears. Nervous sweat prickled over her whole body. A few insects from the road had managed to make their way inside, and instead of dancing around the torches, they circled Ailis.

When the door finally opened again, Ailis nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Commander,” the sentry said, sinking to one knee and bowing his head, hand poised on his sword’s pommel.

“Arise, soldier,” a deep, gravelly voice commanded.

The man who entered was dressed in the black robes of a Baltan cleric, but he wore an iron chest plate over them and had a sword strapped to his side. He wore a black circlet of ironshell beetles around his shaved head. His narrow face was aged with deep grooves across his forehead and heavy lines around his mouth.

“Well, well,” he said, striding into the room with a vitality that belied the age of his face. “What have we here? Heretics speaking oaths from the Lord of Flame? Strange days. Strange days, indeed.” He crossed to the head of the table, standing

opposite the three of them. Bracing his hands on the tabletop, his gaze landed on Viera. “Let’s hear it, then.”

She repeated the Baltan phrase again, hands twisted together in an anxious knot.

The Baltan commander didn’t react immediately, his gaze tracking thoughtfully over Viera while her words hung in the air. Finally, he straightened.

“I know the oath you invoke,” he told her. “Have you held up your end of it?”

Viera visibly sagged with relief. “Yes,” she said urgently. “I am prepared to make the exchange.”

The commander’s gaze flickered to Ronan, who loomed like a golem behind Viera. “*This* is the Darshan commander? He looks like a pig farmer.”

“I am Ronan va Rieves, former Darshan commander. I survived the godfire at Murrtag.”

Something sinister flickered in the commander’s eyes as he smiled at Ronan. “And you just waltzed into Baltan territory?” His gaze cut to Viera. “Did you ensorcel him?”

“No. He came of his own free will.”

The commander looked skeptical.

“I don’t have the power to compel,” she said. “He came on a debt of honor.”

The commander seemed to accept that. He straightened, turning to the guards. “Take my esteemed colleague—”

“*No*,” Viera cut in. “I’ll see my son first. You don’t get Ronan or the Tear until then.”

The Baltan commander considered her with raised eyebrows. “Brave little hedgewitch,” he said with condescending amusement. “Very well, then. I’m feeling magnanimous. Soldier, fetch Neros.”

Viera’s brow creased, but she said nothing as she watched the younger sentry leave the room once more. They waited in

tense silence. Eons later, the door opened again. The young sentry finally returned with another man following him.

The newcomer looked to be near Ailis's age—late twenties or early thirties—but his flat gaze and scarred face spoke of several lifetimes of hard lessons. His head was shaved, like the commander's, but the dark auburn of his eyebrows and the pale green of his eyes suggested Frythan blood. His face was a clashing assembly of steep planes and sharp angles—hollow cheeks, deep-set eyes, and a razor-sharp jaw. His neck was wrapped in the shiny, mottled skin of a significant burn scar. A thin, pink scar ran down the side of his face from his temple to the corner of his mouth. He was dressed as a soldier but had the clerical mark—the god's watching eye engulfed in flame—hammered into his armor.

A paladin.

The gaunt, sharp-edged man turned to the commander, who in turn gestured indulgently towards Viera. When the paladin turned to face her, he froze. For a split second, shock widened his eyes, raised his brows. He blinked it away almost immediately, regarding Viera from behind a blank mask.

“Falon!” Viera gasped, rushing towards him with outstretched arms.

He fell back a step, half-drawing his sword in warning.

Viera froze, a choked sob escaping her throat. “Falon, it's me. I'm your mother,” she said tearfully. “I've come to free you.”

The paladin regarded her with flat apathy. “I am a son of the Incandescent Savior. I have no mother.”

CHAPTER 16



Viera stared at her son in wide-eyed disbelief. She took a step towards him, but he drew the sword further from the sheath, and she froze again, raising her hands in a gesture of non-aggression.

“Falon,” she said gently, beseechingly. “You—”

“My name is not Falon,” the paladin told her in a flat tone that did little to hide the anger simmering through him. “Falon is dead. I have been cleansed by the Savior’s sacred flame, born into my new life. I am Neros.”

The Baltan commander leaned against the table, arms crossed as he watched the exchange between mother and son. A cruel little smile pulled at the corner of his mouth.

“Falon,” Viera sobbed her son’s name. Tears tracked down her cheeks. “My boy, please. You are my child! I came to save you! You need to come with me! Please, Falon—”

“MY NAME IS NOT FALON!” he roared, unsheathing the sword entirely.

Ronan shifted, putting his body between Ailis and the enraged paladin.

Viera stared at her son, undaunted by the drawn sword, her face a mask of bleak sorrow as tears rolled down her cheeks. “What did they do to you?” she asked faintly. Her gaze snapped to the commander. “What have you done to my boy?” she demanded hoarsely.

“We saved him,” the commander answered.

“No. You brainwashed him,” Viera spat. “It doesn’t matter. If you want what I’ve brought, then you have to hold up your end of the bargain. You must release him to me.”

“I think you’ll find that our ‘end of the bargain’ was that we would allow your son to walk free. He has been his own man for nearly a decade. Our obligation has been met. There was no guarantee that he would use his freedom to go with you.”

“You—you—” Viera sputtered with incoherent outrage.

“Now, we’ve already got Commander Rieves. If you’ll hand over the Tear, we can conclude our business here.”

“I won’t be handing you anything, you duplicitous snake! I stowed the Tear far away from here—and I made arrangements for it to be moved by someone else if I don’t return in a set amount of time. I’ll make sure you never get your precious—” Viera’s tirade ended in a shriek as a gout of white flame burst from her skirts near her hip. She batted at the flames frantically.

There was a sudden thunk as the Imperial Tear dropped from the scorched hole in her skirts. It rolled across the floor, and the commander stopped it with his boot. Instantly, the flames on Viera’s skirt doused.

Breathing raggedly, she glared at the commander who bent to retrieve the egg-sized ruby.

The commander grinned at her. “You’ve fire in you, my vicious little heretic. It’s rare I regret my vow of celibacy—”

Falon—Neros—made the faintest choking sound.

“—but alas, I am a man of my word.” He pocketed the ruby. Looking to the two sentries at the door, he gestured to Ronan. “Take Commander Rieves to the lower dungeon.” He nodded towards Viera and Ailis next. “And see the women settled in the workhouse.”

“No!” Ronan snarled.

“They swore that I’d be allowed safe passage out of your territory!” Viera cried.

“Ah, but that was before you broke the oath by lying to me about the Tear. Now the oath is null and void. I’m no longer bound by it. Don’t be distressed. This is an opportunity for you. You have been brought into the sheltering warmth of the Sacred Flame. Working in service to that divine authority is a gift.” He gestured impatiently at the sentries.

Both men moved forward, swords drawn, focused on Ronan.

“Stay back,” Ronan quietly warned Ailis.

From behind his broad bulk, she couldn’t quite grasp what happened—all she knew was that all hell had suddenly broken loose. Ronan was surprisingly fast for his size, moving around the left-side sentry, using him as a human battering ram against the other. Their armor clanged as they crashed into each other. Seizing upon the chaos, Ronan disarmed the first sentry and swiftly cut his throat. The man dropped, gasping soundlessly.

Ailis pressed herself against the wall, remaining well clear as Ronan took on the other sentry. Iron clashed loudly as Ronan deflected an underhand swing, then used his shoulder to shove the other man back against the wall. He bashed the pommel of his sword against his opponent’s wrist, forcing him to drop his sword. With savage efficiency, he punched the tip of his sword into the sentry’s stomach, just below the edge of his chest plate. It had all happened in the space of seconds. Ronan didn’t wait for the man to drop—just spun immediately to take on the commander, advancing furiously.

“Enough.” The steel point of another sword touched the back of Ronan’s neck.

He froze.

It was the paladin—Neros, once Falon. The boy Viera had come to save. The boy whose death Ronan had blamed himself for.

“Are you going to kill me, Falon?” Ronan asked calmly. He turned slowly to face his former soldier.

Falon was a rigid statue, eyes burning into Ronan’s.

“Ephras wanted him alive,” the Baltan commander said sourly, his sword drawn, though he’d never left his position by the table. “But I’m not certain he’s worth the trouble.”

“You can kill me,” Ronan said, ignoring the commander as he held Falon’s fierce gaze. “But you know that you owe me a life.”

Falon flinched but steadied his sword before Ronan could take advantage of the slip. Ronan had tensed to move, but when his opening never came, his expression faded into rueful bemusement.

After a beat, Ronan sobered. “You owe me a life—I’m spending it on her.” He nodded towards Ailis. “Do what you have to, but get her safely out of here. That’ll square your debt.”

Falon looked pale. His grip on the sword tightened.

“Well, we can’t have whatever this is,” the commander said archly. “Finish him, Brother Neros.”

Ailis’s heart thumped erratically. Panic turned her thoughts into a chaos of screams. The insects that had followed her from the road seemed to swarm around her like a storm. Her awareness of Ronan was a glowing light in her mind, in her chest. But a looming darkness hung over that incandescent strength, threatening to smother it.

Ailis’s gaze tracked frantically around the room looking for something, *anything*, that she could use as a weapon. The only thing she could think to do was to knock over the Spirit torches, send everything up in flames.

Do it, a deep, dark voice urged in her mind. It was the same voice she’d heard on the road, telling her that Ronan would die. *DO IT*.

Reacting almost involuntarily, she kicked the nearest brazier over. The clatter drew everyone’s attention.

The commander frowned, staring down at the small pool of Spirit fire that neither spread nor grew from its new spot on the woolen rug underfoot. A second later, he laughed. “What

do you expect the Spirit to do against His own followers?" he asked with patronizing amusement.

KEEP GOING, the voice urged, cold fury prickling over Ailis's skin. She turned and kicked over the other brazier. The Spirit's flames caught on the woolen rug again, but didn't spread. Even so, she remembered Ronan's earlier warning and was careful not to get too close to it.

Mildly annoyed, the commander said, "The Spirit does not harm the disciples of the Divine Flame. You're only ruining a perfectly good rug."

Ailis stared in despair at the two spots of white flame, though an inkling of confusion broke through. If the Spirit fire couldn't harm the Baltans, then why didn't they use *this* as a weapon instead of the godfire that harmed everybody? It must not be suitable as a weapon.

The commander turned his attention back to Falon. "Finish him, *paladin*," he commanded impatiently. "Mind his blood doesn't mingle with the Spirit."

A sudden realization struck her. "You make the godfire from this, don't you?"

She almost laughed at the commander's suddenly rigid expression.

Her sense of Ronan as a glowing light seemed to expand in her mind, intensify. Unbidden, Mirni's caustic dismissal echoed in her mind. *Some of them would make a god of him.*

Then the commander, *Mind his blood doesn't mingle with the Spirit.*

A wild, reckless, possibly suicidal plan came to her—and she acted on it before her better sense could stop her. She lunged at the commander.

"AILIS!" Ronan barked furiously, moving to intercept her, but brought to an abrupt halt by the sword at his throat.

The commander swung his sword up, just as Ailis had anticipated, and she reached out to grab the blade with her

bare hand. Finely honed steel bit into her skin, opening her palm with sickening ease.

She released the blade and scrambled backwards, pursued by the commander. Clutching her wounded hand in a trembling fist, she squeezed her blood onto both of the Spirit flames. They sparked as her blood landed. For a second, nothing else happened. Her heart thundered in her chest, pounded in her ears.

She'd failed.

But then, the first flame began to emit a sooty black smoke. Then the other one. Both flames shifted from blazing bright white to gleaming, oily black. Tendrils began to spread across the carpet.

The commander stared at her, a vein bulging from his forehead, his eyes so wide she could see the white all around them. "You *stupid* bitch."

CHAPTER 17



The godfire spread across the rug, forcing Ailis to dance away from it while so many soft, buzzing wings beat the air around her.

“Hold them!” the commander snapped at Falon as he edged around the table. “Then bar them inside.”

Falon obeyed like a clockwork automaton, withdrawing his sword from Ronan’s throat to take a guard position in front of the door while the commander maneuvered himself to slip out behind the threat of Falon’s blade.

If he escaped, they’d all be locked in with the godfire, left to a painful, horrifying death. Ailis acted without thinking, throwing herself at him, tackling him to the ground in a clattering heap. Her cheekbone bashed against his chest plate so hard, she saw stars for a brief second.

“Ailis!” Ronan roared, lunging after her. He ripped her away from the commander before the other man could retaliate, flinging her into a corner furthest from the spreading godfire.

The insects buzzing around the room were drawn to the strange dark incandescence of the godfire. Their wings and bodies caught with it when they flew too near. But they did not die. They simply became flying projectiles of godfire. Everywhere they landed, more godfire ignited. Tapestries, maps, icons were engulfed in onyx flame. The eerie idols of pitch and sawdust burst into terrifying balls of godfire. It

radiated a strange kind of feeling that wasn't heat, but still somehow burned. Thick smoke began to fill the room.

Ronan and the commander grappled with each other while Falon held the door, barring escape.

A flame-engulfed moth landed on the commander's back, where neither the commander nor Ronan were aware of it.

"Get away from him!" Ailis cried. "Ronan! He's on fire!"

Ronan threw the other man away from him, slamming him against a wall.

The commander had heard Ailis's cry and began frantically searching his vestments for godfire. He wouldn't be able to see it for a while; it had started between his shoulder blades and was spreading down the back of his armor.

But Falon had seen it. His ready stance faltered as he straightened uncertainly.

"Do something!" the commander barked at him as he frantically unbuckled his chest plate.

"There's nothing to do," Falon said apologetically. The flame had spread up the back of the commander's surcoat, licked its way onto the bare skin of his neck. "The Sacred Flame calls for you, brother."

"He'll call you all!" the commander snarled, lunging towards Ronan.

Ronan caught the commander's lunge with a raised foot and used the strength of his leg to shove the man across the room. He hit the edge of the table and stumbled before falling to his knees on the rug—the godfire-consumed rug. The gleaming black flames washed over his body like the incoming tide. His screams were inhuman, ratcheting Ailis's fear higher.

Ronan turned immediately to Ailis and grabbed her arm, dragging her towards the door. The godfire had licked its way up the walls to the coffered ceiling. The larger it grew, the faster it spread.

"You owe me a life," he growled at Falon.

The paladin regarded him blankly. After a second's tense pause, he stepped aside. His gaze went to the mother he no longer claimed. "Move!" he barked at her.

But Viera had frozen in terror.

With a savage snarl, Falon grabbed her arm and dragged her to the door. "Go!" he shouted, shoving her out behind Ronan and Ailis.

With the door open, the godfire spread readily into the corridor, eating its way across the walls as if they were made of paper and not stones. Fire-engulfed insects spread like a plague, planting new little blooms of godfire wherever they landed.

Ailis and Ronan ran as fast as they could, but the godfire was faster. It was an inferno now, consuming the castle with its inexorable spread.

"Cover your mouth and nose," Ronan shouted. "Don't breathe the smoke!"

She remembered Mirni's damaged lungs and pulled her tunic up to cover her face as she ran. The smoke preceded the spreading godfire, chasing behind them like an angry dark cloud.

Viera gave a sudden cry, and Ailis looked back just in time to see her trip to the ground while the godfire smoke enveloped her.

"Fucking hell," Falon bit off as he spun back to go after his mother.

"Keep going!" Ronan barked at Ailis. "Run!"

The air around them began to darken. A sharp, acrid smell burned at Ailis's nose, made her eyes water and her skin itch.

"Keep going!" Ronan urged hoarsely.

They reached the end of the corridor and made it into the great hall—which was so filled with smoke that Ailis couldn't see five feet in front of her. Ronan grabbed her arm, holding tight to her as they picked their way across the smoldering space. The long wooden tables were all ablaze with godfire,

and so were the wooden beams overhead. They had to dodge falling debris and skirt around pools of godfire that spilled from the tabletops it was consuming.

Even though she was clinging to his arm, Ailis could hardly see Ronan through the smoke. His light, though, was a constant steady glow that seemed to keep her anchored and clearheaded, despite the terror of their situation.

They had nearly reached the entry when a loud *crack* split the air above them. Ronan suddenly flung Ailis forward, throwing her clear of the wooden beam that came crashing down.

“Ronan!” She spun back to find him, but her way was blocked by a heap of godfire-consumed rubble.

“Run!” he cried hoarsely from the other side. “Get out!”

Ailis squinted, seeking out his light, even though she didn’t really “see” it with her eyes. It was there, still glowing, but stifled under the godfire and slowly fading.

“Ronan!” she called frantically. “Get up! Keep going! Please!”

His voice returned to her, indistinct, faint, fading. His light continued to dim.

Ailis cast around the massive space helplessly. Baltans were fleeing through the rubble on the other side of the great hall, and Ailis knew she’d find no help in that quarter. But Ronan wasn’t supposed to need help—he was blessed by Limna!

“He’s yours!” Ailis screamed into the smoking air, with no other ideas for how to invoke the goddess. “Save him!”

He has served his duty, the dark voice told her. He is mine now.

Ronan’s light blinked out.

Ailis dove after it—not with her body, and not with her mind, but with some third part of herself that felt like mist and moonlight. She plunged through the dark smoke, through the

dark earth, through the dark of a starless, moonless night, and came out the other side.

She stood alone in a colorless, cold world. A single road stretched to the horizon, where a faint and distant glow beckoned. The silence struck her first—the absence of buzzing insects, of human voices, of animals or wind or running water. Slowly, details resolved around her, and she realized she wasn't alone. She was surrounded by bodies milling along the road. All of them faint and insubstantial, translucent as silk gauze. Up the road, among their number, one man shone with brighter light than the others.

Ronan.

Ailis ran to him, weaving through filmy, indistinct bodies, reaching desperately for a strong hand no longer made of flesh, but of soft, eternal light. Her own form was like pale blue smoke, and her hand twined with his like a cloud passing over the sun.

He turned, startled. "Lisaya?" he asked in a faint voice that echoed as if it had come from the back of a cave.

"Stay with me," she told him. "Come back with me."

He shook his head, startled. "Where are we?" he asked, gazing at the flood of travelers moving past them.

"Lost," she answered. "We're in the wrong place. You have to come back with me. *Please, Ronan.*"

He nodded, confused, but let her lead him against the flow of other travelers. But after a moment, he hesitated, raising his arm to shield his eyes.

"Lisaya, it's too bright."

"Keep going. Please, trust me. Come with me."

"I can't see anything."

"Close your eyes. Trust me."

He did. Ailis pulled him back and back and back along the road. There was nothing but darkness where they were headed, no door to escape through, no ladder to climb, nothing. But

Ailis could still sense, distantly, the feel of her body, the burn of godfire smoke, the strange not-heat that it radiated. She concentrated on that feeling, held onto it like an anchor, and used every ounce of strength she possessed to drag Ronan with her.

The dark world they'd fallen into seemed to part around her like mud, and then she was falling through the sky, sinking through dark earth, plunging through acrid smoke. She came back to her body with a vicious slam that seemed to rattle her teeth. Ronan's hand was no longer clutched in hers—but his light had returned, flickering and faint on the other side of the collapsed beam.

“Ronan!” she screamed, reaching for that third part of herself, where she still held onto Ronan's light, and wrenched hard. “Stay with me, Ronan!”

In a sudden burst of shattered timber and flying ash, Ronan surged through the flames. He hit the ground and rolled, flames of godfire licking over his body in lingering streaks. He shoved himself back to his feet and brushed the flames away like dust.

He was alive.

“Ronan,” she gasped, stunned at what he'd done. What she'd done.

“Keep moving, Lisaya,” he said gruffly, grabbing her arm and dragging her with him as if they hadn't just walked hand in hand through death.

They finally reached the entry and burst into the bailey with desperate gasps. The godfire hadn't spread to the courtyard yet, but it was already consuming the outer walls of the castle. It was only a matter of time. All around the castle, Baltan soldiers and clerics and servants spilled out from windows and doors and any opening a body could fit through. Nobody paid any heed to Ronan and Ailis as they raced from the keep. They were just another pair of terrified animals fleeing certain death.

CHAPTER 18



Ailis swayed on her feet as she followed Ronan, suddenly more tired than she'd ever felt in her life. A gnawing, bone-deep exhaustion that wanted her to crumple to the ground.

“Ah, I feel you, Lisaya,” Ronan said, pulling her closer to him, scooping her into his arms and carrying her. “I’ve got you. Just a little further, and then you can rest.”

The blackened land surrounding the castle was filled with survivors who watched from a distance as the castle was consumed by godfire. One of them was Viera. Her face and clothes were streaked with soot, tear tracks running down her cheeks. She sat on a charred stump and stared blankly at the wreckage.

With Ailis still in his arms, Ronan paused at the sight of her. “Viera?” he asked uncertainly.

She didn’t look away from the castle. “Just leave me.”

“What happened to Falon?”

She continued to stare, her face impassive, her gaze blank. “He went back inside.”

Ronan let out a heavy breath, turning to gaze at the castle with undisguised grief. “He was always an idealist.”

Viera’s chin quivered. Fresh tears tracked down her cheeks. She took a steadying breath and collected herself. “He was.” There was something terribly final about her use of the past tense.

“I’m sorry,” Ronan said gently.

She shrugged, finally turning to look at him. “The curse is broken.”

His brow furrowed. “How do you know?”

“I could always feel it on you, and it’s not there anymore. Perhaps it’s because the Tear was burnt up in the fire. Or perhaps it’s because *you* were.” Her gaze flickered to Ailis briefly. “I suppose, in the end, we did need a death-touched soul to break it.”

A stilted silence lapsed.

Ronan finally broke it. “What now, Viera?” he asked, holding Ailis more tightly to his chest.

She sighed. “I won’t be returning to the village, if that’s what you’re concerned about. There’s nothing there for me. And the minute the others find out what I’ve done, they’ll run me out.”

Ronan was quiet for a long moment. “Where will you go, then?”

Viera looked to the horizon. “Some village somewhere is in need of a hedgewitch.” She shrugged, brushing gritty, soot-caked hair out of her face. “Best for everyone that way.”

Ronan considered her. Finally, he sighed and nodded. “You may be right. Goodbye, Viera.”

“Goodbye, Ronyit. Have a good life.”

“You’re just going to let her go?” Ailis mumbled blearily when they were some distance away. “After what she did?”

“There’s nothing to be gained by punishing her. And she’ll suffer the loss of her son for the rest of her life.”

“Good.”

Ronan stifled a sound that might have been the faintest chuckle. “How did I overlook your vicious streak?”

“Because *you’re* an idealist.” She lolled against him, feeling the weight of the entire sky bearing down on her. She

wanted to melt into Ronan and sleep forever.

“Hold on, safisa. Just need somewhere private.”

For what? she was tempted to ask, but couldn't find the energy.

A few minutes later, Ronan carried her off the road to a copse of blackened trees. Sheltering behind them, he set her gently on the ground. It was the first time since they'd left the castle that Ailis had gotten a good look at him. He was as soot-smearred as Viera had been, his red hair caked in inky black, his face streaked with it. His vivid eyes stood out all that much more starkly, boring into her with earnest hope.

“I've never done this before, but Timir explained it to me.”

“Done what?”

“It's... hard to explain. Limna's Blessed can help Aeturn's Anointed when they've gone into the beyond.”

“Is that what we did?”

“It's what *you* did. You lent some of your life force to me to bring me back. That's why you're so tired.”

“Is that how you brought Falon back?”

“No. He hadn't yet stepped into the beyond. Limna caught him just before he was out of her reach—I was just the vessel for her command. But I think I can give back some of what you gave me. Here, just... let me try.”

Ronan took her hands in his and closed his eyes, bowing his head as he concentrated. Ailis watched him, tired and confused, until suddenly, she felt a euphoric wave pass from Ronan's hands to hers. It swept through her whole body, as bracing as a plunge into icy water but without the shocking discomfort. After a moment, the overwhelming energy ebbed and faded. She sat up straighter, surprised by the change. She was still tired—would dearly love a warm, soft bed—but the exhaustion wasn't so crushing anymore.

“Better?”

“Yes,” Ailis breathed, staring at their joined hands.

“There are more effective ways to do it. But we have neither the time nor the privacy.” Ronan stood up, pulling Ailis to her feet as well. “We’re not far from the Frythan border. Once we cross it, we’ll be safer. We’ll find food and an inn.”



IN THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING, THEY REACHED TOURENE, a small traders’ outpost in eastern Frythe, near the Hullean border. Ailis’s strength had faded, and Ronan had her in his arms again when they found an inn that would take them in—a difficult feat considering the unholy amount of soot and road dust and grime they were covered in.

It was a rougher kind of place than Ailis might’ve ordinarily been inclined to stay at, but she was so desperate for sleep that she nearly wept with joy when the innkeeper gave them a room. Ronan ordered two meals and two baths to their room and paid with a bit of silver he’d pried from the pommel of the sword he’d taken off the Baltan sentry.

In their room, he helped her into one of the hip baths and set to methodically scrubbing her, as gently and un-lasciviously as he would’ve bathed a kitten. The water was absolutely disgusting when he rinsed her, and he used the only other bucket to give her another rinse, then sent for more water.

After he’d helped Ailis into the narrow, scratchy bed, Ronan stripped his clothes and began washing himself. Ailis watched through heavy eyelids, too exhausted to appreciate anything about the scene except that Ronan was safe and alive. But after a moment, some small part of her barely coherent mind noticed a significant detail.

“Ronan!” She sat up unsteadily. “Your tattoos!”

He looked down at his water-sluced chest, squinting in the dim candlelight. “I wondered if they wouldn’t do that,” he said mildly.

His tattoos were still twisting blue knots in the Frythan style, but his back no longer depicted the Imperial Crown looming over a battlefield. Instead, the twisting blue lines were made of the usual sorts of knots and spirals that the Frythans favored in their art. She knew the symbols had important meanings, but she had no idea what those meanings were.

“Do what?” Ailis asked.

“Change back after the curse was broken.”

“Are those your original tattoos?” she asked drowsily, sinking back down against the lumpy pillow.

“I think so. It’s hard to recall after so many years without them.” He dried off with the scratchy, threadbare linen they’d been given, and crawled into the small bed with her, shifting her so that she was wedged between his big body and the wall.

“Your dragon is gone, Drakkir,” she said regretfully, laying her hand on his chest where the twisting blue lines wrapped around Frythan runes that she couldn’t read.

“I still have her,” Ronan said, tightening his hold on Ailis.

“*You’re* the dragon.”

“You’re the one who burned down the Baltan fort, Lisaya. You walked through godfire and brought me with you.”

She considered that with some surprise.

“Goodnight, safisa,” Ronan said softly.

She twisted to curl against him, pressing her lips to his. “I love you.”

“I should hope so, after all you’ve put me through.”

Despite her exhaustion, Ailis laughed. “You’re supposed to tell me you love me back, you ass.”

He wrapped his arms around her, hauling her body tightly against his, and pressed his lips to her hair. “Isn’t it obvious? I’ll follow you in life and death, my love. Ni safisa. You’re mine and I’m yours, as long as you’ll have me.”

“The rest of our lives,” Ailis told him decisively, then immediately undercut the gravity with a huge, jaw-cracking yawn.

“Beyond that,” Ronan promised, kissing her hair again. “Sleep now, Lisaya.”

IN THE MORNING, AILIS WOKE SLOWLY, GROGGILY, NOT wholly certain of her surroundings. Slowly, she remembered that she and Ronan had found an inn and that the scratchy, lumpy surface she was laying on was not a hayrick, but an actual bed. Ronan’s warmth was a protective wall against her back, his arm a comforting weight over her waist. She turned back to look at him, only to find that he was wide awake and watching her.

“Good afternoon, safisa.”

“Afternoon?”

“You needed sleep. Are you hungry?”

“Yes. But don’t leave.” She wrapped her arms and legs around him, clinging tightly.

Ronan laughed softly. “I have to, to get something to eat.”

“Later.” She tipped her face up to his, taking his lips in a soft kiss.

Ronan groaned, rolling on top of her and deepening the kiss.

She broke away suddenly, breathing hard, heart racing. She cupped his face, staring into his eyes with fraught intensity. “I thought I’d never kiss you again,” she told him, her throat tightening as she remembered the godfire coming down on top of him, his light blinking out. “I thought I’d never hold you again. Never sit beside you again. Never hear your voice, never—”

Ronan crushed his mouth to hers, cutting off her fears. “Forgive me, Lisaya,” he pleaded, his lips still pressed to hers. “I didn’t want to.”

“I know.” She kissed him back. “You made a vow to your people.” She kissed him again, and again, then broke away, holding his face between her hands. “But you fulfilled that vow, Ronan. Their claim on you is second to mine now, because you owe me a life, just as Falon owed you. You’ll pay it back by not sacrificing yours.”

Ronan smiled at her. “I learned my lesson there. Even if I tried to sacrifice myself, you’d just drag me back.”

“Don’t make me,” Ailis all but growled at him.

His smile grew. “Never again.”

He bent down and kissed her again, and this time, there were no more words needed between them. Ailis needed his closeness, his warmth, his vitality, with a hunger that bordered on starvation. She needed him inside her and around her, holding her up, weighing her down. She needed to feel the pounding of his heart and the rasp of his breath and the heat of his skin. She needed to feel the *life* in him, to bask in its glow, to lavish in its strength.

“Easy, safisa,” Ronan’s voice rumbled against her throat, where his lips had traveled. “I’ve got you.”

Ailis gave herself over to Ronan’s care, arching into his touch as he lit sensation all over her body with his lips and tongue and teeth and hands. He trailed his hands over every part of her while he kissed her as if the taste of her body alone could sustain him. He nibbled along her neck as his callused fingers teased her nipples to aching points. He sucked on those nipples while one big hand slid between her thighs, cupping her mons and rubbing the heel of his palm over her clit.

A strange frisson passed between them. Not just shared pleasure, but something soul-deep and vital. Ailis gasped at the feel of it. Ronan groaned approvingly, moving his hand faster, using a little more pressure. Fresh little bursts of that strange feeling kept washing over Ailis, heightening the pleasure of Ronan’s touch, but also filling her with a soft, floating bliss.

“So sweet for me,” Ronan murmured against her skin, rubbing his bearded jaw restlessly against her like a bear marking territory. “I need to be inside you, Lisaya.”

“Yes,” she panted. “Need you.”

He shifted his hips between her open thighs and guided the head of his cock to her entrance. He sank into her slowly, stretching her tenderly. Ailis sighed with languid pleasure, arms thrown over her head, spine arched, head tossed back. She wrapped her legs around Ronan’s hips, pulling him in deeper, until he was fully seated inside her. That soft, floating ecstasy briefly overwhelmed her. When she came back to herself, Ronan’s cheek was pressed to hers, his breath rasping in her ear as he worked his hips, grinding his cock into her with rolling thrusts that seemed to hit every sweet spot she had.

She clung to him, meeting his thrusts with urgent need. The empty-headed bliss washed over her in steady pulses, like waves on a beach rolling in and rolling out, leaving her dazed, spinning between the physical ecstasy of their joining and the spiritual ecstasy of whatever strange energy was passing between them.

“Do you feel it, Lisaya?” Ronan asked hoarsely. “Feel what I’m giving to you?”

Everything. He was giving her everything—pleasure and caring and comfort and love and *life*.

“Come for me,” he urged, tongue tracing the shell of her ear. “I can feel you on the edge. Let go.” He sank all the way in and worked his hips in tight circles, grinding against her clit, lighting up every sensitive spot inside her. “Give it to me,” he rasped.

She couldn’t help but surrender. Orgasm exploded through her, and with it, the ecstasy that had been washing over her in waves suddenly crashed into her, dragging her out of her body. The world spun and she spun with it, thrown through the dark of the sky and the emptiness of whatever lay beyond it.

She wasn't alone, though. Ronan was with her—steady warmth, keeping her anchored. “Lisaya,” he breathed her name, a prayer, an invocation, a reminder.

And suddenly she was falling down and down and down. Stars raced away from her. Clouds parted around her. The warm, dark earth rose up to meet her. She fell back into her body like a stone dropped into the ocean.

Ronan was still with her, still in her, still holding her as he shuddered through the last throes of his climax. When he sagged over her, spent, Ailis clung to him, eyes wide, filled with a stunning vitality she'd never experienced before.

“What... what was that?” she asked breathlessly.

“That was what Limna's Blessed do for Aeturn's Anointed,” he said, winded. “I think. Timir can be really wordy when he gets going on a topic.” He eased his weight off of her, shifting onto his side, keeping Ailis in his arms. “I'm not one of the Blessed, and you're not one of the Anointed. But we've been marked by those gods, so... I assume it worked?”

“I feel like I could fly.” She sat up, restless with abundant energy. “Is that going to happen every time, now?”

Ronan laced his fingers behind his head and smiled up at her, saturninely pleased. “I don't think so. Only if you need the, er, replenishment.”

“But what about you?” Ailis asked, suddenly worried. “If you've given me some of your... life force? Are you alright?”

“I'm right as rain,” he assured her. “I'm just a conduit, if I understand properly. I'm no worse off than I was. Better actually, all things considered.” He smiled cheekily at her.

Ailis leaned down to kiss him. “Gods, I love you,” she whispered against his lips. She felt his smile against her own.

“I love you, Lisaya.”

EPILOGUE



TWO MONTHS LATER...

“**D**rakkira!” A bright voice greeted Ailis merrily, but very suddenly.

She spun around, startled. “Nilime?”

The beautiful Cothori girl all but skipped inside the cottage’s open door, followed by a gray-haired elder woman who supported herself with an elaborately carved walking stick.

“Ah, hello, Mis’ss Dellen,” Ailis greeted the Urdivicean women with the proper honorific—something she’d nearly fallen out of the habit of doing while living with so many Frythans. “Thank you for coming.”

The old woman nodded graciously. “Mis’ss Rieves,” she greeted Ailis in turn. Frythans didn’t share a surname with their spouse when they married, unless they’d both come from the same village, but Brynnor Dellen could not be convinced to call Ailis by anything else. “I’ve brought Nilime with me so she can observe, if that’s no trouble to you.”

Ailis considered the girl. “You don’t want to continue with your mother’s field of healing?”

Nilime shook her head. “I like this better than sickbed and battlefield healing. It’s happier, you know?”

“I can see that. And how’s Penfrin treating you, then?”

After the curse had been lifted and Ronan and Ailis had returned, several of the villagers had chosen to move to the

larger town of Penfrin—mostly young people, including Nilime. In turn, several of Penfrin’s residents, including some of Ailis’s former traveling party, had elected to move to the village where life was a little quieter.

“Good,” Nilime said happily.

“And how’s Ginni?”

Nilime flushed beet red. “Good,” she answered softly, smiling bashfully down at the basket of herbs in her hands. “She sends her blessings.”

Taking pity, Ailis suppressed a giant grin, and turned her attention to the healer. “Where would you like me?”

“Just have a seat here, dear.” Mis’ss Dellen gestured to the closest chair, angled between the kitchen table and the hearth. “Let’s see what ails you.”

RONAN RETURNED TO THE COTTAGE JUST AS AILIS WAS bidding goodbye to Nilime and Mis’ss Dellen. He greeted them both, making Nilime blush again when he asked after Ginni. When they’d gone, he turned to Ailis with a frown. He was covered in dirt from the field he and several other villagers had been clearing for crops.

“Are you well, Lisaya?”

“Very well. I—”

“You sent for Penfrin’s healer? What’s wrong with Cora?” Cora Nimet had been one of the Penfrin folk who’d opted to move to Ronan’s village after the curse lifted. She’d been a battlefield healer towards the end of the Darshan war.

“Well, Cora’s aptitude is in illness and injury. Mis’ss Dellen’s focus is midwifery.”

Ronan blinked. “Mid—” He stared in mute shock. Finally, he seemed to find his tongue again. “*Safisa*. Are you with child?”

She nodded. “It would seem so.”

“But *how*? You had the charm—”

“The charm is healing magic, tied to a person’s life force. Mis’ss Dellen thinks it was revoked, either when I went into the beyond to fetch you, or when you, er, ‘replenished’ my life force.”

Ronan’s eyebrows shot up. Very slowly, his shocked expression transformed into one of slightly smug satisfaction. “At the inn in Tourene?”

He’d said and done much, much filthier things to her, but for some reason, *this* was what made her blush. Pressing her hands to her flushed cheeks, she nodded mutely.

“Lisaya.” Ronan suddenly looked stricken. “Do you want this? You had the charm. If you don’t, the healer—”

“I want it.”

Ronan stared at her, mouth partially ajar.

“I want the baby. With you. If... if you want that.”

He clapped his mouth shut and scrubbed agitatedly at his beard. “Do I— Lisaya. Do I *want* this? A child—*my child*—borne by the fiercest woman alive?”

“Oh, hush.”

“Of course I want this!” He pulled her into his arms suddenly, kissing the top of her head fiercely. “My wife is pregnant!” he said to himself in shocked wonder.

They’d only just married a few weeks ago, in a small ceremony in the village square. Ailis still hadn’t quite accustomed herself to being called “wife” again. But with Ronan, the surprise that came with the word was always a pleasant one—a giddy little reminder of the happiness she’d staked out for herself.

“Don’t tell anybody else yet,” Ailis said, hugging him tightly. “The first few months are the riskiest.”

Ronan pressed his lips to her hair. He murmured soft endearments in Frythan, words Ailis couldn’t understand, but whose meaning was crystal clear.

“How’s the field coming along?” she asked, giving him a proprietary squeeze before pulling away to begin brewing the tea Mis’ss Dellen had left her for a healthy pregnancy.

“Good.” Ronan took a seat at the table, investigating the jar of herbs. “It’s too late in the season to harvest anything, but we’ll plant sedge lettuce and leave it to overwinter. In spring we’ll turn it into the soil. It makes for healthy soil, and healthy soil makes for a good harvest.”

Ailis smiled. After decades of living through the violence and suffering of war, he finally had the peaceful farm he’d always yearned for. “The baby will arrive around the time of spring planting, Mis’ss Dellen said.”

Ronan stared down at the herbs, as still as a statue. He stared for so long that Ailis started to worry. Finally, he got up from the table and pulled Ailis into his arms again.

“I’m so happy, safisa. And I am more terrified than I have ever been in my life.”

“Don’t be.”

Ronan laughed, borderline hysterically. “Yes, if only it were that simple.”



SEVEN MONTHS LATER...

A BABY’S OUTRAGED CRIES SUDDENLY FILLED THE COTTAGE.

“Good set of lungs,” Mis’ss Dellen, the midwife, observed. “Here you are, my dear. Your son.” She laid the baby on Ailis’s chest, helping her to cradle her arms beneath his tiny body.

“Lisaya,” Ronan rasped, throat choked with emotion as he stroked her sweat-soaked hair. “Safisa, look at what you did.”

“Very well done,” Mis’ss Dellen said matter-of-factly. “Couldn’t have asked for an easier birth.”

“That was *easy*?” Ronan demanded, appalled.

“You’ve got a healthy baby and a healthy wife, and all before lunchtime. Yes, Mes’r Rieves, that is an easy birth. Now stop pestering me. We’ve still got to get the boy to latch on.”

Ailis was exhausted and sore and raw and still not done doing dramatic new functions with her body, and overwhelmed by the brand-new human being she was holding in her arms.

“*Ronan*,” she said hoarsely, urgently.

He looked back to her immediately, bending to bring his face level with hers. “I’m here, *safisa*. Tell me what you need.”

Sudden, huge feeling overwhelmed her, and tears streamed from her eyes. “I don’t know,” she sobbed, holding the screaming infant with a mixture of staggering devotion and crushing terror.

“It’s alright,” Ronan soothed, though a flash of panic had crossed his face. He cupped her cheeks, wiping her tears. “I’ve got you. You’ll be alright.”

“You’ll be just fine, *lovie*,” *Mis’ss Dellen* said confidently. “Go on and cry. It’s perfectly normal. Emotions become a bit strong after giving birth. Nursing will help. It releases—oh! Here comes the afterbirth.”

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, AILIS LAY DROWSILY ON A CLEAN bed, dressed in a clean chemise, cradling her sleeping baby in her arms, his belly full of milk. Ronan lay behind her, serving as a human body pillow, his lips pressed to her temple while he trailed a finger over the curve of his baby’s cheek.

“Have you thought of a name?” he asked softly.

Frythan custom held that it was unlucky to name a child before they were born. Ailis was fairly certain he’d managed to go the entire pregnancy without so much as *thinking* about possible names. He’d been a nervous, hovering helpmeet for the entire duration, determined to do everything exactly right—from brewing Ailis’s pregnancy tea every morning to

pestering her into doing the daily stretches Mis'ss Dellen had recommended to riding to Penfrin at the crack of dawn to buy a fruit she had been craving from the market—and it had only made Ailis love him more.

“I think you should name him,” she said, sleepy and content.

Ronan was quiet for a moment. Ailis looked back at him in question and found him staring down at their son with rapt adoration. When he met Ailis's gaze, his expression shifted, but the intensity of his love never wavered.

“Are you happy, Lisaya?” he asked quietly.

“Of course I am,” she told him easily, honestly. “You're a better man than I ever knew existed. And now I have a family again—a family with *you*—and I can't imagine a life better than this one.”

His gaze softened, his hand lifting to gently touch her cheek. “I gave up on happiness so long ago. I don't know what I did to deserve this. You are my heart, Lisaya, and the fact that we made a child together is the greatest magic I've ever witnessed.”

She lay back against him, aglow with joy, overwhelmed by the love she felt.

“I like the name Valerin,” he said. “It was my grandfather's name. He was a good man.”

Ailis considered their son's sleeping face. “Valerin,” she whispered.

The baby slept on, peacefully oblivious.

“Yes, I think he looks like a Valerin,” she decided.

Ronan kissed her temple. “I love you, safisa.”

“I love you,” she said, the greatest truth she knew. She let her eyes close as the need for sleep finally caught up to her. She was safe in Ronan's arms.

THANK YOU

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Guerre writes sexy-sweet fantasy, sci-fi, and contemporary romances. A hopeless romantic and an unapologetic nerd, Heather loves everything to do with romance, aliens, shifters, cyborgs, monsters, and magic.

For more from Heather, you can subscribe to her newsletter at heatherguerre.com/newsletter. Subscribers receive alerts for new releases as well as newsletter-exclusive bonus material.

