



A HISTORICAL ROMANCE

THE CALL OF THE SEA

FROM BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
SIAN ANN BESSEY



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Covenant Communications, Inc.

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For Sarah Eden
I could not write of Ireland without thinking of you

Acknowledgments

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Special thanks also to Sarah M. Eden, who answered many questions about medieval Ireland and commiserated with me over the messy and complicated nature of that time in history. Thank you, Briana Shawcroft, for creating the beautiful map at the front of this book, and, Hannah Bischoff, for designing such an eye-catching cover.

I am grateful for my Welsh heritage. My father is fond of reminding me that we descended from Welsh royalty and can trace our family line to Owain Gwynedd. Even though none of my family members currently wears a crown, I am thankful for the opportunity to share a small portion of my homeland's rich history with my readers.

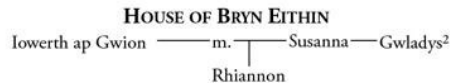
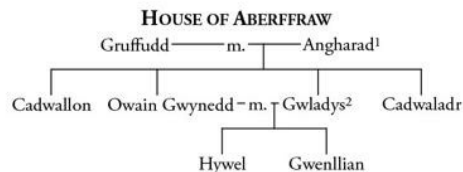
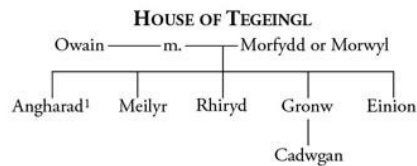
In addition to that, creating this story enabled me to more fully contemplate the peace that comes from a belief in Christ and His teachings. I am forever grateful for Him and for the love and support of my family, friends, and readers. Thank you all for making my writing journey possible.

Genealogy

THESE FAMILY TREES INCLUDE ONLY those people who are mentioned in this book as well as a few parents who were added for clarification. Many of those listed (including Owain Gwynedd) had more than one spouse and several more children.

Owain's daughter Angharad (from the House of Tegeingl) is the same person as Gruffydd's wife, Angharad (from the House of Aberffraw), making Owain Gwynedd and Cadwgan first cousins. The only fictional people listed are those in the House of Bryn Eithin.

Owain ap Gruffydd became known as Owain Gwynedd when he was made king. This was done to distinguish him from Owain Cyfeiliog, who was the ruler of the neighboring kingdom of Powys.



¹ Angharad, daughter of Owain and Morfydd from the House of Tegeingl, is the same person as Angharad, wife of Gruffudd from the House of Aberffraw.

² Gwladys, wife of Owain Gwynedd, is the same person as Gwladys, the sister of Susanna from the House of Bryn Eithin.

Pronunciation

IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN THE historical integrity of this novel, I have stayed true to the names and places found in the accounts of the Vikings' involvement in Owain Gwynedd and Cadwaladr's dramatic falling-out in 1143. Since many of the names, places, and foreign words will be unfamiliar to modern readers, Covenant Communications is making available an audio pronunciation guide on The Call of the Sea's webpage on the Covenant Communications website.

The QR code below will take you to that audio pronunciation guide, a recording in which I personally pronounce each of the unfamiliar words. This webpage will also include a listing of the words and where they are found in the book as well as a time stamp for where they are found in the recording so you can jump to any word you want to see or hear. I hope this will enhance your reading experience as you enter the world of medieval Ireland, Gwynedd, and Deheubarth.



Glossary

Ap: Welsh for “son of.” Used in lieu of a surname.

Bach: Welsh term of endearment. Literally, “small.”

Britannia: England.

Cymry: The general name given to the people living in the country we now call Wales when the land was divided into different kingdoms. Literally, “fellow countrymen.” *Cymru* (pronounced the same but spelled differently) is currently the Welsh word for “Wales.”

Dyflin: Norse name of the city now known as Dublin.

Edling: Male heir to the Welsh throne.

Faering: Small boat, usually with two sets of oars and may include a sail.

Eryri: Welsh name for the Snowdonia mountain range.

Farfar: Norse for “grandfather.”

Ferch: Welsh for “daughter of.” Used in lieu of a surname.

Gramercy: Ancient exclamation of thanks.

Jarl: A Norse chief.

Karve: A longship with a broad hull, often used for transporting goods.

Llys: Welsh royal court.

Nain: Welsh for “grandmother.”

Nones: A fixed time for prayer that usually refers to the ninth hour after dawn or 3:00 p.m.

Ongullsey: Norse name for “Ynys Môn,” believed by many to be the origin of the name Anglesey.

Styrimadr: Norse for “navigator” or “skipper.”

Tref: Welsh for “town.”

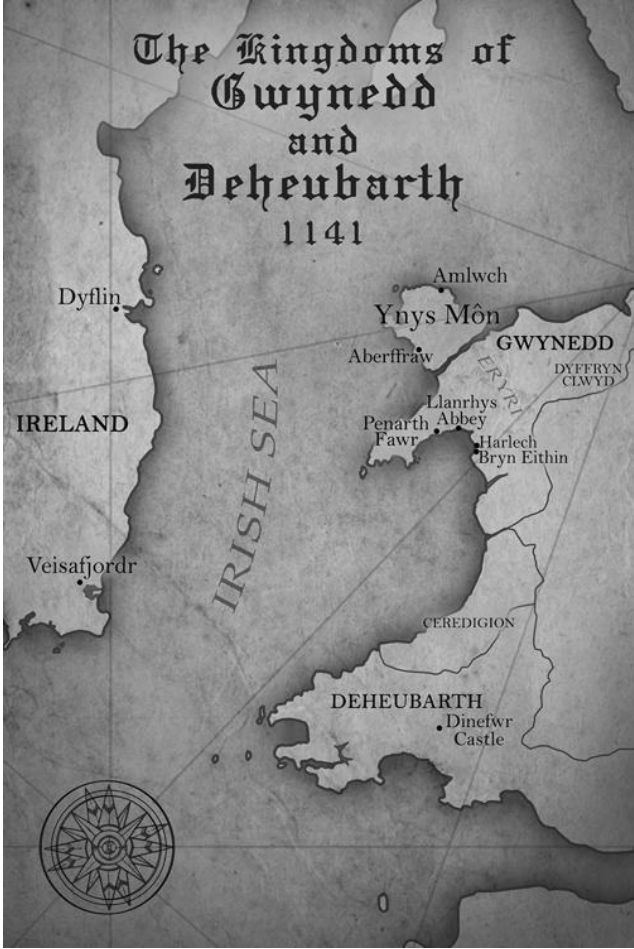
Uchelwr: Welsh pedigreed aristocracy.

Valhalla: A great hall in Norse mythology where those slain in battle are received.

Veisafjodr: Norse name for Wexford, Ireland.

Ynys Môn: Welsh name for the island of Anglesey.

Yr Wyddfa: Welsh name for Snowdon, the tallest mountain in Wales.



Chapter 1

The Kingdom of Gwynedd, 1141

A SEAGULL'S CRY PIERCED THE air. Rhiannon raised her head to watch the large white bird glide in a wide arc over the sheltered bay and soar out to sea. What freedom such birds enjoyed. To ride the wind and the waves, to travel farther than the eye could see. Rhiannon could only dream of such unfettered liberty.

Stepping over the tide pool she'd been exploring, she turned toward the large house that overlooked the beach. Bryn Eithin's solid gray-stone walls and purple slate roof had protected her since her birth sixteen years previously. Its idyllic location, with the Irish Sea at its front and rolling pastures at its rear, was hard to equal. Indeed, compared to most young women in Gwynedd, she was fortunate. Her father owned land and retained servants. She was well cared for. Beyond the loss of her mother several years before, she lacked for nothing. Except, perhaps, the freedom of a seagull.

"Rhiannon!"

Her father, Iorwerth ap Gwion, appeared where the sand met the scrubby grass of the low dunes. He stood with his hands on his hips, his expression grim. Rhiannon spared the sky another glance, and her heart sank. The sun had lowered, and she had no need to consider the lengthening shadows to realize she was inexcusably late.

Lifting her skirts, she scrambled off the craggy rocks and ran across the beach toward him. "Forgive me, Father." She stopped to catch her breath. "I failed to keep track of the time."

"Clearly." He frowned. "I had hoped that today, of all days, you would not give me cause to seek you out, Rhiannon."

"I would have returned before the evening meal. Truly, I would have."

"The servants have their preparations well in hand, but you are still whiling away the afternoon beside the sea." His gaze traveled from her windswept hair to her sand-dusted gown and damp hem. He shook his head despairingly. "How am I to introduce you as a prospective bride to Owain Gwynedd's cousin when you resemble a foundling? And a wet one, at that?"

She offered him a contrite smile and slipped her arm through his. His frustration was born of concern for her. She knew this. Just as she knew that it would soon pass.

"Walk me back to the house to ensure that I cannot be distracted by the

call of the sea again, and then place me in Heledd's expert care," she said. "Heledd will have me dressed and ready to greet your guests in no time."

"Our guests, Rhiannon." He was not yet ready to fully exonerate her. "Cadwgan ap Gronw does us a great honor by coming to dine with us."

"He comes because the king suggested it," Rhiannon said.

"And why should he not? Your mother was the sister of his wife, the queen. Your father is a member of the uchelwr."

"Your position as a member of the pedigreed aristocracy will undoubtedly influence who I eventually marry, but must that decision be made so soon?"

"Yes," her father said firmly. "Cadwgan may wait as long as he wishes for the wedding ceremony—you know that I have no desire to have you leave—but you have reached the age when a betrothal is both expedient and expected."

Rhiannon sighed. This was not the first time they'd had this conversation. No matter how much she hoped for her father's stance to alter, it did not. As his only daughter, it was her duty to marry well. Her father wanted what was best for her. He wished her to have every comfort and security. She should be glad. Mayhap, if she exerted a little more effort, she *would* be glad.

"This Cadwgan ap Gronw is handsome, is he not?" she said.

They started back toward the house together.

"I am not of a mind to consider such things, but I daresay he is pleasing enough. A little taller than I, with curly, dark hair."

"And young." That attribute alone was more than most young ladies in her situation could claim when meeting a potential spouse.

"Not more than eight and twenty. And yet, despite his youth, he owns a large parcel of land in Dyffryn Clwyd."

The district of Dyffryn Clwyd had been claimed by Gwynedd several years before, but with all the infighting that continued to plague the king, it was no secret that Owain Gwynedd was anxious for an ally within the uchelwr living in that area. As much as Rhiannon wished it were different, her role in this marriage was that of a prize or a bargaining chip.

"What will happen if Cadwgan decides against me?" she asked.

"He will not." Her father's expression softened. "Your lack of awareness of your natural beauty only enhances it, bach. Cadwgan cannot help but be captivated by you."

Her hair swirled wildly around her shoulders, and Rhiannon glanced at her wrinkled, salt-water-stained gown.

“Even if he were to come upon me now?” she asked.

Her father nodded. “Aye. As loath as I am to admit it, even now.”

His words, which surely should have offered her greater confidence, in actuality, did the opposite. Rhiannon had oft been told that she had inherited her mother’s silky tresses, dark-brown eyes, and flawless skin. Unfortunately, the same could not be said of her disposition. Whereas her mother had thrived as mistress of a sizable home and a hostess of large gatherings, Rhiannon preferred to wander the beach alone and quietly observe others from afar. If Cadwgan were to base his matrimonial decision upon appearances while paying no heed to her preference for solitude, he would undoubtedly be sorely disappointed in his choice of wife.

The feelings of apprehension that had sent Rhiannon to the sea in search of peace resurfaced. She wished to please her father. If she were fully honest with herself, she also wished to please Cadwgan. But only if she could also remain true to the person she was within. She took an unsteady breath. For now, she could only pray that when her upcoming meeting with Cadwgan was over, she could also claim some measure of pleasure for herself.

They had reached the front door. Her father paused. “A small portion of discomfort over meeting Cadwgan for the first time is understandable, Rhiannon, but I expect you to rise above it. A man of Cadwgan’s rank deserves your respect.” He glanced at her bare, sandy feet. “And that includes being dressed appropriately when you greet him.”

“Yes, Father.” Her stomach churned, but she somehow maintained a placid countenance. “I shall see to my wardrobe straightway. And I will have Heledd help me locate my shoes as soon as she finishes with my hair.”

“Very well,” he said. “I shall look for you in the great hall within the hour.”

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The sleek longboat cut through the rolling waves. Dusk was turning to dark, and from his position in the bow of the agile craft, Leif breathed in the salty air and grinned. Returning home from a successful raid was an exhilarating experience, but unlike most of his companions, Leif’s excitement came not from the value of their haul but from being out at sea.

Ahead of his craft, another longboat navigated the breakers. The Norsemen within were silhouetted against the sky even as the row of circular shields lining the craft’s hull glinted in the last light of the setting sun. Although currently indistinguishable, Leif’s brother sat in the bow of that

boat. As the oldest son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin, Bjorn was the designated leader of this raiding party. Leif did not envy him the position. At nineteen years of age, captaining the second boat was responsibility enough for him.

He pulled on his oar, feeling the water's resistance as his arms moved in unison with those of the other men. The steady, powerful rhythm powered them forward, increasing the distance between the Vikings and the monastery they'd pillaged. Later, if the wind was in their favor, they would raise the sail, but for now, the longboat hugged the coastline, fueled by oars in the hands of twenty Norsemen.

"It would have been nice if the monks had left us something to eat," the man sitting on the other end of Leif's bench grumbled softly.

"What ails you most, Knud?" Although Rune, the rower sitting behind Leif, kept his voice low, there was no mistaking his taunting tone. "Is it rowing all night on an empty stomach or the lack of gold beneath your seat?"

Knud's stroke did not waver, but his square jaw tightened. "You know full well that those goblets should have been mine."

Rune sniggered. "Not so. We each took a cupboard. You could have gathered more of the candles you found in yours had you wished to."

Knud growled his displeasure, but before he could speak further, a low bird whistle sounded from the other boat. A warning call. Other than the gentle splash of oars, all sound on the boat instantly ceased. Every man knew how readily voices carried on the water.

"A light. Over there, just above the bay," Rune whispered.

Leif spotted the flicker even as Rune spoke.

"Is it a traveler?" Knud kept his voice as low as Rune's.

"I think not," Leif said. "I see the outline of a building."

"Aye," Rune said. "Not tall enough to be a monastery or castle but no humble dwelling, to be sure."

Knud's teeth flashed in the gloaming. "What think you, Leif? Is it large enough to provide a meal for forty hungry Vikings?"

Leif glanced at the darkening water. If the decision were left to him, they would make use of the outgoing tide to put out to sea. Leaving the Kingdom of Gwynedd as stealthily as they had arrived was always his preference. Unfortunately, the choice was not his to make.

He kept his eyes on the other longboat, waiting for a signal. The birdcall came again, and with it came the unmistakable grind of oars lifting. Bjorn was turning his longboat toward the shore.

“Looks like you shall fill your belly after all, Knud,” Rune said, satisfaction tingeing his low voice.

Smothering his frustration, Leif raised his oar. The men seated behind him raised theirs as well. Those on the other side of the boat lowered theirs and pulled. The dragonhead carved on the prow of Leif’s boat swung right to follow the serpent tail carved on the rear of Bjorn’s.

Leif gauged the direction of the wind. Already, it had shifted since they had begun their journey. Going ashore for another raid would delay their crossing of the Irish Sea significantly. They would need the wind behind their sails if they were to reach Ireland by morning. He frowned. With two monasteries and a church already looted along this stretch of coastline, news of the Vikings’ uninvited presence on Gwynedd’s soil would have reached the king by now. It was only a matter of time before Owain Gwynedd would send soldiers to oust them from his land.

“You may take the cupboards in the bedchambers, Rune,” Knud said, his eyes on the outline of a substantial longhouse perched above the low cliff. “I am for the great hall. At this time of day, the evening meal should be ready for the taking.”

Leif remained silent. His brother had opted to attempt one more raid. Whether Bjorn had oarsmen complaining of hunger, Leif could not tell. He only hoped that they would not pay too heavy a price for satisfying their appetites.

Chapter 2

“THERE NOW.” HELEDD STEPPED BACK to survey the plaited crown she’d pinned around Rhiannon’s head and gave a satisfied smile. “That did not take long, did it?”

“No.” Rhiannon spoke through stiff lips. “Not long.” In an effort to prevent any cries from escaping, she had clamped her mouth closed some time ago. Giving Heledd a comb had been a risk, but with limited time to prepare for the banquet, it was one Rhiannon had been forced to take.

Somehow, she managed to resist the urge to touch her stinging scalp. Her tangles were gone, and her hair was dressed, so there was no point in looking for sympathy for her throbbing head.

“Well then,” the older woman said, “you’d best join your father. I daresay he’s waited long enough.”

In the years that had passed since Rhiannon’s mother’s death, Heledd had become more of a companion to Rhiannon than a maid, and she was not beyond giving Rhiannon directions.

Rhiannon obediently rose from the stool where she’d been sitting. In this instance, Heledd was surely right. It would not do to disappoint her father again so soon after he’d been forced to come searching for her.

“Has there been any sighting of Cadwgan ap Gronw and his men?” she asked.

“Not that I’ve heard.” Heledd chuckled. “Your father sent Eifion to watch for them. With how fleet of foot that lad is, he’ll be back here long before the nobleman and his retinue ride into the yard.”

Rhiannon nodded. Eifion was their stableboy. He was small and wiry, and at twelve years of age, he could outrun every one of her father’s retainers—including men with far longer legs. Not only that, but he would take his responsibility as lookout very seriously and would return to report the moment he spotted the travelers.

Running her hands down her green gown, Rhiannon squared her narrow shoulders. The sky was clear this evening. If Eifion positioned himself on the bluff above the house, the moonlight would enable him to see a good stretch of the coast road. Since he had not yet returned, she surely had a few moments to compose herself.

“All will be well, bach,” Heledd said. “Cadwgan ap Gronw will be mesmerized by you.”

“Is that how it was for Dai?” she asked, referring to Heledd’s husband who worked as her father’s head groom. “Did you mesmerize him at first sight?”

“I hardly think my appearance would mesmerize anyone. I’m far too plain.”

Rhiannon considered the older lady critically. Her skin was wrinkled, her fingers workworn, and her hips wide, but until now, Rhiannon had never noticed any of those things. “Whatever plainness you claim to possess is not seen by others,” Rhiannon said.

“You have known me long enough to look beyond those things, bach. And I believe the same can be said for Dai.”

“But what of his first glance?”

Heledd’s brown eyes crinkled. “I believe he had eyes only for my fish pie. That was what won him over.”

Rhiannon sighed. “I cannot make fish pie.”

“A lady of your standing and beauty has no need to make fish pie.”

“Perhaps not. But whether it is how well I make fish pie or something else entirely, I should like to have a gentleman come to know my likes and dislikes, my strengths and weaknesses, rather than to make assumptions based merely on what he sees.”

Giving her an understanding look, Heledd crossed the room and picked up a small wooden box. She carried it back to Rhiannon. “There’s no cause for you to feel any less than your mother, bach. If she were here, she would have stood beside you tonight, exceptionally proud of the young lady you have become.” She opened the lid. “Here. Take something of hers with you and let it bring you an extra measure of courage.”

Rhiannon gazed into the box. A silver brooch and a gold bracelet lay beside a ringed cross hanging from a silver chain. Reaching for the necklace, she fastened the clasp around her neck. The ornately carved silver cross rested against her chest. She pressed her hand against it and closed her eyes, picturing her mother standing in the great hall, wearing her burgundy gown and this necklace as she welcomed a party from Owain Gwynedd’s court to her home. She swallowed the lump in her throat and opened her eyes. “I thank you, Heledd. I should have thought to wear Mam’s necklace.”

“It’s a small thing, but mayhap it will make her feel nearer.”

Rhiannon released an unsteady breath. “I must go to my father.”

“Yes.” Setting the jewelry box back on the table, Heledd gave her an

encouraging smile. “It is time.”

Leaving her bedchamber, Rhiannon walked the short distance to the great hall. Colorful tapestries hung on the walls, and fresh straw lay on the wooden floor. Three long tables had been positioned in a horseshoe-shaped configuration. Wooden trenchers and goblets lined each table along with flagons of mead, baskets of bread, and platters of fruit.

In the center of the room, meat sizzled on a spit above a blazing fire. The firelight was augmented by candles burning at the center of each table and in the windows.

Myfanwy, the young maid who helped in the kitchen, entered the room, another basket in her hands. The smell of baking bread followed her, coming from the oven across the yard. Bobbing a curtsy to Rhiannon, she began taking knives out of the basket and setting them on the table.

Rhiannon crossed the room to join her father, who stood near the head table, talking to Dai. The groom had likely come to update her father on the state of the two foals born to her father’s prize mare in the early hours of the morning. If it weren’t for the pending arrival of his guests, her father would have undoubtedly spent all evening in the stable.

“Good evening, Father. Dai.” She summoned a smile.

Both men turned to face her. Dai inclined his head politely.

“Good evening, Miss Rhiannon.”

Her father took a little longer to respond, his gaze softening as he met her eyes. “You look lovely, bach.”

“Thanks largely to Heledd,” Rhiannon admitted.

Dai chuckled. “She knows what she’s about, does Heledd.”

“She tells me that she makes a rather memorable fish pie,” Rhiannon said.

Dai’s grin widened. “That she does, miss. If Nest would ever let her into the kitchen, I daresay she’d make one for you and the master if you asked.”

“Well now,” Rhiannon’s father said. “We shall have to remember that the next time Nest decides to take a few days to visit her sister.”

“Indeed,” Rhiannon said. “Mayhap we could even go as far as to persuade Nest that another such trip should be made very soon.”

Dai looked so pleased that Rhiannon’s natural smile emerged. “It must be some time since—”

The front door swung open so far that it crashed against the wall. The resounding thud was immediately followed by the clatter of running feet. Everyone swung around in time to see Eifion stumble to a halt in the center

of the room. His hair was windblown and his expression stricken.

He took a deep, ragged breath, then cried, "Vikings! Two boatloads of 'em. They just landed on the beach."

Rhiannon's father stiffened. "Are you sure, lad?"

"Yes, Master Iorwerth. I saw the shields along the length of their longboats shinin' in the moonlight. There's no mistakin' their craft, an' there's no mistakin' they're carryin' a lot of men."

"How many?"

"Too many to count, Master."

"Rally the men, Dai," Rhiannon's father barked the order, and Dai took off at a run. Her father turned to her. "Find Heledd. The two of you must leave immediately. Hide in the trees on the hill behind the house until you see the infidels' boats put out to sea. God willing, they will find nothing here worth stealing and will leave as quickly as they have come."

"But, Father—" Horror clogged her throat. Even if Dai were to round up every man and boy who lived and worked at Bryn Eithin, he would muster only five. Five farm laborers against a horde of pillaging Vikings.

"Now, Rhiannon." His tone brooked no argument. He withdrew his dagger from the small scabbard at his waist and pointed to the back of the house. "Go!"

Rhiannon fled the room. She ran directly to her chamber and pushed open the door. Heledd was laying Rhiannon's seawater-stained gown across the back of a chair to dry.

"Heledd! We must leave."

The older woman looked at her in alarm. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Vikings." Rhiannon could barely say the word without fear capturing her voice. Gwynedd's children were raised on stories of the devastating destruction the marauding Norsemen reaped. Vikings had no reverence for churches, monasteries, or holy relics. Gwynedd's men were considered no obstacle to their looting; Gwynedd's women were too often their prize.

Gripping Heledd's hand in hers, Rhiannon pulled her out of the room. Which way? They could reach the hill by running the length of the longhouse and going through the stable attached to the other end of the building, but the fastest route was through the front door and directly across the yard. Once they were beyond the yard, they could remain in the shadows until they reached the trees.

"How close are they?" Heledd asked. Her ruddy complexion had paled,

but her tone remained calm.

“Eifion saw them on the beach.”

The older woman nodded, her expression grim. “Then we have no time to lose.”

Heledd’s words propelled Rhiannon to the front door. She pulled it open and stepped outside. An eerie silence hung over the yard. No seagulls cried. No voices called.

A shadow crossed the open space, melding into the darkness beside the stable doors. Seconds later, two more shadows flitted across the yard. Rhiannon tightened her grip on Heledd’s hand. Were the moving figures friends or foes? Where was her father?

“Hurry, bach.”

Heledd’s whispered warning drew Rhiannon’s attention back to the distant trees. That was their goal. And they must reach it while it was yet attainable.

Turning away from the stable, they hurried along the length of the longhouse, staying in the darkest shadows beneath the eaves. Across the yard, a crack of light appeared, widening as the door to the kitchen opened. A narrow silhouette appeared.

“Myfanwy,” Rhiannon gasped. “She must have returned to the kitchen before Eifion arrived back. She knows nothing of the Vikings on the beach.”

“What of Nest?” Heledd asked.

Rhiannon released her hand. “Remain here. I will send Myfanwy to you. As soon as she reaches you, go to the trees. I will fetch Nest, and we shall follow.”

“No, Rhiannon. Let me—”

“I am faster on my feet than you,” she interrupted. “I shall join you again in no time.” And then, before Heledd could argue further, Rhiannon left the protection of the wall and darted across the yard.

“Myfanwy!”

At Rhiannon’s urgent whisper, the young maid stumbled to a halt. The mead in the pitcher she was carrying sloshed loudly. “Miss Rhiannon?”

“Yes.” Rhiannon was close enough now that she could see Myfanwy’s face. “Quickly. Put down the pitcher.”

“Here, miss? In the yard?”

Myfanwy could not have sounded more mystified had Rhiannon asked her to place the pitcher on the moon.

“Vikings have come.”

Significantly more mead spilled to the ground.

“V-vikings, miss?”

“Yes. And we have no time to lose.” Rhiannon worked to curb her impatience as Myfanwy set the jug on the ground. “Run to the far corner of the longhouse. You’ll find Heledd there. Go with her to hide in the trees. I must fetch Nest.”

Now that she was free of the pitcher, Myfanwy took off running toward the spot where Heledd waited. Rhiannon did not watch her go. She picked up her skirts and crossed the remaining distance to the kitchen at a sprint.

Chapter 3

LEIF COULD NOT RID HIMSELF of the discomfiting feeling that all was not well. He reached the scrub grass and paused to look back at the two longboats lying side by side on the sand. They were far enough up the beach to prevent the tide from reclaiming them but close enough to the water's edge for a speedy departure. With half a dozen men standing guard, the craft would be well protected. Three more men had been sent up the nearby hill to act as lookouts. But neither of those precautions fully offset the risk of storming the unknown longhouse.

He shifted to his right so that he was within arm's reach of his brother. "Are you sure this is wise, Bjorn?" Leif kept his voice low. He had no qualms about expressing his concerns privately, but it would not do for the other men to hear him questioning his brother's leadership.

"The men are hungry," Bjorn said. "They will row better with their bellies full."

Leif refrained from pointing out that if the wind were in their sails, there would be plenty of time for the men to rest. Bjorn knew that as well as he did.

"Do you truly believe that a single longhouse will have sufficient food to satisfy forty hungry men?"

"We will take whatever they have," Bjorn said, his eyes trained on the flickering lights ahead.

Leif frowned into the darkness. There was no reasoning with Bjorn when he was like this. He'd set his sights on the Cymry's longhouse, and like a hawk circling a field mouse in the grass, he was preparing to pounce.

"We go in as one," Bjorn said, raising his voice just enough for the waiting men to hear. "All food is to be brought out to the boats." He raised his arm and eyed the shadowed men sternly. "Is that understood?"

"Are you listening, Knud?" Rune's whispered taunts had yet to abate. "I am to share whatever spoils you remove from the pantry, but anything I discover in the bedchambers shall be mine to keep."

Moonlight glinted off Bjorn's silver armband as he dropped his arm, and Knud's growled curse was lost beneath the Vikings' chilling war cry. In a ferocious wave, they rushed toward the longhouse. Crossing the stretch of grass that separated them from the main structure, the men entered the yard and fanned out.

As far as Leif was concerned, they were there for one reason: to find food.

Clutching his dagger, he made directly for the small building adjacent to the larger structure. If the aroma of baking bread emanating from the half-open door was any indication, it was the kitchen.

He was within a stone's throw of the structure when the door opened wider and two figures exited. Indistinguishable in the darkness, the rustle of fabric told him they were women.

“Make haste, Nest.”

The female voice confirmed his guess, and Leif adjusted his thinking from his native Norse to Gaelic. His frequent interaction with the Irish people living around the Viking settlement of Dyflin had given him a good grasp of their language. There was enough similarity between the Gaelic dialects to enable him to follow a rudimentary conversation in the language of the Cymry.

The women ran toward the far corner of the longhouse. A dog barked, the frantic warning sounding uncomfortably close. Turning to gauge the canine's proximity, Leif saw four men burst out of the stables. Starlight caught the blades in their hands. Instantly, his forward momentum stalled. These men had not been caught unawares; they were wielding weapons.

Several Vikings veered to meet them, their shouts preceding the thuds of impact and the clash of metal.

Leif scoured the yard in search of Bjorn. Most of the men had already entered the longhouse. The clatter and rumble of voices now coming from the small building at his rear suggested that others had beaten him to the kitchen.

Another crash sounded as the shutters on one of the longhouse's windows flew open. By the light of a single candle flickering on the windowsill, Leif saw a man leap out and land catlike on the ground, not more than an arm's length from the fleeing women.

One of the women screamed.

The man came to his feet, towering over them. “Well, well, what have we here?”

Leif's stomach curdled at the tone in Rune's voice. With the Cymry at the stables outnumbered and the men in the kitchen having no need of his assistance, he crossed the short distance between him and Rune at a run.

The candlelight illuminated the pale faces of two women. The older one, whose brown gown was partially covered by a white apron, was pressed against the wall. The other was facing Rune with clenched hands. Her elegant gown indicated her elevated status in the household, and her stance spoke of

anger rather than fear.

“Give me that,” she demanded, pointing at a small wooden box in Rune’s hand.

Rune grinned and took another step toward the young woman. “I daresay you are fair enough to make me wish that I understood your tongue.” He raised his free hand and reached for the necklace around the young woman’s neck. She slapped his hand away, and he laughed, grabbing her arm and yanking her closer. “Ah, there is some fire in this one.”

“You are despicable,” she said, her voice shaking with emotion. “First you ransack my home, and then you wish to steal all that I have left of my mother.”

Leif could not tell whether Rune grasped the meaning of her words, but Leif had heard enough. He stepped out of the shadows. The older woman whimpered, but the young one instantly swung her head around to face him.

Her dark eyes met his, and she wrapped her hand around the circled cross at her neck. “You shall not have it,” she cried.

“Let her go, Rune,” Leif said, reverting to his Norse tongue.

Rune’s grip on the girl remained firm. “I am not finished with her yet.”

The shouts and clanks associated with deadly combat continued on the other side of the yard.

Leif met the man’s eyes with a chilling stare. “We came for food—not women or trinkets.”

Rune gave a derogatory snort. “To ignore such things when they are here for the taking is foolishness.”

“I disagree,” Leif said through gritted teeth. “True foolishness is to disrespect the captain of one’s boat.”

Rune’s narrowed eyes told of his simmering anger. The man was five years Leif’s senior. His broad shoulders hinted at his formidable strength, but Leif was a hand’s width taller than him and had the advantage of rank. He stood completely still, waiting.

With a grunt of disgust, Rune released the young woman and pushed her away. She stumbled, righted herself, and then lunged for the wooden box in Rune’s other hand. The Viking anticipated her move, raising the box out of her reach and hitting her across the head with the back of his other hand. She cried out in pain and staggered backward.

“Miss Rhiannon!” The older woman’s shriek cut through the night and was answered by a roar of fury.

Leif pivoted. One of the Cymry had broken free of the melee at the stable doors and was running toward them, his sword raised. The muscles in Leif's arms tensed. Gripping his knife more securely, he shifted to the right. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rune step behind the young woman and reach for the axe at his hip.

"Touch her again and I shall run you through!"

The Cymry's shout had barely left his lips before Rune let his axe fly. The deadly weapon sailed through the air, penetrating the older man's chest with a sickening thud. Their assailant staggered sideways before doubling over and dropping to the ground.

"Father!" The young woman's cry of anguish reached deep into Leif's heart. She bolted to the fallen man's side, dropping to her knees in the dirt. "No. No, Father."

Leif crossed the short distance between them. The young woman had taken hold of her father's hand and was frantically smoothing back the gray hair from his face. The older man moaned.

"Forgive me, bach." His voice was barely above a whisper. "I . . . I failed you."

"No, Father. You have never failed me. And you never shall." Tears were streaming down the young woman's face.

Rune approached. With a curled lip, he looked down at the injured man. "One day the Cymry will learn that they are no match for a Viking," he said. And then he reached down and pulled his axe from the man's chest.

His victim moaned and gave one last faltering breath before falling silent.

"Father!" the young woman sobbed.

Rune turned his back on them, and from the hillside, a piercing whistle sounded a warning.

"To the boats!" Bjorn's voice rang across the yard.

The sounds of combat were replaced with shouts of urgency. In ones and twos, the Vikings exited the buildings at a run. Some carried bulging sacks. Two hauled a roasted pig, and four more held flagons of mead or ale.

As the yard emptied, the older woman left the protection of the wall and dropped to the ground beside the young woman. She began to wail, and Leif backed away. The lookouts had issued their warning. He must go.

As though she had only now realized that he was still there, the young woman looked up. Cradling her father's head on her knee, her tear-filled eyes met his.

“May God have mercy on your souls for what you have done,” she cried. Her tortured words penetrated his chest like a knife, and Leif took another unsteady step away from her.

“Leif!” Bjorn shouted. “The lookouts report mounted riders.”

The young woman likely did not know what had caused the Vikings’ sudden departure. Her grief was undoubtedly too great to truly care who came, but she deserved some measure of hope.

“Help is coming,” he said.

A flicker of shock entered her eyes. She had understood.

“What good will that do now?” She swiped her hand across her damp cheek. “It is everlastingly too late.” She covered her mouth to muffle a sob. “Go! And may you never set foot on Gwynedd’s soil again.”

Chapter 4

THROUGH A FOG OF DISBELIEF and anguish, Rhiannon heard the rattle of hooves approach the house. The horses entered the yard, and a man's voice—brusque and insistent—punctuated the air. For a moment, Rhiannon wondered who had come. And then, as though from a faded memory, she remembered her father coming to fetch her from the beach and his insistence that she present herself well to the visitors he was expecting this very day.

Her chin trembled at the memory of the pleasure in his eyes when she'd reappeared in the hall, dressed in her finest gown, with her hair pinned. It had been less than an hour ago, yet it felt as though an eon had passed. She released a quivering breath, the pain in her chest threatening to consume her.

The new arrivals were undoubtedly Cadwgan ap Gronw and his party. This would hardly be the welcome he was expecting. She should rise to greet him, but she could not. No matter the nobleman's lofty station, to offer him the deference he was due was currently beyond her.

At some point after the last Viking had disappeared, Nest had left to assess the damage done to the kitchen. Heledd and Myfanwy had returned from the trees. Devastated by what had happened during her absence, Heledd had gone to check on the condition of the men who had attempted to defend the house and its occupants, not least of them her husband, Dai. She had yet to reappear. Myfanwy had disappeared into the house, and Rhiannon had not thought to ask what she was about.

Footsteps sounded, drawing closer. Rhiannon raised her head. A man wearing a dark traveling cloak stood above her.

"You are Rhiannon ferch Iorwerth?" he said.

Drawing on every particle of strength she possessed, she pulled her shoulders back. "I am."

He bowed his head. "My name is Cadwgan ap Gronw."

Rhiannon studied him in the faint light. He was tall but not so tall as the Viking who had spoken to her before he'd left. She frowned. Surely it was unusual for a Norseman to converse in Gaelic. The Viking's accent had been thick but the words fully recognizable. The realization that one of the monsters who had pillaged her home and killed her father could communicate with her was unsettling. It humanized them. She forced all thought of him away. "You have come at the worst possible time, my lord."

"The stableboy claims it was Vikings."

“Yes.”

He swung to face the sea. “Would that we had arrived earlier.”

Sorrow threatened to overwhelm her. If Cadwgan had arrived an hour ago, her father would surely be alive still.

Movement in the shadows drew her attention.

Myfanwy appeared carrying a sheet. “Forgive me, miss. I brought this for . . . for the master.”

Gratitude for the maid’s thoughtful gesture vied with her horror over what had to be done. Slowly, she slid her knees out from beneath her father’s head and gently laid it upon the ground. Fighting back her tears, she rose to her feet.

“I thank you, Myfanwy. Would you be so good as to lay the sheet upon him?”

Myfanwy nodded mutely and softly set the cloth over Rhiannon’s father’s face, unfolding it until it covered him entirely.

“If I may be so bold, Miss Rhiannon,” Cadwgan said, “allow me to offer my men to transport the body to the house.”

The body. Rhiannon clasped her fingers together to prevent their trembling. How had her vibrant father suddenly been relegated to something as impersonal as a body?

“If you would be so good as to have your men place my father on the bed in his bedchamber, I would be most obliged.”

Cadwgan snapped his fingers. “Wyn,” he called. “Madoc.” Moments later, two men dressed in similar traveling cloaks materialized in the darkness. “Carry Iorwerth ap Gwion’s body to his bedchamber.”

The men moved to stand on either end of the draped sheet, and Rhiannon turned to Myfanwy. “Would you show them the way, Myfanwy?”

“Yes, miss.”

Myfanwy darted toward the door, and Rhiannon watched as the two men heaved her father off the ground and started after her. She followed behind.

Cadwgan fell into step beside her. “You have my deepest condolences, Miss Rhiannon.”

She nodded. No words would come.

“Was there no warning raised that Vikings were abroad?”

“None until our stableboy saw them on the beach,” she said.

They entered the hall. Benches lay on their sides. Wooden goblets and trenchers were scattered across the floor. There was no trace of the bread that

had sat on the tables. The platters of fruit were gone, as was the meat that had hung on the spit over the fire.

“The heathens left destruction in their wake,” Cadwgan said, surveying the room grimly. “You will need to look past the disarray if you are to discover the valuables they took with them.”

Rhiannon had given no thought to the loss of her mother’s jewelry box since the shorter Viking had thrown his axe.

“Nothing is so valuable as my father’s life,” she said.

They had reached his chamber, and she came to stand at the foot of his bed, attempting to comprehend the sight as Cadwgan’s men set the draped body down.

“I was a little younger than you when my father died,” Cadwgan said. “He too was killed at another’s hands.”

Rhiannon looked at him then, the candles flickering in the bedchamber allowing her to see him clearly for the first time. His hair and beard were dark brown, his eyes hazel. Under normal circumstances, his features would have been considered comely, but at this precise moment, bitter memories had pinched his lips and creased his brow.

“His death pains you still,” she said.

“It does.”

Rhiannon looked away. If there was to be no easement to the agony she was currently experiencing, she would not survive. Her mother’s passing had been difficult, but she and her father had turned to each other for comfort. Now there was no one. Shock rippled through her. There was no one. She was orphaned, and as an unmarried young woman, she had no claim on this house or the land upon which it stood. She swallowed the lump in her throat. Cadwgan had come expecting to meet a potential bride with a substantial dowry, not a bereaved young woman who might be homeless by week’s end.

“I am sorry that you have come all this way for naught.” She gestured to the upturned table and broken washbasin on the floor. “As you can see, I can offer you little by way of hospitality, and as such, I would not have you feel obliged to stay.”

Cadwgan’s gaze traversed the room. “It is late. I will send two of my men for the local priest. Upon their return, my men and I shall bed down for the night in the great hall.” His eyes settled on her, his assessment obvious but his conclusion a mystery. “Have you considered where your father should be buried?”

Up until this moment, it had not entered her mind. Numbly, she faced the first of the difficult tasks before her. Her father's body would need to be washed and shrouded. There would be prayers, the ringing of the church bells, and at least one mass said for his soul.

"My . . . my mother lies in the Sant Cwyfan church cemetery on Ynys Môn," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. "Adjacent to Owain Gwynedd's llys?"

"Her family is originally from Ynys Môn. It was fitting that she return there for burial." Rhiannon attempted to hold her emotions in check. "I believe my father would wish to lie beside her."

Cadwgan nodded. "Your father was a member of the uchelwr. It is only right that he be buried within sight of the royal court."

As far as Rhiannon was concerned, the gravesite's proximity to the king's llys was immaterial, but if her father's position in society helped facilitate his burial beside her mother, she was glad of it.

"Perhaps Father Iestin can be of assistance in getting word to the priest at Sant Cwyfan church," she said.

"That will not be necessary. I have men enough to spare for such things." Without waiting for a response, Cadwgan inclined his head. "If you will excuse me, I shall give those waiting in the yard their instructions."

It appeared that as far as Cadwgan was concerned, all was settled. Numbly, Rhiannon watched him stride back toward the door and the men awaiting him without. Every one of them was a stranger to her. It was likely that not one of them had ever known her father. Now they never would.

She needed to be with someone familiar—someone who shared a small portion of this all-encompassing loss. Turning a blind eye to the disheveled state of the house, she made for the stables. She had yet to learn the fate of the men who had stood at her father's side.

Lanterns sat atop the stalls closest to the door. Rhiannon paused, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the light. Cadwgan's men milled around, their voices filling the stable as they saw to the needs of their mounts. Eifion hurried past, a bucket of water in his hands.

"Eifion," Rhiannon called, "have you seen Heledd? Where are Meurig and Dai?"

The stableboy swung around, his puffy red eyes a sure sign that he'd been crying. "Heledd's seen' to them over there." He pointed to the far corner of the stable where another lantern glowed. His chin quivered. "Meurig's not

doin' so well, Miss Rhiannon."

She did not wait to hear more. Weaving through the confusion of men and horses, Rhiannon reached the other side of the building in seconds. Heledd was bent over Dai, bathing an ugly gash on his arm with a wet rag. Beside him, her father's younger groom, Meurig, lay with his eyes closed, a wide strip of fabric tied around his chest. A red stain marked the center of the bandage.

Rhiannon dropped to the ground beside Heledd. "How bad are they?"

Heledd looked up with a start. She dropped the rag into the nearby bucket of bloodied water and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Meurig took a spear to his side. I've bandaged him as best I can, but . . ." She left the words hanging, and neither of them spoke for a few seconds. Rhiannon bit her lip in a vain effort to control her emotions. Meurig's only movement was the unsteady rise and fall of his rib cage.

"What of Dai?"

Heledd's voice shook. "The cut on his arm is the worst of it."

"I'll manage, Miss Rhiannon." Dai's voice was faint. "Don't you be worrying 'bout me." He met her eyes, and she saw deep sorrow there. "Heledd told me about Master Iorwerth." He cleared his throat, his mouth moving before any more words emerged. "We fought hard, miss. And though it's small consolation after all you've lost this night, I believe the master would do the same again if given another chance. His presence saved you, and I reckon that means he did what he set out to do."

Rhiannon had thought she had no tears left to shed, but at Dai's somber observation, they came anew.

"You must heal, Dai," she said brokenly. "Bryn Eithin cannot lose another soul tonight."

"You listen to Miss Rhiannon," Heledd said, a hint of desperation in her voice as she swabbed his arm again. "Do you hear me, Dai ap Ifor?"

Dai's smile was weak, but it was welcome. "What's all this? You'll be having everyone thinking you care about me, Heledd."

"Of course I care about you, you foolish man." She wiped her eyes again. "Don't you dare let the wicked actions of Viking barbarians cut your life short."

"Or you'll have words with them?"

"Enough talking," Heledd said, attempting to hide her emotions behind her brusque tone. "You must save your strength." She began wrapping a strip of

cloth around his arm, and he moaned.

“Gently, woman.”

“Hush,” she said, tying the cloth in a knot. “We must get you to a bed in the house.”

“I will ask some of Cadwgan’s men to assist us,” Rhiannon said, coming to her feet. “They can carry Meurig.”

“Aye. Do that, bach.” Heledd glanced at Meurig again and shook her head sadly. “Even though he was always happiest when he was in the stables, it wouldn’t do to leave him here tonight.”

Chapter 5

EARLY-MORNING MIST HUNG OVER THE water as the two Viking longboats entered Dyflin Bay. The first rays of sunlight outlined the rows of buildings lining the shore, and Leif experienced an unexpected wave of relief. Normally, he was sorry to see his time at sea come to an end, but this homecoming felt different. He found himself desiring time away from his companions and their self-satisfied talk.

As was their wont, the Vikings had kept their spirits high by sharing stories of their triumphant raids. Leif had listened in silence. Until now, he had only ever participated in the pillage of monasteries and churches. The men of the cloth associated with those places were known to disappear at the first sighting of Vikings. Many of the monasteries had a round tower with a door placed so high above the ground that it was accessible only by ladder. Although some monks had the wherewithal to take food and treasures into the tower with them when they escaped the incoming hordes, there was almost always something left behind for the Vikings to claim.

The ornate crosses, goblets, and dishes held no religious significance to the Norsemen, and they felt no compunction over seizing anything that caught their eye. There had never been anyone in the vicinity to denounce the act, let alone make a personal and emotional plea that they desist. Until yesterday.

For hours, the Vikings had rowed against the blustery and capricious wind and waves of the Irish Sea. The sail had been of little use to them, and over the last hour, the ache in Leif's shoulders had gradually worked its way down his arms until his very fingers hurt from holding the oar. But no amount of physical exertion had removed the image from his mind of the young woman named Rhiannon dropping to the ground beside her father. Her tear-filled brown eyes and gutted expression had consumed him the entire sea crossing. As had the heart-wrenching words she'd cried.

His Gaelic was not fully fluent, but he was sure she had spoken of a god extending mercy and of the state of his soul. The gods he knew—Ymir, Odin, Frigg, Thor, and Loki, to name a few—ruled over many things, but none of them offered mercy to a man's soul. What had she meant by such words? He shook his head slightly. A good meal and several hours of sleep were what he needed. It was time to put his experience with the young lady behind him and redirect his focus to the haul they were to present to his father.

“Do you see, Leif?” Knud’s voice at the other end of his bench jarred Leif’s attention back to their imminent arrival at the Viking settlement. “No matter the early hour, we are to be welcomed home by a goodly crowd.”

Leif glanced at the nearby shore. Children were running along the path that followed the water’s edge, attempting to keep up with the boats as they made for the rocky harbor. Their cheers carried through the air. A dog barked, and fishermen looked up from their nets as the hulls of the Vikings’ boats grazed the shale.

With well-practiced precision, the Vikings stowed their oars and pulled their crafts clear of the high tide.

“Time to show Jarl Ottar our newly acquired treasures,” Rune said proudly. His teeth flashed in the grayish light. “What say you, Leif? Will the gold cross you claimed at the first monastery be sufficient to impress your father?”

Leif had no doubt his father would be taken with the decorative piece. If the cross’s weight was any indication, it was made of solid gold. The etching was as fine as any Leif had seen, and a single red jewel sat where the horizontal piece met the vertical one. He lifted the sack out from beneath his seat, its heaviness a fitting reflection of his current feelings.

“Leif could bring home a pine cone, and the jarl would be proud of him,” Knud said, pulling his own sack out of the boat. “After all, he brought us across the sea with nothing more than the stars to guide him.”

Rune snorted. “Any Viking worthy of the title could do that.”

Knud glanced at Leif, his eyebrow raised as though expecting a rebuttal.

Leif ignored the look. His skills with an oar and with reading the night sky were well known; he had no need to prove himself to Rune. “I would concern yourself with whether my father appreciates what you have to share rather than his response to my offering,” Leif said, swinging his sack across his shoulder.

Knud’s grin was a perfect foil to Rune’s scowl.

“Mayhap the jarl would look more kindly upon your rather ordinary goblets if you were to also have some fine beeswax candles . . .” Knud left the words hanging as he reached for his bag full of those very things.

“You are a fool, Knud,” Rune growled.

“I would not be so sure,” Leif said, starting up the beach. “My father is known to study maps late into the night. I daresay good beeswax candles would be a fine offering indeed.”

Knud's grin widened, but Rune would not be outdone. He increased his pace across the rocky beach to keep up with Leif's longer stride. "I believe the jarl will consider a noblewoman's jewelry box a far better supplement than monks' candles," Rune said.

Instantly, the weight on Leif's shoulders seemed to increase. For a few short minutes, he had thought on something other than the events at the longhouse. Rune's smug reminder brought the uncomfortable memories back. "An empty jewelry box is scarcely worth mentioning," he said with feigned indifference.

"It is hardly empty."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed, it is," Rune boasted. "It contains jewelry of finely worked silver and gold."

Based on Rune's ease of carrying the small wooden box, Leif was quite sure it contained far less gold than the single cross he carried. And yet, the items had obviously meant a great deal to Rhiannon. Had her strong desire to repossess the box been driven by the intrinsic value of its contents, or was there more to it than that?

"Silver and gold," Leif repeated. "That would certainly increase the worth of a small wooden box."

"It cannot possibly contain anything near so valuable as Leif's cross," Knud said.

Rune gave the box a slight shake, his eyes lighting up at the resulting clink of metal. "The promise of a piece of jewelry from the Kingdom of Gwynedd will win over any woman in Dyflin."

The crowd had grown in the short time it had taken to unload the longboat and was now lining the road that led from the dock to the jarl's residence. Up ahead, those who had gathered to watch the longboats arrive parted to allow Bjorn and the men from his boat to pass through. Leif followed, with Rune and Knud beside him.

"If a trinket is the greatest desire of the women with whom you associate, you are spending your time with the wrong ones," Knud said. He was already scouring the faces lining the road along the dock, and Leif experienced a pang of something that felt remarkably like envy. Knud may be returning from the raid with little more than beeswax candles, but his new young wife, Frida, would welcome him back with open arms. She would care only that he was home.

“Rune!” Two young women stood together near the door of an ale house. One beckoned, smiling coyly. “Come. We wish to hear of your adventures.”

“Yes,” the second one called. “Show us what you have brought back with you.”

Rune acknowledged them with a grin. “Later, ladies,” he called back. “I shall return later.”

They smiled knowingly before turning to watch the men following after them. Leif looked away, sickened at the thought of the women from the ale house pawing through the things that had meant so much to the distraught young woman they had left behind.

“How many goblets did you take from the monastery, Rune?” he asked.

“A dozen.”

Rune’s arrogance grated, and Leif had no desire to feed it, but if he did not act now, he would lose his chance. “Very well.” He kept his pace steady, not willing to show how difficult this was for him. “Give them to Knud.”

At his left, Knud’s footsteps faltered, but Leif’s gaze remained on Rune. Like steam rising from a boiling pot, indignation hissed from the man’s lips.

But before either man could say a word, Leif spoke again. “I have yet to give Knud and Frida a wedding gift. Give Knud the goblets; I will take the wooden box and the jewelry within.” He shifted the sack in his hand. “In exchange, you shall have the gold cross.”

Rune’s eyes widened. No matter his earlier bluster, he knew full well that the gold cross was of significantly more worth than the goblets and jewelry box.

“You would have me claim the gold cross?” Rune asked. Already, his eyes shone with avarice. “Even as we stand before your father?”

Leif set his jaw. He was a fool. The young woman at the longhouse would be none the wiser if Rune flaunted her precious jewelry in front of the women in the ale house. But it would not do to back down now. As much as he wished to be the one to present such a magnificent treasure as the cross to his father, the pleasure such an act would produce would never fully assuage his own discomfort over Rune’s careless disregard for the heartbreak of another. “Yes.”

“Leif.” Knud’s voice was troubled. “As much as I appreciate the gift, are you sure this is wise?”

Wise? No. It was undoubtedly the very opposite. But right? That was something else entirely.

“It will be well, Knud,” Leif said. “You may give the goblets to Frida with my blessing.”

Knud shook his head. “It is too much.”

Leif smiled. Knud’s attitude was a refreshing change from Rune’s. “I believe I heard you lay claim to those very cups at least twice during our voyage.”

“Yes, but—”

Rune thrust his sack at Knud. “Are you addlebrained? Take it.”

Knud offered Leif one more hesitant look before accepting the sack. “You have my thanks, Leif.”

Ignoring Knud—and the fact that he had offered him no gratitude—Rune extended the wooden box to Leif. “I will take the cross.”

Leif slid the sack off his shoulder. “I am sure my father will be well pleased,” he said, handing the weighted bag to Rune.

“Of that, I have no doubt.” Rune’s smug smile had returned. “I wish you well with the ladies, Leif. I daresay one or two of them may show some interest in your prize.”

Leif ignored him. For better or for worse, the deed was done, and he would not allow himself to regret it.

Chapter 6

ONE OF CADWGAN'S MEN TOSSED the final shovelful of dirt onto the dark-brown mound before moving to stand behind the handful of people who had gathered to pay their last respects. Father Iestin chanted one final prayer over the newly filled grave, and Rhiannon swallowed the lump in her throat. Meurig had not survived the night. The priest had arrived in time to offer the groom his last rites, and knowing that he had no close family, Rhiannon had suggested that he be buried on the hill behind the house, in the land he had loved.

At a signal from the priest, Rhiannon stepped forward and set a sprig of rosemary that Myfanwy had gathered this morning atop Meurig's grave. Resuming her former position between Cadwgan and Heledd, she waited whilst the other servants added more stems of rosemary to the mound.

Cadwgan stood silent and somber. Still wearing his dark travel cloak, his gaze remained fixed on the grave at his feet. Heledd's arm was wrapped around Dai's. His injured arm hung limply at his other side. His complexion had yet to regain its full color, and his eyes held the pain he was experiencing, but he had insisted upon attending the short graveside service for his friend.

Rhiannon wrapped her arms around herself, her gray wool cloak doing little to ward off the morning chill. As difficult as this ceremony was, she acknowledged that the one yet to come would be significantly harder. The priest had offered multiple prayers over her father's body last night. The blessings were not as efficacious to her father's soul as the administration of last rites would have been, but with the promise of at least one mass and a formal burial ahead, Rhiannon had faith that her father would pass through to the other side in peace.

Father Iestin must have guessed the direction of her thoughts. He approached her, the palms of his hands pressed together, a sad smile on his lips. "God bless you, child."

Rhiannon lowered her head to accept the blessing. "I thank you, Father."

She heard the rustle of his robe as he moved across the grass, and she raised her head in time to see him greet Eifion, who was standing gazing upon Meurig's burial spot with reddened eyes.

"What say you, young Eifion?" Father Iestin said. "With the many visitors at the house, there must be a great deal of work to be done at the stable. Shall

we go there together?”

“Yes, Father.” Eifion sniffled and ran his sleeve beneath his nose. “I . . . I daresay the horses will be wantin’ fresh water by now.”

“Well, if you were to give me a pail, I believe I could be of some assistance.” He placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “In my youth, I spent a great deal of time in the stables.”

Eifion’s surprised expression was quickly masked behind another swipe of his sleeve. “Did . . . did you like it?”

“Very much.” The kindly priest guided Eifion toward the narrow footpath that led down the hillside. “And I have missed it.”

They walked only a few steps more before the wind captured their voices and their conversation was lost.

Across from Rhiannon, Nest managed a tremulous smile. “If you’ll excuse Myfanwy and me, Miss Rhiannon, we shall return to the kitchen. There’s not much left to work with, but I believe I can manage to put some broth and bread on the table before the noon hour.”

“That would be most welcome.”

Rhiannon had given no thought to eating since yesterday, but Nest was right. Cadwgan and his men would need something to sustain them before they left Bryn Eithin. She watched as the cook and maid followed after Father Iestin.

“Come, Dai.” At Rhiannon’s side, Heledd tightened her hold on her husband’s arm. “There’s nothing more to be done here, and you must rest.”

For a fleeting moment, Rhiannon thought Dai might object, but then his shoulders slumped. “If I had only—”

“No, Dai.” Heledd’s voice trembled. “There is no place for blame here.”

A vision of the bearded, redheaded Viking holding her mother’s jewelry box in one hand and an axe in the other flashed through Rhiannon’s mind. She shuddered at the memory of his cold, blue eyes. Heledd was right. The blame for this tragedy lay far from here, across the sea.

“Listen to Heledd, Dai,” Rhiannon said. “And do everything in your power to ensure that those who are truly responsible do not claim your life also.”

Dai appeared unconvinced, but Heledd gave her a grateful look. “Will you be well if I go with Dai now?”

Rhiannon nodded. What little sleep she’d managed the night before had been fitful and had brought little relief. She longed for some semblance of

peace and had thought to stay on the hill by herself for a spell, but before she could voice the desire, Cadwgan spoke.

“I shall escort Miss Rhiannon to the house.”

A seagull flew overhead, its shadow passing over the grave like an ethereal being. Rhiannon shivered, and Cadwgan extended his arm. Perhaps it was best that she return to the house with the others. She set her hand upon his sleeve. His arm was firm and strong, and she was in desperate need of an anchor.

“You have my thanks, my lord.”

He inclined his head. “It is my honor to be of service.”

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“Leif. I would speak with you for a moment.”

At the sound of his father’s voice, Leif turned from gazing sightlessly into the fire in the great room of the jarl’s house and set his sights on the man crossing the room toward him. Leif had inherited his father’s height and broad shoulders, but whereas Jarl Ottar’s hair and beard were flecked with gray, Leif’s blond locks were tinged with red.

“Father,” Leif said, bowing respectfully.

They had greeted one another upon the Vikings’ arrival at the large house and had sat together at the head table during the celebratory feast ordered to welcome the raiders home, but between viewing each man’s haul, examining the gold cross at length, and overseeing the general merrymaking, there had been no opportunity for his father to do more than express his gratitude for Bjorn’s and Leif’s safe return.

Leif had expected nothing else. Indeed, had he kept his wits about him, he would have retired to his chamber when the other men had left the house. Fatigue—of body and mind—had long since slowed his movements and clouded his thinking. As the jarl’s son and styrimadr of the longboat, he’d not wanted to be the first to leave, so he’d tarried by the fire, waiting for the large room to empty of guests. Now that it had, nothing sounded so inviting as his bed, but it seemed he had waited a few moments too long.

“It appears that your recent raids were successful,” his father said.

“Aye.” Leif hardly thought he needed to qualify his answer. The Vikings’ haul had already been displayed.

His father studied him. “I have just come from speaking with Bjorn. He was under the distinct impression that it was you, not Rune, who left the Cymry’s monastery carrying the gold cross.” His thick, graying eyebrows

came together in a frown. “Is this true?”

Leif ran his fingers through his hair. He should have guessed that someone would question Rune’s claim to the relic. Every one of the Vikings had taken a turn admiring the item in Leif’s sack.

“I took the cross from the monastery wall,” he said. “Later, I exchanged it for items that Rune acquired.”

His father’s frown deepened. “You are aware that I do not tolerate the commanders of my longboats participating in games of chance.”

Leif stifled a sigh. Weariness and patience were poorly matched companions. “I did not lose it in a game of chance, Father. I chose to make the exchange.”

“Did you not recognize the worth of such a piece?”

How could he explain? Was there anything of silver or gold that outvalued peace of conscience? Even now, after forfeiting the treasure to save the contents of the wooden jewelry box, he was unconvinced that it had been enough.

“It will be a prized addition to the riches of Dyflin,” Leif said. “It matters little who first presented it to the jarl.”

Perplexity shone in his father’s blue eyes. “That may be, but I would have preferred that it had been you.” He hesitated. “May I ask what you gained from so costly an exchange? I pray that it was significantly more than the small box of simple ornaments you displayed earlier.”

Leif did not flinch. Nor did his eyes stray to the wooden jewelry box sitting against the wall less than three paces distant. “My gain has yet to be determined,” he said. “But I believe I acted rightly.”

“Very well.” His father’s skepticism remained, but there was a softening in his expression. “There will be time enough to talk of such things in the days ahead. I would rather see the bleary look gone from your eyes first.”

Leif managed a weak grin. “It shows, does it?”

“Go to bed, Leif,” his father said with a flick of his hand. He started across the room toward his own chambers. “You are likely the only man who crossed the sea by night who is still upright.”

Chapter 7

RHIANNON AND CADWGAN HAD ALMOST reached the courtyard when they heard Eifion's shout.

"Men on horseback!" The boy left Father Iestin standing at the door of the stables and raced back to meet Rhiannon. "They're comin' along the coast road, and they wear Owain Gwynedd's colors."

Owain Gwynedd. Rhiannon's heart warmed with a faint glimmer of hope. As a child, she had accompanied her mother to the king's residence on Ynys Môn every summer. For her mother, it had been an opportunity to catch up on the happenings at court and to spend time with her sister, Gwladys; for Rhiannon, it had been eight weeks filled with marvelous adventures with her royal cousins. Although Prince Hywel outgrew their childish games several years before Rhiannon and his sister Gwenllian had, Rhiannon's memories of treasure hunts in the llys and playing together on the sandy beaches remained some of her happiest.

"Were you expecting a visit from the king?" Cadwgan asked. "Surely it is not possible that he has heard of yesterday's tragic events so quickly."

"It may simply be a few of his men stopping on their way back to Ynys Môn. It is no secret that the king's men are welcome at Bryn Eithin."

Cadwgan nodded thoughtfully as he eyed the small portion of road visible from where they stood. "I had not heard that he was gone from the llys."

"Nor I," Rhiannon said. "I am as surprised as you are by these new arrivals."

She did not claim to know Owain Gwynedd well—he'd had very little interaction with her during her summer visits—but he was her uncle by marriage, and if he or any of his retinue had come, she would be glad.

Lifting her hand from Cadwgan's arm, she hurried after Eifion.

"Miss Rhiannon." Nest called to her as she passed the kitchen, and by the look on her face, she'd heard Eifion's announcement. "Is it truly the king coming?" She waved one hand at the nearby open door, her expression a blend of fear and dismay. "I have nothing to offer him or his men."

"Bread and broth will have to suffice," Rhiannon said. "I daresay the men will be grateful for any form of repast."

"But the king—"

"Will be fully understanding when I explain what we have endured," Rhiannon said, attempting to curb her irritation. They had just come from

burying Meurig. Her father—a member of the king’s own uchelwr—lay dead upon his bed. Did Nest truly believe that the monarch would have more concern for the food placed before him than he had for the murders the Vikings had so recently committed?

The rattle of many hooves hitting the pebble-strewn road was audible now, and Rhiannon turned away from Nest to greet the first riders as they entered the courtyard. A white horse carried a pennant bearer. The familiar green flag adorned with three gold eagles fluttered in the breeze ahead of two rows of heavily armed warriors.

Behind the pennant bearer, and flanked by two warriors wearing leather armor and helmets and bearing swords and round shields, came a man dressed in a long blue tunic, his fur-lined cloak clasped at his shoulder with a large silver brooch. His brown hair fell to his shoulder, and as he turned to survey the courtyard, his hazel-eyed gaze instantly landed upon Rhiannon. “Well met, cousin,” he called, a smile lighting his features.

“Hywel!” Rhiannon ran the short distance between them, the familiarity of his greeting causing a lump to form in her throat. To have her cousin come—one who had known her father and would recognize her paralyzing loss—was better than a visit from the king himself.

By the time Rhiannon reached him, Hywel had dismounted.

“I am so glad you are come,” she said.

“Aye. But I wish it were under better circumstances,” he said. “Is your father about?”

“He . . . he is gone.”

“I am come to warn him. We received word at the llys that Llanrhys Abbey has been raided by Vikings.” Hywel scowled. “By the time we reached it, the vile marauders had also sacked the monastery at Penarth Fawr and the church at Harlech. There’s been no sighting of them for two days. They surely know that the Cymry would route them out if they stayed longer. But with them traveling by longboat, and Bryn Eithin so close to the sea, I wished to advise your father to be on his guard. Indeed, it might be best for the household to quit the area until we are sure the Vikings are gone from our shores.”

Rhiannon bit her lower lip to stop it from shaking. “Oh, that you had come a day earlier.”

“Earlier?” Hywel’s attention was suddenly riveted upon Rhiannon’s face. “Why?”

“The Vikings have come already.” It was useless to prevent her tears from falling. “Two longboats pulled ashore below the house in the fading light of last evening. We had nothing compared with the treasures of the abbey, but they stole a few trinkets and our food.” She swallowed. “They also took the lives of our groom and my father.”

Hywel stared at her. “Iorwerth ap Gwion is dead?”

Cadwgan stepped up beside her. “Aye. And we are newly returned from burying his groom on the hillside beyond the house.”

Hywel’s eyes widened. “Cadwgan. I had not thought to find you here.”

“My men and I arrived soon after the Vikings took to sea. I came at Iorwerth ap Gwion’s invitation,” he said calmly. “Like you, I was too late to be of any assistance to the household.”

There could be little doubt that Hywel knew the nature of Cadwgan’s visit. Their close relationship to opposite sides of the royal family made for an advantageous match for both Rhiannon and Cadwgan.

“I am grieved,” Hywel said. “Sorely grieved. My father will be similarly distressed. Iorwerth ap Gwion was the best of men.”

Rhiannon nodded. No words would come.

Hywel’s expression hardened. “The Vikings shall pay for this, Rhiannon.”

“How? They are long gone.”

Hywel shook his head. “Do not underestimate the king, cousin. There is always something that can be done.”

The ache in Rhiannon’s heart was all-consuming. Did no one understand? It did not matter what manner of retaliation the king undertook; nothing would bring back her father.

She looked beyond the men standing beside her, past the line of mounted warriors and the stable, and let her gaze rest upon the vast stretch of open sea below the house. The distant whitecaps danced as the waves rolled toward the shore in a steady, flowing rhythm. Her father may no longer be at her side, but his influence was as constant as the incoming breakers. And no matter the distressing circumstances, she knew what he would expect her to do.

Lifting her head, she offered Hywel a tremulous smile. “I cannot offer you or your men much by way of refreshment,” she said, “but such as we have, you are welcome to share.”

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If the position of the sunbeams filtering through the chinks in the wooden walls was any indication, Leif had been asleep for approximately three hours.

It was not long enough. Logically, he knew that. Unfortunately, his body was not currently willing to listen to logic, and his head was behaving even more traitorously. If he was not reliving his disturbing experience outside the longhouse in Gwynedd in his waking thoughts, he was recreating them in his nightmares.

He turned to his right, and the straw beneath him rustled loudly. The ache in his arms had intensified, making it difficult to find a comfortable position. He rolled onto his other side once more before issuing a frustrated groan and pulling himself into a sitting position. Across from him, Bjorn was sleeping soundly. His brother's even snores made Leif's current situation all the worse. He rolled his shoulders, attempting to work out the discomfort. It made little difference.

Climbing out of bed, he came to his feet and walked across the small room to the table that held a washbasin and a comb. After splashing his face with water, he ran the comb through his blond hair. His tunic was wrinkled, and his boots bore the wavy white lines left behind by dried salt water. He would certainly need to avoid his father. Quite apart from his bleary eyes, his travel-stained clothing would give away his lack of recuperation.

He exited his chamber and entered the longhouse's great hall. It was empty. Benches lined the walls, and the fire had dimmed. This evening, the flames would be stoked again and people would gather, but for now, the women were elsewhere in the house, and the men were about their business in town.

What had begun as little more than a Viking outpost in the 800s was now a thriving settlement. Indeed, Dyflin was rapidly becoming an influential commercial hub for traders from a multitude of nations. The Norsemen's capacity for traveling long distances by sea had been a boon to their economy. The local market boasted stalls selling silver, silks, pottery, and spices from faraway places. In exchange, the Vikings sold honey, wheat, wool, tin, leather, and fish.

No matter the profitable trading that occurred in Dyflin, however, most Vikings had not changed the way they lived. It was unusual for a building in the community to boast more than one room. Leif's father's position as jarl afforded him the luxury of some extra chambers. It was a comfort that Leif particularly appreciated after having shared a longboat with nineteen men for so many days.

His mother's quarters were above the great hall, and it was there that he

headed now.

His knock was answered by one of the household slaves.

“Good day, Bodil,” Leif said. “Is my mother within?”

The plainly dressed young woman opened the door wider to allow him access. “She is, Master Leif.”

Leif stepped inside. To Bodil’s right, two low stools sat beside three large baskets of raw wool. The empty stool, Leif assumed, was where she’d been seated before she’d come to the door. It appeared that she had been wool sorting. On the other stool, another slave named Hilda was combing the wool in preparation for spinning. And sitting on a chair a few feet distant was an elegant woman dressed in a light-blue gown with a silver girdle around her slim waist. Her fine facial bone structure was matched by her clear skin, and her golden-brown hair was plaited into two long ropes.

“Good day, Mother,” he said.

Smiling, his mother set down her spinning distaff and rose to her feet.

“Leif!” she said. “I heard that you were returned. Welcome home!”

He stepped toward her and lowered his head to kiss her cheeks. “I believe you are shrinking, Mother.”

She laughed. It was a warm sound that helped soothe the ache in his heart. “When was the last time you stood beside your father, son? I believe you may have overtaken him in height.”

Although Leif had been taller than Bjorn for two years, he had never considered the possibility that he would one day overtake his father. Among the people of Dyflin, the jarl was considered a giant of a man—in influence and stature.

“If that is the case,” Leif said, “I shall outgrow my seat in the longboat.”

“Well now. Mayhap we have finally found a way to keep your feet on dry land.”

Leif chuckled. “Or a reason to build a bigger boat.”

She shook her head affectionately. “One day, Leif. One day, you shall find a reason sufficiently compelling to put down roots.”

“Why would I do that when I have the opportunity to visit places yet to be discovered and see the lands my ancestors once knew?”

His mother looked at him quizzically. “Is there a boat returning to the north countries soon?”

“If there is, I have not heard of it.”

She accepted his response but studied him more closely. “You mentioned

the land of your ancestors, so I assumed . . .” Her voice trailed off, and he thought he saw concern flicker in her hazel eyes. “Is something amiss, Leif?”

“Would you tell me what you remember of your grandmother? The one who was a Cymry.”

Understanding flooded her face. “Ah. You stepped on Cymry’s soil this time. Is that it?”

“Yes.” He was not yet ready to share the whole of his experience, but his mother knew him well enough to know that something had been stirred within him. “I felt something there unlike anything I have experienced in our raids along the coast of Ireland.”

“Sit with me.” She waited until he had moved the chair in the corner next to hers before resuming her seat. Taking up the spinning distaff again, she appeared momentarily lost in memories.

“Mother?”

She sighed. “I was but twelve years old when Nain died.”

“Nain? Was that her name?”

“It was not her given name, but it was what I called her.” His mother smiled. “She had a big heart and a fiery temper. She used to say that Farfar forced her to learn the Norse tongue and Norse ways but that her children would eat laverbread and her grandchildren would call her Nain.”

“Laverbread?”

“It must have been something she ate in her homeland,” his mother said. “She made it with seaweed.”

Leif grimaced. “I’m surprised Farfar was willing to tolerate such food.”

“I think Farfar would have done almost anything for her. He was part of the raiding party when she was captured. According to all the family stories, she was brought back to Dyflin to be sold as a slave, but he fell in love with her. He bought her only to make her a free woman and ask her to be his wife.”

Leif pondered this. Most of the slaves who came and went through Dyflin’s market had been born into slavery and knew nothing else. Occasionally, however, a raiding party would return with captives who were then sold to merchants from around Europe.

His thoughts inevitably returned to Rhiannon. Rune had entertained the idea of bringing her back to Ireland. Leif had seen it in his eyes. But for some reason—even though Leif had grown up within a social system that included slaves—the very prospect had seemed abhorrent to him.

May God have mercy on your souls. He clenched his hands as her tortured words echoed through his mind.

“Did your Nain ever speak of her former life? Of her people or . . . or her God?” he asked.

His mother became thoughtful. “There is one memory I have never shared with another.” As though turning back time, the distaff spun in her hand. “Nain and I were walking along the seashore together. I cannot tell you where, exactly, but we were alone. She held my hand and pointed to the clear, blue sky and then to the sea. ‘Astrid,’ she said, ‘that very same sun shines over my home in Gwynedd, the same water laps at its shores, and the same God watches over us all.’” His mother smiled sadly. “Nain stood gazing out to sea for some time after that. I was young, so I did not press her to explain the meaning of her words, but perhaps I should have.”

“Why would she single out one god when there are so many?”

“I cannot say for certain. But it may be that notwithstanding how long she had lived amongst the Norse people, her belief in the god she had known in her youth remained.”

“The Cymry believe in only one god?”

“So I am told. And the Irish, the same.”

Leif frowned. One god who oversaw all things would be powerful indeed.

“The change must have been hard for her,” Leif said.

His mother nodded. “At first, surely. But by the time I knew her, she had become accustomed to her life here. She spoke Norse unless she was upset, and then she reverted to her mother tongue.”

Leif chuckled. “That must have occurred more than once for you to remember it.”

“Her hair was white when I knew her, but by all accounts, when she was young, she had beautiful red hair—and a temper to go with it.” His mother’s eyes twinkled. “I believe it fair to say that my brothers heard significantly more Gaelic words than did I.”

“I wish I had known her.”

“As do I.” His mother smiled. “I believe she would have liked you very much.”

He raised his eyebrows. “More than she favored my headstrong uncles?”

She laughed. “Undoubtedly. Unlike you, neither of them had so much as a hint of red in their beards.”

Chapter 8

IT SEEMED TO RHIANNON THAT grief must have muddled her senses. Else why would it appear that Cadwgan wished nothing more than to have Hywel gone? They had sat at the table to eat Nest's bread and broth together but had yet to agree upon anything.

"It would have behooved you to warn those living along the coast first rather than making directly for the monasteries the Vikings had long since plundered and abandoned," Cadwgan said.

"The barbarians are not known for attacking family dwellings," Hywel responded. "And if we had not visited Llanrhys Abbey, we would not have known the direction the Norsemen were taking."

"What difference would their direction make if they were gone when you arrived?"

Hywel's irritation was mounting. "A frustration you experienced at Bryn Eithin, it would seem."

"I was not sent out to rid our land of the marauders."

Rhiannon broke into the exchange. "It was the approach of Cadwgan and his men on the coast road that sent the Vikings back to sea. I am grateful for his arrival and for all that he has done since."

Cadwgan's gaze remained fixed upon Hywel, who acknowledged Rhiannon's point with a slight inclination of his head. "May I be permitted to speak for my father in expressing thanks for your assistance."

"It has been an honor to be of service. Would that I had been given the opportunity to fight with Iorwerth ap Gwion."

"You did not speak with Rhiannon's father before he passed, then?" Hywel asked.

"I did not."

The change in Hywel's expression was so small as to make it almost indiscernible, but when he turned to Rhiannon, he spoke with greater confidence. "If you would have a servant pack your trunks, Rhiannon, my men and I will escort you to Ynys Môn. Until other arrangements are made, you shall stay at the royal llys."

Cadwgan's expression darkened. "I may not have spoken to Rhiannon's father yesterday," he said, "but it does not signify that we had not come to an understanding. Iorwerth ap Gwion wished me to take his daughter to wife, and no matter Rhiannon's unexpected change in circumstances, I am

prepared to act upon her father's request. She shall travel with me to Dyffryn Clwyd, and we shall be married forthwith."

Married forthwith. Rhiannon blinked. Had she heard Cadwgan aright? She no longer had a dowry to offer the nobleman, yet he wished to make her his bride. It was more than she could have hoped for, and she waited for some semblance of happiness—or at the very least, relief—to lift her spirits. But nothing came. Her heart was an empty cavern void of all emotions.

"You would deny Rhiannon a time of mourning, then?" Hywel appeared equally unmoved by Cadwgan's gesture. "Surely you must be made of stone to ignore the pain she is currently experiencing."

"On the contrary," Cadwgan said, his eyes flashing angrily. "I know better than you what it is to lose a father too soon."

"Then it would seem fitting that you would allow her the courtesy of being present at her father's burial before you make her your wife."

"If courtesy is something you wish to discuss, you might give some consideration to Rhiannon's immediate situation," Cadwgan responded. "With the death of her father, she now finds herself without home or income. I am in a position to alleviate her concern on both counts."

"That is no concern at all," Hywel said. "Rhiannon is a well-loved member of my mother's family and a frequent visitor at the royal llys. For the time being, she belongs there."

Rhiannon stared at Hywel. Did he truly believe that? No matter the time she'd spent at Owain Gwynedd's llys in her youth, Bryn Eithin was the only place she'd ever called home, the only place to which she justly belonged.

Cadwgan rose and fixed Hywel with an icy glare. "No matter that you ride at the head of four dozen soldiers, you have no authority in this instance."

Hywel came to his feet, meeting Cadwgan's look without flinching. "On the contrary, I speak and act for Owain Gwynedd."

Cadwgan snorted. "Have you so quickly forgotten that your father, the king, has already given this match his blessing?"

The first flicker of emotion lit Rhiannon's chest, and she recognized the burn as indignation. The two men were openly discussing *her* future, but neither of them had spared her a glance. "That may be," she said, "but it is my understanding that no contract has been signed."

At the sound of her voice, both men swung to face her. Hywel's familiar hazel eyes met hers even as Cadwgan's dark eyebrows rose questioningly. Rhiannon took a steadying breath. As difficult as it was to contemplate

leaving the rugged beauty of the home she'd always known for the lavish royal court on Ynys Môn, the alternative—to go with Cadwgan now, to marry him straightway—was unthinkable.

Raising her chin a fraction, she met Cadwgan's enigmatic gaze. "Your offer to take me as your wife at this unfortunate time is the height of gallantry, my lord, but I cannot, in good conscience, accept." Though the bedchamber where her father's shrouded body lay was currently beyond her view, emotion clogged her throat. "I must travel to Ynys Môn to witness my father's burial, and as I am now without either parent, I shall most assuredly require a time of adjustment and mourning."

Cadwgan's frown was quickly lost behind his polite bow. "If that is truly your wish."

"It . . . it is."

"Then, I shall honor it." He raised his dark head and when he faced her once more, she experienced a pang of misgiving. Would she live to regret her decision if the handsome nobleman chose to look elsewhere for a bride?

Ignoring Hywel, she clasped her hands together and assumed the confidence she'd so admired in her mother. "If you are still of a mind to consider me worthy of your attention after some months have passed, I hope you will seek me out."

An emotion she could not quite identify lit his eyes. It was instantly masked by a mannerly inclination of his head.

"But of course," he said. "I shall make it a point to ask after you when I next visit the royal llys."

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Leif stood alone on the bluff. Below him, the Irish Sea's waves beat relentlessly against the weathered cliffs, spraying the seagulls that dared fly too close. Pebbles rattled as the water spilled over them, the sound captured by the brisk breeze. The sea appeared gray today. It matched the sky—and his mood—perfectly.

With no conscious thought, he loosened the strings of the small purse hanging from his belt and withdrew a silver brooch. He pressed it against his fingers, rubbing his thumb against its surface. There was no need to look upon the engraving. He knew each line, could likely reproduce the delicately etched daffodils in his sleep—what little sleep he'd managed to claim since returning from Gwynedd, at least.

He raised his face to the blustery wind, closed his eyes, and groaned. He

could not continue like this. For a week now, his nights had been haunted by Rhiannon's beautiful but distraught face. His days were filled with trying to push her out of his mind. No matter how often he told himself that he had not been the one to throw the lethal axe at her father, he'd been unable to assuage the guilt he felt for what the men under his and Bjorn's command had done.

He'd hoped that asking his mother about her grandmother would offer him some measure of understanding, some insight into how the Cymry's culture differed from his own. Did the Cymry's god offer any greater comfort to those who lost loved ones than Thor or Odin offered to the Norse? Were their women of higher birth given the kind of freedoms Norsewomen enjoyed—to own land and run a business—or had the young woman in his dreams lost far more than her father that fateful night?

Unfortunately, his mother had not given him the answers he'd sought. Instead, he'd left her chambers with a greater realization that no matter the land or the people, love of family was universal. As was a belief in a higher power. Rather than ease his mind, the memories Leif's mother had shared with him had caused his questions to multiply.

He wrapped his fingers around the silver brooch and watched a seagull soar along the shoreline. The large white bird bobbed up and down, riding the wind as it blew inland toward a small stone structure built at the head of the short peninsula. The seagull cried, wheeling above the gravestones that surrounded the building and identified it as a church.

Leif's gaze shifted from the bird to the distant wooden door. It was closed. But he had seen it standing open before. On more than one Sunday, he had watched the Irish locals follow the narrow path that cut across the grassy slope to enter the small church. The path was clear now, and curiosity drove his feet forward, toward the empty cemetery.

Most of the stones lay flat on the ground, with names and dates chiseled into the solid gray surfaces. A small posy of wilted bluebells lay upon one of the smaller stones, and as he walked between the graves, a hushed sense of reverence entered Leif's heart. This burial site was as far removed from the ship burial afforded to the most honored Vikings as it was to the funeral pyres that sent the spirits of Norsemen and -women to Valhalla.

He walked around the corner of the church, his feet coming to a halt before the large circled stone cross standing tall among the horizontal slabs. Immediately, a vision of Rhiannon clutching a similar cross at her neck filled his mind. Why was it here? Was it possible that the Cymry and Irish shared

far more than the Gaelic tongue?

Stepping forward, he touched the lichen-covered stone. "What power does this symbol hold?" he muttered.

"Would ya be speakin' Gaelic, lad?"

Leif swung around, his hand instinctively reaching for the small dagger at his belt.

"Now, now. There be no need for that." The Irishman pointed to the knife and shook his head. "No need at all."

Leif slid the blade back into its leather strap and studied the stranger more carefully. He wore a simple brown tunic, cinched at the waist by a narrow rope belt. A long piece of cream-colored cloth lay draped across his shoulders. His hair was gray and thinning, and his blue eyes appeared to be assessing Leif just as carefully.

"What brings you to Saint Mary's Church this windswept day?"

"Curiosity," Leif replied.

"Ah!" The man's eyes lit up. "So you do be speakin' Gaelic."

"A little." Leif shrugged. "Enough to get by."

"'Tis a good thing, for I cannot speak a word of yer Norse tongue."

"I've heard tell it sounds like music to an unfamiliar ear," Leif teased. Most of the Irish he'd spoken to had nothing good to say about the Norse people's guttural tones.

The older man chuckled. "I won't be caught lyin', son. Especially so close t' the church. But it seems t' me that you're needin' t' learn a great deal if you're thinkin' an Irish priest would consider the Norse language melodic."

"I believe you are right," Leif said, his grin disappearing as resolve quickly replaced humor. "There is much I have to learn." He reached out to touch the circled cross again. "This symbol, for example. I have seen it elsewhere. What is the meaning behind it?"

A look of veneration fell upon the priest's face. "It would take more than a few minutes in the graveyard t' explain the significance of the holy cross."

"How long?" Leif asked.

The priest cocked his head to one side and studied him silently for a moment. "Come with me into the church," he said. "And we shall see."

Chapter 9

THREE HOURS. THAT WAS ALL it had taken for Leif to begin to understand how important the symbol of the cross was to Christian people. When Father Robert shared the tale of a God who'd made the ultimate sacrifice for humankind, Leif had been skeptical. Why would an all-powerful Being submit to such ridicule and pain? But when the priest went on to tell of this same God, Jesus, appearing to a woman named Mary days after His death, something in the way Father Robert spoke as he recounted that visitation—the joy and marvel in his countenance—touched Leif's heart. And he felt something he'd never felt before.

Even now, sitting on the shore over four weeks after that fateful day, the memory of the warmth that had filled Leif in the small, dark church had yet to fade.

He reached for another wad of tar-coated wool and pressed it into a chink on the longboat's hull before looking across the bay to the distant promontory where Saint Mary's Church stood surrounded by waving grass and gravestones.

It had taken visiting the small church regularly for a full month before Leif had been willing to acknowledge that the feeling—a lightening of his heart and mind—was intrinsically connected to time spent speaking of Jesus. He had gazed upon the precious papyrus the priest had unrolled in the church. He'd studied the intricate illustrations depicting Jesus standing in a boat overflowing with fish and had run his finger along the lines of Latin as Father Robert had translated the words into Gaelic so that he might understand. And somewhere along the way, Leif's focus had changed. He had changed.

“Forgive me for being the one to deliver such bad news to the jarl's youngest son.” Knud's voice brought Leif back to his present situation with a start.

“Bad news?”

“Indeed.” The hint of humor in Knud's eyes belied his solemn words. “The longboat's leaks will not mend themselves, no matter how long you sit on the beach waiting for it to happen.”

Leif offered him a rueful smile and reached for another handful of the tarry fibers. “I daresay it is for the best that we are not participating in a race to complete our portion of the boat.”

“I should say so.” Knud pressed a gummy finger into a knot in the wood.

“We would have lost hours ago.” He grunted. “Of course, Rune’s readiness to visit the ale house may have contributed to the speed in which he and Erik finished the other side.”

Leif frowned. “Unfortunately, that does not omen well for the quality of his workmanship.”

“Rune cares more for raiding than sailing,” Knud said. “He has little patience for patching a boat.” He paused his work and gave Leif a thoughtful look. “For you, I would guess it is the opposite.”

“Aye.” There had never been any question in his mind. “But what of you? What is it that draws you out to sea?”

Knud shrugged. “My father was a Viking; I am a Viking. I will likely never bring home the largest haul or be the strongest oarsman, but I claim the honor for my family.”

Leif studied him curiously. “But not for yourself?”

“Rune seeks for glory and adulation through being a Viking. I find pleasure in other things.”

“Such as,” Leif pressed.

Silently, Knud applied more tar to the hull. Leif waited, hoping his companion would trust him with a response. Knud glanced at him and raised his eyebrows. “Are you truly going to wait there until I speak?”

“Of course,” Leif said, folding his arms. “And I shall take great pleasure in watching you work.”

Knud shook his head, but a smile tugged at his lips. “Silversmithing,” he said. “I have long been fascinated by the craft, and some months ago, I persuaded Old Sten to take me on as an apprentice. I have much to learn, but I am beginning to see improvement.” He shrugged. “I have considered participating in fewer raids in the future so that I might focus on honing my skills.”

Silversmithing. Seemingly of its own volition, Leif’s hand moved to the pouch at his belt. Pressing his fingers against the leather, he felt the outline of the silver brooch he kept within. “I envy you,” he said. “To finely tool precious metals is a rare skill. Old Sten is a master, and if you are working with him, you are undoubtedly learning well.”

“You speak the truth,” Knud said. “He tolerates no slipshod workmanship and spares no one’s feelings when meting out his opinion.”

Leif chuckled. Old Sten was known as much for his cantankerous disposition as he was for his finely wrought silver jewelry. “You have learned

to endure his irritability, then?”

“I am willing to put up with a great deal to do something I love.” He offered Leif a thoughtful look. “As are you, I daresay.”

Leif considered his remark. What was his great love? He’d been drawn to the sea for as long as he could remember. Its power, beauty, and moods never ceased to enthrall him. He had looked forward to being of an age that he could participate in Viking raids because it had enabled him to connect with the water and travel to far-off places. Somehow, he had all but ignored the true reason for those ocean voyages.

Only a few nights ago, the stark reality of how his changing outlook might impact his future had hit him with the force of a hammer. He was a Viking, the son of Jarl Ottar, honor bound to represent and fight for his people. But how could he, in good conscience, attack Christian churches and monasteries now that he understood what the symbols and relics the Norsemen stole meant to those who lived and worked there?

And what of the ten sacred commandments Father Robert had recited almost every time they’d met? It was no wonder that Rhiannon had looked upon him with such abhorrence those weeks ago. In less than an hour, the Norsemen had violated more of those mandates than he cared to count. He pushed past the uncomfortable memory.

“I have always loved the sea,” Leif admitted. “But as of late, I have wondered if there might be something more—something else—for me.”

Knud’s eyes widened. “Something more than participating in the raids?”

“Aye.” He could only imagine his father’s reaction should he choose to do something other than lead one of the longboats along the coast or across the Irish Sea. The discussion would not be pleasant.

He shifted farther down the boat, moving the bowl with him. The brooch in his purse bumped against his thigh. “Perhaps I too should try my hand at silversmithing,” he said.

Knud’s astonished expression quickly turned to a warm grin. “I daresay I could put in a good word for you with Old Sten. Mind you, you’d best prepare yourself for some criticism of your initial efforts. Old Sten is no respecter of persons. His praise is given for workmanship, not lineage.”

Leif’s grin matched Knud’s. “A man whose respect is worth earning, then,” he said as a new and welcome eagerness filled him. A fresh focus sounded like just what he needed.

Rhiannon lay a small bunch of buttercups atop her mother's grave before setting a second one upon her father's. Taking a step back, she swallowed against the ache in her throat. It had been five weeks since she'd arrived at Ynys Môn and had been welcomed into the royal household. Four weeks since her father's funeral at Sant Cwyfan's church and subsequent burial beside her mother. And the pain of loss had yet to lessen.

"You see." Rhiannon's cousin Gwenllian stepped up beside her and slipped her arm through Rhiannon's. "The buttercups' petals are reflecting the sunshine. It's as though the sun itself is smiling upon your parents' graves."

Rhiannon managed a weak smile. "It is good to see the sunshine after so many days of rain."

Gwenllian had been marvelous, treating her as a beloved sister and alternately offering support and distractions ever since Rhiannon arrived. But with both of Gwenllian's parents alive still, it was almost impossible for her to comprehend the emptiness Rhiannon was feeling. Cadwgan had understood. She'd seen the pain mirrored in his eyes when he'd spoken of his father. But Cadwgan had not traveled with the small caravan that had journeyed from Bryn Eithin to transport her father's body to its final resting place, and despite his reassurances that he would visit the llys before much time had passed, Rhiannon had not seen him since he and his men had quit Bryn Eithin a few hours before she'd left it herself.

Gwenllian tightened her grip on Rhiannon's arm and guided her away from the graves. "I might have gone mad if I'd been stuck inside much longer. Even the guards were complaining of the wet, and they never complain about anything at all."

"Nothing at all?" Rhiannon's smile widened. Gwenllian's bent for exaggeration was often the very best distraction.

"Well, I have heard one or two make mention of the lack of extra bread at the evening meal these last few days. But in truth, how is the dough meant to rise when the air is cold and wet from morning till night?"

"How indeed?"

"And at least there was plenty of fish with last evening's meal." Gwenllian paused. "Although, now that I think on it, there was a table of soldiers expressing their dislike of the pungent smell when the servants brought in the platters of cod and plaice."

"Ah, so it would seem there have been a few additional grumbles in the

llys beyond those directed at the weather.”

Gwenllian had the grace to laugh. “Mayhap one or two.” She tugged Rhiannon away from the secluded cemetery and toward the spot where the narrow grassy headland gave way to sandy slopes. “But not today. I hereby declare that this day shall be free of all grievances. A perfect day, actually. And as I am daughter to Owain Gwynedd, my word should be taken as a command.”

“But of course,” Rhiannon said. “I am quite sure the wind and the waves will recognize such undeniable authority immediately.”

“I would certainly hope so.” Gwenllian’s eyes sparkled. “Shall we put them to the test?”

Rhiannon had never been one to deny the call of the sea—particularly when facing sadness and inner turmoil. “I should like that. But what is to be the punishment if the waves splash our gowns or the wind tugs our hair free of its ribbons?”

Gwenllian appeared to ponder the matter. “If neither element behaves as it should, we shall not visit the beach again for a week.”

“To be clear,” Rhiannon said. “Are we to punish ourselves or the sea?”

The breeze teased the loose tendrils of her hair and her cousin smiled ruefully. “No matter my royal upbringing, it seems that issuing well-thought-out punishments is beyond me. I had best hope that Anarawd has no need of such skills in his future wife.”

Rhiannon smiled comfortingly. Although Gwenllian’s hand had been offered to Anarawd ap Gruffydd, prince of Deheubarth, as a means of forming an alliance and strengthening the Kingdom of Gwynedd, she had the good fortune of being promised to a man whom she had met more than once and for whom she had already started to develop warm feelings. “Anarawd is blessed to be promised to so lovely a bride,” she said. “You shall be an asset to both him and his kingdom.”

The humor left Gwenllian’s eyes, and her expression softened. “I thank you for your kind words, Rhiannon, but be assured that when the time is right for your betrothal and marriage, the gentleman who claims you will be the luckiest of men.”

A vision of Cadwgan’s brooding face flooded Rhiannon’s mind. Would he wait for her, or would he seek another who was willing to be his bride straightway? Her heart did not answer. Neither did it beat any faster. But mayhap, with time, she would come to feel something akin to the happiness

she saw in Gwennlian's eyes when she spoke of her marriage to Anarawd.

Chapter 10

Two Years Later

“WILL I DO?” GWENLLIAN TURNED a slow circle in front of Rhiannon, her green silk gown shimmering as she moved. The gold coronet atop her light-brown hair and the gold girdle at her waist glistened in the candlelight.

“You look magnificent,” Rhiannon said. “Anarawd will not be able to take his eyes off you.”

Gwenllian pressed a hand to her stomach, and Rhiannon might have been concerned that her cousin would empty it had she not known that Gwenllian had eaten next to nothing all day.

“I am to be married on the morrow,” Gwenllian said. She had repeated the same phrase on and off all day. Clearly, her mind was struggling to grasp what the steady trickle of guests who had been arriving at the llys for the past several days all knew. “What is the matter with me? After all this time, I should be glad that my wedding day is almost here. Instead, I can barely stand upon my own two legs.”

Rhiannon rose from the chair she’d been occupying in Gwenllian’s chamber and took her cousin’s hands. “You have nothing to fear. Already, you and Anarawd have formed an amicable relationship.” She tilted her head to one side and offered Gwenllian a knowing smile. “I might go as far as to say a loving relationship.”

Her comment was met with the lowering of Gwenllian’s eyes and a hint of color in her pale cheeks.

“He is a good man,” Gwenllian whispered.

“He is indeed, and you shall be sickeningly happy together.”

Gwenllian raised her head in time to catch Rhiannon’s teasing look.

“Sickeningly?”

“If your new husband is not catering to your every whim from the moment you step out of the church, I shall eat a bowlful of gooseberry fool before sundown.”

“But you detest gooseberry fool.”

“I most certainly do,” Rhiannon said. “That is how sure I am that with Anarawd at your side, you will be the happiest of brides.”

The hint of a smile tugged at Gwenllian’s lips. “I own that I am the most fortunate of women.”

“Mayhap the most fortunate of all,” Rhiannon said, squeezing her hands

before she released them.

“Until you are married to Cadwgan.”

Rhiannon’s smile suddenly felt forced. Cadwgan had visited the llys half a dozen times in the two years she’d lived here. Each time, he had singled her out to exchange a few words in the great hall, but he had never broached the subject of marriage again. At first, Rhiannon had assumed he was honoring her desire for a time of mourning. But as the months wore on with no renewal of his intentions, she had begun to wonder if he had changed his mind on the matter.

For her part, Gwenllian remained adamant that Cadwgan was simply biding his time. Rhiannon was not so sure. Perhaps another young lady had attracted his attention—one whose heart responded more vigorously to his presence than did hers.

The clatter of horses’ hooves and urgent shouts coming from the courtyard saved Rhiannon from responding to Gwenllian’s comment.

“Anarawd,” Gwenllian whispered. “He is come.”

Rhiannon reached the window first and pushed open the shutters. Twilight was falling, but there was sufficient light to see the cluster of mounted horses gathered near the doors to the great hall. A man in a dark traveling cloak leaped from the lead horse, tossing the reins to one of the two young grooms who had hurried to join them from the stables on the other side of the yard.

“Is that Hywel?” Rhiannon asked.

“It would seem to be,” Gwenllian replied. “The horse he dismounted has the correct markings.” She frowned. “But why is my brother here with no more than the number of men he had with him when he left? Father sent him to Deheubarth to accompany Anarawd to the llys for the wedding. I see no sign of Anarawd, and surely the prince of Deheubarth would travel to his own marriage with a larger retinue than that.”

“It is possible that Hywel has ridden on ahead to warn the household that the guests’ arrival is imminent.”

“Perhaps.” Gwenllian stepped away from the window, her expression troubled. “But I think it best if we go to the great hall to discover for ourselves what the shouts are about.”

Rhiannon did not argue. The air of tension hovering over the men in the courtyard did not omen well. And if the speed at which Gwenllian exited her chamber and made for the great hall was any indication, she had sensed it too.

The doors to the great hall hung open, and as the women approached, the rumble of male voices, low and pressing, reached them. Hywel spoke again, and Owain Gwynedd's roar filled the llys, reverberating off the stone walls and stopping Rhiannon and Gwenllian in their tracks.

"What manner of treachery is this?" the king bellowed.

Gwenllian reached for Rhiannon's arm, clutching it tightly. "Something . . . something terrible has happened." She took an unsteady step back. "We should go."

"No." Rhiannon faced the entrance, waiting, straining to hear more. "We must learn what this is about. If Hywel is here without Anarawd, the news must involve him. And if so, you have a right to know what has happened."

Gwenllian took another step back, attempting to pull Rhiannon with her. "But it is not our business. . . . Whatever it is, it is for my father and brother to . . ."

Rhiannon refused to listen. Brushing aside her cousin's arm, she walked directly into the great hall.

The tables were set for the prenuptial feast, the fire burned brightly, and candles flickered at every table. If there had been servants in the large room before, they were gone now. Only two occupants remained: Owain Gwynedd, dressed in the finery befitting his station, and his son, Hywel, still dressed in his gray wool travel cloak. Whereas Hywel stood with his back to Rhiannon, the king's face was clearly visible. And it was contorted with anger.

"You come to tell me that this fiendish act was committed by my own brother?"

Hywel ran his fingers through his hair. "All signs indicate that Cadwaladr's men were behind the murder."

Murder. Rhiannon's heart lurched. It was no secret that relations between various branches of the royal family were often strained. Those in positions of power were constantly on guard against hidden allegiances and vendettas designed to oust them from leadership. Those who wished to usurp them were rarely without allies or a clandestine plan. It was a dangerous game that, in the past, had too often ended in bloodshed. But Owain Gwynedd was a strong ruler, and if there had been whispers of treason since he'd taken the throne, he had quashed them before they'd become a reality.

"My own brother?" A hint of disbelief tinged Owain's anger. "You are sure, Hywel?"

"One of the grooms was called upon to assist two men with their horses in

the early hours of the morning. He reports that the men were wearing Cadwaladr's colors and rode away in haste. Soon afterward, the murder was discovered."

"He saw them clearly in the dark of night?"

"The moon was full, their red-and-yellow tunics unmistakable." Hywel hesitated. "Even had his men escape unseen, the dagger used to pierce Anarawd's heart is known to belong to Cadwaladr."

The king's curse was eclipsed by Gwenllian's cry. Rhiannon swung around. Her cousin had followed her into the room and stood, one hand on a table for support, the other covering her mouth.

"Gwenllian." The king's gaze shot to his daughter and then, just as swiftly, to Rhiannon. "Rhiannon. What are you doing here?"

"The banquet." Rhiannon swallowed. Gwenllian had been right. It would have been better to stay away, to learn of this tragedy another way. "We heard Hywel and his men arrive, and we came . . . we came to see . . ." Her words trailed off.

Owain Gwynedd was no longer looking at her. His attention was on Gwenllian. "Anarawd's murder shall be avenged, Gwenllian," he said. "I shall make this right."

"I was to be married," she sobbed. "On the morrow. I was to marry Anarawd. If he is truly dead, you cannot make that right."

Owain Gwynedd's jaw twitched. He fisted his hands and turned to Hywel. "Where is Cadwaladr now? Was a search made for him in Deheubarth?"

"My men and I joined the hunt as soon as the alarm was raised. All indications are that he and his men escaped by boat to Ireland."

The king's eyes narrowed. "So, my brother effectively sealed his guilt by fleeing."

"Aye," Hywel said. "And no doubt plans to join forces with the Irish high king."

Owain Gwynedd shook his head, his expression grim. "Cadwaladr will not be petitioning the Irish for assistance. He has gone to Dyflin, to the Norsemen."

The Norsemen. For the last two years, Rhiannon had done all in her power to block out memories of the Vikings' attack on Bryn Eithin. Now, the awfulness of that fateful evening washed over her, remembrance of the cruel eyes of the man who had killed her father leaving her trembling. Another pair of eyes—bluer and filled with something that had resembled remorse—filled

her mind. As she'd done so many times in the past, she pushed the vision away. The tall Viking had seemed more humane only because he'd spoken to her in Gaelic.

Taking a few stumbling steps back, Rhiannon reached for her cousin. Gwenllian fell into her arms, her sobs almost masking her father's curt commands.

"Acquire fresh mounts." Owain issued the order with icy calm. "I wish you and your men to reach Ceredigion by morning. All of Cadwaladr's retainers are to be evicted from his home. By order of the king, you are to seize his land and goods and then raze his castle. Cadwaladr has hereby forfeited all rights to property in Ceredigion and Gwynedd."

Hywel bowed. "It shall be done, Father."

"Go," the king said, his expression unreadable. "And let it be known abroad that justice for Anarawd's murder will be swift and sure."

Chapter 11

THE CRY OF EXCITED VOICES reached Leif over the ringing of the hammer against the piece of silver on the anvil before him. He paused, hammer raised, and turned toward the open doors of Old Sten's workshop. Enough early-morning light was filtering in to allow Leif and Knud to work on the jewelry they were designing to sell at the upcoming market in Veisafjodr, but for most Dyflin residents, the day was too young to be out of bed.

"Is Bjorn's longboat expected back today?" Knud asked.

It was the most likely cause of the unexpected noise coming from the bay, but the Viking raiders had left only two days before.

Leif set down his tools with a frown. "If Bjorn is returning so soon, I would wager the news is not good. When I spoke with him last, he was aiming for the coast of Brittany."

"There's no accounting for what storms can do to a boat in open water," Knud said.

"Aye," Leif was already making for the exit. "But a damaged craft is preferable to injured men."

Knud set aside the necklace he was working on and met Leif at the door. "We've at least an hour before Old Sten arrives. There's time enough to visit the dock before then."

Leif gave him a grateful nod. Over the last two years, Knud had proven to be a loyal friend. After Leif confessed his reluctance to participate in raids, Knud had sacrificed his opportunity to return home with valuable spoil by volunteering to join Leif in standing guard over the longboats rather than participating in the plundering. Later, when Leif's regular interactions with Father Robert brought him to the point where being associated with the pillage of monasteries and abbeys in any way became unacceptable, Knud had been the only one to support Leif's decision to pass his position of leadership in the second longboat to another. It had been far less painful than Leif would have imagined. His cousin Arne had the most experience in the boat and was more than ready to take on the task.

The men who had sailed with Leif had accepted the change with varying degrees of surprise and acceptance. Rune's reaction had been one part incredulity and another part anger that he had not been offered Leif's position at the helm. For himself, Leif was happy to have Rune as far from a leadership role as possible. It had been two years since the raid that had

changed the course of his life, and even now, he occasionally awoke in a cold sweat, with Rune's callous killing of Rhiannon's father filling his nightmares.

Telling his father of his intention to become a silversmith had been the most difficult conversation of all. His father had been furious. The jarl was a Viking. His sons were Vikings. It was a matter of tradition. Of pride. And it had taken months for his father to acknowledge that Leif's decision was more than a passing whim and that he had no small amount of skill in jewelry making.

Leif strongly suspected that his father's eventual softening from raging anger to reluctant acceptance was largely due to his mother's influence. He'd mentioned it to Father Robert once, and the priest had suggested that Leif's Christian great-grandmother may have also held some sway from beyond the grave. No matter which woman deserved the credit, Leif was grateful. Despite the change in his religious outlook, he was a proud Norseman and had no desire to be estranged from his family or his people.

"We have new arrivals coming in to dock," Knud said, interrupting Leif's churning thoughts with the basic observation. "But that's no Viking longboat."

They had reached the end of the narrow street, and up ahead, a small boat bobbed up and down in the shallow water. Shorter and wider than the Viking longboats, this craft carried not more than half a dozen oarsmen. Each of them sat leaning on an oar, watching the growing crowd on the bank warily. A single sail flapped against the mast above the men's heads, a circled cross boldly emblazoned upon the canvas.

"It's come from Gwynedd or Deheubarth," Leif said.

"How can you tell?"

Leif tore his eyes from the familiar symbol and studied the ship more carefully. "Do you see the leather pulled tight over the woven hull? It is the same method the Cymry use with their coracles."

Knud studied the boat. "They must have had the wind in their sail to arrive here safely in so flimsy a vessel." He paused. "Or do we assume they were simply blown off course?"

"When it comes to foreigners, we assume nothing," Leif said grimly. "Particularly when Dyflin's fiercest Vikings are gone to sea." He started down the pebbled slope with Knud at his heels. Onlookers—primarily children and the fishermen who gathered daily at the water's edge—parted to let them through. The young people's excited voices had become subdued

whispers, and a feeling of uncertainty hung in the air.

Leif reached the water's edge and stood with his hands on his hips. "Who goes there?" he called in Gaelic. "And what brings you to Dyflin's shores?"

A short man wearing a brown traveling cloak stood up in the boat. The craft rocked back and forth, and the stranger grasped the mast to steady himself.

"My name is Seisyll," he called. "I speak for Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd—brother to Owain ap Gruffydd, king of Gwynedd—who is come to seek an audience with Jarl Ottar of Dyflin."

At Leif's side, Knud released a hissing breath. Although he could not understand the Gaelic, his friend had obviously recognized the names. Leif remained perfectly still. He had yet to meet Owain Gwynedd, but the king's reputation as a powerful leader preceded him. If Leif's memory served him correctly, Owain had two brothers, one of whom had died at least a decade past. Was it possible that this boat carried the other?

"I am Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin." He spoke loud enough that his voice carried across the water. "What business does Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd have with Jarl Ottar?"

A wave rolled in, causing the boat to sway. Seisyll staggered back a step before resuming his post with as much dignity as he could muster.

"It is a matter for the jarl's ears only," he called back.

"Would you have me send someone to warn the jarl?" Knud asked softly.

"Aye," Leif replied. "I can hold him off a little while longer, but if the boat truly carries Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd, my father will wish to send men to escort him to the great hall."

Knud gave an almost imperceptible nod and slipped away.

With his fingers wrapped around the handle of the knife in his belt, Leif kept his eyes on the boat. "You may approach the shore," he said, raising his voice again.

Seisyll resumed his place on a wooden bench, and a second man rose. This one had his sea legs beneath him, and within a few short minutes, he had furled the sail. When the large wool cloth was tied securely, he sat and the splash of oars began.

The small boat approached steadily, and it wasn't long before the hull scraped the pebbled beach. Someone gave an order, and four men jumped out to drag the boat out of the water. Once the prow was clear, the only man who had remained seated finally stood. His fur-lined cloak covered all but his

shoes and the lower portion of his hose and was clasped at his shoulder with an elaborate gold brooch. Dark hair fell to his shoulders and was the same color as his beard.

“Leif, son of Ottar,” he said, inclining his head. “I am Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd.”

Leif bowed, raising his head as the thud of rapid footsteps reached him. “Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd,” he said. “Your escort is come.”

††††

Rhiannon stood barefoot on the sand dune, watching the sun rise over the mountains of Eryri. Its pale-yellow light cast a faint glow across the narrow strait separating Ynys Môn from the mainland, turning the dancing waves from slate gray to silver. She breathed deeply, offering a silent prayer that the new day would bring fresh answers to the maelstrom of questions circulating the llys, along with some small measure of peace for Gwenllian.

Turning her back on the distant mountain range, Rhiannon scoured the beach below for any sign of life. Soon after her arrival at Ynys Môn, she’d discovered that strict restrictions governed the lives of royal household members. Rules while living within the llys and rules when away from it. Conforming to those expectations had felt as though she were having her wings clipped, but gratitude for her inclusion in the family had prompted obedience. Except in one instance.

For as long as she could remember, being beside the sea had brought her solace and peace. Walking the sandy beach was a time to think, a time to pray. She could only do those things on a deep personal level if she was alone. And so, even though it was against Owain Gwynedd’s explicit instructions, she occasionally slipped out of the llys in the early hours of the morning to spend time with her own thoughts on the shore.

Today, the only movement in the crescent-shaped bay came from a pair of cormorants fighting over something on the distant rocks. Ignoring the birds’ raucous cries, Rhiannon followed a narrow path through the scrub grass to the beach. She carried her shoes in one hand and raised her gown’s hem with the other as she ran across the cold, wet sand to the water’s edge. White foam fringed the waves, quickly coating her toes and leaving them so cold she could barely feel them. She sighed. Oh, that one’s heart could be so easily numbed.

Last night, upon the news of Anarawd’s death, Gwenllian had declared her heart forever broken. Rhiannon understood. She’d felt the same when her

father had been killed. And yet, time had a magic all its own. It did not erase pain, but it made it bearable. It could not replace a loved one, but it could bring others into one's life to help fill a void. Two years ago, Gwennlian had been one of those people for Rhiannon. And Rhiannon desperately wished to return her cousin's act of kindness.

She searched the horizon. To the west, the sea stretched out as far as the eye could see, with no land to mar the prospect. And yet, those who knew—those who'd sailed beyond Gwynedd's shores—claimed that Ireland was not so far distant. How long would Cadwaladr have to travel to reach its coast? And would he be welcomed there?

A shiver ran down her spine as Owain Gwynedd's words rang through her mind. *He has gone to Dyflin, to the Norsemen.* Were all Norsemen as depraved as the ones who had ravaged her home? Once again, memories of the tall Viking's troubled eyes returned, and for the first time, she allowed herself to consider the possibility that his intentions had not been as evil as those of his comrade. Indeed, was Cadwaladr, a man ruthless enough to have his niece's groom killed on the very week of their wedding, any better than a Viking?

Surely the answer was no. All too often, it seemed that life was a mass of tangled riddles, and if she could only solve the most important one and hold fast to the truth it revealed, all would be well. But somehow, in the chaos of life, it was easy to lose sight of those simple answers and, thereby, lose sight of the truth.

What was the truth surrounding Anarawd's death? Cadwaladr had to have a strong motive for plotting so despicable an act. He was not in line to benefit in rank or lands from the prince of Deheubarth's passing. Owain Gwynedd had obviously viewed his daughter's marriage as a means to cement an alliance between the two kingdoms. Would Cadwaladr have considered his brother's increased influence a threat to his own position? She shook her head slightly. She did not know enough of the machinations of powerful men to have the answers.

Turning to her right, she started toward the narrow peninsula at the far end of the bay. Her heels sank into the sand as she walked, and a piece of seaweed floated up the beach and back out to sea. She paused to watch it go. And then, closing her eyes, she allowed the gentle shushing of the waves to soothe her troubled mind. Amidst the current anger and unrest in the kingdom, three constants remained as fixed as they always had been: the

presence of God, the reliability of the sea, and the promise of time. No matter what lay ahead, Rhiannon would find her way. And so would Gwenllian.

Chapter 12

LEIF'S FATHER SAT UPON A large, intricately carved wooden chair in the great hall. In Bjorn's absence, Leif stood at his right. Halfdan, his father's closest adviser, stood at his left. A few yards away, Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd faced them. The five men who had accompanied the nobleman across the Irish Sea flanked him, but their presence was nothing compared to the Norse guardsmen lining the room.

"You came to Dyflin uninvited, Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd." Leif's father spoke sternly. "What brings you here?"

The nobleman met his glare without flinching, but he made no response.

Leif's father grunted in frustration. "Leif, it appears that we are in need of your fluency in the Gaelic tongue. I would have you translate."

"As you wish, Father." Leif's confidence in speaking Gaelic had improved immeasurably, thanks to his regular interaction with Father Robert and his attendance at the Christian church meetings. He eyed Cadwaladr and translated his father's words.

No matter that Leif's pronunciation differed from his own, the nobleman appeared to understand. "I am come to ask for assistance from the Viking chief," he said.

The words were sufficiently similar that Leif grasped his meaning and repeated them in Norse.

His father raised his eyebrows. "The Cymry are not known for requesting assistance of anyone. Ask him why he is doing so now."

Leif complied, and for the first time, he saw a hint of uncertainty—fear, even—in their royal visitor's eyes.

"Anarawd ap Gruffydd, prince of Deheubarth, is dead, and I have been unjustly accused of being his murderer. Until my name has been cleared of wrongdoing, it is not safe for me to remain in Deheubarth, Ceredigion, or Gwynedd."

"Why did you not go to your brother, the king, with this grievance?" Leif's father asked after Leif had translated Cadwaladr's explanation.

"Anarawd was to be his son-in-law," Cadwaladr said. "He was killed on the week of his wedding to Owain's daughter, Gwenllian. My brother's fury over the loss of a prosperous alliance, along with his daughter's crushing disappointment, will undoubtedly taint his view of the facts." He paused. "Those who sought to implicate me in the murder employed every effort to

leave a trail of false clues behind.”

“Why should we believe you?” Leif’s father’s voice rang with skepticism. “What is to stop you from spinning a tale such as this only to commit a similar crime in Dyflin?”

“I know better than to cross a Viking,” Cadwaladr said.

Leif’s father eyed him warningly. “False flattery will avail you nothing here.”

Cadwaladr inclined his head. “I stand by what I said, Jarl Ottar. I have come because I believe the Vikings offer me the best hope of redemption. Your men can enter Gwynedd before Owain amasses his warriors.”

Leif’s father’s eyes narrowed. “You would have me send my men against your own brother?”

“I would have you send your men against the villain who tricked Anarawd’s household into believing that it was I who wished their master dead.”

“And who might that be?”

Cadwaladr frowned. “As of this moment, I can only guess.”

Leif’s father grunted. “You wish me to send Vikings to invade Gwynedd on nothing more than a vague notion that someone wishes you ill?”

“Someone has accused me of a murder that I did not commit,” Cadwaladr said, his voice rising. “That is considerably more significant than wishing me ill.”

“But no more connected to Norse affairs.” His father leaned back in his chair and waved a hand at the Cymry assembled before him. “Escort them back to their boat. They are to be gone from Dyflin within the hour.”

Leif did not bother to translate his father’s instructions. It seemed that Cadwaladr had recognized the dismissal for what it was. He stepped forward before the guards were close enough to prevent him.

“I will pay you handsomely,” he said.

Leif attempted to take the nobleman’s measure. What was his motivation? Was he plotting the overthrow of Owain Gwynedd and wished to use the Vikings to help him accomplish the treachery? Or was he truly so desperate to clear his name that he would stoop to bribing the leader of a nation with whom the Cymry had a fractious relationship?

“Has he resorted to begging?” Leif’s father asked.

“No. He is offering to pay you for your services.”

Leif’s father studied Cadwaladr silently. “How much?”

Leif translated again.

Cadwaladr did not hesitate. "One thousand head of cattle."

Leif's father eyed him thoughtfully, his previous look of dismissal replaced by one of speculation. "A generous offer—unless your coming here is simply a trap, the claim of a murder and promise of a bounty nothing more than a lie."

"To attempt so risky a deception would be pure folly."

"I agree. But I have yet to determine your level of foolhardiness."

"Send someone to my brother's court," Cadwaladr said. "Have him discover what is being said about my involvement in Anarawd's death."

Leif's father glowered. He was not one to accept orders from another. "I shall think on it," he said. "And in the meantime, you and your men shall remain here. Under guard."

Something that looked remarkably like relief flickered through Cadwaladr's eyes. "No guard will be necessary," he said.

"On the contrary," his father said, rising to his feet as Leif continued to translate for both men. "The guard is essential." He barked a command at his men. "Take them to the north chamber and lock them up."

Cadwaladr straightened his shoulders and glared at Leif's father. "You would lock the brother of Gwynedd's king in a bedchamber?"

"There is a dungeon if you would prefer."

"I have done nothing," Cadwaladr hissed.

His father ignored him. "Guards!" he called. The men who had been watching the exchange moved to surround the Cymry. "Take them away."

Once again, the Cymry needed no translation. Without a word, they followed Cadwaladr out of the room. Halfdan waited only until the door closed behind them before voicing his concern.

"It could be a devious plot, my lord. The Cymry are known to be wily adversaries."

"True," Leif's father responded thoughtfully. "But one thousand head of cattle is no mean prize if this Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd speaks aright."

Leif turned from watching the door through which the Cymry had disappeared. "What sense do you have, Father?"

"That he desperately wishes me to accept his offer," his father said. "But I have yet to ascertain whether it is truly for his own preservation or for a larger, underhanded scheme."

"How do you intend to uncover the truth?"

His father looked at him, his expression shrewd. “By sending someone I trust to Gwynedd.”

“You would do as Cadwaladr suggested? Do you truly believe Owain Gwynedd would share the details of infighting within Gwynedd’s royalty with a Norseman?”

“No. But I daresay the locals at the market on Ongullsey would happily recount recent news from within the royal court. Especially to visiting Norse merchants who were willing to listen.” His father smiled, a slow, self-satisfied smile. “Did you not tell me that you and Knud have been creating silver items to sell?”

“The market is in Veisafjodr, Father. Not Gwynedd.”

“I have been told that Norsemen with goods to sell are always welcome at the markets on Ongullsey.”

“Forgive me,” Leif said stiffly. “I find it hard to believe that the very people who so openly abhor Vikings would willingly make room for Norsemen at their market.”

“Then you have much to learn of human nature,” his father said. “It is remarkable how quickly avarice for an unusual silver armband or an exquisite Viking necklace will change hearts.”

The thought did not sit well. “I am a silversmith, not a spy. I do not—”

His father’s eyes flashed, and he raised his hand, stopping Leif’s refusal before it fully began. “Do not misunderstand me, Leif. I am not issuing a suggestion. The brother of Gwynedd’s king has come to Dyflin spewing forth words of treachery. He wishes the Vikings to form an allegiance with him. We must know the truth before we proceed. Not only do you have a sound reason for visiting the island where the king dwells, but you are the son of the jarl and speak the best Gaelic of any Norseman in Dyflin. You may have eschewed Viking raids, but with your brother and our forty strongest men gone, you are duty bound to your people to do this.”

It was true. All of it. Smothering the painful memories of his last visit to Gwynedd, Leif straightened his shoulders and inclined his head. “I will speak to Knud directly. We shall leave with the tide tonight.”

“Put out your wares at the market closest to Owain Gwynedd’s court. A casual conversation with those who come and go freely within the llys will teach you much about what has occurred. Learn what you can of the king’s mindset and where he places the blame,” his father said. “Cadwaladr and his men will be kept under lock and key until I receive your report.”

The message was clear. Do what must be done and return directly. It was the Viking way. And in this instance, the familiar pattern was just as well. The less time Leif spent in Gwynedd, the less likely it was that his thoughts would dwell on the young woman from that land who had haunted his dreams for so long.

Chapter 13

RHIANNON STOOD IN FRONT OF the door to Gwenllian's chambers. It had been a week since her cousin had shut herself away to grieve over the loss of her betrothed. Seven long days of waiting for Hywel to return from Ceredigion with a report from Cadwaladr's residence. And seven unnerving days of watching the king pace the llys muttering about betrayal, dishonor, and revenge.

There was nothing Rhiannon could do about Hywel's continued absence or Owain Gwynedd's foul temper, but surely there was some way to help Gwenllian move forward. Something that might make this day better than the previous seven.

She knocked, and Gwenllian's maid, Bethan, answered the door.

"Good day, Bethan," Rhiannon said. "I am here to see Princess Gwenllian."

Bethan shifted her feet anxiously. "I fear that the princess is not of a mind to entertain anyone at present, Miss Rhiannon."

"Of that, I am sure. But I am not here to be entertained." She leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Allow me entrance, and if your mistress objects to my presence, I shall tell her that I forced you to admit me."

Bethan glanced over her shoulder before settling a concerned look on Rhiannon. "Very well, miss. I reckon she could use some company."

"As do I," Rhiannon said, quashing the last of her qualms and stepping into the room. "Where is she?"

"In bed, miss."

"At this hour?" Noonday was rapidly approaching, bringing with it the heat of the afternoon sun.

"She . . . she claimed there was nothing to rise for."

Rhiannon sighed. She'd faced more than her share of loss, so she recognized the hurt Gwenllian was experiencing, but she also knew that giving up was not the answer. "Lead me to her."

Bethan crossed the straw-covered floor to stand before a large tapestry suspended from an iron rod.

"Miss Rhiannon is here to see you, Your Highness," she said.

"Tell her that I am not entertaining callers today," Gwenllian said, her voice muffled.

Rhiannon moved forward and pulled back the tapestry. “She told me that already. I am come to change your mind.”

Gwenllian raised her arm so that it covered her eyes. “No, Rhiannon. Leave me in peace.”

“This wallowing in misery,” Rhiannon said, pausing to gesture at the rumpled bedding and Gwenllian’s tangled hair, “is not peace.”

Gwenllian moaned. “Close the drape. The sunlight is hurting my eyes.”

“That is because your eyes have not seen sunlight for far too long,” Rhiannon said, pushing the tapestry back far enough that Bethan could draw a cord around it and anchor it to the wall. “There. You may take a moment for your eyes to adjust. But a moment is all you have because Bethan is going for fresh water to bathe your face and wash away the tears.” She gave the maid a meaningful nod, and the savvy girl hurried away to refill the pitcher. “You will feel far more yourself after you dress and freshen up.”

“How can you say such a thing?” Gwenllian’s arm dropped from across her face, and she glared at Rhiannon through puffy eyes. “Anarawd is dead.”

“He is. And I am more sorry than I can say. But *you* are not dead, my dear cousin. You are still here to bless your father and mother with your presence, to watch out for your brother, and to be my dearest friend.”

“I am in no fit state to do any of those things.”

“Not now, perhaps,” Rhiannon said. “But you will be one day.”

Gwenllian rolled over and faced the wall. “That day is not today.”

Rhiannon sat on the edge of the bed and placed her hand on her cousin’s shoulder. “I may not understand exactly what you are feeling in losing the man you were to marry, but I do understand the pain of having someone you love torn from you before you were ready. Believe me when I tell you that one of the most difficult things you can do is to arise each morning to face the day with that person gone from it. It is also one of the most important.”

“It is beyond me, Rhiannon.”

“No, Gwenllian, it is not. You are far braver than you believe. I have seen you rise from your bed after enduring the misery of sweating sickness and return to the saddle after losing your beloved horse to a broken leg.”

“Neither of them was as painful as this.”

“I know,” Rhiannon said. “Nor had they effects so long-lasting. But they exemplify your courage and reassure me that you will overcome this challenge also.”

“I should like to postpone being brave until the morrow,” Gwenllian said.

Rhiannon laughed. “You may postpone taking a walk into town with me until the morrow, but rising to wash and dress are to happen today.”

Gwenllian’s head swiveled to face her. “I will not go into town.”

“Why is that?” Rhiannon asked.

“I could not bear it.” Gwenllian’s voice broke. “All the whispers and the pointed fingers.”

“There will be no blame or criticism for something so wholly out of your control. If those you meet outside the walls of your chamber are sorry for what you have endured, accept their kindness graciously. It has been my observation, however, that most people have burdens enough of their own. They have little time to spare for worrying about the concerns of others—especially one so fortunate as the daughter of Owain Gwynedd.”

“You make me sound terribly self-absorbed.”

“Are you?” Rhiannon asked.

Gwenllian looked away. “I suppose I am. Or I have been these last few days, at least.” She swallowed hard, and when she turned back to Rhiannon, there was a hint of determination in her voice. “I shall wash and dress.” She gave Rhiannon a look of warning. “But do not expect me to eat. My mother has already begged me to take some broth, but the very thought of food turns my stomach.”

Rhiannon had a fairly good idea of how long it had been since her cousin had partaken of a meal. She also knew that the courtyard was currently filled with the smell of freshly baked bread and pottage.

“Very well,” she said, “I will forebear from all mention of food.” She moved away so as to hide her smile. “There will be time enough for you to change your mind when you smell today’s dinner cooking.”

“I will not change my mind,” Gwenllian said, but as she slipped out of bed, she did not sound quite as certain as she had before.

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Leif and Knud rested their oars and eyed the shoreline from the small boat.

“Do we bear north or south?” Knud asked.

“South,” Leif said. “To that rocky area beyond the bay.”

Knud nodded his agreement and dipped his oar into the water once more. Leif waited until the small faering began to turn before lowering his oar and matching his rowing stroke with Knud’s.

They were too close to land to use the sail now. The red-and-white striped fabric would immediately identify them as Vikings, and Leif wished to avoid

any chance of encountering resistance before making landfall.

“Look,” Knud said. “Do you see it? There’s an inlet just beyond the promontory.”

“Aye,” Leif said. “It will put us close to the llys but keep us hidden from anyone who may come to the beach.”

Knud grinned. “And we shall be within walking distance of the village of Aberffraw.”

“I would imagine the largest market on the island is held in the village closest to the llys,” Leif said, slowing his stroke as they neared the rocks. “With any luck, news from within the nearby court is freely shared amongst the merchants.”

“We shall learn what your father wishes to know even if we must needs go door-to-door with our wares,” Knud said.

Leif grimaced. He hoped it would not come to that.

“If we are fortunate, there will be room enough for visiting merchants to display their goods.”

Knud chuckled. “You have only to set your silver armbands on the ground and there will be customers aplenty.”

Leif slowed his rowing still more, allowing the waves to push the boat forward. Over the last two years, he had come to love creating unique items out of silver, but his affinity for the water had never dimmed. He should, perhaps, thank his father for demanding that he set sail for somewhere farther afield than Veisafjordr. Crossing the Irish Sea with Knud these past two days had been as exhilarating as it had been exhausting. But now that they were within so close a distance of Owain Gwynedd’s llys, it was time to focus on the task he’d been given.

“Steady now.” Leif kept his voice low as they entered the rocky inlet.

Beside him, Knud pressed his oar against a rock half submerged in the water. “It’s shallower than I’d hoped,” he said.

“Aye, but the narrow channel will obscure us from the view of any boats that may pass by,” Leif responded. “I daresay this inlet will serve our purposes very well.”

With a gentle grind, the hull scraped the pebbled seabed, and Leif rose to his feet. “This will do,” he said, stepping out of the gently rocking boat and into the water. The sudden cold seized his breath. It seemed that the Irish Sea was no warmer on Gwynedd’s shores than it was on Ireland’s.

“Here.” Knud tossed him a rope, and Leif waded a few feet farther to tie it

around a large boulder.

“Now what?” he asked when Leif climbed back into the boat.

“Now we eat, rest, and wait for the sun to drop,” Leif said. “It will be harder for the locals to identify two Norsemen when the village is in shadows. But it will be easy enough for us to discover where the market is held.”

“The smell of cows and pigs lingers far too long at such places,” Knud said, securing his oars beneath his seat. “Why would anyone be a farmer when they could be out at sea or working silver?”

Leif grinned. “Why, indeed? Although, I daresay we should thank the men who work with such animals for putting food on our tables.”

“They could be bringing in fish.”

Leif handed him a slab of bread and cheese from the bag at his feet. “How does eating a cold mackerel sound right now?”

Knud’s eyes rolled upward. “You’ve made your point. The next time I meet a dairy farmer, I shall thank him profusely.”

“And hold your nose all the while.”

His friend took a large bite of cheese and chewed slowly. “More than likely.”

Leif chuckled. Mayhap they would come across a farmer with cow manure upon his shoes on the morrow. Watching Knud thank him for his work would be vastly entertaining. Particularly since Knud spoke almost no Gaelic.

Chapter 14

WITH THE LOWERING OF THE sun, the temperature in the courtyard had cooled since Rhiannon and Gwenllian's first visit. Grateful that she'd been able to persuade her cousin to take a second outing—this time to the stables—Rhiannon stood inside the stable doors, watching quietly as Gwenllian ran her hand down her mare's nose.

"Forgive me for having neglected you this week, Hazel," Gwenllian said. "I shall not let so many days pass without visiting you again."

The horse snorted gently, and Rhiannon smiled. Gwenllian's need for time with her horse was as essential as Rhiannon's need for time with the sea.

"If the good weather holds, we could go for a ride on the morrow," Rhiannon said.

"Yes." Gwenllian's answer was instant, but then memory returned, and the light in her eyes dimmed. "If I am well enough."

Rhiannon offered her an encouraging smile. "You have done well today. There is no reason to claim happiness you do not feel, but if being with Hazel brings you even a little peace or joy, it is worth pursuing."

Gwenllian nodded. "I do feel better when I am with her."

"I daresay she feels better when she is with you also." Rhiannon patted Hazel's neck. "What say you to that, girl?"

The horse nickered and rubbed its nose against Gwenllian's shoulder. Gwenllian smiled. It was likely the first smile she had offered in a week, and it brought Rhiannon hope.

"Very well," Gwenllian said. "A short ride. After noon."

"Did you hear that, Ioan?" Rhiannon asked the young stableboy.

"Yes, Miss Rhiannon. I'll have Hazel made ready."

"And a mount for Miss Rhiannon, if you would," Gwenllian said. She glanced at Rhiannon. "I'll not go without you."

"I am happy to accompany you." Once they were mounted, Rhiannon would suggest that they ride toward the market. After horses, Gwenllian's greatest love was purchasing exotic fabric and jewelry from traveling merchants.

As the stableboy led Hazel back to her stall, Rhiannon and Gwenllian stepped out of the stable in time to hear a shout at the entrance of the llys. A couple of guards ran to open the gate, and a dozen men on horseback clattered into the courtyard.

“Is it Hywel?” Gwenllian’s voice wavered. “Has he finally returned with news?”

“No.” Rhiannon stared at the man riding at the head of the party. “It’s Cadwgan.”

Four months had passed since the nobleman had visited the llys, and she’d heard nothing from him in the interim. She had thought of him occasionally during that time, wondering if she would ever be more important in his life than she was now. But she had never craved his company the way she’d seen Gwenllian long for Anarawd’s. She ran her hands down her green wool gown and straightened her shoulders. No matter his unexpected arrival or their uncertain relationship, she would greet Cadwgan with cordiality and poise.

“Shall we cross the courtyard to receive him?” Rhiannon asked.

“I would rather not,” Gwenllian admitted. “But my father would expect nothing less.”

Rhiannon slid her arm through Gwenllian’s. “And you will save me from having to greet him alone.”

“Does seeing him again cause you anxiety?”

“Not exactly.” How could she explain the emptiness she felt when she did not understand it herself? “But having you with me will certainly ease the initial awkwardness of speaking to him again after so long apart.”

Gwenllian gave her an understanding look. “Cadwgan has never been one to show his feelings, but I am sure he will be happy to see you.”

Feigning confidence she did not feel, Rhiannon nodded. Gwenllian had known Cadwgan since childhood and certainly understood the nobleman’s temperament better than she.

At their approach, Cadwgan slid from his saddle.

“Good evening, Gwenllian. Rhiannon.” He bowed, and when he raised his head, his dark eyes met Rhiannon’s, but when he spoke again, it was to address Gwenllian. “I am glad to see you looking so well, cousin.”

Mayhap it was the fading light that hid Gwenllian’s wan complexion and puffy eyes. Or perchance Cadwgan had chosen courtesy over truth. Whatever the reason, Gwenllian mustered a weak smile. “You are kind to say so.” She raised her head slightly. “Welcome to the llys, Cadwgan.”

“I wish I were here under happier circumstances,” he said. “I was a member of the groom’s party at Dinefwr Castle when Anarawd’s death occurred and had every intention of coming directly to Ynys Môn to offer my condolences, but I met Hywel on my way. His journey to the llys was so

swift, he had already spoken to your father and was en route to Ceredigion. I offered to assist him in fulfilling the king's charge to strip your uncle of his lands and possessions."

"It is done, then?" Gwenllian said, her voice little more than a whisper.

"Aye. Hywel and his men are only a few hours behind us. I daresay he will wish to be the one to report to your father on all that occurred."

Gwenllian nodded, and Rhiannon caught the glint of tears in her eyes. She tightened her grip on Gwenllian's arm. This was not how she wanted their outing to the stables to end. "We are grateful for the news, Cadwgan," Rhiannon said. "Waiting for word has been difficult for us all but especially for the king and Gwenllian."

"I am glad to be of service," Cadwgan said. "I pray that this act of retribution will enable Gwenllian to move past any disappointment she may have experienced."

Rhiannon frowned. She had yet to hear a priest couple prayer with retribution. Surely there was an obvious incompatibility between the two actions. And to relegate Gwenllian's current suffering to something as inconsequential as disappointment was as thoughtless as it was absurd. Rhiannon took a step back, pulling Gwenllian with her. "It is good that you are arrived safely. And I feel sure that Owain Gwynedd will be even more grateful to have Hywel return and hear the news he bears. But it is growing late, and as I gave my word to Gwenllian that our visit to the stables would be of a short duration, we will take our leave of you now."

"Of course." His eyes flashed in the moonlight, but Rhiannon was unable to identify the nature of the emotion exposed there before he dipped his head. When he raised it again, his expression was placid. "Mayhap I could accompany you on an outing beyond the confines of the llys on the morrow? I have been told that the market in Aberffraw is the best on the island."

A trip to the market was precisely what Rhiannon had planned for Gwenllian's first excursion beyond the confines of the royal court. But had Cadwgan intended to include them both in his invitation? Rhiannon could not tell, and although the nobleman's gaze had fallen upon her, his expression revealed nothing.

"If the fair weather holds, that would be most agreeable," she said.

"Gwenllian and I would be happy to join you. We shall be ready at nones."

Beneath her arm, Gwenllian stiffened. Rhiannon ignored the subtle message. There was no doubt her cousin would claim that a ride to the market

was beyond her present capabilities. Rhiannon did not believe it. Cadwgan may not have intended for the excursion to assist in Gwenllian's recovery, but that was precisely what Rhiannon hoped it would do.

"The ninth hour at the stables," Cadwgan said, confirming the arrangement with an inclination of his head.

It did not escape Rhiannon's notice that he exhibited no more enthusiasm for the appointment than he would have had Owain Gwynedd scheduled a meeting with him to discuss a hostile incursion. Mayhap he did not consider spending time with her to be as desirable as she would wish.

"I am not certain that—" Gwenllian began.

"Until then, my lord," Rhiannon said, cutting off her cousin's pretext for remaining in her bed past noon before it fully began. "Come, Gwenllian. We should inform your father that Cadwgan is here and that Hywel will arrive shortly."

Thankfully, Hywel's coming was sufficiently significant to distract Gwenllian from her excuses, and she increased her pace to match Rhiannon's.

"At this hour, my father should be in the great hall," she said.

Rhiannon nodded. "Then we shall go there first."

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Leif stood in the shade of a large oak tree and absently swatted a fly away from his face. A few feet away, Knud was haggling with a farmer over the price of an etched silver platter. Notwithstanding his limited Gaelic, Knud was managing the job well. Leif smothered a smile. His friend's business acumen was almost as impressive as his silversmithing.

Leif allowed his gaze to travel slowly around the marketplace. There was a surprisingly large assortment of vendors. Some were locals, selling such things as vegetables, fish, and honey. Across the small square, a portly fellow had a barrow filled with woolen fabric, and an older couple a little farther down had a table full of linens. Closer to the livestock, women were selling butter, eggs, and cheese.

The square had been filled with people all day. Leif had placed Knud in charge of selling their wares while he'd tuned his ears to the lyrical cadence of the Cymry's Gaelic. At first, he'd had to concentrate to make sense of the words, but over the last few hours, the differences in pronunciation had seemed to lessen. Not that any increase in his comprehension had been very helpful. He had yet to hear any mention of Anarawd's death.

“We have sold over half our wares already,” Knud said. “And for a good price.” He grinned. “It seems that Viking silver is valued even more on Ongullsey than it is in Veisafjodr.”

“We may need to hold back some items so we have reason to return another day,” Leif said. “No one has spoken of Anarawd or Cadwaladr within my hearing.”

“What of Owain Gwynedd’s daughter or the wedding that was to happen?” Knud asked.

Leif shook his head. “Not a word.” He eyed the fishmonger at a nearby cart. He was chatting with a young maid as he scooped a handful of mussels into a bowl. If Leif’s initial observations were any indication, the fishmonger was the most talkative of their merchant neighbors. “Mayhap it is time for me to do some fishing,” he said.

Knud followed his gaze. “Aye. I daresay some friendly interaction with the locals would not go amiss.”

Leif grinned. “I am going to take a short walk. Do not sell everything in my absence.”

“Everything but the pendant you created,” Knud said. “That is quite possibly the ugliest piece I have ever seen.”

With a chuckle, Leif turned his back on him. They both knew that the only reason the pendant still lay on the table was because it was priced so high. It had taken Leif a fortnight to perfect the etching on the silver that had been molten and cast to resemble a crashing wave. It was one of his most beautiful pieces of work, and Knud would not sell it for less than the asking price.

Leif wandered closer to the fishmonger’s barrow. As soon as the maid took her leave of the merchant, he approached the man. “What kind of fish do you catch in these waters?” he asked.

The fishmonger looked at him with surprise. “Well, I never. A Norseman who speaks Gaelic!”

“I am glad you understand. The Cymry’s inflection is a little different from what I am used to.”

“Different. Smoother on the tongue. Easier on the ears.” He shrugged. “It’s one an’ the same to a Cymry.”

Leif smothered a smile. It appeared that national pride was not limited to Vikings. “And do the Cymry’s melodious voices attract the biggest fish?”

The fishmonger’s weather-worn face cracked into a crooked smile. “I would not be surprised. Just look at this plaice.” He held up a large, flat fish.

“Ave you ever seen the like?”

“I cannot say that I have,” Leif admitted. “It would feed a family well.”

The fishmonger grunted. “I daresay. But I’m savin’ this one fer the royal court. It’s worthy of the king’s table, this one.”

It was exactly the opening Leif had hoped for. “Does the royal cook buy from you often?”

“Often enough,” the man said, puffing his chest out a bit. “She knows I ’ave the freshest fish at the market.”

“With such regular contact with people living in the llys, you must hear all the news.”

“Aye. There’s not much I don’t know.”

“I daresay it’s been especially unsettled there recently,” Leif said as though he already knew all the details.

“Terrible, it’s been.” The fishmonger dropped the plaice back onto the barrow with a slap. “I’ve ’eard tell that the princess ’as yet to eat a morsel or leave ’er chambers, and the king’s been in a rage for days.” He shook his head. “To have ’er bridegroom murdered on the very week of ’er weddin’. And by ’er uncle, no less. Well, it’s not surprisin’ Owain Gwynedd is furious, is it?”

“What is he threatening to do?”

“What ’as ’e already done’s more like it,” the fishmonger said. “Prince Hywel was barely at the llys long enough to change ’orses afore Owain Gwynedd sent ’im to Ceredigion to seize Cadwaladr’s land and possessions. If Cadwaladr ever sets foot on Gwynedd’s soil again, I reckon ’e’ll be killed by the king’s own ’and.”

Leif nodded, his mind racing. It would seem that Cadwaladr had not exaggerated the threat to his life. But what of his assertions of innocence? “Is it a surety that Cadwaladr is guilty of the murder?”

“Whether or not the prince performed the deed, I cannot say, but by all accounts, the fatal wound was caused by Cadwaladr’s dagger.”

Cadwaladr’s flight immediately after the discovery of his weapon at the scene of the crime certainly pointed to his being involved.

“It’s no wonder that the king’s wrath was swift and sure,” Leif said.

“No wonder, indeed.” The fishmonger waved his hands over the barrow and displaced at least a dozen flies. “With Anarawd’s death, ’e lost a valuable alliance.”

“And a brother,” Leif said thoughtfully. If Calwaladr spoke the truth about

his innocence, what would be the greatest motivation for another perpetrator: the loss of a political allegiance or the severing of a close family tie?

The fishmonger might have said more, but his attention had strayed from Leif and the fish to a small group of people entering the square on horseback.

“Well now,” he said, standing a little taller and straightening his tunic.

“This really is somethin’.”

“Do you know the new arrivals?” Leif asked.

“It’s Princess Gwenllian—out of ’er chambers at last. And with ’er are ’er cousins, Cadwgan ap Gronw and Rhiannon ferch Iorwerth.”

Leif stilled. Rhiannon. The name had haunted him for over two years, but he had not heard it spoken since he’d stood outside a faraway longhouse. He took a deep breath. Reason told him that Rhiannon was a common enough name in Gwynedd and that the young lady entering the marketplace could not possibly be the same person he’d encountered farther south on the mainland. Unfortunately, his thumping heart was not listening to reason.

Chapter 15

RHIANNON WATCHED CADWGAN ASSIST GWENLLIAN off her mount, noting her cousin's hesitant smile when she landed on her feet and turned to survey the busy marketplace. It had taken every grain of persuasive power Rhiannon possessed to convince her cousin to accompany her and Cadwgan on this outing. But now that they were here, she hoped Gwenllian's love for browsing through the stalls would overcome her earlier reluctance.

"Rhiannon? Are you ready to dismount?"

With a start, Rhiannon realized that while she'd been focused on Gwenllian, Cadwgan had moved to stand beside her horse. "Yes, of course." She released the reins, and he raised his arms to lift her down. His hands were firm and his arms strong, and when he set her on the ground, she raised her eyes to his. "I thank you," she said softly.

He offered her a ghost of a smile and released her. "My pleasure."

Rhiannon swallowed her disappointment. Even though Cadwgan preferred to keep his emotions hidden, it would have been encouraging to see more proof of his supposed pleasure.

She looked away. Truth be told, no matter that his hands had been at her waist, her pulse had maintained its steady beat throughout. Cadwgan was not the only one unaffected by their close proximity.

Two of Cadwgan's men stepped forward to claim their mounts' reins, and Cadwgan gestured toward the center of the square. "Shall we proceed?"

With the first glimmer of enthusiasm Gwenllian had shown in days, she nodded. "I believe the wool merchants are here today. Mayhap they have something new."

Rhiannon smiled. "I think we should visit their stall first."

The local people stepped aside, politely inclining their heads or bobbing a curtsy as Gwenllian passed by. A few exchanged surprised whispers, but Gwenllian's presence at the market was sufficiently commonplace to cause no great distraction. The normalcy was good for her, and as they made their way to the far corner of the marketplace and the wool merchants' stall, Rhiannon saw the despair that had hovered over Gwenllian for so long begin to dissipate.

"Is there anything in particular that you are hoping to find?" Rhiannon asked.

"If they have any blue cloth, I will purchase it," Gwenllian said without

hesitation. “The merchant assured me that he would have some this month.” She offered Rhiannon a sly look. “I asked him to save it for me.”

Rhiannon laughed. “Then I am doubly glad we are come. The merchant has likely been watching for you all week.”

“Yes,” Gwenllian said, the tension in her shoulders visibly lessening. “It is good to be here.”

“Good day, Princess Gwenllian.” The cloth merchant greeted her with a glint in his eyes that hinted at an anticipated sale. “You must see what I have for you.” Without waiting for Gwenllian to respond, he withdrew a bolt of pale-blue finely woven wool from beneath his table. “I did as you asked, you see, and I set this aside for you. Such exquisite fabric should be worn only by royalty.”

Gwenllian ran her fingers across the cloth. “It is very fine.”

“It was created by master weavers in Flanders.”

Gwenllian’s eyes widened. “Flanders, you say?”

“Aye, Your Highness.” He took in Cadwgan’s skeptical expression and straightened his shoulders. “Any good wool merchant would recognize the unique quality of cloth produced there.”

“How did you come by it?” Cadwgan asked.

“The best weavers are always anxious for wool from Gwynedd, my lord, and are often willing to barter to acquire it.”

His answer likely lacked the details Cadwgan had hoped for, but Gwenllian was more than satisfied. “What do you think, Rhiannon? Is it not the most beautiful fabric you have ever seen?”

“It is, indeed,” Rhiannon said. “It would make a very fine gown.”

Gwenllian’s smile was instant. “My thoughts exactly.” She turned to the merchant. “I wish to purchase your fabric and would have you deliver it to the llys by day’s end.”

Rhiannon caught the merchant’s gratified look immediately before he bowed his head. No doubt he knew that Gwenllian had no more need of another gown than he did.

“It would be my pleasure, Your Highness,” he said.

Cadwgan cleared his throat. “Does this market boast a bladesmith of any worth?” It seemed that the nobleman had tired of discussing fabrics.

“There’s a fellow who comes once a month from over Amlwch way,” the merchant said, “but he usually sets up his stall near Afan the Fishmonger. A couple of silversmiths from Ireland have put out their wares in his usual spot,

but whether they have blades to sell, I cannot tell.”

“Silversmiths, you say?” Gwenllian’s interest settled on the intriguing merchandise even as Rhiannon’s was drawn to the travelers who had braved the sea.

“Aye.” The wool merchant pointed to a large man on the other side of the square who was gesturing at a silver bowl lying amid an assortment of other glittering objects on a cloth upon the ground. “There’s one of them, see?”

The stranger’s tunic was cut a little differently than the tunics of the Cymry at the market, and his sandy-colored hair hung in two plaits below his shoulders.

Rhiannon’s breath caught. “He’s a Viking.”

“Norsemen is what they’re calling themselves,” the merchant said. “From Dyflin.”

“I’ve heard tell that the Norsemen are uncommonly skilled silversmiths,” Cadwgan said.

“I’ve heard the same,” the merchant said.

“We should go there next,” Gwenllian said. “Mayhap they have some pieces of Norse jewelry for sale.”

Rhiannon touched the ringed cross that always hung around her neck and swallowed against the memories she had worked so hard to suppress. “I believe I shall visit the candlemaker whilst you see what the Norsemen have brought,” she said.

“Nonsense,” Cadwgan said. “You are as likely as Gwenllian to see a trinket that catches your eye. We shall go together.”

Rhiannon took an unsteady breath. Cadwgan was right, and she was being foolish. There was no need to miss out on seeing the Norsemen’s handiwork for a memory that was so wholly unconnected with this marketplace.

“Come, Rhiannon,” Gwenllian said. “The candlemaker is always here. The Norsemen will have something entirely new to show us.”

Rhiannon managed a weak smile. The market had worked its magic upon her cousin. She could not allow her own irrational fears to undo the progress Gwenllian had made.

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The newcomers crossed the square, their sights set on Knud and the goods he stood over. From his position behind the fishmonger’s stall, Leif studied the young woman whose finely embroidered gown and elegantly dressed hair set her apart from the other shoppers. This must be Owain Gwynedd’s

daughter. The one whose betrothed had so recently been murdered. He glanced at the nobleman walking beside her. His brooding expression was a fitting accompaniment to his dark hair and eyes. The dagger at his belt and his air of watchful tension spoke of a man alert for possible danger, but no guard would be dressed so finely.

“The gentleman with the princess,” Leif said. “Is that the cousin you spoke of?”

“Aye.” The fishmonger was also watching the royal visitors’ progress through the market. “Cadwgan ap Gronw. ’Is late father was a brother to Owain Gwynedd’s mother.”

“Does he reside at the llys?”

“No. ’E visits occasionally, but ’is home is in Dyffryn Clwyd. I daresay ’e’s been with Hywel, sorting things out in Deheubarth and Ceredigion after Anarawd’s murder.”

Leif mentally sifted through what little he knew of Owain Gwynedd’s family. Hywel was a name he’d heard before, and if his memory served him, it belonged to Owain’s son and heir. To his good fortune, the fishmonger corroborated the information without prompting.

“Owain sent ’is son to seize Cadwaladr’s lands as soon as ’e ’eard what ’ad ’appened. Word is, Hywel arrived back at the llys in the early hours of the morning.”

“Not soon enough to accompany his sister to the market,” Leif said, rather sorry that he’d not been offered the opportunity to set eyes on the edling.

“So it would seem.” The fishmonger brushed a fly from his nose. “Not that ’e usually accompanies ’er, mind. It’s ’er other cousin who most often comes to the market.”

“Are they brother and sister, then, these two cousins?”

“Not at all. Rhiannon ferch Iorwerth’s mother was the queen’s sister, and rumor ’as it that the lady is to marry Cadwgan ap Gronw, but as yet, there’s been no official announcement.”

The small group was closer now, and as they circumvented a large barrow of vegetables, Leif caught sight of the young lady walking on the other side of Cadwgan. Her green gown, although elegant, was not as extravagant as Gwenllian’s, and her dark hair was loose, flowing like a silky curtain to her waist. Cadwgan said something. She replied, turning to face Leif for the first time.

For a full five heartbeats, the world stopped, and Leif was transported to a

courtyard lit by flickering torches. Shouts from Vikings racing for their boats filled the air, but all he could hear were the sobs of the young woman on the ground before him. Leif took a ragged breath. The vision faded, and as the busy marketplace came back into focus, he forced himself to keep breathing.

The young woman who had haunted his daytime thoughts and nighttime dreams for two years was not more than twenty paces from him.

“Looks like you and yer friend ’ave some new customers,” the fishmonger said, a hint of envy in his voice.

“Yes.” Leif’s feet had yet to move.

The fishmonger gave him an odd look. “Seein’ as ’ow their purses are deeper ’un anyone else’s on the whole island, it might serve you well t’ greet them.”

Leif had a sinking feeling that his presence might, in fact, do the exact opposite. But Knud would not wish to fumble through the inevitable language barrier in the presence of such prestigious people. He could only hope that after all this time, Rhiannon would not know him.

A woman approached the fishmonger, and setting her basket on the edge of his stall, she began haggling with the man over the price of a piece of cod. With the fishmonger’s attention fully diverted, Leif took his leave.

He chose his path carefully, coming up behind the new customers so that he might hear their conversation before they noticed him.

“It would seem that they do not have any knives, Cadwgan,” Gwenllian said. “Which is a shame, because their workmanship is exceptional.”

“Indeed.” Cadwgan took one of the candlesticks Knud had crafted and raised it to eye level, studying it carefully.

“Two,” Knud said, lifting two fingers to indicate that he was asking two coins for the piece.

Cadwgan snorted. “It is hardly worth one.”

Knud folded his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Two,” he repeated.

Cadwgan replaced the candlestick. “I think not.”

“It is very finely made, Cadwgan.” Rhiannon spoke for the first time, and even had Leif’s eyes been closed, he would have known her voice. “Surely the silver itself is worth a gold coin.”

“It lacks refinement,” he said.

Leif stiffened. If there was one quality Knud could claim above all else in his silversmithing, it was elegance of design.

“What of that pendant,” Gwenllian said, pointing to the piece Leif had

made.

Cadwgan reached for it. The sun caught the etched detail work, sending sunbeams dancing across the ground.

“How beautiful!” Rhiannon’s voice rang with wonder. “It scatters light as it moves.”

Cadwgan glanced at her, his expression thoughtful. He turned the pendant in his hand. The sunbeams swirled. “How much for this one?” he said loudly.

“Raising your voice does not assist comprehension,” Leif said. He stepped forward but kept his face averted from Rhiannon. “And that particular item is not for sale.”

The words spilled out without forethought, driven by an emotion he did not understand. He simply knew that he could not countenance the haughty nobleman taking possession of that particular necklace.

Cadwgan’s dark eyes sparked with anger. “Your name, if you please.”

“Leif,” he said. This was not the time to give his parentage. Any nobleman with close connections to the crown would recognize the name of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin.

“How does a Norseman come to speak the Gaelic tongue?”

Cadwgan offered no introduction, and Leif attempted to tamp down his irritation. As far as the nobleman knew, he was a simple silversmith and deserved no such courtesy.

“I live in Ireland. Gaelic is spoken there.”

Cadwgan’s nostrils flared, a sure sign that he did not appreciate Leif’s blunt response. But Leif owed this nobleman nothing—least of all, one of his most valuable pieces of jewelry. He extended his hand for the pendant.

“There are many other fine items available for purchase,” he said.

With a scowl, Cadwgan dropped the necklace into Leif’s hand and turned away. “Are you ready to visit the candlemaker, Rhiannon?”

She did not reply immediately. Leif shifted slightly, meeting her eyes for the first time. Her face was ashen.

“No,” she finally whispered. “It cannot be.” She raised one hand to her mouth to stifle a sob and staggered back a pace.

“Rhiannon! What is it?” Gwenllian reached her side.

“The Viking.” She shook her head as though unable to say the words. “He . . . he . . . was there. He . . .”

Guilt, hot and searing, pierced Leif’s chest. “Please, Rhiannon,” he said, taking a step toward her. “I would speak with you.”

“No,” she cried, cutting him off before he could say anything more. She seized Gwenllian’s hand. “We must go. Now.”

He sensed movement at his left and swung around just in time to avoid Cadwgan’s vicious thrust. The blade in his hand missed its mark, but the nobleman was undeterred.

“What manner of vermin are you to speak to one of Cymry’s noblewomen with such familiarity?” He lunged again. Leif sidestepped and reached for the knife at his belt.

“Stop,” Rhiannon sobbed. “I beg of you. There has been too much needless bloodshed already.”

Ignoring her, Cadwgan advanced a step. Leif sensed Knud’s presence, tense and alert behind him. Beyond the small group, a crowd of whispering spectators was gathering.

“She is right, my lord,” Leif said. “I have no desire to do you harm.”

“Silence,” Cadwgan growled.

Leif circled left, his eyes not leaving the nobleman’s face. He stopped and feigned a step to the right. Cadwgan pounced. Leif pivoted, catching the Cymry off guard. He reached for Cadwgan’s wrist and squeezed. The nobleman’s knife clattered to the ground.

“One should never underestimate a grip born of rowing across the sea, my lord,” Leif said, pulling Cadwgan’s arm behind his back and leaning close. “Rhiannon ferch Iorwerth has expressed her desire for no bloodshed. Unlike you, I shall honor her wishes.”

“Knud,” he said, reverting to Norse. “Pick up his knife and give it to the lady with the long dark hair.”

There was a rustle behind him and then Knud’s voice. “It is done, Leif.”

Forcing Cadwgan to turn around, Leif faced Rhiannon once more. “The choice is yours, my lady,” he said, speaking in Gaelic once more. “If you choose to leave with the knife in your hand, there will be no further bloodshed. If not, I can give you no promise.”

Cadwgan pulled against his grasp. “Return it to me, Rhiannon. He will not wrest it from me a second time.”

Rhiannon lowered her gaze to the knife in her trembling hand. All around them, the crowd hushed. Leif counted the pounding beats of his heart. A baby cried, and then Rhiannon moved. Wrapping her fingers around the handle of the knife, she backed away. “I wish to return to the llys, Cadwgan.”

Gwenllian moved to stand at her side. “Come,” she said. “I will go with

you.” The two young ladies walked away. The spectators parted for them.

Leif loosened his grip on Cadwgan, and the furious nobleman wrenched his arm free. “You will pay for this,” he hissed.

Leif said nothing. This was not the time to tell the nobleman that public humiliation was nothing when compared to a mortal wound or unrelenting remorse.

With a muttered curse, Cadwgan marched away. Leif watched him go.

“Would you care to explain what just happened?” Knud said.

“A mistake from the past returned to influence the present,” Leif said grimly. “Suffice it to say, we have overstayed our welcome, and the sooner we are gone, the better. It will not take Cadwgan long to send royal guards after us.”

Chapter 16

GWENLLIAN WAITED UNTIL THEY HAD cleared the crowded marketplace and were almost to their waiting horses before breaking her silence. “Are you going to tell me what caused you to tremble and turn as white as a goose feather back there?”

Rhiannon glanced over her shoulder. The Viking was no longer in sight, but Cadwgan had started across the square toward them. She tightened her grip on the nobleman’s knife and attempted to do the same with her reeling emotions. A full explanation was beyond her at present. But what could she say to stem Gwennlian’s questions? Or worse, Cadwgan’s? She was not yet ready to speak of the tall Viking with the blue eyes, whose voice she had known instantly.

“It was the first time I have seen a Viking since my father’s death.” She swallowed. Trying to explain how one moment she’d been admiring a silver necklace and the next she’d been drowning in memories of that fateful night at Bryn Eithin was beyond her. “I had not realized how unprepared I was for the encounter.”

Compassion filled Gwennlian’s countenance. “Forgive me, Rhiannon. It was thoughtless of me to push you to visit them.”

Rhiannon shook her head. “Do not take any blame upon yourself. None of us could have known that he would be—”

“So ready to defend your honor.”

Rhiannon blinked, trying to make sense of Gwennlian’s words. “To defend my honor?” She could see no correlation between the Viking’s unexpected appearance and a threat upon her honor.

“Why, yes. Cadwgan responded the moment the Norseman spoke to you with such familiarity.”

Understanding dawned. Gwennlian had interrupted because she assumed Rhiannon had been referring to Cadwgan when she’d actually been speaking of the Viking. Rhiannon struggled to remember their brief interaction. Had the Viking truly said anything worthy of a physical attack? What had driven Cadwgan to go to such lengths?

His knife lay heavy in her hand. She held it out to Gwennlian.

“Take this and return it to Cadwgan,” she said.

Her cousin accepted it with confusion. “Do you not wish to give it to him yourself? He will be here momentarily.”

Rhiannon reached for the reins of her mount. “I think it best if you do it. He will speak further about the incident, and I wish to forget it.” A groom stepped forward to assist her into the saddle, and she wheeled her horse around. “I will see you at the llys.”

Gwenllian’s confusion turned to alarm. “But you cannot leave without an escort.”

“Allow me this, Gwenllian,” Rhiannon said. “You shall have Cadwgan and his men to ride with you. I need some time alone to clear my head.”

Empathy shone in Gwenllian’s eyes. She knew about such things more than ever before. “I daresay the sea will help you. It always does.”

Rhiannon had not considered her destination. Perhaps because she had no need to think on it. The soothing rush of waves forever called to her.

“May I ask that you forbear from telling Cadwgan where I am gone,” she said. “I will see him again soon enough.”

Gwenllian nodded. “Go swiftly. He is almost upon us.”

Rhiannon required no second bidding. Touching her heels to her mount’s side, she left the marketplace at a gallop.

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Leif scrambled up the rocks that protected the small inlet. In the water below, his boat rocked gently on the waves. The few remaining silver bowls, candlesticks, and items of jewelry that he and Knud had not sold at the market lay wrapped in a blanket, hidden beneath one of the seats. Two small pouches—one attached to Knud’s belt and the other to Leif’s—contained the coins they’d acquired. All that remained now was to wait for evening and the turning of the tide.

When they’d finished readying the boat, Knud had risked slipping back into town to purchase some bread for their journey. Thankfully, he had returned successful and was now resting ahead of the rowing they had before them. All being well, the lowering light would enable them to leave Gwynedd’s shores unnoticed, and once they were out to sea, they could raise the sail.

Reaching the top of the craggy rocks, Leif scoured the water. It was clear of craft. At this time in the late afternoon, most fishermen had returned to shore. Turning to his right, he studied the beach. On the other side of the crescent-shaped bay, a rocky promontory much like the one on which he stood jutted into the sea. Between the two, golden sand began at the water’s edge and rose to cover grassy dunes before disappearing into a thick grove of

pine trees.

A flash of light drew his gaze to a spot where the trees met the sand. Shading his eyes from the brightness of the setting sun, Leif strained to identify its source. It flashed again, and this time, he saw movement between the trees. A brown horse, barely visible amid the tree trunks, stuck its head out from behind a pine. The metal on its bridle caught the sun, sending a flash of light across the rocks at Leif's feet. He tensed. If there was a horse wearing a bridle, somewhere, there was a rider.

Lowering himself onto his stomach, he examined the trees for further sign of movement. Nothing. Widening his search to the dunes, his gaze followed the length of the bay, ending at the distant rocks. And then he saw her. She was standing on a boulder at the water's edge, her green gown fluttering around her legs and her hair flowing like a dark ribbon in the sea breeze. Leif's heart began to pound. He did not need to see her face to know that it was Rhiannon.

He forced himself to search the area once more. Convinced that there was no one else nearby, he scrambled down the other side of the rocky headland. Upon reaching the sand, he stayed in the shadows of the promontory, working his way up the beach until he reached the sand dunes. The waving grass on the undulating terrain was a poor excuse for protection, but it was better than walking across the open sand.

When he reached the other side of the cove, his feet slowed. A force greater than reason had driven him across the bay, but now that he was within thirty paces of Rhiannon, he found himself desiring to retreat. She had made her abhorrence of him perfectly clear. What good would it do to attempt speaking with her again? More importantly, what could he possibly say that would help her grasp the depth of his sorrow over what happened so long ago?

He stopped, clenching his hands in indecision. To continue or to leave before she became aware of his presence? A seagull cried. Rhiannon raised her head to watch it soar over the waves and then circle back across the bay. She turned, her eyes following the bird's progression until it disappeared over the headland. And then she saw Leif.

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Panic swept over Rhiannon. The Viking was on the beach, and she was alone. Consumed by memories and comforted by the majesty of the sea, she had lost track of time. Again. She could only pray that her negligence had not

cost her her life.

“I would speak with you, Rhiannon ferch Iorwerth.”

Trembling within, she raised her head. “Leave me be, Viking!”

He took a step toward her. “I mean you no harm.”

“How can you say such a thing? You killed my father! He was an honest nobleman devoted to the care of his daughter, his servants, and his land.” She thought she’d cried herself dry, yet the words produced fresh tears. “What manner of monster does such a thing?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing emerged. Pain as real as the emotion she had so recently witnessed in Gwennlian pierced his blue eyes.

“Forgive me.” His voice was low. “I have no right to ask it of you, I know, but ask it I must. If I could go back in time and have Rune’s deeds undone, I would do it in an instant. If I were offered the chance to prevent him from throwing the axe that felled your father, it would be done.”

“Stop!” she cried. “You may come to Ynys Môn posing as a simple merchant, but I know what you truly are. In your heart, you are a plundering, murdering Viking.”

He stiffened. “You know nothing of my heart, my lady,” he said.

“And you know nothing of mine. But I shall tell you this much: the night you and your horde attacked my father’s home and left him for dead, my heart broke.”

He fell silent, shifting his gaze from her to the open sea. The sun was beginning to set, and the horizon was streaked with yellow and orange. Rhiannon watched him anxiously. Was he so preoccupied with his thoughts that she could escape? Tentatively, she stepped off the boulder and onto the wet sand.

“Father Robert taught me that God can heal all things,” he said. “Do you believe that includes broken hearts?”

Rhiannon stared. She must have heard him incorrectly. “I know nothing of your pagan gods.”

He turned to her then. “I am not speaking of Norse gods. I am speaking of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Is that not who you worship?”

Rhiannon’s fingers found the circled cross around her neck. “It is.”

“My great-grandmother was a Cymry. According to my mother, she never renounced her Christian faith even though she left this land when she was young.”

“You have an ancestor who was a Cymry?” It was impossible to hide her

incredulity. “Is that why you speak Gaelic?”

His smile was so fleeting she wondered if she had imagined it, but for that brief moment, the vicious Viking disappeared.

“I have wondered if that is why the language came more easily to me than to others, but I must credit my fluency to Father Robert.”

It seemed she had not misheard him earlier, but she was no closer to understanding. “Who is Father Robert?”

“He is the priest in Dyflin who taught me about your God.” His eyes met hers. “And about confession, repentance, and forgiveness.”

A gust of wind caught the folds in Rhiannon’s gown and whipped them against her legs. She wrapped her arms around herself, but the change in position did little to contain her body’s heat or calm her turbulent emotions. “Who are you to speak of such hallowed principles as though you know them?”

He straightened his shoulders a fraction. “My name is Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin. I was raised to be a Viking, but after what happened to your father, I went seeking answers and found them with an Irish priest. He gave me reason to hope for a fresh beginning, and I have chosen to take a new path.”

“The son of the jarl is now a merchant?” Rhiannon scoffed. The notion was ludicrous.

He shook his head. “I am a silversmith.”

She eyed him warily, memory of his interaction with Cadwgan at the market returning. “Did you make the necklace Cadwgan wished to purchase?”

“I did.”

It was Rhiannon’s turn to pause. Was it possible that a man who had participated in the mayhem and violence of a Viking raid could produce something so stunning as that particular piece of jewelry? It could not be. Surely that kind of beauty was a reflection of light within the artist. “There is no reason I should believe anything you tell me.”

“I willingly confess to having many flaws,” he said, “but I have never been accused of speaking falsehoods.”

She searched his eyes. They were troubled but showed no hint of ferocity or malice. If he spoke the truth, mayhap he would let her leave. She stepped to the right, prepared to walk around him. “Then I wish you well in your silversmithing.”

“There is something else.” He had not moved to prevent her escape, but there was something in his voice that stopped her. “Cadwaladr, brother to Owain Gwynedd, is in Dyflin. He claims he has been accused of a murder that he did not commit.”

Anger flared. “Anarawd ap Gruffydd, the prince of Deheubarth, is dead,” she said. “Killed by Cadwaladr’s blade. If it is true that Cadwaladr has sought sanctuary with the Vikings, then it would behoove your father to set an extra guard at his door.”

“It is certain that he is guilty, then?”

“How could he be otherwise?”

“If another wished Cadwaladr blamed for the crime, it would not be so very difficult to accomplish. Knives can be stolen; servants can be bribed.”

Rhiannon stared at him. What he was suggesting was treasonous. And yet, was murdering Anarawd any less so?

“Why would anyone go to such lengths?”

“Why, indeed,” Leif said. “But by the same token, why would Cadwaladr murder the man who was to be his niece’s bridegroom?”

“Because the marriage would create a strong alliance between Owain Gwynedd and Anarawd ap Gruffydd, which would increase the king’s influence considerably.”

“And would that be detrimental to Cadwaladr? I was under the impression that until this incident, the brothers were politically aligned.”

Was that true? Rhiannon knew very little of the skirmishes for power that plagued the crown, but bards often sang of the great battle against the Normans at Crug Mawr, where Owain Gwynedd and Cadwaladr fought together and successfully annexed Ceredigion to their father’s realm. Cadwaladr’s lands were in the north portion of Ceredigion. Surely an alliance with the neighboring prince of Deheubarth would have served him as well as Owain Gwynedd.

“I know very little of such things,” she confessed, “but Owain Gwynedd believes his brother is guilty and has stripped him of his lands.”

Leif looked over his shoulder at the dark swathe of trees separating the king’s llys from the shore. “So Cadwaladr’s downfall is assured,” he said softly.

Rhiannon followed his gaze, the first wisps of misgiving entering her heart. Were there lies buried within the news coming from Deheubarth and Ceredigion? And if so, how were they to be discovered? Surely Owain

Gwynedd knew whom he could trust. She took an unsteady breath. If the kings' ranting over the last week was any indication, he had considered Cadwaladr to be one of them. "I must go," she said.

At some point during the last few minutes, her fear that Leif would do her harm or prevent her departure had disappeared.

As if to confirm her newfound conviction, he nodded. "Farewell, Rhiannon."

Her eyes met his once more, and then clasping the lower portion of her gown in both hands, she lifted the hem off the ground and ran toward the trees without looking back.

Chapter 17

RHIANNON PAUSED OUTSIDE THE HEAVY wooden door leading to the great hall, attempting to catch her breath after her swift descent from the floor above. A low rumble of voices reached her from within. She grimaced. No matter that she'd ridden her horse at a gallop and had changed out of her sand-encrusted gown the moment she'd set foot in her bedchamber, she was late. And since the queen insisted that Rhiannon sit with the family at the head table, her belated arrival would be noted by all in attendance.

Seeking a small measure of extra courage, she pressed her fingers to her mother's necklace and reached for the door.

"Rhiannon. Wait."

Rapid footsteps sounded on the flagstones behind her, and she turned to see Hywel approaching.

"It is better that we enter together, do you not think?"

Relief brought a smile to her face. It was the first time she had seen Hywel since his return to the llys late last night. "I should say that making an inexcusably late entrance with the edling is infinitely better than making one on my own," she said.

His grin was a welcome sight even if it did not completely hide his exhaustion. "It is good to see you after so long," he said.

"I am glad you are returned." She studied his face. "It was a difficult journey, I imagine."

The smile vanished. "A difficult journey and an even more difficult task."

"It is done, then. Cadwaladr has nothing to return to."

"His castle is burned to the ground," Hywel said bluntly.

Rhiannon waited for the sense of relief she had expected at his pronouncement. It was uncomfortably absent. Pushing aside the seed of doubt Leif had planted in her mind, she turned her thoughts to how this news might affect Gwenllian. "Have you told your sister?"

He shook his head. "Since returning, I have spoken to no one but my father." He frowned. "How does Gwenllian fare?"

"She has suffered greatly, but she left her chamber to visit the stables yesterday, and today, she accompanied me and Cadwgan to the market."

"You are good for her, Rhiannon."

"I understand something of her pain."

"Two years ago, it was yours," he said.

“Yes.” After all she’d experienced in the last few hours, she did not wish to dwell on those memories. Perhaps Hywel felt similarly, because he reached for the door handle she’d relinquished.

“Come,” he said. “I am hungry.”

Rhiannon followed him into the room. Men and women ceased their chatter and rose to their feet. Hywel offered a few of them a polite nod, but he did not stop until he reached the head table, where he bowed to his father and mother. Rhiannon curtsied beside him.

“My apologies for my late arrival, Father.”

Owain Gwynedd frowned, and Rhiannon made the silent observation that she had not seen him smile since the news of Anarawd’s death had reached him.

“After so many days traveling, I would have thought your stomach would have called you to the great hall for food before now,” the king said.

“I believe it was trying, Sire, but it was unable to penetrate the thick fog of sleep that fell upon me the moment I reclaimed my bed.”

“Hm.” Owain Gwynedd’s gaze turned to Rhiannon. “And you, Rhiannon? Have you been sleeping the evening away also?”

“No, Sire. I was exercising one of the horses.” It was true. In a manner of speaking.

“Well, the head table is sadly lacking in occupants, so you had best be seated.” He waved Hywel to the empty seat at his right, and Rhiannon moved to sit on the other side of the table, where, to her pleasure, Gwenllian was seated beside her mother.

“I am happy that you are here,” Rhiannon said. Eating at the head table without her cousin for the last eight days had been an unexpected challenge. Owain Gwynedd’s dour mood had affected everyone, and she could only endure listening to complaints about the cost of grain and the latest machinations of the Marcher Lords for so long.

“I came in search of you,” Gwenllian said. “You have been gone for hours.”

Guilt at the concern she had so obviously caused pricked at Rhiannon’s conscience. “You know how poorly I keep track of the time when I am by the sea.”

“Yes, but you were in distress when you left the market.”

Rhiannon reached for a piece of bread from the basket on the table, trying to determine how much she should say. “I am much improved.”

“I am glad.” She hesitated. “Cadwgan was furious that you left unaccompanied.”

Rhiannon frowned. Since they had no formal marriage agreement, it was not Cadwgan’s place to dictate where she went or with whom. “Where is Cadwgan now?” The chair beside Hywel was vacant.

Gwenllian speared a piece of pork with her knife and stared at it as though willing herself to eat it.

“He has gone after the Norseman,” she said.

Rhiannon set down her bread. “Why would he do such a thing?”

Gwenllian shrugged. “The Norseman humiliated him at the marketplace.”

“The Norseman simply did not wish to fight.”

Gwenllian gave her an odd look. “I thought the Norseman upset you.”

“He did.” Rhiannon reached for another piece of bread even though she had yet to finish her first one. “Seeing him again . . .” Catching her mistake, she started differently. “Seeing Norsemen again for the first time since the Vikings raided my home was a shock. I pray it will not be so difficult next time.”

“I have never seen them at the market in Aberffraw before,” Gwenllian said. “Mayhap they will not return.”

“That would be best.”

Gwenllian had yet to put the piece of meat on her knife into her mouth. “If Cadwgan finds them, it is certain.”

On the beach, Leif had approached her so stealthily, Rhiannon had had no idea the direction he had come or why he had not yet gone to sea. Vikings were known for taking to the water at the first sign of trouble. Cadwgan may have made a cursory sweep of the town and its environs, but surely his focus by now would be at the shore.

“I pray his pursuit does not lead to bloodshed.”

“Cadwgan can take care of himself,” Gwenllian said.

A vision of Leif standing tall, broad-shouldered, and strong, with the relentless roar of the ocean’s waves behind him, filled her mind, and she found that she did not share Gwenllian’s confidence.

Swallowing her anxiety with some bread, she pointed to the piece of meat on Gwenllian’s knife. “Looking at it will do you no good.”

Her cousin sighed and took a small bite. “My stomach tells me otherwise.”

Rhiannon offered her a sympathetic look but the queen saved her from saying anything more on the subject. She had turned from her conversation

with the king in time to see Gwenllian sample the meat.

“I am glad to see you eating once more, Gwenllian,” she said. “Your father has just informed me that we are to leave for Deheubarth at week’s end. You must do all you can to regain your strength in that time.”

“Deheubarth?” Gwenllian said. “At week’s end?”

“Yes.” Her mother set her hand comfortingly over Gwenllian’s. “The king has determined that we must all attend Anarawd’s burial. He has not given up hope of forging an alliance between our two kingdoms, but after Cadwaladr’s treacherous act, it is imperative that we show our respect and loyalty to Deheubarth’s royal family.”

Gwenllian paled. “Hywel has only now returned from stripping Cadwaladr of his land and castle. Anarawd’s murderer has been cast out of Gwynedd. Does that not show support enough?”

“Those things have done much to reassure Anarawd’s family of your father’s determination to right a grievous wrong, but negotiations between the two must start anew.”

Neither Rhiannon nor Gwenllian mistook the queen’s underlying meaning. The search for another husband with strong political ties—preferably from within the kingdom of Deheubarth—had begun.

Gwenllian’s chin quivered, but she raised it fractionally. “I understand.”

The queen patted the hand beneath hers. “All will be well, Gwenllian. Your father will ensure it.”

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Leif heard the horses’ hooves before he saw the riders. Crouching behind some of the larger rocks atop the promontory, he watched a dark-haired man on a black mount break through the pine trees and start across the dunes. Behind him, five more riders followed.

The man in the lead pointed north and then south. “Spread out!” His shouted command carried on the breeze. “I want every inch of this bay covered. Inform me immediately if you discover anything that might suggest the Norsemen were here.”

Leif’s eyes were instantly drawn to the far end of the beach, where he and Rhiannon had spoken. He’d been wise to return across the sand at the water’s edge. Already, the tide had covered his footprints. The only remaining signs that someone had been on the beach recently were the displaced sand along the base of the cliff and the trail Rhiannon had left. If any of the men spotted the latter, they would realize the footprints were too small to belong to a tall

Norseman. The former may cause problems.

Already, the riders had scattered. Their leader had chosen to ride toward this end of the bay. Staying in the shadows, Leif watched as the rider emerged from around one of the sand dunes and paused to face the rocky headland. Cadwgan. Leif pressed himself against the rock and counted to ten. When the thud of hooves against wet sand signaled Cadwgan was moving once more, Leif dared another look. The nobleman was making for the promontory.

Descending the other side of the headland as quickly as possible, Leif pulled the rope anchoring his boat out from around the boulder at the water's edge.

"Your time to rest is over, Knud." He dropped into the small craft and shook his friend's shoulder to rouse him. "We must be away."

Instantly alert, Knud reached for his oars. "The tide?"

"It will have to do." Leif wound up the rope and set it beneath his seat before taking up his own oars. "A group of riders led by Cadwgan ap Gronw is on the beach. They're searching for Norsemen."

"How long before they reach us?" Knud asked, already pushing the boat away from land.

"If one of them chooses to climb up to see what lies on the other side of the promontory, we have minutes, at best."

A shout sounded, and the rattle of falling rocks filled the inlet. With renewed urgency, Knud dipped his oars into the water and pulled. The boat slid forward.

"Watch for the sandbar up ahead," he warned from the bow of the boat.

Silently praying that the tide had risen sufficiently to allow them access to the open water, Leif raised his oars. He heard the soft grind of the hull brushing the sandbar, but moments later, a receding wave caught the boat, lifting it free and sending it through the inlet's narrow opening and into the sea.

There was another shout, this one much closer.

Leif did not turn around. "Row," he said.

A splash sounded at his right, followed by another at his left. Arrows. A solid thud vibrated through the boat.

Knud's head whipped up. "They hit the mast."

"Row harder," Leif urged.

Experience lent them rhythm; well-used muscles gave them speed. The

boat cut through the water like a knife through butter. Behind them, the voices faded until all that could be heard was the sound of the wind, the waves, and the splash of their oars.

“Enough,” Leif panted, lifting his oars. “We are beyond the range of their longbows.”

Knud lowered his head to catch his breath. “I would not recommend fleeing arrows by sea as the best method of awakening from a nap.”

Leif managed a wry smile. “Better that than awaking to a dagger at your throat.”

“I cannot argue with you on that score.” Knud rolled his shoulders and raised his head. “What of the sail? Was it damaged?”

The fading light made it impossible to tell. “Lower the sailcloth. We shall make the best use of it we can, even if it is torn.”

As Knud reached for the leather straps attached to the wool sail, Leif took one last look over his shoulder at the smudge of land disappearing in the darkness. Had Rhiannon returned to the llys only to send Cadwgan after him? The thought filled him with unexpected sorrow. So too did the realization that he would likely never know.

Chapter 18

RHIANNON AWOKE IN A COLD SWEAT. It had been months since she'd relived her father's death so vividly, but tonight's nightmare had been different. The characters had changed roles.

Tossing back the bedcovers, she stumbled to her feet and crossed the room to the small table on which sat a pitcher and bowl. She lifted the pitcher. Her hands trembled, sending water spilling onto the table as she attempted to pour a small portion of the liquid into the bowl.

"Help me, Father God." It was the same simple plea she'd uttered after every nightmare in the past, but this time more than ever, she felt the need for divine aid and comfort.

Setting down the pitcher, she splashed the cool water on her face and neck and wiped it dry with a nearby rag even as her nightmare's last images replayed in her mind. The vicious, redheaded Viking raising his arm to throw his axe at her father and Leif snatching the weapon from him moments before it launched. Cadwgan stepping out of the shadows, his longbow drawn. Her scream masking the whoosh of the arrow in flight and her father's cry as it pierced his chest.

Lowering her head, she took three cleansing breaths. The pictures would fade. They always did. But she could not return to bed until her overwhelming distress had passed. She reached for the shawl draped over the nearby chair and drew it across her shoulders. Her hands shook still. This nightmare had affected her deeply.

She moved closer to the window. Pushing open a shutter, she gazed out at the night sky. It was black and sprinkled with myriad pinpricks of light. Her gaze instantly landed upon Ursa Major, and she followed the line of stars to the bright light of Polaris. The star that guided men home. That was what her father had called it. She swallowed the lump in her throat. Where was her home?

Bryn Eithin, the home of her childhood, now belonged to another. Some might say that the llys was her home. She had lived here for two years. But although the royal family had made her feel welcome, it had never truly felt like home. Cadwgan had once offered her his home. Would he ever do so again? She shuddered, the memory of her nightmare still fresh in her mind.

Inevitably, her thoughts slid to Leif. Was he using Polaris to guide him home to Ireland this very night? She tried to imagine what it would feel like

to use the wind and the waves to travel so far, to be one with the sea and the stars. In her small chamber built of stone, such freedom seemed as intangible as smoke.

Cadwgan had arrived back at the llys just as the royal family was leaving the great hall. She had been relieved to see him return unharmed, but since he and his men had lacked all hint of jubilation, it seemed clear that his quest to discover the Norsemen had been unsuccessful. Hywel had not been satisfied with supposition alone, however, and had pressed Cadwgan for details.

“We saw them,” Cadwgan had said. “They were hiding like water rats in the inlet beyond the bay and were too cowardly to face us like men.”

“What happened?” Gwenllian had asked. Rhiannon had been afraid to question him further, but curiosity had drawn her cousin out of the contemplative mood that had descended upon her after hearing of their impending journey to Deheubarth.

“They took to sea.” Cadwgan’s response had been terse.

Surely Rhiannon’s sense of relief at such news was wrong. She, more than anyone, had reason to wish the early demise of any Viking. And yet, last night, standing in the courtyard, listening to Cadwgan’s report, she had been glad to know that Leif and his companion had escaped. And now, staring at the stars guiding them across the water, she realized that her sentiment was unchanged.

A breeze danced into the room through the open window. Reluctant to close the shutter, she gathered the shawl around herself more tightly. The courtyard below was silent. A single torch burned at the llys’s main gate, marking the entrance for travelers arriving at night and lighting the way for the guards. But for now, the royal court was silent.

Rhiannon rested her head against the window frame and closed her eyes. How much of what Leif had said could she truly believe? He’d spoken of God—her God—as though he knew Him. And the remorse in his eyes and voice when he’d recalled the Viking raid upon her home had seemed genuine. If it had caused him to turn his back on the life he’d been born to, it was significant indeed.

She sighed. He’d talked of forgiveness. It was something she’d never thought to entertain when it came to Vikings. Even now, revulsion for the man who had felled her father churned in her stomach. But if she was honest with herself, she could admit that sometime during the last twenty-four hours, there had been a softening in her attitude toward Leif. She had not reached

full forgiveness—mayhap she never would—but she no longer felt fearful in his presence, and she found herself wishing that she knew him better.

The sound of footsteps reached her through the open window. She looked out to see a guard's silhouette outlined against the gate. Another guard approached to take his place. Rhiannon glanced at the sky again. The horizon was tinged with the gray light of oncoming dawn; the night shift was over.

Closing the shutter, she crossed the room and crawled into bed with her shawl still about her shoulders. The day ahead would be filled with preparations for a long journey, and her opportunity to rest was rapidly disappearing. Blocking all thoughts of Leif from her mind, she pondered on the beauty of the stars and the majesty of the sea. Her body relaxed, her breathing slowed, and sleep finally overtook her.

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Rhiannon woke to a knock on the door of her chamber. Blinking against the bright light streaming through the chinks in the shutters, she pulled herself into a sitting position on the bed. Her shawl fell from her shoulders, reminding her of the reason she had slept so late. "Who's there?" she called.

"Euan, Miss Rhiannon. I bear a message from the king."

Rhiannon stumbled out of bed. She could not very well put off receiving Owain Gwynedd's page. With no sign of her maid, Efa, Rhiannon tugged her shawl more fully around herself, ran her fingers through her tangled mane, and opened the door.

Euan bowed. "Forgive the interruption, Miss Rhiannon. Owain Gwynedd requests that you join him in the great hall at noon."

"Of course," she said, assuming a calm she did not feel. "Please tell the king that I would be honored to meet with him." She tightened her grasp on the ends of her shawl. It was not the page's duty to do her bidding, but she was desperate. "While you are on your way back to the great hall, if you would be so good as to get word to Efa that I am in need of her assistance, I would be most grateful."

He bowed again. "Yes, miss."

Rhiannon closed the door and leaned against it. She took a deep breath. What the king wanted with her, she did not know, but such a summons was rarely a good thing. Pushing away from the door, she hurried to her wash basin. If the position of the sun in the sky was any indication, she had no time to spare.

It was not long before the echo of the guards' marching footsteps outside

marked the arrival of the noon hour.

Efa tied a strip of leather to the bottom of Rhiannon's plait and stepped back. "That should do it, miss."

"Bless you, Efa." Rhiannon rose from her chair and hurried to the door. "I cannot thank you enough."

Her maid bobbed a curtsy. "'Twas nothing, miss."

Rhiannon took the passage that led to the spiral staircase at a run. Placing her hand on the smooth stone walls to guide her, she navigated the east tower's steep stairs, emerging into the daylight at the bottom. Hastening across the courtyard, she passed through the arched entrance that led to the great hall.

The passage was empty. She stood outside the main doors and ran her hands down her blue gown. Drawing back her shoulders, she took another deep breath and knocked.

"Enter!"

Rhiannon pushed open the door. The vast room was empty, save for Owain Gwynedd. He sat on a large, ornately carved wooden chair on a raised platform to her right.

She dropped to a curtsy. "You asked to see me, Sire."

"I did." He beckoned her forward. "I wish to thank you for the particular kindness you have shown to Gwenllian since the news of Anarawd's death reached us. She spoke with me last evening and told me of your benevolence."

Relief filled her. If she had been summoned simply to allow the king to offer her his thanks, all was well. "It has been my pleasure."

"You and Gwenllian have become close friends these past two years. I fear that with Gwenllian's marriage postponed, your upcoming separation will be all the more difficult."

In an instant, Rhiannon's relief evaporated. "What separation is that, Sire?"

"Cadwgan ap Gronw requested an audience with me last evening."

A large stone settled in Rhiannon's stomach. She clasped her hands together, willing herself to remain calm.

"He has been extremely patient, Rhiannon," the king continued. "Indeed, I am twice amazed that he has waited so long after your father's death to renew his offer of marriage. Cadwgan's consideration of your time of mourning is to be commended."

“Yes, Sire.” She could not argue the point, even though her heart screamed that she was still unready to enter into marriage vows with the nobleman.

“With your father now gone, he has come to me asking for your hand in marriage. I have given my consent.”

Rhiannon swallowed against the lump in her throat. It was done, then. With no thought of consulting her on the matter. She should have expected nothing less. “With my father’s lands entailed to another, I have no dowry to offer him,” she said.

The king dismissed her concern as easily as he would brush aside an insignificant fly. “You need have no fear on that account. Upon your marriage, I shall bestow a handsome sum upon Cadwgan.”

“I . . . I thank you, Sire. You are most generous.”

Was it possible to feel completely numb inside yet appear completely normal to an outside observer?

“I am happy for you, Rhiannon. Cadwgan is a man of considerable wealth and power. You shall never want for anything.”

Except love. Her heart’s silent cry went unheeded. No matter how much Rhiannon wished it otherwise, she had never felt anything deeper than acquaintanceship for Cadwgan. After all this time, she could not even claim a bond of friendship with him.

Owain Gwynedd cleared his throat, and with a start, Rhiannon realized he was waiting for her to speak.

“Forgive me, Sire, this has all come as rather a shock.”

“Not too great a shock, I would think. Your betrothal to Cadwgan was all but finalized by your father, and you have interacted with the nobleman several times since then. Surely you were aware of his continued interest.”

“I did wonder about it occasionally,” Rhiannon confessed. “But he has done nothing to single me out for many months.”

“Well, that uncertainty is behind you now.” The king appeared particularly pleased with the situation. “Cadwgan has asked that the wedding occur within the month.”

Despite the fact that her hands were clasped, they began to tremble. “So soon?”

“He has been waiting two years. I hardly think anyone could accuse Cadwgan of rushing the marriage.”

A hint of irritation had entered Owain Gwynedd’s voice, and Rhiannon

lowered her head to hide the tears filling her eyes. “No. Of course not.”

“Very well. I shall inform Cadwgan that I have spoken with you. The queen can help you with wedding arrangements. She is well-versed in such matters, having so recently planned for Gwenllian’s marriage.” He frowned, a look of pain appearing on his face and then almost immediately disappearing. “I shall make an official announcement regarding your betrothal upon our return from Deheubarth. For the present, however, I believe we both have travel preparations to make.”

Rhiannon recognized the dismissal. “Yes, Sire.” She curtsied again. “I thank you for your time.”

He nodded in acknowledgment, and she fled the room before her tears fell.

Chapter 19

“IT IS COMPLETELY OUTRAGEOUS!”

Leif winced as Cadwaladr’s outburst crescendoed to a deafening pitch. Leif had been home for only a couple of hours, but his father had had the guards bring the nobleman in to hear Leif’s report. Upon learning that Owain Gwynedd had stripped him of his lands and home, Cadwaladr’s fury had known no bounds.

“How could he do such a thing without allowing me a voice?”

“Tell him that if he does not exhibit greater dignity, our discussion is over,” Leif’s father said. He was rapidly losing patience with the Cymry.

Assuming his role of translator once more, Leif passed along his father’s message.

Cadwaladr stopped his pacing. “Mayhap if the jarl were to learn that he had lost every possession, he might take up shouting also,” he said with a growl.

“If you are as guilty as Owain Gwynedd believes,” Leif’s father responded, “then you are fortunate indeed. As yet, you retain your life.”

Cadwaladr ran his fingers through his hair. “I am innocent, I tell you. Someone else hatched this plot and has poisoned my brother and my people against me.”

“Who would do such a thing?” Leif asked.

“You think I have not spent every waking hour since leaving my homeland attempting to ascertain that very thing?” Cadwaladr released a frustrated breath. “A man in my position makes enemies regularly.”

“Name them,” Leif’s father said.

“There have been altercations with Normans and Marcher Lords, those within my brother’s inner circle, and those vying for positions of power within Ceredigion. The list would be extensive.”

If Cadwaladr cooperated, a scribe could take down the names, but it would be a tedious, likely futile, endeavor. Leif tried another approach.

“Your dagger was found at the scene of the murder. If, as you claim, it was wielded by another, when was the last time you remember it being in your possession?”

“At Dinefwr Castle.” Cadwaladr responded without hesitation. “A few members of the uchelwr had gathered to celebrate Anarawd’s upcoming marriage. Two days before his murder, we went hunting in the forest north of

the castle. I had the knife with me then. Hywel ap Owain rode with me that day, and he commented on the fine etching on the cross guard.”

“The same etching that identified the knife as yours when Anarawd ap Gruffydd was discovered dead,” Leif guessed.

“It boasted a unique design,” Cadwaladr said. “It was made by a bladesmith from Dyflin.”

Leif raised his eyebrows but translated Cadwaladr’s information without comment. His father’s eyes flashed.

“So the fatal wound was administered by a Viking blade.”

“Your craftsmen are unparalleled,” Cadwaladr said. “That knightly sword was weighted better than any other blade I have owned.” His hand instinctively moved to his belt, but it was empty. “The knife was missing the day after the hunt. I have been using the poor substitute your guards seized from me since then.”

If someone had taken Cadwaladr’s knife with the intent of using it to incriminate him, it was likely that the narrow window of time was purposeful. Cadwaladr would have had little opportunity to spread word abroad that he was missing his weapon.

“According to my son’s report, there is no doubt of your guilt in the mind of Owain Gwynedd. I would be a fool to side against the king in a situation such as this,” Leif’s father said.

“Someone at Dinefwr Castle knows the truth. If you would but send someone to Deheubarth to ask amongst the servants at the castle—”

“Enough!” The last of Leif’s father’s patience had fled. “I sent two men on a fool’s errand. I will not repeat the meaningless endeavor.”

Panic flickered across Cadwaladr’s face. “I shall double the reward,” he said. “Two thousand head of cattle.”

Leif’s father snorted. “With no land or possessions, you have nothing to offer as payment. You already owe me one thousand head for sending men to Ongullsey. How do you propose to pay that?”

“My brother will reinstate all that I have lost when he learns of my innocence.”

“And if he does not?”

Cadwaladr refused to contemplate such a thing. “This shall be my final request. If no proof is found at Dinefwr Castle, you may do with me as you wish.”

“What I wish is to have you gone from Dyflin,” Leif’s father growled.

“And it shall be done. You and your men are to be away from here by sunset.” He turned to the nearest guard. “Take him back to his men, and have their poor excuse for a boat made ready.”

“Jarl Ottar.” Cadwaladr stood his ground as a guard approached. “Have someone search Dinefwr for the servants who claim they saw my men leave the castle on horseback the night of the murder. I was roused from my bed by one of my men who told me that two riders wearing my coat of arms were seen escaping the castle. I tell you now they were not my men. The distinctive tunics of checkered red and gold were worn to implicate me.”

“Even if that were true, such evidence would be burned or buried by now,” Leif’s father said.

Cadwaladr clenched his fists. “Someone saw something, I am sure of it.”

Leif’s father looked away. “Seize him.”

The guard stepped closer, but Cadwaladr turned on his heel and started for the door unaided.

Leif waited until the door closed behind him before speaking.

“I am willing to go to Deheubarth,” he said.

“It’s a waste of time,” his father responded. “No Cymry would confide a secret to a Norseman that had the potential to rattle the very foundations of the uchelwr. The hostility between our nations precludes it.”

“I wish to try,” he said.

“Why?”

“To uncover the truth.”

“In this instance, the truth matters not,” his father said. “Once Cadwaladr leaves Dyflin, his fate is not our responsibility.”

“I beg to differ, Father. The truth always matters.”

His father paused, studying him shrewdly. “This is important to you.”

“Yes.”

“I ask again, Why?”

Leif had no definitive answer. “I witnessed for myself a small portion of the damage this incident incurred: a bride mourning a groom, a king severed from a brother, an allegiance undone. And all for what? We have been offered no sound reason for Anarawd’s death, and yet there must be one. If Cadwaladr cannot supply it, mayhap another can.”

“Even if that is the case, it does not signify that we must needs become involved.”

“We may lose nothing for turning Cadwaladr away, but if we prove his

claim of innocence, we gain two thousand head of cattle.”

His father stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Your arguments have merit. As much as I wish to be rid of the Cymry, we can afford to guard them a while longer if it leads to so great an increase in our livestock.” He hesitated. “Your brother and his men have yet to return.”

“Knud will accompany me,” Leif said. “We work well together.” He had yet to inform his father of their narrow escape from Ongullsey. Some things were best left unsaid. Especially if they would undermine his desire to finish the job they had begun. “Any attempt to gain the trust of the locals would be undermined if the town were flooded by Vikings,” he continued. “Our best hope of learning what really happened is for Knud and I to go to Dinefwr alone.”

Leif’s father eyed him silently for a moment. “I would not have you underestimate the danger you are placing yourself in, Leif. Dinefwr Castle is inland. There will be no easy escape by sea should this undertaking go awry. And if your relationship to the jarl of Dyflin becomes known, you are as likely to become a target as you are to be given any special privileges.”

“I understand.” Every Norseman felt safer with the sea and a longboat within easy reach, but Rhiannon was the only person who knew of his parentage, and she would be far from Deheubarth. “I shall remain on my guard, as will Knud. And if it quickly becomes apparent that there is no proof to be had to support Cadwaladr’s claims, we shall return forthwith.”

“Very well.” His father offered him a nod of approval. “I am glad to see that you are willing to embark upon so risky a venture for the benefit of your people.”

Leif said nothing. If his actions prevented heightened ill will between the Cymry and the Norse, so much the better. If his father increased his wealth in livestock, he was glad. But his motivation ran deeper than both those things. He desired to uncover the truth and to make amends for past actions.

“Halfdan can provide you with funds for your journey.”

“I thank you, Father,” Leif said.

“Yes, well, you’d best find Knud and have him inform his wife that he is returning to sea sooner than he thought.”

Leif grimaced. “Mayhap he can bring Frida a trinket from Deheubarth to compensate for his long absence.”

“His safe return will be far more valuable to her,” his father said, starting for the door. “You’d best remember that.”

“What do you mean, we are to go to Deheubarth?” Knud said. “We’ve barely been home long enough to eat a hot meal.”

“I realize that,” Leif replied. “But the longer we wait, the less likely it is that we shall uncover the truth behind Cadwaladr’s claims.”

Knud moved out from behind the workbench, folded his arms across his ample chest, and glared at Leif. “Whose idea was this?”

It would be easy to blame his father. After all, he was the one who had insisted that Leif make the trip to Gwynedd. But Leif was not in the habit of misleading his friends, and to embark upon a quest for truth with a falsehood was the worst kind of beginning. “Mine.”

Knud’s glare deepened. “Do I need remind you that the Cymry were shooting arrows at us as we left their shores?”

“We will be far from Ongullsey and those who wished us ill.”

“Almost all the Cymry wish Norsemen ill,” Knud said.

“Mayhap if we were to help uncover the truth behind Anarawd’s death, it would promote goodwill between our nations.”

“They may have the right of it already. Why are you so determined that Cadwaladr has been wronged? He could be the murderer Owain Gwynedd believes him to be.”

Leif ran his fingers through his hair, wishing he had something tangible to which he could attribute his unease. “There is no clear motive for Cadwaladr to commit so heinous a crime. It has caused him to lose everything. He admits to having enemies. If someone wished to see him ruined, using Cadwaladr’s knife as the murder weapon would be a master stroke.”

“You do not think Cadwaladr is foolish enough to have used his own blade,” Knud said.

“It was a Viking-made knightly sword,” Leif responded. “Other members of the uchelwr had commented upon its unique design.”

Knud raised his eyebrows. “Do you believe it was one of Grom’s blades?”

“It had to be. He’s the best bladesmith in Dyflin and the only one who sells his wares abroad.”

Knud whistled through his teeth. “Your father is fortunate that the knife was linked to Cadwaladr. A Viking knife and a dead prince of Deheubarth is a flammable mix.”

Leif nodded grimly. “The brother of the king of Gwynedd seeking refuge with Vikings after committing a murder is equally incendiary. My father

must either offer Owain Gwynedd proof of Cadwaladr's innocence or wash his hands of him."

"Washing his hands of him would be a far easier option."

"So my father believes."

Knud's glare returned. "Did you truly volunteer us for this madcap expedition when your father was prepared to have Cadwaladr face his future without our interference?"

"I did."

"Why do I even consider you a friend?"

Leif grinned. "Because you cannot live without me."

"False. I could live quite happily and far more safely without you." Knud began putting away the tools that he had only recently taken out. "Frida is making herring for dinner, and I refuse to leave without eating it with her."

It was a fair request. Leif had no wife at home waiting for him. Knud and Frida deserved one night together.

"We will sail with the morning tide," Leif said. "And whilst you enjoy Frida's company and cooking, I will pay a visit to Grom to see what he can tell me about the knife he sold to a member of Gwynedd's royal house."

"I wish you luck," Knud said, already making for the door. "The last I heard, Grom was gone to Britannia. His son is likely watching over the shop."

Leif nodded. He'd heard the same news. If Grom was away, perhaps Leif would visit Father Robert instead. In truth, his need for counsel from the priest was likely greater than his need for information from the bladesmith.

Chapter 20

THE STEADY CADENCE OF HOOVES hitting the hard-packed earth mingled with the creak of leather and jingle of bridles as the royal caravan slowly wound its way along the coast road. A flag bearer flanked by two guards led the long cortege. Behind them, Owain Gwynedd sat astride his charger, with Hywel riding at his right and Cadwgan at his left. Members of the king's retinue, the queen, Gwenllian, and Rhiannon came next, followed by more guards.

For the first part of their journey, the sea had been in plain sight, but now the road was leading them inland. In the distance, the tip of Yr Wyddfa was lost from view in a layer of low-lying clouds. The overcast skies had yet to produce any rain, and Rhiannon silently prayed that their good fortune would continue. Gwynedd's weather was notoriously fickle, particularly in the spring.

The green hillsides were covered in bright splashes of yellow. It seemed that the blooming gorse bushes were valiantly attempting to bring cheer to the otherwise gray day. Rhiannon sighed. She should not be feeling so disconsolate. After all, they were traveling to attend the burial of Gwenllian's betrothed, not hers. Another sigh escaped. Why could she not bring herself to be happy that her marriage to Cadwgan was now assured?

Her gaze drifted to the dark-haired man riding at the king's left.

"He is a fine-looking gentleman," Gwenllian said.

Rhiannon started. "Who?"

"Why, Cadwgan, of course." Gwenllian offered her a small smile. "You were gazing upon him."

Warmth crept up Rhiannon's cheeks. "I did not think—"

"You do not need to apologize for admiring your betrothed," Gwenllian said.

Rhiannon was beginning to regret telling her cousin about the betrothal before it was officially announced. Gwenllian's enthusiasm over the news was significantly greater than her own, and she had brought up Rhiannon's new status more times than Rhiannon could count.

"Did you spend very much time with Cadwgan when you were young?" Rhiannon asked, looking to the past in an effort to deflect Gwenllian from yet another conversation about her future.

"Not a great deal. He's significantly older than me, and when one is young, the difference in age seems far greater. Hywel knew him better in his

youth than I.”

Rhiannon’s gaze shifted to Hywel. His head was tilted so as to listen to something the king was saying. His hair was lighter in color than Cadwgan’s, his eyes less striking, and his nose slightly bent. And yet his smile was ready. Rhiannon tightened her grip on the reins as she realized that in the two years she’d known him, she had yet to see Cadwgan smile.

“Was he a happy child, do you think?”

“He may have been when he was very young,” Gwenllian said, “but a shadow seemed to come over him after his father was killed. It took time for him to rise above that tragedy.” The haunted look had returned to her eyes. “I daresay such things take their toll on all of us.”

“I am sure of it.” Rhiannon needed no reminder. Her recent encounter with Leif had resurrected difficult memories and emotions aplenty.

As had happened all too often since their encounter on the beach, her thoughts strayed to the Viking. Nothing could erase the part he had played in her father’s death, but for almost two days now, her heart had whispered that perhaps he was not the monster she’d believed him to be. Irritated that he had muddled her feelings so fully, she turned her attention to the beauty of the landscape around her, searching for the peace that usually came from being beside the sea.

“He’s coming!”

At Gwenllian’s whispered warning, Rhiannon swung her head back around, half expecting to see Leif approaching. Instead, she saw that Cadwgan had moved from his position beside the king, and now that she and Gwenllian were nearing the spot where he’d been waiting, he was angling his mount toward them.

“I will ride with my mother for a time,” Gwenllian said, and before Rhiannon could stop her, she urged her horse forward, leaving an empty space beside Rhiannon for Cadwgan to fill.

“Good day, Rhiannon.” Cadwgan matched his horse’s stride to hers.

“Good day.” She bit her lip, wondering what to say next. There had been so much to do in preparation for this journey, she had not spoken to him since her interview with Owain Gwynedd.

“The king told me that he has spoken to you of my desire to make you my wife.”

“He did.” Heaven help her. Could she not generate more than two words at a time?

He raised one dark eyebrow. "I hope the news pleased you."

"In truth, my lord, I was overwhelmed. You do me a great honor."

"Surely, it cannot have come as a complete surprise. I made mention of marriage two years ago," he said.

She nodded. "I remember. But with no promise made between us, I had not thought it my right to hold you to your earlier offer."

"I confess, since then, my responsibilities in Dyffryn Clwyd have precluded me from spending as much time with you as I would have wished, but that will matter little once we are married."

Rhiannon nodded, swallowing against the lump in her throat. How far was Dyffryn Clwyd from the sea? Or from anyone she knew and loved? "Tell . . ." She swallowed again. "Tell me about Dyffryn Clwyd."

She had expected his expression to soften or his eyes to warm at the opportunity to speak of his ancestral home, but neither occurred. He kept his face forward, his tone even. "My castle stands on a rise overlooking a large vale. The land is good, with pastures that are well suited for raising sheep, and the hamlets boast excellent markets."

Rhiannon waited. The silence between them lengthened. Did he truly believe her interests lay in sheep and markets? "How long has your family lived in the area?"

This time, she saw a flicker of emotion in the tensing of his jaw. "My father and uncles ruled the district of Dyffryn Clwyd after my grandfather. Upon their deaths, the district was annexed by Gwynedd. I cannot imagine living anywhere else, even though the power my family once knew in the region is gone."

All hope of eliciting a smile from Cadwgan vanished, and Rhiannon resigned herself to riding in awkward silence.

But the nobleman surprised her with a question of his own. "Do you miss Bryn Eithin?"

"I miss the people most," she said. "My father and the servants I'd known since childhood. I do not know what became of the servants after the house was entailed to another." She hid her sadness over the loss of those friendships with a shrug. "My homesickness for the house itself was lessened because Owain Gwynedd's llys is located beside the very same sea."

He looked at her curiously. "You delight in being near the water?"

"Yes." She was not yet prepared to tell him of the depth of the peace and joy she drew from the ocean's grandeur. Those feelings were too personal for

their fledgling relationship. “What is it that you delight in?”

He did not answer immediately. She waited. Was there nothing?

His jaw tensed again. “Righting wrongs,” he said. “I delight in righting wrongs.”

Instantly, her thoughts went to Cadwgan’s quest to challenge Leif after their interaction at the market, and his seemingly noble response inexplicably lost a portion of its merit.

“I daresay there are many wrongs to be found,” she said.

“Indeed. I shall likely never see an end to them in my lifetime.”

She should probably ask about some of his former ventures. But she could not bring herself to dwell on the losses others had incurred, even if Cadwgan had ultimately improved their situations.

A shout sounded from the front of the cortege, and Rhiannon looked up to discover that they were coming upon a small hamlet.

“Do you think we shall stop here for a repast?” she asked.

“I think it likely,” Cadwgan replied.

Rhiannon’s stomach was empty, and she was more than ready to be out of the saddle, but her relief at the possibility of an interruption in their journey did not simply stem from physical discomfort. She glanced at Gwennllian, willing her to end her conversation with her mother soon enough to join her before they dismounted. She need not have worried.

It seemed that Cadwgan was also ready to bring their stilted discussion to an end. “If you would excuse me,” he said. “I had best return to my place beside the king before we enter the hamlet.”

“Yes, of course,” Rhiannon said, offering him a polite nod. She could not muster a smile.

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Leif set down his small sack in the corner of the silversmith’s shop and crossed to the shelf where Knud had set all the pieces they’d brought back from Ongullsey. It was not difficult to find the pendant he’d made. Even in the weak morning light, it sparkled. He picked it up, rotating it slowly in his hand so that the froth-tipped waves he’d etched into the silver appeared to move. Somehow, he’d managed to capture his love of the sea—and a little part of himself—in this piece.

He ran one finger across its edge, the vague impression he’d received in the dark of the night solidifying into conviction. He could not explain the impulse that had caused him to step forward at the marketplace and take the

piece from Cadwgan. After all, he hardly knew the man. But he did not regret his decision. He knew who this piece was meant for now. And he would be the one to give it to her, not her dark-eyed escort.

Taking the necklace with him, he returned to his sack and withdrew a small wooden box from within. The box was worn from use, and the hinge creaked as he opened it. Inside lay a plain gold bangle and a silver brooch. He picked up the brooch, admiring the workmanship. Although simple, the Gaelic design instantly drew the eye. It did not belong hidden away in his bedchamber; it belonged on Rhiannon's gown and shawl.

He set the brooch beside the gold bangle and laid his silver pendant on top. Closing the box, he put it back into the sack. If he could not find someone in Deheubarth whom he could trust enough to return Rhiannon's mother's jewelry box to her, he would persuade Knud to make a stop on Ongullsey before they sailed home. He did not know quite how he would accomplish it, but somehow, this box and its contents would be with their rightful owner by month's end.

Lifting the sack over his shoulder, Leif left the shop and started for the dock. Already, the streets were busy with merchants setting out their wares. A stray cat crossed his path, and a couple of women stood on the corner chatting. He continued past them with purposeful strides. His sack contained provisions enough for the voyage ahead; the purse at his belt contained coins enough for them to manage once they arrived. There was no reason to delay his departure any longer.

The cry of seagulls and the slap of waves hitting the boats at anchor became louder the closer he drew to the dock. Sparing a brief glance for the Cymry's boat, Leif headed directly for his own faering. Knud was already onboard, checking the sail.

"Will Frida forgive me for taking you away again so soon?" Leif asked, climbing in behind him and stashing his sack beneath one of the seats.

"That depends upon how handsomely you pay me," Knud said.

Leif caught the glint of humor in his eyes. "So, you are not willing to make this journey for honor alone?"

"That, my friend, is your job, not mine. I am here for the gold." He began unfurling the sail. "And I told Frida there will be a lot of it."

"Would she take payment in cattle?" Leif asked. "There are two thousand head in the offing."

Knud whistled. "Well, now, that really is something. Although I think

Frida would rather have a gold goblet. It would be easier to keep in the house.” Leif laughed, but Knud’s attention was on the fabric in his hand. “When did you patch the arrow hole in the sail?”

“Last night,” Leif said. “You were right. Grom is away and is not expected back for at least a week. I visited Father Robert until he was called away for vespers.” He shrugged. “I had the time to do it.”

“You need a home life,” Knud said, pulling one of the ropes taut. “You need a wife.”

Leif was disinclined to argue. The thought had crossed his mind more than once in the recent past, but Norse young ladies desired a husband who was a valiant Viking, a hero who returned from plundering Christian churches with treasures untold. His close connection to the jarl may attract some maidens, but his decision to forgo participating in Viking raids was usually met with disparagement.

A vision of Rhiannon’s face flashed through his mind. There was one young lady who would approve of his choice—if she could ever bring herself to believe him sincere. He pushed the thought away. He’d told Father Robert about his encounter with Rhiannon. The priest had praised Leif’s efforts to speak with her and had encouraged him to move forward. It was sound advice but did not fully dispel the dull ache in Leif’s chest. Mayhap the pain would always be there.

Shaking off his unexpected melancholy, he attempted to make light of Knud’s advice. “What I need at this moment is a strong wind at our back and a good oarsman.”

“Have you set our course?” Knud asked.

“We make for the southern coast. Dinefwr Castle is some distance inland. We will likely have to lower the sail and follow the shoreline until we find a place to hide the boat.”

Knud eyed him warily. “It seems to me that this voyage requires altogether too much rowing.”

With a chuckle, Leif reached for the anchor rope. “Prepare your oars. We are taking to sea.”

Chapter 21

LEIF CHOPPED TWO MORE LONG branches off the willow tree with his axe and dragged them over the sand to the boat. Knud reached for them, draping them over the faering's stern.

"Is that adequate?" he asked.

Leif stepped away, studying their handiwork from multiple angles. "The cove appears to be sufficiently remote that it will not attract visitors. This far up the beach, the boat is protected from the tide, and with all the branches concealing it, it should remain hidden from the view of any who pass by on the water."

Knud joined him, eyeing the severed tree limbs critically. "We will lose some of our cover as the leaves die."

"True." Leif reached for his sack. "All the more reason for us to accomplish our goal in a timely manner."

"Aye," Knud said, picking up a similar bundle from the sand. "Given that we are preparing to enter hostile territory once more, I would prefer to have a means of escape available to us still."

Leif looked at him thoughtfully. It had taken them twice as long to reach Deheubarth as it had to cross the sea to Ongullsey. They'd slept in the boat, which had done nothing to improve their appearance and little to diminish their exhaustion. They would be well served to do anything in their power to appear less like travel-weary foreigners. "Undo your plaits," he said, setting down his sack and tugging the leather strips off the ends of his own.

"Why?" Knud asked.

"Like you, I would rather not begin this endeavor with a target on my back. We are taller and fairer than most Cymry, but nothing sets us apart as much as our hair."

"Until I speak."

Leif nodded. "I will be the one to talk. With our hair loose, mayhap we can avoid being immediately identified as Vikings." He pointed to the trees beyond the beach. "We will go that way. When we happen upon our first hamlet, we shall acquire horses for the remainder of the journey."

With his sandy-colored hair now falling freely, Knud hefted his sack once more. "Why could this place not be reached by sea?" he grumbled.

"Mayhap the royal family of Deheubarth wished to avoid Viking raids," Leif suggested.

“Hm.” Knud trudged across the sand toward the break in the trees. “A valid reason, albeit a weak one. The farther east we go, the closer we are to the border with Britannia. I have no doubt the Normans take their turn attacking the Cymry too.”

Mentally adding an untold number of Normans to the list of people who may have wanted to eliminate the prince of Deheubarth, Leif shouldered his sack. “We have a daunting task before us,” he said. “We’d best be about it.”

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Rhiannon’s entire body ached. It had been three days since they’d left the llys, and even though they had stopped to sleep at inns along the way, she’d been in the saddle so long, she was beginning to wonder if her legs would hold her when she was finally called upon to stand upright.

Dusk had fallen. The two guards at the head of the royal cortege held flaming torches to light the way through the woodland. The rustle of leaves and glow of eyes in the underbrush alongside the road was a constant reminder that the people and their horses were trespassers in this place.

An owl sailed overhead, and at Rhiannon’s side, Gwenllian shivered. “Why are wild creatures so much more frightening at night?” she said.

“I daresay they think the same of us,” Rhiannon replied. “After all, we are considerably bigger.”

Gwenllian shivered again. “I shall be glad to be out of this forest and able to see the stars once more.”

“Hywel told me that we would reach the castle by day’s end. Surely it cannot be too far away now.”

“I remember that the north side of the castle was bordered by dense woodland,” Gwenllian said. “It is possible that we are approaching through the trees.”

Rhiannon had forgotten that Gwenllian had been to Dinefwr Castle once before, when she and Anarawd had met for the first time.

“Will visiting here again be difficult for you?” Rhiannon asked.

“I was not here long enough to come to know any of the servants, and I cannot claim any emotional attachment to the castle, but it will be very strange to be here knowing that Anarawd is not.” She paused. “I pray it will not be overly taxing.”

“You shall rise above the trial. Look how far you have come this week.”

“Thanks largely to you,” Gwenllian said.

“I can only claim credit for dragging you out of your chamber the first

time. The remainder of your activities have been of your own making.”

“The first and second time,” Gwenllian corrected her.

Rhiannon laughed. “I stand by what I said. You are more courageous than you believe.”

In the distance, a trumpet sounded, and the flicker of torches appeared through the branches. Gwenllian released an unsteady breath.

“We have arrived,” she said. “I fear I shall be searching for that courage until the day we leave.”

Rhiannon kept her eyes forward as the castle came into view. It sat on a rise, surrounded by a tall curtain wall. The silhouettes of three round towers stood out against the night sky, torches burning brightly from each one. At the base of the hill, a dark ribbon cut across the pasture, accompanied by the distinctive sound of running water.

“There is a river,” Rhiannon said.

“The River Tywi,” Gwenllian said. “It cuts through this valley. The castle sits upon a ridge a considerable distance above its northern bank.”

Rhiannon’s heart lifted. It was not the sea, but perhaps she could visit the river if ever she craved time beside the water.

The horses’ hooves clattered over the wooden drawbridge, the sounds all but eclipsing the grinding of the rising gate. A trumpet sounded again, closer this time, and suddenly they were inside the castle.

Small buildings lined the curtain wall. Rhiannon guessed that they belonged to such artisans as the blacksmith, the tanner, and the fletcher. Two buckets attached to long ropes sat at the base of a low stone wall that circled a well, and a large oven located across from another building marked the location of the kitchen. Up ahead, the stable stood with doors wide and torches blazing to welcome them.

Stableboys and grooms milled around, taking charge of weary horses as their riders dismounted and started toward the inner courtyard. Rhiannon saw Owain Gwynedd disappear with Hywel and Cadwgan immediately behind him. The queen took longer and stood near the stable door, waiting for Gwenllian and Rhiannon to join her. They guided their mounts forward, stopping as two grooms stepped up to help them.

“May I assist you, my lady?”

The man’s workworn hand reached out to take the leather straps, and in the flickering light of the nearest torch, she saw a small portion of a vicious-looking scar that disappeared beneath the sleeve of his tunic. She shifted

slightly so as to lift her leg over the upper pommel and caught her first clear look at the man's face. Her breath caught. "Dai!" Her shock was mirrored in her father's head groom's expression. "Is it truly you?"

"Miss Rhiannon." Dai's smile warmed her heart. "Well, aren't you a sight to behold." He helped her to the ground. She took a tentative step, grateful that her legs did not fail her.

"How ever did you come to be at Dinefwr Castle?" she asked.

"Heledd grew up in a hamlet not far from here," he said. "When the new master arrived at Bryn Eithin, he brought his own servants with him. He had no need of us, so we traveled back this way. Lucky for us, the castle had need of help."

"Do you mean to tell me that Heledd is also here?" Rhiannon's voice caught in her throat.

"You know full well that I wouldn't dare go anywhere without her." He grinned. "She serves as the castle's laundress. You'll most likely find her in the north tower."

The north tower. Rhiannon swung around. Which was the north tower? All around her, guards were dismounting and horses were being led into the stables. Gwenllian had joined her mother and was waiting, watching her expectantly. "I am needed elsewhere, but I cannot go another day without seeing Heledd."

He chuckled. "The moment she knows you are here, she'll leave what she's about to find you, Miss Rhiannon. Have no fear of that."

"I will be watching for her."

He began leading her horse away. "I'm right glad to see you again, miss."

Rhiannon smiled, a wave of gratitude for this unforeseen miracle sweeping over her. "No more so than I am to see you, Dai."

She waited until he disappeared among the shadowy forms of the other grooms and horses entering the stables before hurrying to join Gwenllian, her mother, and a castle escort. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting," Rhiannon said.

"We must hurry," her aunt said, allowing no time for explanations. "The king will be wondering what has become of us."

With a nod to their escort, she started through the entrance to the inner courtyard. Gwenllian and Rhiannon fell into step behind her.

"Who was it that you were talking to?" Gwenllian asked.

Rhiannon slipped her arm through her cousin's, unable to contain her

smile. “An old friend,” she said. “And it made every step of that infernally long journey worthwhile.”

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“More trumpets,” Knud said as a third blare cut through the air. “Word must have reached the castle that Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin, has arrived.”

Ignoring Knud’s teasing, Leif thoughtfully studied the edifice standing atop the rise. Darkness shrouded the tref below, but the fortress was ablaze with light. “Something significant is happening,” he said. “It’s hard to believe that Prince Cadell would arrange a large social function so soon after his older brother’s death. He is doubtless still in mourning.”

“Well, whatever it is, it will have caught the attention of the townspeople. Someone will share the news with us.”

“I daresay,” Leif said. It was going to be difficult to gain the trust of the locals, particularly with Knud’s limited ability to communicate, but it was vital that they know what was occurring at the castle before they entered. “I shall ask at the inn.”

“I pray they have lodging available,” Knud said. “I was ready to dispense with being in a saddle hours ago.”

Leif grunted his agreement. Norsemen spent far more time in longboats than on horseback. He was quite sure that whatever saddle-soreness Knud might claim, his could rival it.

The road they’d been following along the river veered left, and before long, it was lined with an assortment of thatched-roofed stone buildings. Signs hung above a few of the doors. It was too dark to see them clearly, but Leif guessed that they marked the tref’s business establishments.

“Keep a watch out for an inn,” Leif said.

“Over there.” Knud gestured to his right. “You see it? There looks to be a stable at its rear.”

The building appeared a little larger than its neighbors, and a chink of pale light shone through the shutters of the closest window.

“I will try the door,” Leif said, dismounting and handing Knud his reins. “Wait here.”

He crossed the short distance to the door and knocked. Footsteps sounded from within, and moments later, the door opened to reveal a burly man with dark hair and beard.

“Good evening to you,” Leif said. “My friend and I just arrived in the tref

and are in need of a room.”

The man placed his fists on his ample girth. “No chambers fer you at the castle after all them royal people arrived, eh?”

At Leif’s startled expression, the man chuckled loudly. “Yer welcome. We may not ’ave a servant fer every room ’ere, but I can give ya both a bed and a meal.”

“Our horses?” Leif asked.

“Have yer friend take ’em round back,” the man said. “There’s a lad in the stable who’ll take care of ’em fer ya.”

“I thank you,” Leif said. Keeping his back to the innkeeper, he moved closer to Knud. “There’s a boy in the stable who will take the horses,” he said softly. “Just hand him the reins and meet me inside. The boy should not need any instructions.”

“I hardly know what to do with a horse anyway,” Knud muttered, but he turned his mount toward the stable, leading Leif’s horse behind him.

Leif turned back to the innkeeper. “He will see to the horses,” he said.

The large man opened the door wider and invited him inside.

“The name’s Elis,” the large man said.

Leif’s thoughts raced. If he offered Elis his real name, he would be all but introducing himself as a Viking. As much as he wished to learn what was happening at the castle, he did not want word that two Norsemen were staying in town to reach the stronghold’s inhabitants.

“Luc,” he said, landing on the simplest name he could conjure up that was not too far distant from Leif. “And my companion is Ned. You’ll find that he does not say much, but he’s a good enough fellow.”

They entered a large room. Three rectangular tables took up most of the space, with an assortment of mismatched chairs and benches alongside each one. Two young men sat at the far table, bowls of pottage before them. On the other side of the room, a fire burned in a wide stone fireplace, and a woman dressed in a serviceable gown stood over a large pot hanging over the flames.

“Good evenin’, sir,” she said, straightening.

“And to you,” Leif replied.

“This ’ere’s Luc,” Elis said. “This is me wife, Lowri. An’ over there’s Rhun an’ Maelon.”

The men at the far table offered Leif cursory nods, and Elis crossed the room to reach for a key hanging from a shelf on the wall.

“Yer chamber is upstairs at the end of the passage,” he said. “Will either of ya be wantin’ any mead or pottage?”

It had been several hours since Leif and Knud had last eaten, and the smell coming from the bubbling pot was making Leif’s stomach growl. “Both would be welcome,” he said.

Elis gave him a curious look. “Where d’you hail from? Nowhere local, I’ll wager.”

“The coast,” Leif said. “North of here.”

“That’ll do it. They don’t talk quite right up there.”

“What of the people who’ve arrived at the castle,” Leif asked. “Where are they from?”

“Why, it’s Owain Gwynedd himself,” Elis said, taking two wooden bowls off the shelf and handing them to his wife. “Along with more retainers an’ guards than me boy could count. Saw ’em, ’e did. Marchin’ out of the forest and into the castle.”

Leif’s pulse quickened. Why was the king of Gwynedd in Deheubarth? And more to the point, who had he brought with him? “It’s a long way from Ynys Môn,” he said, remembering to use the Cymry’s name for the island the Norse knew as Ongullsey.

“It is that. But ’e’s come for the royal burial.” Elis’s expression dropped. “A terrible thing, it was. Who would ’ave believed the prince would be murdered in ’is own bed mere days afore ’is weddin’? I daresay Owain Gwynedd felt ’e owed it to Prince Anarawd’s family and the people of Deheubarth to come, seein’ as ’ow ’is brother was the one who committed the crime.”

“I have no doubt you are right,” Leif said. “When is the burial?”

“On the morrow. In the graveyard on the ’ill. There should be quite a gatherin’.”

Leif pondered this information as Lowri filled two bowls with steaming pottage. To observe the dignitaries who considered Anarawd’s death sufficiently important that they made a long journey to be here might be worthwhile—and telling. On the other hand, it would be far easier to have a quiet conversation with servants at the castle while the residents and guests were gone.

“Sit wherever ya wish,” Elis said, handing him a bowl. “An’ take this one fer Ned. I daresay ’e’ll be in shortly.”

“He will be glad of it,” Leif said, taking the nearest chair.

That very moment, the door opened, and Knud walked in. He took one look at the bowls on the table and gave an approving grin.

Elis chuckled. "I reckon yer right."

Chapter 22

RHIANNON HAD SCARCELY TAKEN THE time to admire the furnishings in the bedchamber she'd been assigned to next to Gwenllian's. She had yet to run her fingers across the soft wool covers on the bed or try the cushioned chair beside the fire. Indeed, from the moment she'd retired to her room following the banquet Prince Cadell had ordered in honor of Owain Gwynedd's arrival, she had alternated between pacing across the small room and watching for any sign of a familiar figure in the courtyard below.

Surely Heledd would come. If Dai was able to get word to her, surely she would not wait until the morrow to call upon her. Discouragingly mindful of the lateness of the hour, Rhiannon crossed to the window one more time. She had barely reached it when a soft knock sounded. She flew to the door and pulled it open. And there, standing in the dimly lit passage, was her erstwhile nursemaid and companion.

"Heledd!" Rhiannon's voice caught.

The older lady's face broke into a warm smile, and Rhiannon reached for her workworn hand. The gesture was instinctive, the feeling of comfort she drew from Heledd's touch as familiar as it was immediate.

"Come in." She pulled Heledd inside and closed the door behind her.

Heledd's eyes were moist. "When Dai told me you were in the castle, I scarce allowed myself to believe it."

"Nor I," Rhiannon said. She laughed through her tears. "I have been pacing the room, wondering if I imagined my encounter with Dai this whole time."

Heledd lifted her free hand and gently touched Rhiannon's face. "And yet, you are here. And even more beautiful than I remembered."

Rhiannon shook her head. "You always were overly generous in your assessment of me." She drew her toward one of the chairs beside the fire. "Sit. Tell me everything. Do you like working at Dinefwr Castle? And what became of Eifion, Nest, and Myfanwy after I left Bryn Eithin?"

Heledd did as she was bid, setting her hands upon her lap as Rhiannon took the seat across from her.

"As far as I know, Eifion and Nest are still at Bryn Eithin, working for the new master. He brought his own groom with him, and his wife brought her own maid. But they were happy to keep Nest on as cook. And the new groom was glad of Eifion's help."

“What of Myfanwy?”

“She returned to her family in the hamlet but was hoping to find work at one of the other large homes nearby.”

“I pray she was successful.”

“She was a hard worker,” Heledd said. “And good maids are difficult to come by.”

Rhiannon nodded. It would be almost impossible for her to locate Myfanwy now. She could only hope that she had found a position where she could be happy. “And you?” she said. “Do you and Dai enjoy being at the castle?”

“Well enough,” Heledd said. “Being the castle’s laundress is a heavy responsibility, but I have several girls working under me, and we manage. It was a challenge for Dai to go from being head groom at Bryn Eithin to being one of many at the castle, but it did not take long for his experience and skill to be noticed.” Pride shone in her eyes. “Prince Cadell always asks for him, as did Prince Anarawd, God rest his soul.”

Heledd’s words were a poignant reminder of Gwenllian’s loss and the reason for their journey to Deheubarth.

“Was it terrible here that night?”

Heledd needed no clarification. “Aye. Dai saw Cadwaladr’s men escape the castle, but it wasn’t until Cadwaladr himself left with the remainder of his retinue that the alarm was raised and we learned what had occurred.”

“Dai saw the murderers?”

“He did. He was in the stable when they ran in demanding their horses.”

“And was he also there when Cadwaladr arrived?”

“Aye. He was the one to help Cadwaladr into his saddle.” Heledd gave a troubled sigh. “The thought that he assisted in the nobleman’s escape has not sat well with him.”

“But Dai did not know,” Rhiannon said. “He was simply fulfilling his duty.”

“So I’ve told him. Time and time again. No one believed Cadwaladr would order his men to do such a thing.”

Unbidden, Leif’s voice echoed through her mind. *He claims he has been accused of a murder that he did not commit.*

“Is it possible that he did not?”

Heledd stared at her. “There is no mistaking that the deadly weapon found with Prince Anarawd was Cadwaladr’s. And no mistaking that the coat of

arms Dai saw on the tunics worn by the escaping men was also his.”

“Of course.” The evidence was clear. Too clear, in fact.

For the first time, Rhiannon allowed the seed of doubt Leif had planted to send out a tentative root. If Cadwaladr had wished to benefit from murdering Anarawd, surely he would have used a knife that did not immediately implicate him. And would he not have required his men to use stealth when leaving the castle rather than have them arrive at the stables and demand mounts?

“I saw one of the Vikings who sacked Bryn Eithin last week,” she said.

If Heledd had been surprised by her previous question, she was stunned by this apparent change in subject and news. “Where was he?”

“At the marketplace in Aberffraw and later on the beach.”

“Did he threaten you?”

Rhiannon thought back on her brief interaction with Leif. Her first response to his presence had been terror. She had been badly shaken by the memories that surfaced at his unexpected appearance. But the dread had dissipated by the time they had parted on the beach. Indeed, when she thought on him now, she felt no fear. Confusion and caution, most certainly. But not fear. “No. He begged my forgiveness.”

It appeared that she had shocked Heledd into silence. She gave the older lady a concerned look. “I offered him nothing more than a moment of my time. He was not the one who killed Father or Meurig. Neither did he injure Dai. Nevertheless, he appeared to own some portion of the blame and felt the weight of guilt.”

“And so he should.” Heledd had found her voice, and it rang with accusation. “Those heathens killed two good men, ransacked your home, and almost took the life of my husband. Even your betrothal to Cadwgan ap Gronw was ruined by their actions.”

Rhiannon looked away. “Cadwgan has renewed his offer of marriage. The king will make an official announcement of our betrothal when we return to Ynys Môn.”

Heledd gasped and clapped her hands. “That is wonderful news.”

“Yes.” It was. Truly. So why did the very thought of it make her feel ill?

“You are not happy?”

She should have known Heledd would sense her disquiet. They had been apart for two years, but they had been together for sixteen.

“I should be happy. There is nothing . . .” Rhiannon clasped her hands

together tightly and began again. "There is no reason I should not be."

"And yet?"

Rhiannon swallowed hard. "And yet, the thought of marrying Cadwgan, of living in Dyffryn Clwyd, away from everyone I know and love, away from the ocean . . . it fills me with dread."

"Rhiannon." Heledd's eyes were now filled with concern. "It is normal for a new bride to feel anxious about the future."

"I understand that," Rhiannon said. "Gwenllian's nervousness on the eve of her wedding had her fluttering around like a caged butterfly."

"And you do not feel thus?"

"No." She took a deep breath. "Tell me this: if Dai had told you that upon your marriage you would move far from everything and everyone familiar, would it have affected your outlook as your wedding drew near?"

Heledd's smile was gentle. "I would have gone anywhere to be with Dai. In fact, I did."

"You moved from Deheubarth." Dai had told her that they had returned to Heledd's place of birth when she'd seen him earlier.

"I did. That was when I went to work for your mother at Bryn Eithin."

Rhiannon and her parents would be forever grateful that Heledd had been willing to take that leap of faith. Rhiannon would do well to follow her example.

"Mayhap, if I am most fortunate, I will find a maid so loyal and wonderful as you in Dyffryn Clwyd."

"I am sure you will, bach."

Clinging to that hope, Rhiannon mustered a smile. "It is late, and I must not keep you from your bed any longer."

Heledd nodded. "Dai will be glad to know that we have talked. He will be in the stable again tomorrow, preparing the horses for the ride to the graveyard."

"I will watch for him," Rhiannon said. "And for you when I am in the castle."

Heledd walked to the door and took the handle. "Good night, Miss Rhiannon."

This time, Rhiannon's smile was filled with gratitude for their unexpected reunion. "Good night, Heledd."

When the guards riding behind the last of the visiting dignitaries

disappeared around the corner, Leif led his horse out of the inn's stable. He paused in the small courtyard. Like birds going home to roost, the locals who had lined the street to watch the royalty and nobility pass were dispersing, returning to their homes and businesses now that the show of pageantry was over.

Leif scoured the emptying street. There was no sign of Knud. All being well, his friend had found somewhere to hide near the graveyard. They had determined that since he could not communicate with those within the castle, his efforts were best served in observing those attending the burial. He may not know many of the guests, but Knud could spot a smug expression as well as anyone. If there was a nobleman at Anarawd's burial who appeared the least pleased to be there, Leif wanted to know about it.

Trusting that Knud would do his job, Leif mounted his horse and entered the road, heading the other way. He passed gray-stone houses, a tired-looking donkey tied to a stake, and a stray cat skulking beneath a hedgerow. The scattering of buildings came to an end, replaced by a grass-covered hill. Leif eyed the castle at the top. It was larger than it had seemed in the dark. The curtain wall ran around the entire circumference of the castle, making it quite clear that it was meant to protect those within. The question yet unanswered was whether it would prevent him from entering.

He approached the main gate slowly, alert to every sound—a hammer hitting an anvil, a woman's shrill voice, and the bark of a dog. A guard appeared, and Leif slowed to a halt.

"State your business," the guard said, eyeing Leif warily.

There was no reason to conceal that he was a stranger. The castle and tref were currently filled with them. "I am passing through the tref and was told that the castle had a blacksmith who might be willing to reshoe my horse."

The guard frowned. "The castle blacksmith has far more important things to do."

"Of that, I have no doubt," Leif said. He could still hear the hammer. "But I would be much obliged if he would tell me how far I might travel on the shoes my horse has presently."

The guard appeared to weigh his options. Leif sent a silent prayer heavenward and attempted to maintain a relaxed position. After what seemed like far too long, the guard stepped aside. "Be quick about it," he barked. "And if Gethin has no time for you, you must needs go to the blacksmith in the next valley."

“I thank you,” Leif said, and before the guard could change his mind, he rode through the castle entrance.

Following the clanging of metal, Leif turned left. The courtyard was remarkably quiet, and it did not take long for him to locate the source of the noise. He slid from his saddle, and taking his horse by its reins, he approached the man standing before a blazing fire with a hammer in his hand.

He was tall with broad shoulders and a large nose. His brown hair was tied at the nape of his neck, and a sheen of sweat covered his brow. Raising his arm, he wiped his sleeve across his forehead before picking up the horseshoe he was working on and placing it into the fire.

“Good day,” Leif said. “Gethin, is it?”

The blacksmith looked up, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. “Aye. And who might you be?”

“Luc,” Leif said. “I arrived in the tref last evening and wondered if you’d be good enough to check my horse’s shoes. I fear one is coming loose.”

Gethin wiped his forehead once more. “I ’ave a groom comin’ to fit one of Prince Cadell’s ’orses within the ’alf ’our. You’ll ’ave to wait until I ’ave those shoes finished.”

“I’m much obliged,” Leif said.

Gethin grunted his acknowledgment, rotated the horseshoe in his tongs, and started pounding again. Leif waited until the ringing of metal stopped.

“I saw the cortege pass through the tref,” he said. “It appears the castle has many visitors.”

“Too many,” Gethin said, eyeing the horseshoe. “Between you an’ me, I’ll be glad when they’re gone. With the extra ’orses they bring in and the repairs that suddenly ’ave to be done right away, I can barely keep up.”

“Does the royal family entertain often, then?”

“Often enough. The last time was right afore Prince Anarawd was to marry.” He shook his head. “If you saw ’em goin’ to the graveyard, I daresay you ’eard what ’appened then.”

“I heard mention of the prince’s death, but I have yet to speak to anyone who was in the castle when it happened.”

“Owain Gwynedd’s brother, Cadwaladr, was behind it,” Gethin said, thrusting the horseshoe into the fire with a little more force than necessary. “Middle of the night, it was. But the groom, Dai, was up. Not knowin’ what ’ad ’appened in the castle, ’e readied the ’orses for the two men Cadwaladr ’ad commit the murder. Course, some people are sayin’ Dai should ’ave

sensed somethin' was amiss because their tunics were stained with blood."

Leif raised his eyebrows. This was new information. "How did you learn that?"

"Well, the tunics were found, weren't they? And there was no hidin' the bloodstains."

"Where did they find them?"

"In the forest." Gethin withdrew the horseshoe from the heat and made a few final adjustments to it before dipping it into a bucket of water. Steam hissed.

"Who found them?" Leif prompted.

"A couple of lads from the tref. They were out catchin' rabbits and came upon a badger set. They knew better than t' disturb the badger, but one of the lads saw somethin' red and gold stickin' out of the 'ole and used a stick 'e found lyin' about to pull it out."

"Mayhap the very same stick used to push the tunics into the hole," Leif said.

Gethin inclined his head. "That could be. But the villains should 'ave known better than t' 'ide 'em in a badger set. Anyone could tell you that a badger would never tolerate somethin' like that blockin' its tunnel."

"You think the animal pushed the tunics most of the way out?"

"Must have." Gethin set the horseshoe on the table beside three others. "Else 'ow would the boys 'ave spotted 'em?"

How, indeed? Unless the men had made a halfhearted attempt at hiding the tunics with the hope that the clothing *would* be found.

"What did the boys do with the tabards?"

"Why, they brought 'em t' the castle."

"You wag your tongue faster than an old woman, Gethin." At the gruff voice, Leif swung around to see a gray-haired man with a dirt-smudged tunic glaring at the blacksmith.

"Don't tell me you don't spend 'alf the day talkin' to 'orses, Dai."

Dai. Leif studied the man more carefully. Was this the groom who'd seen the escaping murderers?

"Horses only listen," Dai said. "There's never any reason to worry about them twisting your words."

Gethin grunted. "You worry too much." He inclined his head toward Leif. "This 'ere's Luc. 'E's yet another man needin' 'orseshoes."

Dai's suspicious expression remained. "I feel that we have met before.

Where do you hail from?"

"The coast," Leif said, sticking to the response he'd given to Elis. "North of here."

"I've lived in that area," Dai said. "Have you heard of Bryn Eithin?"

The name was vaguely familiar, but Leif could not place it. "I cannot say that I have." His horse nickered, and he seized the distraction to change the subject. "Do not allow me to slow your work. I told Gethin that I would happily wait until he has finished with the castle's horses."

A trumpet sounded from the castle entrance, and Gethin cursed. "You'd best bring the mare over straightway, Dai. The royal party's returnin' and there'll be no gettin' 'er out of the stable once all those riders fill the courtyard."

The trumpet notes were replaced by the pounding of hooves hitting the hard-packed road beyond the curtain wall. Dai did not hesitate. He crossed the courtyard and had the stable doors open in an instant. Leif eyed the distance between the blacksmith shop and the entrance, his tension mounting. There was no escaping unseen now, not with the road filled with dignitaries and guards. His only viable option was to stay out of sight until the courtyard and road cleared.

Chapter 23

RHIANNON GLANCED AT GWENLLIAN, CONCERN gnawing at her. Her cousin was pale, her posture in the saddle unnaturally stiff. Gwenllian had maintained a dignified calm throughout the burial, but now that they were returning to the castle, Rhiannon feared that her control might slip. She wished she could exchange a few encouraging words with her, but at the end of the brief service at the graveyard, Cadwgan had taken the position beside Rhiannon for their return to the castle. Without comment, Gwenllian had moved forward to ride next to her mother.

Flexing her fingers on the reins, Rhiannon attempted to expel some of her tension. It would be easy to claim that her unease was due to her worry for Gwenllian, but her cousin was in good hands. Her mother was with her and would be mindful of Gwenllian's fragile condition. Unfortunately, no one in this group was mindful of Rhiannon's current discomfort.

Cadwgan cleared his throat, and Rhiannon looked at him expectantly. No matter that the nobleman had chosen to ride with her, he had yet to say a word.

"As the king will be announcing our betrothal within the week, I thought it advisable that we be seen together," he said.

Rhiannon's grip on the reins tightened again. Was he truly as emotionally detached as he appeared? "I daresay you are right," she said. "Although, I regret that doing so necessitates such effort. I have no doubt you have many things needing your attention."

"You are correct," he said. "Thankfully, our betrothal will be short, so I shall soon return to those important and pressing things."

Rhiannon was surprised by the pain his words inflicted. To have her fears that there was no real feeling between them so convincingly confirmed was unexpectedly difficult. Mayhap her disappointment came because Heledd had made her believe that marriages could be more than a political contract. Did any young lady desire a husband who displayed such callous indifference to spending time with her?

Keeping her chin up, she watched Owain Gwynedd and Prince Cadell ride through the castle entrance ahead of them. "You do not anticipate that we will spend much time together after the wedding, then?"

"I have no desire to deny you time to pursue your own interests, and I, of course, will continue with mine." He shrugged. "Such freedom will be

mutually beneficial, I believe.”

It struck her then. Cadwgan had no notion of what made her happy or what made her sad. Indeed, he did not know her at all. And by the same token, she did not know him.

The guard standing at the gate saluted. Cadwgan acknowledged him with a slight inclination of his head, and they rode into the courtyard. Ahead of them, the grooms and stableboys hurried to attend to the horses and their riders. The king, Prince Cadell, and Hywel had already dismounted and were walking into the inner courtyard in deep discussion. Cadwgan’s gaze followed them.

“There is no need for you to linger here,” Rhiannon said. “We were seen together the entire journey from the graveyard.”

“Very true,” Cadwgan said, dismounting in one swift movement. “You there!” he called to the closest stableboy. “Take my mount.”

The young boy hurried forward and claimed Cadwgan’s horse’s reins.

“Mind you care for him well,” Cadwgan warned.

“Yes, my lord.”

The stableboy began leading the horse away, and Cadwgan offered Rhiannon a polite bow. “Good day, Rhiannon.”

She hid her relief with a nod. “Good day, my lord.”

The next moment, he was gone, striding swiftly to catch the king and the princes.

Rhiannon looked away. Closer to the stables, she spotted Dai helping Gwenllian to dismount. Another groom was assisting the queen. Guards were leading their horses through the stable’s wide doors, and stableboys were scurrying between them. Rhiannon hesitated, wondering if she should move a little closer to Dai and hope that he would also help her dismount or if she should capture the attention of one of the other grooms.

“May I be of assistance?” A man spoke.

Rhiannon swung around, her heart in her throat. A pair of blue eyes as stunning as they were familiar looked up at her. No longer twisted into two tight plaits, his blond hair fell in gentle waves to touch his broad shoulders.

When she did not speak, he raised his arms. “May I be of assistance?” he repeated. “It seems that your escort has abandoned you.”

“I sent him away.”

The corner of his lip quirked upward as though he were trying not to smile. “Am I to gather that you are in the habit of sending gentlemen away?”

Her cheeks warmed. Her brusque orders that he leave when he'd come upon her on the beach had been justified. He was a Viking.

Memory brought new cognition.

There was a Viking in Dinefwr Castle.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed.

"Offering to help you dismount."

Her gaze darted around the courtyard. The chaos continued at the stable doors, and all attention was on the queen and Gwenllian. No one was looking her way.

"If you would refrain from calling attention to my presence here, I would be most appreciative," he added.

Could Vikings read minds? Taking an unsteady breath, Rhiannon released her reins. His hands reached for her, grasping her securely around the waist. She swung her leg free, and he lifted her. For one long moment, she was suspended in the air, and then he set her feet gently upon the ground. His eyes met hers, and like the sky after a lightning strike, awareness crackled between them.

"I . . . I thank you," she managed.

"It was my pleasure." He lowered his hands and stepped back a pace.

"Good day, Rhiannon."

"Good day, Leif."

She caught his smile just before a stableboy walked between them, leading a black charger. And then he was gone. She blinked, scouring the courtyard.

"May I take yer horse, miss?" The same stableboy who'd taken charge of Cadwgan's mount had returned.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Yer horse, miss." He pointed to her mare, its straps now trailing the ground.

"Of course." She attempted to gather her wits. "You have my thanks."

With a cheery smile, he took the reins and led the horse away.

The courtyard was emptying. Even the queen and Gwenllian were now gone. Rhiannon's gaze moved slowly from the stable to the fletcher's shop to the smithy. A lone horse stood patiently waiting for the blacksmith to inspect its hooves. She watched the burly man reach for a tool before she turned away and started toward the inner courtyard.

Leif was here. As much as she wished that his appearance had been an apparition, his touch had been real. It had also been thrilling and unlike

anything she had ever experienced before. Pressing a hand to her mouth, she stifled a sob. How had she come to this? She was to marry a man for whom she had no feelings, and her traitorous body had responded to a man who had all but sanctioned her father's death.

Reaching the entrance to the north tower, Rhiannon pulled open the heavy door. Lifting the hem of her gown, she ran up the spiral staircase and along the passage above. Someone called her name, but she ignored it. Fumbling with the latch, she let herself into the bedchamber and closed the door behind herself. The room was cold. It mattered not. Crossing the room in four steps, she dropped onto the bed and let her tears fall.

††††

He was a fool. Pressed against the wall of the blacksmith's shop, Leif berated himself once again. If Rhiannon had called out, if someone else in the party had recognized him, he could have been taken away in shackles. And for what? A flash of gallantry? He groaned and ran his hand across his face. He was twice the fool because he knew full well that if he were given the opportunity to live that short time with her again, he would make the same choice.

The shock of seeing Rhiannon ride into the courtyard had caused all sense of caution to flee. Unfortunately, seeing Cadwgan beside her had caused another, equally troubling response. He released a tense breath. How could he feel such intense jealousy when he barely knew the young lady? It was as ridiculous as it was undeniable. And it had taken him to her side the moment the rancorous Cymry had abandon her. He attempted to tamp down his anger. No young lady deserved such treatment—least of all, Rhiannon.

He had held her for only a moment, but for that instant, everything around him had faded into insignificance. And that was incredibly dangerous. Clenching his fists, he pushed past the intimate memory, forcing himself to focus on what he must do next. A careful look around the courtyard confirmed that it had emptied and that Gethin was at work on his horse. He stepped closer, and Gethin looked up, a file in hand.

"I wondered when you would reappear," he said. "The left rear shoe was loose. But all it took was one nail to set it right."

"Good news indeed," Leif said, relieved that the blacksmith had found something to correct. "And you were faster than I thought you would be."

Gethin grunted. "It's a good thing too. Dai will be back 'ere any minute, bringin' with 'im one of the 'orses that was out today. 'E's saying it's thrown

a shoe.”

“Then I should leave you to your work,” Leif said, withdrawing a coin from the purse at his belt and offering it to the blacksmith.

“Much obliged,” Gethin said.

Leif glanced at the entrance to the inner courtyard. Returning without arousing suspicion would be nigh impossible, yet he still had so much to learn if he was to prove Cadwaladr innocent.

“How much longer will Owain Gwynedd and his party be at the castle?” he asked.

Gethin shrugged. “They don’t tell the likes of me such things, but I imagine they’ll be gone soon enough. They came for the burial, and that’s behind ’em.”

If the blacksmith was correct, the heightened security at the castle may diminish in the next day or so, and that might work to his benefit. Then again, he would lose his opportunity to observe those who had something to gain by Anarawd’s death. And Rhiannon would be gone.

The thought brought Leif up short. Half an hour ago, he had not known she was here. Now that he had seen her—spoken to her, even—a new resolution settled upon him. Although he had yet to determine exactly how it could be done, he would return Rhiannon’s wooden jewelry box to her before she left.

Across the way, the latch on the stable door lifted. It was all the warning Leif needed. Having no desire for another encounter with the mistrustful groom, he mounted his horse and took the reins.

“Many thanks, Gethin,” he said.

“Good day t’ you, Luc,” the blacksmith responded. “May the remainder of your travels go well.”

Chapter 24

THE MOMENT LEIF ENTERED THE bedchamber, Knud jumped to his feet from the wooden chair in the corner of the room. “You took your time,” he said, wasting no words on pleasantries. “Did you see him?”

“Owain Gwynedd?”

“No,” he said. “That brute, Cadwgan.” Knud placed his hands on his hips. “Being up a tree with no means of escape when the man who tried to kill you a week earlier is standing directly below is not something I would recommend to another.”

“What were you doing up a tree?”

“You asked me to watch those in attendance at the burial. Would you have had me join the group in the graveyard uninvited or simply stand at the roadside and watch them ride by?”

Leif inclined his head. “The tree was a good option.”

“I am glad you think so,” he said grumpily. “Albeit a bit late.”

Leif chuckled and placed a hand on Knud’s shoulder. “I would have picked you to come out ahead had you been forced into combat with the man.”

“That is neither here nor there when he has a dozen guards at his beck and call.”

“True,” Leif conceded. “But as you are here rather than at the castle in chains, I assume you remained concealed. What did you learn?”

“Owain Gwynedd was somber. His edling, Hywel—I assume it was him; they stood together and share a likeness—appeared troubled. Cadwgan was watchful of those around him. His gaze strayed to Owain’s son more than once.”

“Did he pay attention to the women?” Leif asked.

Knud gave him an odd look. “Not that I noticed. The women kept to themselves. It was the same two we saw at the market. The brown-haired young lady shed a few tears. She was the only one who did. The dark-haired one and the older lady were on either side of her, offering support occasionally.

“Anarawd’s brother, Cadell, stood a little distant, an adviser beside him. I would hazard a guess that there is little love lost between him and Owain Gwynedd.”

Leif raised his eyebrows. “Why do you say that?”

“Conversation between the two seemed more perfunctory than friendly. Smiles were forced.”

“Cadell believes Owain’s brother murdered Anarawd. I daresay it is understandable that he would bear some hard feelings toward the king.”

“Is it?” Knud said. “Surely Cadell had the most to gain from his brother’s death. He is now prince of Deheubarth.”

“That matters nothing if he truly cared for his brother and never really wished to rule.”

“Have you ever known a younger brother to not wish for the power of the elder one?” Knud asked skeptically.

“Aye.” Leif dropped into the solitary wooden chair Knud had vacated and met his friend’s eyes without flinching. “I have no desire whatsoever to be the jarl of Dyflin, and if someone were to kill Bjorn in such a premeditated way, I would be hard-pressed to look past it. Although it goes against the Christian teachings I have embraced, I fear it would be difficult to prevent those negative feelings from affecting my view of the murderer’s brother.”

“Fair enough,” Knud said. “Although, I would contend that your lack of interest in power and leadership is even more peculiar than your decision to be a silversmith rather than a Viking.”

“So says the other man in Dyflin who chooses to stay and work on his craft rather than participate in raids overseas.”

Knud grinned. “We are a pair of misfits.”

“We are indeed.” Leif looked at him thoughtfully. “But mayhap we need to start thinking less like silversmiths and Vikings and more like Cymry.”

“How is that exactly?”

Leif rose to his feet once more and began pacing across the room. “Think on it, Knud. What did Frida ask you to bring her?”

“A goblet.”

“Precisely.”

If Knud’s expression was any indication, there was nothing precise about it at all. “Would you care to enlighten me further? I see no correlation between Frida’s desire for a gold goblet and the way Cymry think.”

Leif pivoted and crossed the room again. “Amongst our people, there is prestige and honor in being a Viking, in returning from raids with the most valuable treasures. Frida expects you to return home with a precious trinket. That is the way of the Vikings. Not so, the Cymry.”

“You think we are missing something by focusing on the motives most

familiar to us,” Knud guessed.

“It is possible.” Leif frowned. “If we could identify the correct motive, it would make it far easier to identify the assailant.”

“Agreed,” Knud said. “So what is your preference? A typical Viking emotion, such as avarice, or something we have yet to fully explore, such as jealousy, fear, revenge, or love?”

Leif ran his fingers through his hair. How could strangers ascertain a murderer’s passions when such things were usually kept hidden from his closest friends? Thanks to his interaction with Gethin, Leif had learned about the recovery of Cadwaladr’s tabards, but he still knew almost nothing about the men who had been with Anarawd the night of his death.

“I will have to return to the castle,” he said.

Knud frowned. “I do not know what excuse you conjured up for entry the last time, but the guards will surely not accept it again. And I do not especially wish to come to the rescue should you be the one put in shackles rather than me.”

“Your gallantry is overwhelming,” Leif said dryly.

“I am simply encouraging you to think of something that does not involve walking into the Cymry’s fortress with no means of escape.” Knud gave him a meaningful look. “Your mother will thank me.”

Knowing that Knud was right did nothing to ease Leif’s feelings of frustration and helplessness. He did another circuit of the small room. This time, his gaze landed on his sack lying on the bed. He stared at it, a fresh notion—one that was no less rash than reattempting to enter the castle—beginning to form in his mind. “I have an idea.”

“If it is of the same caliber as the one that caused us to set sail from Dyflin, I wish you would reconsider,” Knud said.

Leif ignored him. “I will send a message to Rhiannon and ask that she meet me outside the castle walls.”

“Who is Rhiannon?”

“She is the dark-haired young lady I spoke to at the market. The one at the burial today.”

Knud stared at him. “Are you going to invite the guards also, or will you leave that responsibility to her?”

“She will not send the castle guards after me.”

“And why is that?”

“I cannot say,” Leif said. “It is simply a feeling I have.”

Knud raised his eyes to the ceiling. “You come to Deheubarth looking for facts, for proof of Cadwaladr’s innocence, and yet you willingly walk into a situation fraught with danger based on a feeling?”

“That sums it up well,” Leif said, already emptying his sack of everything but the wooden jewelry box. “The innkeeper, Elis, said he had a responsible son, did he not?”

“You are mad,” Knud said, shaking his head. “Completely mad.”

Leif stopped what he was doing. “I would have you wait here, Knud. And if I do not return to the inn by evening, return to Dyflin without me.”

“Flattered though I am that you believe me capable of rowing the boat that distance alone, I would rather have another set of oars to help me.”

Leif’s lips twitched. “I may be mad, but I am good for that, at least.”

“At this present time, I believe it may be all you are good for.” He sighed heavily. “What is your plan?”

“I shall have the innkeeper’s son deliver this box to Rhiannon. She will know who it is from, so he need not mention my name. A simple ‘At the river within the hour’ will suffice. If she is willing, she will meet me there.”

Knud’s gaze darted from Leif’s face to the box. “Is that the box Rune took from the house we raided up the coast from here? The one you traded the gold cross for?”

“It is.”

“Why are you giving . . . ?” Knud’s words trailed off, and his head snapped up. “Rhiannon was the girl at the house those years ago.”

Leif avoided his eyes. “It is time that it was returned to her.”

“How long have you known she was the one from that night?”

“The moment I saw her at the market.”

“And you brought the box with you this time in case you saw her? Did you know she would be here?”

Leif shook his head. “I had thought she was on Ongullsey and had not yet devised a way of delivering it.”

“Of course you had not,” Knud muttered.

Leif smiled. “It will be well, Knud. If she does not come, she will have her mother’s jewelry box and we are none the worse for trying. If she does come, I will ask her for information on the noblemen and royalty. Mayhap she knows something that will steer us the correct way.”

“And what if she comes accompanied by Cadwgan or Hywel or two dozen castle guards?”

“Then I leave without speaking to her,” Leif said.

“If they do not kill you first.”

“I shall be careful. They will not come upon me unawares.”

“No, they shall not,” Knud said grimly. “For I shall be watching their route.”

“You will be at the inn,” Leif reminded him.

With complete disregard for Leif’s last comment, Knud started for the door. “Give the sack to Elis’s son. I shall go for our horses. There is sure to be another tree that can conceal an observer somewhere near the river, but I would be glad of a few extra minutes to choose my perch this time.”

Leif’s heart lightened a fraction. “You have my thanks, Knud.”

His friend paused, his hand on the door handle. “Be warned,” he said. “My services as lookout come with a price. When this latest adventure is behind us, I shall require your assistance in acquiring one very fine goblet.”

“It shall be done,” Leif said with a grin.

Chapter 25

RHIANNON AWOKE TO SUNLIGHT BATHING her room. She blinked, the stinging beneath her eyelids bringing instant remembrance. She had cried herself to sleep. Tossing aside the blanket, she shifted to a sitting position on the bed and studied the pattern of light on the floor. If the angle of the shadows was any indication, she had slept into the late afternoon.

For a moment, she wondered that no one had come looking for her. The thought was quickly followed by the realization that Gwenllian was likely keeping to her chamber after the emotional toll Anarawd's burial had taken upon her. Concern for her daughter would eliminate any thought of Rhiannon from the queen's mind. The only other person in the castle who would truly care about Rhiannon's heartache was Heledd, and she would be hard at work until late this evening.

Crossing to a small table, Rhiannon picked up her comb and ran it through her long hair. When she had tamed her tresses into some semblance of submission, she twisted her hair into a long plait and tied it off with a short ribbon. Bending over the wash basin, she splashed her face with cool water and patted it dry with a rag. Mayhap, if she were very fortunate, the puffiness she felt around her eyes would subside before she needed to make an appearance at the evening meal.

A knock sounded at the door. Rhiannon started. She had no desire to see anyone, but if it was Gwenllian, it would not do to turn her away. "Who is it?"

"Hefin, Miss Rhiannon. I bear a delivery for you."

Hefin? With a delivery? Rhiannon struggled to gather her scattered thoughts. What could Hywel's young page possibly have for her?

Curiosity overcame hesitation. "Come in."

The door opened, and Hefin stepped across the threshold, carrying a sack. "Good day, Miss Rhiannon," he said with a bow. "This was left at the castle gate for you. One of the guards called me over when I was in the outer courtyard and told me to see that you received it."

Mystified, Rhiannon reached for the sack. "Did the guard give you the sender's name?"

"No, miss. All's he said was, 'Within the hour at the river.'"

Rhiannon's pulse quickened, her fingers tightening around the sack.

"I thank you, Hefin," she said.

“Yes, miss.” He bowed again, and without another word, he backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Rhiannon stood perfectly still, her eyes on the linen sack in her hand. The object within was hard and square. A quiver of apprehension coursed down her spine. She had no notion what the sack contained, but an indefinable whisper told her it was important.

Lowering herself onto the edge of the bed, she set the sack beside her and pulled it open. She released the fabric. It dropped to the bed, allowing the top of a small wooden box to emerge from within its folds. With a gasp, she reached for the object. Her fingers trembled.

Drawing the box closer, she lifted the lid. A single heavy tear—the only one left to her after her earlier crying spell—rolled down her cheek and landed on her thumb. Slowly, she ran her finger across the familiar silver brooch within.

“Mam,” she whispered. “Oh, that you were with me still.”

She touched the bracelet, its smooth surface cool beneath her fingertip. How could this be? Her mother’s jewelry box had disappeared with the vile Viking who had killed her father. And yet, here it was, looking just as she remembered, her mother’s brooch and bracelet seemingly untouched. But there was something else. Slowly, she withdrew a silver pendant. Sunlight caught the intricate engraving on its edges, sending flecks of light dancing across the ceiling. Rhiannon’s breath caught. This pendant had not belonged to her mother, but she had seen it before.

Tilting the piece of jewelry, she examined the finely etched wave more carefully than she had done at the market. The workmanship was breathtaking. It was quite possibly the most beautifully worked silver she had ever seen. Leif had told Cadwgan it was not for sale, so how had it come to be in her mother’s jewelry box? And how had the jewelry box returned to her?

She set the pendant aside and closed the lid on the box. Lovingly running her hand across its surface, she closed her eyes as memories assailed her. The jewelry box sitting where it had always sat on the table in her mother’s chamber, and then later in Rhiannon’s. Her father pinning the brooch on her mother’s shawl, the look of love in his eyes making Rhiannon’s heart ache. And her mother, holding Rhiannon’s hand and twirling her in a circle, the bracelet on her wrist swirling with her.

Rhiannon’s throat tightened as the dark memories pushed in. The

marauders' shouts, her father's cry, and the callous expression on the redheaded Viking's face as he'd raced away, this box in hand. And then there was Leif. His blue eyes, sorrowful, haunted. And his broken apology. Rhiannon swallowed against the pain. Leif had done this. Somehow, he had found her mother's jewelry box and had returned it to her.

She swung to face the window. Already, the sun was lowering. How long had it been since Hefin had been at the door? *Within the hour at the river.* That had been the message. That had been *Leif's* message. Slipping the pendant into the small purse attached to her girdle, she tucked the wooden box back into the sack and hid it under her blanket. She moved to the door, opened it, and peered outside. The passage was clear. Raising her skirts a couple of inches, she hurried to the tower and down the stairs.

Two years of practice in avoiding the royal guards as she made her regular pilgrimages to the sea at Aberffraw gave her the skills necessary to escape the castle. Rhiannon stood in the shadows of the entrance to the outer courtyard long enough to watch the guards march back and forth three times. It was enough. The brief moment between when the first one turned his back on the entrance and the second one replaced him was consistent each time.

Walking as though she were simply out for an afternoon stroll, Rhiannon sauntered closer to the main gate. A groom greeted her with a polite bow while leading a white horse toward the stable. She passed the fletcher's shop and the entrance to the guardroom. The guard on the right side of the entrance turned. Rhiannon counted to three and walked directly out through the open gate. She did not turn around. If either of the guards noticed her, they said nothing, but the steady march of their feet accompanied her pounding heart as she crossed the dirt road and started down the embankment toward the river.

The soothing sound of rushing water gradually replaced the rhythmic beat of heavy footsteps, and Rhiannon slowed to take in the view. A wide river cut through the valley, winding in a gentle curve around the rise upon which the castle stood. Trees and shrubs dotted the grass-covered landscape and lined the river bank, but the only other sign of life was a fox that darted out from between two oak trees and disappeared almost immediately.

Rhiannon paused, the first hint of misgiving settling upon her. Would she ever learn to curb her impulsive nature? She had raced out of the castle with little forethought and no escort. Furthermore, not a soul knew where she had gone. She looked to the left and the right, grateful that as yet, there was no one in sight. The water rushed by, calling to her. It had been too long since

she had stood at the seashore, watching the waves roll in. She would walk to the water and feel of its calming influence before returning to the castle.

Hurrying down the remaining slope, she made for a small break in the vegetation at the water's edge. The limbs of a rhododendron bush hung low, dipping its leaves into the river. Rhiannon crouched beside it, the tips of her fingers submerged, reveling in the glossy smoothness of the cool liquid.

"You love water."

She had not seen or heard Leif's approach, but she had expected nothing less. "Yes." She rose to face him. "Do you?"

He smiled, and a hundred butterflies swirled within her stomach. "Very much. There are few places that I would rather be than in a longboat with a stiff breeze in the sail and open water before me."

A wave of longing swept over her. "I have dreamed of going to sea for as long as I can remember."

"Then, why have you waited?"

This was not the time to tell him that her father would never have heard of it. "I have yet to find a fisherman willing to take me onboard," she said.

"You will not experience the full majesty of the sea in a small fishing vessel near the shore."

"I daresay," she said, "but my opportunities to sail in a longboat are fewer still." She tipped her head to one side, studying him curiously. "Is that why you created the pendant? Because of your love of the sea?"

"That particular piece came to life in my hands. It was a rare, rather wonderful moment when my heart and my hands were in tune."

"Why did you put it in my mother's jewelry box?"

His eyes met hers, and Rhiannon's pulse quickened. "I wished you to have it," he said. "It seemed only right that after having been deprived of your mother's jewelry all this time, her pieces should be added upon."

Rhiannon looked away, an unfamiliar ache forming in her chest. How was she to respond to such a gift? She had never received anything so beautiful, so meaningful, and yet, in all good conscience, she could not accept it. Her fingers moved to the purse at her waist, but before she opened it, she asked the question that had circled her mind since she'd first opened the sack. "How did you come upon my mother's jewelry box? You were not the one to leave with it."

"I offered Rune something he considered to be of greater worth in exchange for the jewelry box."

Rhiannon's heart was pounding once more. "Why?"

"Because it did not belong with him." He paused as though choosing his words carefully. "You cannot know how long the memory of your agonized cries from that fateful night have haunted me. I had no thought that I would ever see you again, but safeguarding the items that were so dear to you seemed to be one small way in which I could make amends for what occurred."

Struggling to make sense of what he'd told her, Rhiannon attempted to find her voice. "I . . . I am most thankful. Having my mother's things returned means more than I can say." She pried open her purse and withdrew the pendant. "But I cannot accept this." She held it out to him, the silver wave on her palm, the chain dangling between her fingers, and forced herself to continue. "When we return to Ynys Môn, Owain Gwynedd intends to announce my betrothal to Cadwgan ap Gronw. It would be unseemly for me to accept so personal a gift from another man."

She caught the flash of something that looked remarkably like pain in Leif's eyes. But it was gone before she could fully identify it. He reached out his hand, but rather than taking the pendant from her, he wrapped his fingers around hers, burying the pendant in her closed fist. "The pendant is yours. Although I have no say over whether or not you ever choose to wear it, I can insist upon this."

The air stilled between them.

"I . . . I cannot . . ."

He tightened his grip. "Please, Rhiannon. It belongs with no other person."

Rhiannon lowered her gaze to their clasped hands, the threat of tears pricking her eyes. "What do you want of me?"

To her own ears, her tortured whisper revealed a heart that dreaded her union with Cadwgan but yearned for more time with Leif. But whether Leif heard the same, she could not tell. Regret filled his expressive blue eyes, and he released her hand.

"I am come for the same reason that I was in Aberffraw: I must know if Cadwaladr is truly guilty of murdering Anarawd."

The abrupt change in subject helped Rhiannon rally her defenses. "You remain convinced that Cadwaladr is innocent."

Leif shook his head. "I am convinced of nothing. But I have yet to find a motive strong enough to lead Cadwaladr to do something so violent, and I am wary of the well-placed clues leading to his charge."

“The tabards and knife,” she said.

“Aye.” He looked at her quizzically. “If the men guilty of a murder could be identified by their tabards, what do you think they would do with those pieces of clothing?”

“Burn them,” Rhiannon said without hesitation. “They would destroy all evidence that tied them to the crime.”

“I agree. Which is why I find it troubling that the tabards in question were discovered by some local boys whilst they were out hunting in the forest.”

“They were found?”

“So the castle’s blacksmith told me. And they were returned to the castle.”

Rhiannon’s thoughts whirled. Why had Heledd not told her this when they had been speaking of the crime? Surely, as the castle laundress, she would be aware of the clothing’s reappearance.

“If the men seen leaving the castle in Cadwaladr’s tabards were part of a well-orchestrated ruse, there is someone else behind the crime,” Leif said. “But as an outsider, I do not know the players well enough to discover a possible motive on my own.” A new level of urgency tinged his voice. “I need to know if any of the noblemen or royals in the castle harbor sufficient jealousy, a desire for revenge, or a secret so terrible that it could drive him to kill another.”

“How is one to ever uncover such truths? Surely they would rarely be revealed to another.”

“I require only a single observation or a memory—no matter how faint—of an unguarded word, an obvious grudge, or unusual behavior to steer me aright.” Leif fixed her with a penetrating gaze. “Would you be willing to help me?”

Rhiannon stumbled back a pace. “You wish me to spy for you?”

He shook his head. “I simply wish you to make a few subtle inquiries into the background and mindset of the noblemen in the castle. If you discover nothing that might point to another being responsible for Anarawd’s death, I can report the same to my father.”

“Why are you so determined to do this? Why do you seemingly care deeply about something so wholly unconnected to you or your people? Surely you owe Cadwaladr no allegiance.”

“It is true that I owe Cadwaladr nothing. Indeed, I scarcely know the man. But I do know something of the suffering that occurs when truth is ignored. For me, that is reason enough.”

Rhiannon tore her gaze from his earnest expression. How could she possibly refute such a response?

“What if I were to learn something that leads me to question Cadwaladr’s guilt as you do?” she asked.

“Then I would ask that you get word to me at the inn in the tref without delay.” He offered her a ghost of a smile. “They know me as Luc.”

Before Rhiannon could formulate a suitable response, a warbling whistle sounded. Leif tensed, and Rhiannon swiveled to face the small grove of trees a little farther downstream.

“What was that?” she asked.

“A warning,” he said. “Quickly, Rhiannon. Someone is coming. You must go.”

“But what of you—” She turned her head, but he was gone.

Chapter 26

RHIANNON SCoured the nearby trees and shrubbery. Nothing. The pendant still clasped tightly in her hand was the only proof that Leif had ever stood beside her. A breeze puffed by, bringing with it the distant murmur of men's voices. With trembling fingers, she opened her purse and slid the pendant inside, then she tightened the drawstring once more and straightened her shoulders before she stepped out from behind the rhododendron bush.

Two horsemen were approaching from the forest. Keeping her head down, Rhiannon crossed the grassy area that bordered the river and started up the slope to the castle.

"Rhiannon!"

Her expectation that the men would not know her withered alongside her hope that they would be too preoccupied with their conversation to notice her. She paused, turning to face the riders. It was Hywel. And unless she was mistaken, his companion was Dai.

"Do you see who I discovered in the stables?" Hywel called.

"I do." Rhiannon's smile was natural. "Seeing Dai was the second-best thing that happened to me yesterday."

"The second-best?" Hywel said.

The men were close enough now for her to see Hywel's raised eyebrows and hear Dai's throaty chuckle.

"If I did not know you'd seen Heledd as well, I might take offense," Dai said.

Hywel's expression cleared. "Your wife is also at the castle, then."

"Yes, Your Highness. She's the laundress."

"Which is how you learned of the tabards' discovery," Hywel said.

Dai shifted in his saddle as though suddenly wishing to be anywhere else. "Yes, Your Highness."

Rhiannon watched the exchange, her thoughts racing. "Is that where you have been?" she asked. "To see the spot where the tabards were found?"

Hywel's eyes narrowed. "What do you know of such things?"

Mentally berating herself for speaking before she had taken the time to consider her words, Rhiannon shrugged. "Only that Cadwaladr's tabards were located in the forest."

"Heledd talks overly much," Dai grumbled.

She probably should have corrected him, but Heledd was well able to

defend herself against her husband, and it was better that both Hywel and Dai believe that Rhiannon had gleaned the information from her than from Leif. Besides, Hywel was regarding her with suspicion still.

“Why are you here without an escort?” he asked.

“I came to see the river.”

Dai slid from his saddle. “I see that you have not changed, Miss Rhiannon,” he said. “Always needing to be near the water.” He offered her the leather straps. “Allow me to assist you up. I’ll not ride while you walk.”

Fully prepared to refuse, Rhiannon took one more look at Hywel’s face and decided against it. For now, placating her cousin was a far better approach, especially if she wished to extract any further information from him.

“I thank you, Dai,” she said.

The older man assisted her into the saddle, stepped back, and offered her a crooked smile. “It’s like old times, miss.”

“It is.” Her responding smile was tinged with sadness. As wonderful as it was to see Dai and Heledd again, nothing would ever be quite the way it had once been.

“I appreciate your assistance this afternoon, Dai,” Hywel said.

The groom bowed. “Glad to be of service, Your Highness.”

Hywel turned to Rhiannon. “Whenever you are ready,” he said.

She started the horse up the gentle incline, and Hywel’s mount kept pace. They passed an outcropping of gorse bushes. Rhiannon guided her horse around the thorny branches, and Hywel followed. She glanced at him. He was unusually quiet.

“Something is worrying you,” she said.

“What do you suppose has become of Cadwaladr?” he asked.

Rhiannon bit her lower lip. Surely it was no coincidence that Hywel was thinking of his uncle after Dai had taken him to the place the tabards had been found. But what had prompted him to ask to see it in the first place?

“I was under the impression that he had gone to Ireland,” she said.

“Yes.”

She waited, but when he said nothing more, she glanced at him again. A crease lined his forehead as though he were deep in thought.

“Hywel,” she ventured. “What would have driven Cadwaladr to kill Anarawd?”

“That’s just it,” he replied. “After all this time, I have yet to land upon

anything that makes any sense. There was no dispute between them, no vying for the same land or the same woman, no jostling for power. As far as I can tell, Cadwaladr would gain nothing from Anarawd's death."

"What if it was not him after all?" Rhiannon said, echoing Leif's words.

Hywel ran his hand across his face, his expression haggard. "It crossed my mind as my father's men razed Cadwaladr's castle to the ground, but the evidence seemed so certain."

Rhiannon recognized the distress in Hywel's eyes. If her cousin was not experiencing genuine concern, he was a consummate actor. "If it was not him, then who?"

"How is anyone to know?"

"Think, Hywel," she urged. "Is there a nobleman who was here with you that night who either had a great deal to gain from Anarawd's death or who harbored bitter feelings toward him?"

"His brother, Cadell, surely had the most to gain, but he owns land south of here and as far as I can ascertain, that is where he wished to remain. He had no quarrel with his brother.

"William Montgomery was here. He is a marcher lord. It's possible that he thought Cadell would be a weaker ruler and would, therefore, offer the Marcher Lords more power.

"It is no secret that my father had hoped to form an alliance between Gwynedd and Deheubarth through Gwenllian's marriage. As such, he had more to lose than to gain with Anarawd's death, and as Owain Gwynedd's edling, I would place myself in that same position.

"Cadwgan has never fully overcome his bitterness over the death of his father, but Anarawd had nothing whatsoever to do with that."

Cadwgan had mentioned his father's early death the day he arrived at Bryn Eithin, but he had given her no details.

"What happened to his father?"

"It was long ago," Hywel said. "There is no need to talk of it now."

"If I am to be Cadwgan's wife, I should know such things," Rhiannon said. "And I would rather hear it from you than burden him with recounting a painful memory." Already, the castle entrance was within sight. It would not be long before their opportunity to speak privately would be gone. "Tell me," she urged.

"How much do you know of my ancestry?"

"My mother and your mother are sisters. I know little of your father's

family beyond recognizing it as the royal line.”

“My grandfather, Gruffydd ap Cynan, was the king of Gwynedd before my father. His wife, my grandmother, was Angharad ferch Owain. She was born into the family that ruled Dyffryn Clwyd. Upon her father’s death, her three brothers, Meilyn, Rhiryd, and Gronw, ruled over the area. My grandfather wished to annex Dyffryn Clwyd to Gwynedd. He sent my uncle Cadwallon to see it done. Cadwallon killed the three rulers of Dyffryn Clwyd in battle and claimed the land for Gwynedd.”

Rhiannon stared at him. “All three? Killed in one battle?”

“Aye. It was a military endeavor but brutal nonetheless.” Hywel sighed. “One of those killed was Cadwgan’s father, Gronw.” He gazed sightlessly at the castle before them. “When we were young, Cadwgan and I were wont to seek each other out at large gatherings. We spent many happy hours playing together. But after his father’s death, something changed. Whenever he visited the llys, he was petulant and listless. And then he stopped coming altogether. Over the next few years, Cadwallon continued to conquer more land for the kingdom of Gwynedd until, in 1132, he met an army from Powys and was killed. Einion, the younger brother of Meilyn, Rhiryd, and Gronw, claimed it was done to avenge their deaths. He also maintained that Cadwgan played a significant role in Cadwallon’s demise.”

Rhiannon’s grip upon the reins tightened, her nails biting into the flesh of her hand. Yet, somehow, she kept the horror she felt from showing on her face.

Hywel glanced at her, concern in his eyes. “Even though Cadwgan and I have never fully renewed the friendship we knew in our childhood, I would have you know that after Cadwallon’s death, he returned to court again and has gained much respect for the work he has done to improve the situation of those living in Dyffryn Clwyd.”

“I see.” In actuality, she did not, but it seemed an appropriate response. Particularly as all her energies were directed toward calming the nausea currently threatening to overcome her.

Their horses entered the outer courtyard with a clatter of hooves. Two stableboys came running out of the stable to greet them. Hywel dismounted, handed off his reins to one of the boys, and turned to assist Rhiannon. When her feet were on the ground once more, he stepped away.

“I likely shared more than I should,” he said. “But you are strong, Rhiannon. Stronger than Gwenllian, I think. You must know that violence

and death are integrally woven into our history and will undoubtedly follow us into the future. I would wish to lessen it. Indeed, when I am king, I will make every effort to lessen it, but the very nature of men makes it seem an almost impossible task.”

“Not impossible.” Rhiannon refused to believe it. “Surely there is more goodness and truth in the world than there is evil and lies.”

“I would like to think so.” He looked toward the south tower, where Deheubarth’s royal family resided. “And though it may take effort, those things are most certainly worth seeking out.”

Chapter 27

LEIF WAITED UNTIL THE OLD groom disappeared over the rise before emerging from the trees. Rhiannon and Hywel were long gone, probably within the castle by now. Watching her ride away had been harder than it should have been. He clenched his fists. She was to marry Cadwgan, and no matter how much he wished it otherwise, there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

“Well?” Knud approached, drawing their horses behind him. “She did not bring guards with her, which I consider a hopeful sign. What did she say?”

“He’s not worthy of her.”

Knud gave him a perplexed look. “Who is not worthy of whom?”

“Cadwgan,” Leif said, unfurling his fingers only to clench them again. “Owain Gwynedd intends to announce Cadwgan’s betrothal to Rhiannon upon their return to Ongullsey.”

“Then I am very sorry for her.” When Leif made no response, Knud fixed him with a penetrating look. “Tell me you have not developed feelings for that young lady.”

Leif reached for the reins of his mount. “Come. We must quit this place.”

Knud refused to relinquish them. “Tell me,” he demanded.

“There is nothing to say. We spoke only a few minutes. I asked her to search for any information that might help shed light upon who murdered Anarawd, but she had made no commitment to do so before you issued your warning call.” He shrugged. “You saw her leave with Hywel. She will be with Cadwgan later. It is unlikely that she will make contact with me again.”

“I agree. It seems improbable.” He continued to keep a tight grasp on the reins. “Now back to the other matter. The one you are so pointedly ignoring.”

Leif grunted irritably. “There are definite disadvantages to having you with me.”

“I daresay.” Knud was completely unperturbed. “But as my whistle likely saved your life and Rhiannon’s reputation, I do have my uses.”

Leif sighed. There was no fight left in him. “Very well. I have never before experienced the sense of awareness I feel when I am with Rhiannon. When she looks at me, I have an unaccountable desire to stand a little taller, to strive to be more noble, more loyal, more true.”

“That answers my question well enough,” he said, his expression uncommonly serious. “But surely you are not—”

Leif raised his hand to stop him before he continued. “You have nothing to fear. Not only does she despise all Vikings, but she is to marry the man who wishes me dead.”

Knud nodded. “I am glad you remain rational enough to see the impossibility of the situation.”

“That is the best counsel you can offer?”

“I did not realize that you wished for my guidance.” Finally relinquishing Leif’s reins, Knud mounted his horse and waited for Leif to do the same.

“My advice is simple,” he said, wheeling his horse around. “Ride away. And as soon as we reach the coast, sail away. If you are fortunate, your good sense will return by the time we arrive in Dyflin.”

As much as he wished it otherwise, Leif knew that Knud’s recommendation would never work. If the last two years had proven anything, it was that he could not simply forget Rhiannon.

He looked up at the seemingly impenetrable castle walls, the first whisper of defeat entering his heart. Were the secrets held within not for him and Knud to uncover after all? He pushed the discouraging thought away.

“We shall stay in the tref one more day,” he said. “If we learn nothing new by sunset on the morrow, we shall return to Dyflin, and Cadwaladr shall be required to face the consequences of whatever occurred at Dinefwr Castle on his own.”

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Rhiannon sat on the edge of her bed, the open wooden jewelry box on her knee. Three items lay within. Each of them had been her mother’s and carried with them treasured memories. In her hand, she held a fourth piece. The only one that was hers alone. The only one that spoke to her soul. Closing her eyes, a vision of Leif’s face as he’d pressed the pendant into her hands appeared. Insisting that he take it back had proven futile. But what was she to do with it? There was no doubt that Cadwgan would recognize the stunning pendant should he see it, and the last thing she wished to do was rouse the ire of a man who had so violently sought vengeance upon another. No matter its beauty, it would have to remain hidden.

With shaking hands, Rhiannon slipped the chain over her head. The silver wave lay against her blue gown, glistening in the candlelight. She brushed it with her fingertips, and then she lifted it, tucking it beneath the layers of fabric at her neck. She felt the chain slide against her skin, the pendant cold against her chest. Taking an unsteady breath, she took the brooch from the

jewelry box and pinned it to the front of her gown. Tonight, she would have the strength of the sea and the love of her mother with her. She prayed it would be enough.

A knock sounded at the door. With a start, she closed the lid on the jewelry box and slid it beneath the blanket on the bed. “Come in,” she called.

The door opened, and Heledd appeared. “I hope you don’t mind me stopping by, Miss Rhiannon. I know you’re expected in the great hall within the hour, but I’m only now leaving my responsibilities with the linens.” Her smile was hesitant. “Unless you’ve employed the services of a castle maid, I wondered if you’d like me to dress your hair before you go down to eat.”

Rhiannon rose to her feet. Closing the distance between them, she put her arms around the kindly older lady. “Bless you, Heledd. I should have known you would think to come, particularly when I have been missing my mother more than usual.” She pulled back. “If your fingers still contain the magic they held years ago, I would be most grateful to have you take care of my tangled mane.”

Heledd laughed softly. “With no sea breezes here to snarl your hair, I believe I can manage.”

Rhiannon stepped toward the chair, pausing when she realized that Heledd had yet to move. She turned. Heledd stood staring at her, her face ashen.

“Heledd? Are you well?”

“Your . . . your brooch. I did not expect . . . Forgive me, it’s simply . . .”

Rhiannon smiled. “It is well, Heledd. My mother’s jewelry box and pieces have been returned.”

“How is it possible?” Heledd’s shock mirrored the feelings Rhiannon had experienced only hours before.

“The Viking I told you of—the one at the market in Aberffraw—he had it delivered to me.”

Heledd placed her workworn hands upon her cheeks. “Is there more to this tale, or is it truly one of God’s miracles?”

“I think it fair to claim both,” Rhiannon said. Reaching for one of Heledd’s hands, she drew her to the bed. “Sit here.” She pulled the box out from under the blanket and handed it to her. “I shall tell you what I can.”

Heledd listened while Rhiannon told of her unexpected meeting with Leif in the outer courtyard the day before and of the jewelry box delivery today. Omitting all mention of the pendant Leif had given her, she recounted her decision to meet him at the river.

“What were you thinking, Miss Rhiannon?” Heledd said. “With no escort, anything could have happened to you.”

“I acted impulsively. I grant you, it was foolish, but Leif had done nothing to earn my distrust.”

“He killed your father!” Heledd gasped.

Rhiannon stiffened. “Leif has no blood on his hands.”

“How can you say such a thing?”

“The Vikings who killed my father and Meurig and wounded Dai may have arrived on the same boat as Leif, but they are very different men. Leif has begged my forgiveness for an act over which he had little control.” She looked away as the memory of Leif’s pleas on the beach echoed through her mind. “He claims to have discovered Christianity, and I . . . I am inclined to believe him.”

Heledd stared at her in stunned silence. Rhiannon met her look, knowing that without hearing from Leif himself, Heledd’s attitude toward the Norseman was unlikely to soften.

“Why is he here?”

“Cadwaladr is in Ireland. He maintains that he is innocent of Anarawd’s murder. Leif has come to uncover the truth.”

“What right does a Viking have to determine such things? There is proof enough of Cadwaladr’s guilt,” Heledd said. “His knife and tabards have been found.”

“Leif is inclined to believe someone else made it appear that Cadwaladr committed the crime.” For the first time since the conversation began, Rhiannon saw a hint of uncertainty in Heledd. She pressed her slim advantage. “You know Prince Cadell well. Did he wish to rule Deheubarth enough to kill his brother?”

“Prince Cadell had no desire to rule,” Heledd said firmly. “He has always been the quieter of the brothers, glad to have Anarawd be in the position of leadership. Indeed, I have never seen him look so lost as he has this past fortnight.”

“What of William Montgomery. I heard tell he was here the night of the murder.”

“He was here, but he was in his cups that night and was assisted to his chamber in a drunken stupor whilst Prince Anarawd was yet in the great hall.”

“Could he have killed the prince in his drunkenness?”

Heledd shrugged. "I daresay such a thing is possible when in that state, but to have two men leave wearing Cadwaladr's tabards at just the right time would have been beyond him."

"What of Hywel?" Rhiannon despised herself for asking, but in fairness, she must.

"He, Cadwgan, and Cadwaladr all appeared in great spirits that night. They left the great hall with Prince Anarawd and each retired to their respective chambers."

So Cadwgan's defense was much the same as Hywel's.

"None of the castle staff have reported having heard a quarrel between any of them," Heledd continued.

As Rhiannon thought through this new information, footsteps sounded in the passage. Voices muffled by the thick walls and solid door followed. She glanced at the window, noticing for the first time that the sun had set. "It is late," she said. "I must make haste."

Heledd set down the jewelry box and reached for Rhiannon's comb. "It seems to me that you and I have entered this race before." She reached for Rhiannon's long hair. "Be still. I shall have it plaited in no time."

Heledd was as good as her word. Within minutes, Rhiannon's dark hair was piled upon her head in a plaited crown.

"I cannot begin to express how much I have missed you," Rhiannon said, rising from the chair. "Thank you for coming to me this evening."

"It was my pleasure," she said, moving aside so that Rhiannon could easily exit the room. "Take great care, Miss Rhiannon."

"I shall." Rhiannon recognized the concern in her former nursemaid's eyes and leaned forward to kiss her wrinkled cheek. "Do not fret. Even though I have come to the unfortunate realization that my heart rarely listens to my head, I will endeavor to be less impetuous in the future."

Heledd offered her a weak smile. "It has been that way with you since you were very young, Miss Rhiannon, and I would not wish it differently. I pray that your heart will always lead you aright."

"I pray the same," Rhiannon said. "Farewell, Heledd."

"Farewell, Miss Rhiannon."

Chapter 28

LEIF GAZED SIGHTLESSLY AT THE flickering flames in the inn's large fireplace, the bowl of pottage on the table before him largely untouched. He was vaguely aware of the three men laughing over a flagon of mead on the other side of the room and of Knud eating voraciously at his right, but his thoughts were with those gathered at the great hall in the castle.

Unable to stomach the notion that Rhiannon was likely seated beside Cadwgan at the royal banquet, he focused his attention on what little he had learned of the events surrounding Anarawd's death since arriving here. The details were sparse, and like an unfinished tapestry, the full design remained unclear.

"I am missing something, Knud," he said. "Something vital."

"Aye," Knud replied. "Your meal." His friend paused his chewing long enough to point at Leif's bowl. "If you are not going to eat, I shall take it."

Leif slid his bowl toward him. He had no doubt the pottage was flavorful. Upon their return to the inn, the aroma coming from the large pot hanging over the fire had filled the large room, and Knud had insisted that they partake immediately. Unfortunately for Leif, food held no appeal whatsoever. He needed answers, not nourishment.

"How can it be that Anarawd seemingly had no enemies yet lies dead?"

Knud drained his bowl and reached for Leif's. "Mayhap he was killed in error."

"If he had been away from his own castle, that theory would carry more weight. As it is, he was in his own bed in his own chambers. No one—not even a guest—would mistake who lay there."

"True." Knud chewed a moment more. "Mayhap his death was not the end goal but rather a distraction."

"What kind of distraction?"

Knud shrugged. "What occurred after Anarawd's death that may have been overlooked because all attention was upon the murder?"

"His brother, Cadell, left his lands to return to Dinefwr Castle. It may be that upon his departure, his holdings were unprotected."

"Have you heard word of an incursion south of here?"

Leif shook his head. "I believe the locals would be talking of it if any part of Deheubarth had been invaded."

"Agreed," Knud said. "What else is there?"

“Gwenllian lost her betrothed, Owain Gwynedd lost his allegiance, and Cadwaladr lost his land and the trust of the king.”

“Cadwaladr was fortunate to lose only those things,” Knud said. “Had he not fled Deheubarth, it would have been his life.”

Leif stared at him, Knud’s words circling his mind again. *Had he not fled Deheubarth, it would have been his life.*

“This was not about Anarawd at all,” he said, conviction strengthening his voice. “Somebody wanted Cadwaladr dead.”

Knud slowly lowered his full spoon back into the bowl. “Why not simply kill Cadwaladr, then? His bedchamber would have been as easy to enter as Anarawd’s.”

“You are forgetting the other things you listed,” Leif said. “For a man with a vendetta against the royal house of Gwynedd, this was a masterstroke. Of the three brothers, Cadwallon is already dead. Cadwaladr is now gone—whether by death or exile—and Owain’s attempt to increase his power and influence through an alliance with the prince of Deheubarth is thwarted.”

“If what you suggest holds any measure of truth, what is to say that the man behind such villainy will be content until the king himself is dead?”

Leif eyed him grimly. “Nothing at all.”

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In the center of the great hall, a minstrel raised his lute and plucked out the first notes of another song. Rhiannon forced a pleasant expression. Surely this banquet would never end. No matter her desire to be back in her bedchamber so that she might have time to think away from the loud laughter and incessant buzz of conversation, she might have enjoyed the evening to some degree had she been seated beside Gwenllian. As it was, her cousin sat on the other side of the table, between her father and Prince Cadell.

Rhiannon was situated between Hywel and Cadwgan, and since Hywel had spent most of the meal talking to his mother at his left, Rhiannon had been required to maintain a stilted conversation with Cadwgan. He had offered his estimation on the music, the meal, and the local countryside in so definitive a manner she’d felt it unnecessary to share her opinions. And as he’d made no effort to extend their discussions, it appeared that he did not wish to hear them.

Indeed, she had all but given up attempting to introduce another topic when Cadwgan surprised her by breaking the uncomfortable silence between them. “It seems that Gwenllian is feeling more herself this evening.”

Rhiannon's eyes were immediately drawn to the other side of the table where Gwenllian and Prince Cadell were talking with each other. Gwenllian smiled. It was a soft, gentle smile far removed from the vivacious laughter she had often shared with Anarawd, but it expressed genuine pleasure. "I am glad to see happiness on her face," she said. "It has been a difficult time for her."

"Better that her loss occurred now than after her marriage," Cadwgan said.

"I am not sure that Gwenllian would agree. She loved Anarawd and would have gladly spent more time with him than she was given."

Cadwgan grunted. "She is young and easily influenced. I have no doubt she will be just as happy with the next gentleman her father wishes to make an allegiance with as she would have been with Anarawd."

Rhiannon tamped down her indignation. It would not do to argue the point with him in front of the king. And Gwenllian certainly did not desire her personal feelings to be given such public attention. "You believe love in marriage is easily come by, then."

"There are few members of the royal family who marry for love," he said. "Their marriages are simply political contracts."

"If that is true, then may I be so bold as to inquire why you desire my hand?"

It was a brazen question, but one that begged asking. Rhiannon had no fortune or land. She came with no potential allegiances.

"Owain Gwynedd would never countenance me marrying his daughter," Cadwgan said, his response void of emotion. "Not only are you related to the royal family by marriage, but you are one of few who have been welcomed within their circle. Although your dowry was lost to you with the death of your father, your connections are priceless."

The rock that had sat in Rhiannon's stomach since Owain Gwynedd informed her of her betrothal to Cadwgan took on the weight of a boulder. Clasp her hands to hide their trembling, she straightened her shoulders. "I see."

For a fleeting moment, she wished she had not asked, but not knowing would have only added to her misery. At least now, she knew her worth in his eyes. She glanced at him. His eyes were narrowed, his attention directed toward Gwenllian and Cadell still.

"It appears that Owain Gwynedd may not need to look far to form a new alliance after all," he said.

He had moved past his unfeeling remarks about Rhiannon as quickly as he had his earlier criticism of the minstrel's playing. Rhiannon swallowed her hurt and followed his gaze. Cadell was saying something to Gwenllian, his dark head closer to hers than it had been before. Gwenllian smiled again. Rhiannon looked to Owain Gwynedd. He too was watching his daughter, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Prince Cadell." The king's booming voice carried over those of everyone else in the large room, instantly drawing Cadell's attention. "I had thought that my party and I would quit Dinefwr Castle at first light tomorrow. Upon further reflection, however, I should like to request that we delay our departure for one day. I believe there are matters that you, Hywel, and I should discuss."

Cadell inclined his head. "It shall be as you wish, Sire."

With a satisfied expression, Owain Gwynedd relaxed in his chair and raised his goblet to his lips.

Nearby, Hywel offered his father a surprised look. "If we are to stay longer," he said, "I have heard tell that the local market is well worth a visit."

"I daresay it is," the king said, "but I shall require your attendance when I meet with Cadell. The ladies may go to the market. Cadwgan can accompany them."

Cadwgan's frown was quickly hidden by his bowed head. "I am happy to be of service, Sire."

"Very well," Owain Gwynedd said. "It is settled."

Rhiannon thought it likely that no one beyond the king was truly happy with the arrangement, but as the lutanist began another song, those at the head table dutifully resumed their previous conversations. Except Cadwgan. He chose to remain silent.

Chapter 29

SLEEP DID NOT COME EASILY for Rhiannon, and when it did come, it was filled with disjointed dreams. Scenes from her time at the river with Leif blended with scenes from the banquet with Cadwgan. Echoes of Leif's request for her help contrasted with Cadwgan's silent disregard. By the time morning light seeped through her bedchamber's shutters, overwhelming dread over her forthcoming marriage had her rising early to avoid a continuation of the nightmares.

Wishing that she could take her heartache and concerns to the seashore, Rhiannon dressed quickly and made her way to the stable. Heledd would be almost impossible to find in a castle this large, but Dai would likely be with the horses. If she could not draw healing from listening to the waves, she would do it through the steadying presence of an old friend.

The castle was quiet. Rhiannon's slippers made barely a sound as she followed the dimly lit passage to the tower. Descending the spiral staircase, she entered the inner courtyard. The gray light of early morning painted the ground with shadows. Somewhere beyond the walls, a cockerel crowed. The door to the south tower opened, and a maid exited carrying a bucket. She started toward the well in the outer courtyard. Rhiannon waited until she disappeared before cutting across the inner courtyard in her wake.

The smell of baking bread filled the air, and a thin spiral of smoke rose from the stone oven near the kitchen. Two guards exited the guardhouse and headed toward the castle gate, and a stableboy ran the short distance between the stable and the smithy. The familiar ringing of metal on metal was absent, but the blacksmith was undoubtedly stoking the fire.

Drawing her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, Rhiannon crossed to the stable, opened the door, and slipped inside. She pulled the door closed behind her. A candle burned on a shelf nearby, augmenting the pale light coming in through the shuttered windows. The air, warmer than it had been outside, smelled of hay and animals. An occasional nicker and the shuffle of horses' hooves echoed through the vast space.

A young man, his hair disheveled and his face pockmarked, came out of the nearest stall, carrying a pitchfork. Upon catching sight of Rhiannon, he bowed. "Mornin', miss," he said. "Can I 'elp you?"

"Is Dai in the stable this morning?" Rhiannon asked.

"Yes, miss. 'E's takin' care of Prince Cadell's 'orse in the far corner." He

shifted anxiously. "Shall I get 'im fer you?"

"Thank you, but there's no need." She smiled. "I do not wish to interrupt your work. Now that I know where to look, I shall find him without difficulty."

The young man transferred his pitchfork to the other hand and bowed again. "Very good, miss."

Grateful that her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, she followed the narrow walkway between the horses' stalls toward the faint, melodious whistle coming from the other side of the stable.

"I believe you whistled that very same song at the start of every day at Bryn Eithin," she said as she approached an open stall.

Dai's head popped up from behind an enormous black stallion, and she saw his teeth flash in a crooked smile.

"Well, now. There's no use changin' a good thing, is there?"

Rhiannon laughed. Coming to the stable had been a good idea. Already, she felt the comfort that came from being with someone who cared about her.

"Not at all. Although, I seem to remember Heledd complaining that your selection of songs was rather limited."

"The 'orses like the ones I know just fine. Besides, when am I supposed to learn new ones?"

It was true. Dai had no opportunity to listen to the minstrels perform in the castle. And he likely had little free time to go into the tref.

"You're kept busy here, then?"

"Aye. Too busy. Especially when there's important visitors."

It was the opening she'd needed. Heledd had told her that Dai had seen the men who had fled the castle wearing Cadwaladr's tabards. It was possible that he could provide her with the type of information Leif was seeking.

"Was it bad the night Prince Anarawd died?" she asked.

He stilled. "What has Heledd told you?"

"Only that you were the one who saw the men leave the castle."

"I helped them escape," he said bitterly.

Rhiannon reached out to touch his arm. "Dai, you were doing your job. And doing it well, I might add."

The stallion snorted, and Dai ran a calloused hand along his shoulder. "I should've known they were up to no good," he said. "They demanded the 'orses be readied right away and cared little about the disturbance they caused."

“They caused a disturbance?”

“Any time someone comes into the stable shoutin’ orders, it unsettles the ’orses. Doin’ it in the middle of the night only makes it worse.”

Rhiannon frowned. Dai’s description of the men’s getaway made no sense whatsoever. Surely the men guilty of Anarawd’s murder would wish to slip out of the castle with as little noise or fuss as possible. Indeed, had stealth been their aim, they would have had saddled horses waiting for them outside the gates.

“Did you recognize them?” she asked.

He shook his head. “There was no mistakin’ Cadwaladr’s colors on their tabards, but they kept their hoods up to cover their faces.”

Was it possible that Leif was right about Cadwaladr’s innocence? It seemed odd that the men who so flagrantly flaunted the nobleman’s colors took pains to hide their personal identities.

“Did they say or do anything that would enable you to recognize them again?”

Dai finished refilling the stallion’s feed trough with oats before straightening. “One was taller than the other. The short one spoke fer them both. There weren’t anythin’ special about the way he spoke, but when he took the reins from me, I saw that he was missin’ half his forefinger on his right hand.”

Rhiannon stared at him. “Have you shared this with anyone else?”

“No one asked. I supposed those in authority had already sorted out who the men were.”

Rhiannon was well aware that as a female and a visitor to the castle, there was a great deal that would not be shared with her, but she was equally sure that if Leif knew of this detail, he would already be using it to locate the man in question. “I cannot tell you what is known and what is not,” she said, “but I would beg you to be careful. Such knowledge is dangerous.”

“I am nothing more than an old groom, Miss Rhiannon. I wield little power. No one will feel threatened by me.”

Rhiannon was less certain, but she mustered another smile. “What of the young stableboys?”

Dai chuckled. “You have me there. They quake in their boots if I ever catch ’em neglectin’ their work.”

Rhiannon laughed. The simple act eased her disquiet, and even though she knew the reprieve would be short-lived, it was a gift.

“I am grateful to you for brightening my day, Dai,” she said. “The royal family of Deheubarth is fortunate to have you at the castle.”

“I don’ know ’bout that.” He reached for the stall’s gate. “But I will say that I’d rather be with these ’orses than just about anywhere else.” He gave her a knowing look. “If I remember right, you feel somethin’ similar for the sea.”

Rhiannon followed him out of the stall. “True. And the nearby river, although impressive in its own way, is not quite the same.”

“Not at all.” His eyes twinkled in the half light. “I’m right glad you chose the stable over the water this morning, Miss Rhiannon. It was a treat to see you again.”

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“I am returning to the castle,” Leif said, standing over Knud’s bed with his hands on his hips.

Knud blinked away sleep and looked up at him. “One day, you will run out of terrible ideas.”

“I shall announce myself as Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin, and shall demand to see Cadell and Owain Gwynedd.”

Knud laid his arm across his eyes and groaned. “I gather that my longed-for day of sanity is not today.”

“It has to be done, Knud. I have been thinking on it all night. If our theory about Cadwaladr being the intended victim is correct, Owain Gwynedd’s life may well be in jeopardy.”

“He has guards,” Knud said. “Lots of them.”

“So did Anarawd.”

Knud thrust his arm from his face. “Well, if they are not employed guarding the king, they will be escorting you to the dungeon. Need I remind you that you are a Viking? They will take you away before you’re given a chance to open your mouth.”

“I am not a Viking,” Leif growled. “I am a Norseman.”

“The Cymry do not know the difference.”

Unfortunately, there was truth behind Knud’s assertion, along with a high likelihood that he would not make it past the castle gates if he attempted to enter with his real identity. “What do you suggest, then?”

“What do I suggest?” Knud sat up on his bed and reached for his tunic. “I suggest that you follow through on the pledges you made yesterday. First, you accompany me to the market to purchase a goblet for Frida.” He raised

an eyebrow. “Unless you’d rather pillage a local church for one, of course.”

Leif folded his arms across his chest. “That last comment does not deign a response. What do you propose we do after going to the market?”

“We wait until day’s end,” Knud said simply. “That is what you told me we would do. If, by any chance, Rhiannon chooses to supply you with information or the proof you have been seeking by then, your chances of being granted an audience at the castle will go up significantly.”

Leif could not deny the sense of urgency he’d experienced when he’d awoken this morning, but neither could he fault Knud’s logic.

“With the burial over, the royal party will leave for Ongullsey any day. I must speak with Owain Gwynedd before he leaves. We will do as you say, but at sunset—whether or not I have received word from Rhiannon—I will go to the castle. At that hour, everyone will be gathered in the great hall.”

“Including the guards,” Knud said.

“I believe Owain Gwynedd will allow me to say my piece when he knows that it involves his brother.”

Knud stood and slipped his knife beneath his girdle. “It is my understanding that Owain Gwynedd does not feel kindly toward Cadwaladr. You may not get beyond mentioning his name.”

“It is a risk I am willing to take,” Leif said. “But I will not make that decision for you. Frida deserves to have you arrive home with her goblet. If I do not return from the castle, I wish you to make for the coast straightway and, from thence, to Dyflin.”

“As I told you before, I’d rather have you do your share of the rowing.” Knud crossed the room and reached for the door handle. “You accompany me to the market, and I shall accompany you to the castle.” He smirked. “Fair is fair.”

Chapter 30

AS FORTUNE WOULD HAVE IT, the first stalls Leif and Knud came upon at the market sold foodstuffs, and Knud insisted that they eat before beginning their search for a goblet.

“You might consider leaving some rye bread and cheese curds for the next customer,” Leif said when it seemed that Knud had eaten enough for them both.

“There is still plenty to be had,” Knud mumbled, his mouth full of bread crumbs. “You see.” He pointed to the small woman at the stall who was handing a slab of dark bread to a peasant.

Leif shook his head. Truth be told, it was safer to have Knud’s mouth full of food whilst they were at the market. There was less chance of anyone overhearing them conversing in Norse.

“Come,” Leif said. “We have a goblet to find.”

They wandered the stalls. Many were run by farmers selling their produce. One merchant had a fine assortment of ducks, chickens, and larks hanging up by their feet, with a large bucket of freshwater eels on the table beneath. A young farmer’s wife was selling honey, and next to her, there was a table covered in wax candles.

“Over there,” Knud said, pointing to their left. “A woodcarver.”

Sure enough, sitting on a stool beneath an oak tree, an elderly man was whittling a piece of wood. Laid out on a blanket at his feet was an assortment of bowls, spoons, goblets, trenchers, and ladles.

“Will Frida be content with a wooden goblet?” Leif asked. It was a far cry from the gold chalices Vikings brought back with them after a successful raid.

“Ask what he wants for one,” Knud said softly. “Mayhap two wooden goblets would please her.”

Leif approached the woodcarver. “My friend is looking for gold goblets,” he said.

“You’ll not find anythin’ like that ’ere. The only merchant at the market who’s sellin’ items made of metal is the bladesmith over by the well, but ’e specializes in knives and tools.” He picked up one of the wooden goblets with a gnarled hand. “If yer lookin’ fer goblets, these ’ere are the finest you’ll find anywhere.”

Leif took the cup from him and studied the delicate design carved around

the circular rim. "You do good work."

The woodcarver's smile was almost toothless. "So I've been told."

"How much?"

The old man's price was ridiculously high. With a laugh, Leif set the goblet back on the blanket. The woodcarver had no way of knowing that Leif had plenty of experience haggling with customers. He glanced at Knud, who was watching him expectantly. Leif grinned. This was going to take little effort at all.

Before long, Knud was the proud owner of two beautifully made wooden goblets, the woodcarver was happily tucking coins into his purse, and Leif was ready to make another purchase.

"The old man said there's a bladesmith near the well," he told Knud. "Shall we see what he has?"

"Lead the way," Knud said.

It was not difficult to find the bladesmith. Two men blocked their view of the merchant, but one of them held a spade and the other, a pair of sheep shears. Leif and Knud waited their turn, and when the customers moved away, they stepped forward to examine the merchant's wares.

"Knud! And, by all the fish in the sea, Leif, son of Jarl Ottar!"

Leif's head shot up. Grom, the very bladesmith he had attempted to speak with before leaving Dyflin, was standing before them.

"Keep your voice low, my friend," Knud said. "To those in this tref, we are travelers from the north."

Grom raised his eyebrows. "What brings you here?"

"We had business at the castle," Leif said, purposely keeping his answer vague. "For the time being, it is best that no one knows our homeland."

"What of you?" Knud asked. "I had not expected to see you in Deheubarth."

"I travel through Gwynedd and Deheubarth on my way to and from Britannia," he said. "I rarely return to a tref on the same trip, but when I was here a fortnight ago, a nobleman asked to see my knives. He claimed to have owned a Norse blade for a short time and wished to replace it." He shrugged. "Word of mouth sells well. If he was happy with his blade, he may send others here to seek me out."

The air left Leif's lungs in one ragged breath, and if the look on Knud's face was any indication, his friend's thoughts were running parallel to his own. How long had Cadwaladr's knife been in another's possession before it

had been used on Anarawd? Long enough for the villain to ascertain its quality and crave one of his own?

“This nobleman,” Leif said. “What can you tell me of him?”

Grom scratched his head. “Tall, he was. Dark hair and dark eyes. And affluent. He paid the price I asked without a quibble.”

“How many of the men at the burial fit that description, Knud?”

“Two,” Knud replied without hesitation. “Cadwgan and Cadell. Cadwgan is the taller of the two, but they are both dark-haired.”

“Well now, I was going to say that the name started with a C.” Grom scratched his head again. “I’ve learned enough Gaelic to buy and sell, but I fear their strange names often get the better of me.”

Cadwgan or Cadell. Leif’s mind raced. Was it possible that this unforeseen meeting with Grom could narrow their search for the murderer? Once at the castle, Leif could demand that both men reveal their weapons, but even if one was carrying Grom’s knife, Leif had no proof that the same man had once wielded Cadwaladr’s. They needed something more.

“Behind you,” Knud hissed. “Three guards wearing Cadell’s colors.”

Leif’s thoughts scattered. He glanced to his right. Three castle guards were approaching, their hauberks clinking faintly as they walked. Knud stepped to the left. Leif followed, relieved when the men’s attention remained on Grom’s wares rather than on his customers.

“Tell me, stranger,” the shortest of the guards said, “which is your most well-balanced sword?”

Grom handed the Cymry a doubled-edged, slightly tapered blade. “Try this,” he said.

The other two guards moved closer to examine the weapon. Leif caught Knud’s eye and gave a slight nod. Without a word, they slipped into the crowd milling around the nearby well and then started back the way they had come.

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The local people parted to allow the castle visitors to pass through the market. Two little girls stood barefoot beside a tree, pointing and whispering as Rhiannon, Gwenllian, and Cadwgan walked by with three of Cadwgan’s retainers. The youngest child had a mass of unruly dark curls that reminded Rhiannon of her own hair at that age. Rhiannon smiled at her. The child covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a giggle. The one beside her—a sister, if their similar features were any indication—poked her.

Loosening the ribbon at the top of the purse attached to her girdle, Rhiannon fished out a small coin. Without a word to Gwenllian or Cadwgan, she deviated from the path they were taking toward the cloth merchant and approached the children. The older girl tugged on her little sister's worn tunic and pulled her into a tumbled curtsy.

"Good day to you," Rhiannon said.

"Good day, miss," the older girl said. The younger one looked at her with wide eyes and popped her thumb into her mouth.

"Are you enjoying the market?"

The older girl shifted her feet uncertainly. "Our brother, Iago, told us t' wait 'ere whilst 'e went to buy eggs fer our mam."

"You are being very good to do as he asked." She pressed the small coin into the little girl's palm. "When he comes back, mayhap you can surprise your mam with some honey also."

The girl looked at the coin in her hand as though she'd never seen anything like it before.

"Gramercy, miss." She pressed her clenched fist to her chest, her words coming out in a rush. "We ain't ever 'ad 'oney afore."

"Then I daresay you will like it very much," Rhiannon said.

"Rhiannon, is something amiss?" Cadwgan appeared at Rhiannon's elbow, and the girls stumbled back a pace.

"Not at all," Rhiannon said. "I was simply exchanging a few words with these children."

He scarcely acknowledged them. "Gwenllian is waiting."

Rhiannon glanced over her shoulder. Gwenllian had reached the cloth merchant's stall and was already inspecting a piece of linen. "She appears to have things well in hand," Rhiannon said. "But I am happy to join her now."

Without another word, Cadwgan offered her his arm.

Averting her eyes from him, Rhiannon set her hand upon it and smiled at the children again. "I wish you both well," she said.

The girls repeated their faltering curtsies, and Cadwgan led her away.

"If you wish to speak to someone, one of my men can fetch the person," he said. "There is no need for you to go out of your way."

"In this instance, that was not possible," Rhiannon said. "Those young girls were standing exactly where their brother had requested that they stay."

Cadwgan sniffed disparagingly. "They are children."

"Which makes their obedience all the more admirable." A change of

subject would seem to be the best recourse to counter her mounting irritation with the proud man at her side. “Is there something in particular that Gwennlian is hoping to find?”

“The highest quality linen, I believe.”

They had reached the stall. Rhiannon lowered her hand from his arm and moved to stand beside her cousin.

“Look,” Gwennlian said. “Is this not the finest fabric you have seen?”

Gwennlian’s quest for linen had obviously been forgotten in the presence of the green silk the merchant had laid out before her. Rhiannon ran her fingers over its smooth surface.

“It is magnificent,” she said.

“I agree.” Gwennlian gave a pleased nod and turned to the balding man with the leathery skin, who was standing behind the stall watching them with hawklike attentiveness. “How soon can you have this delivered to the castle?”

“If you have decided upon this fabric, there is no need to wait.” Cadwgan spoke before the man could respond. “One of my men can carry it.” He snapped his fingers, and a retainer stepped forward. “Madoc, I would have you transport this to the castle.”

“Very good, my lord.”

The squat man waited for the merchant to gather up the fabric and then reached for it with his left hand before claspng the other end between his thumb and the remaining portion of his forefinger on his right hand.

Rhiannon reminded herself to breathe. Dai’s description of the man who had demanded a horse the night of Anarawd’s murder circled her mind. Short. Missing half the forefinger on his right hand. She took another breath. Dear heaven. This had to be one of the villains. And he owed his allegiance to Cadwgan.

With her thoughts racing as quickly as her heart, she turned slightly. The other retainers were watching the exchange at the stall. Both stood a full head above the man with the damaged finger. Was one of them the second assailant?

“I thank you for your assistance, Cadwgan,” Gwennlian said.

Rhiannon dragged her attention back to her companions to see Cadwgan incline his head politely. “It is my pleasure.”

A tremor of abhorrence coursed down Rhiannon’s spine, leaving her trembling. The man she was to marry had orchestrated a murder and then

duped everyone—including the king—into believing it was done by another.

“Are there any merchants you wish to seek out?” Gwenllian asked.

“I am content to wander the marketplace,” Cadwgan replied. “What of you, Rhiannon?”

Rhiannon opened her mouth to speak, but no words emerged. She cleared her throat.

Gwenllian frowned. “Are you quite well?”

“I am.” Somehow, Rhiannon managed some semblance of a smile. “It is simply that Cadwgan’s question took me by surprise.” She pointed to the other end of the square. “Mayhap we should do as he suggests and walk a while.”

Cadwgan appeared satisfied with her response, and Rhiannon took a moment to regain her composure. Even as the ramifications of her discovery washed over her, it was vital that neither Cadwgan nor his men suspect that she had noticed anything out of the ordinary.

They started across the square. Her thoughts swirling, she focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Owain Gwynedd needed to know what she had discovered. As did Cadell. But if she made a request for an audience with them, how long would it take before they responded? They were locked away in private meetings and would not look kindly upon an interruption. Hywel was more likely to listen to her, but gaining access to him today might be as difficult as reaching his father.

They passed a fishmonger drawing freshwater eels out of a barrel and a farmer’s wife selling butter. A dog barked; a bird took flight. For the people in the marketplace, nothing much had changed in the last few minutes. In Rhiannon’s world, everything had.

Her thoughts flew to Leif. He had been correct to question Cadwaladr’s guilt. Correct to believe that clues to the true perpetrator existed. If he were to learn what she had uncovered, what would he do? She knew the answer immediately. He would inform the king. And if he entered the castle as Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin, Owain Gwynedd would be informed directly. Her heart pounded. That was it. Her best means of relaying the information in a timely fashion was to do it through Leif. But how to reach him?

He had told her to get word to him at the inn. Escaping Cadwgan and Gwenllian long enough to go to the inn herself was impossible. Not without an explanation of why she felt the sudden urge to go there. She needed a messenger, but the only people she knew in Dinefwr were Dai and Heledd,

and they were at the castle.

Cadwgan spoke. Startled, Rhiannon looked up. Whilst she had been pondering, they had reached a woodcarver's stall. Thankfully, Cadwgan had not been directing his question to her but, instead, was talking to the old man standing above his wares. Gwenllian handed Cadwgan a bowl covered in an intricately whittled pattern. Cadwgan turned it over to examine it more carefully, and Rhiannon seized the opportunity to scour the marketplace. Surely there was someone who could help her.

A child's laughter caught her attention. She turned in time to see the two little girls she'd spoken with walking away from a woman selling honey. The older one held a small pot, and beside her walked a gangly boy carrying a basket of eggs. He must be their brother.

Another glance at Cadwgan and Gwenllian assured Rhiannon that they would be occupied for a few more minutes. Cadwgan's three retainers stood nearby, but for the moment, their attention was on the couple selling ale two stalls down. Moving quickly, Rhiannon approached the children. The girls broke into smiles.

"We bought the honey," the oldest said.

"I am very glad to see it," Rhiannon responded before turning to the boy. "You are Iago?"

He frowned. "Aye."

"This is the lady who gave us the coin," his sister said enthusiastically.

The creases on Iago's forehead disappeared, but Rhiannon did not wait for him to speak. She withdrew another coin from her purse and held it out to him. "Would you like to earn another coin?" she asked. "I need to get a message to someone at the inn."

Iago eyed the coin hopefully. "I can do that."

Rhiannon glanced over her shoulder. One of Cadwgan's retainers was watching her. She swallowed, a sense of urgency pulsing through her.

"Here." She handed the boy the coin. "Go directly. At the inn, ask for a guest named Luc. Tell him, 'Cadwgan.'"

"Cadwgan," Iago repeated. "That is all?"

"Yes." Footsteps sounded behind her, but she did not turn around. "Quickly."

He handed the basket of eggs to his sister. "Meet me at the well," he said, and then he took off running.

"Rhiannon? Why this sudden obsession with these children?" Cadwgan's

voice set her teeth on edge, but Iago was out of sight, which gave her reason to smile.

“It is hardly an obsession,” she said, turning to face him and Gwennlian. “The youngest reminds me of how I looked as a child. I gave them a coin earlier to buy some honey and wished to see if they had accomplished the task.”

Cadwgan glanced at the pot in the older girl’s hand. “And the eggs also? There was no need for that, surely.”

Given the threadbare condition of the children’s clothing, Rhiannon thought the children’s need for extra assistance was clear, but she refrained from saying so. It was better that she make no mention of the missing brother, who had purchased the eggs. “In truth, the youngest’s hair does look much as yours did at that age,” Gwennlian said.

Rhiannon wanted to hug her. Cadwgan might not consider a wild, untamed mane to be an asset, but at least the wariness in his eyes had been replaced by impatience.

“Well, if you are quite finished with the children, they should be on their way,” he said.

Rhiannon offered the girls a reassuring smile. “Be sure to walk carefully lest you break the eggs.”

The older girl nodded. “Come, Ina,” she said, forgoing any attempt at another curtsy in her desire to be gone.

Ina took hold of her sister’s tunic and stumbled after her. With Cadwgan frowning over them and his retainers hovering in the background, Rhiannon understood the children’s unease. She only wished that she could escape with them.

Chapter 31

“LUC!” THE INNKEEPER’S VOICE PRECEDED a loud knock.

Leif set down the few items of clothing he’d been gathering and darted a concerned glance at Knud before crossing the room and opening the door.

“Good day, Elis,” he greeted the man. “How may I be of service?”

“This is Iago.” The innkeeper pushed a scrawny boy forward. “He has come to the inn with a message for you.”

Instantly, Leif’s pulse quickened. Rhiannon was the only person, other than Grom, who knew he was here. Had she discovered anything?

“Good day, Iago,” he said, transferring his attention to the boy.

Elis touched his shoulder, and the boy bowed. “Good day, sir. A lady in the marketplace, I . . . I did not get her name . . . She asked me to come.”

Leif had no need of a name or a description. “Very well. What was her message?”

“Cadwgan.”

The air seemed to still. Leif set his hand on the door frame, his grip tight. “That is all?”

“Yes, sir. Just ‘Cadwgan.’”

Elis frowned. “If this is some sort of prank, Iago—”

“Leave him, Elis,” Leif said. “I understand the message well enough.” Too well, in fact. He took a deep breath. Cadwgan. Surely Rhiannon would not have singled out the very man she was to marry unless she was certain. What had she discovered?

“Well then,” Elis said, his cheerful demeanor restored by Leif’s reassurance that the boy had done no wrong. “If that’s everythin’, we shall take our leave.”

Iago nodded and began backing away.

“Wait,” Leif said. “Were you paid for your services, lad?”

“Aye, sir. The lady, she gave me a coin.”

Leif drew another one from the purse at his waist. “Were you to return to her?”

“No, sir.”

So Rhiannon had been at the marketplace but was there no longer. “Did you hear any mention of her destination?”

“No, sir.” He shrugged. “All them people with her, they were from the castle.”

Iago was right. The best place to find Rhiannon and those with her would be at the castle.

Leif handed the boy a coin. "I thank you, Iago."

His eyes widened. "Gramercy, sir."

Two coins in one day was likely more than the boy had ever earned before, but his thin arms and legs looked as though he could use a little extra.

"Off with you, then," Elis said.

Iago needed no second invitation. He sprinted down the passage toward the stairs without looking back.

"Ned and I aim to depart within the hour," Leif said, taking a few more coins out of his purse and handing them to the innkeeper. "I thank you for your hospitality."

"'Appy to oblige," Elis said. "I shall let my boy in the stables know that you'll be needin' yer horses. Godspeed to you."

Leif closed the door and turned to face Knud. "You heard?"

"Cadwgan." Knud whistled through his teeth. "What did Rhiannon discover?"

"I cannot say. But this much I know: if Cadwgan learns that she has uncovered his deception, he will take her life."

"And so, we act now."

"We act now," Leif said, stuffing his last remaining items into Knud's sack with an urgency that bordered on panic. If anything happened to Rhiannon because he'd asked her to do this for him, he was not sure that he would recover. It had taken him long enough to come to peace with his role in the events at her home, and that had been before he'd come to know her.

Knud reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Calm yourself, my friend. She has friends at the castle—powerful friends."

"They do not know of the danger that surrounds her."

"Which is why we are going to tell them," Knud said, lifting the sack over his shoulder.

Leif met his eyes. "You are sure of this? I believe it fair to say that Iago's brief message increased the level of danger at the castle significantly. You have Frida at home and—"

"I'd rather face Cadwgan and his Norse-made knife than Frida wielding a wooden spoon if she were to learn that I'd let you enter that place alone," he said. "And since I fail miserably at keeping secrets from her, I fear you are stuck with me."

Leif reached for the door, his gratitude manifest in a grin. “Mayhap we should find you a tree to climb.”

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Rhiannon watched the groom lead her mount away. Ahead of him, Dai was guiding Cadwgan’s horse into the stable. She had hoped to speak with Dai—to warn him of the danger he was in if his ability to identify one of the fleeing assailants became known—but Cadwgan had demanded her old friend’s attention the moment they had arrived back at the castle, and it had been impossible to exchange a private word.

“Come.” Gwenllian stepped up beside her and took her arm. “If we return to our rooms directly, we shall have a little time to rest before we are expected in the great hall.” Fatigue showed in her eyes. “I confess I had not anticipated how much our outing would tire me.”

Rhiannon began walking with her toward the inner courtyard.

“I daresay a short respite before the banquet would be wise,” she said, even though it was the last thing on her mind.

After having awoken so early this morning, Rhiannon’s need for sleep was as great as Gwenllian’s, but her need to speak with the king was greater. And the best time to do it would be before everyone was gathered together.

“Do you think your father will have finished meeting with Cadell by now?” she asked.

Gwenllian glanced at the south tower anxiously. “I cannot tell. They undoubtedly had many matters to discuss, and it will likely depend upon whether they are of similar minds on those subjects.” She stumbled over a cobblestone, righting herself quickly. “I am not so witless as people think, Rhiannon. I am well aware that they will be discussing the possibility of another marriage.”

Rhiannon squeezed her arm. “What are your feelings on the subject?”

“Does it matter?”

“To me, it matters very much.”

Her lower lip quivered. “I loved Anarawd and will not soon forget him.”

“That is how it should be, I think.”

Gwenllian nodded, offering her a sad smile. “And yet, for me, life must continue. And the best way forward is to marry and secure an alliance for my father’s kingdom.” She looked away. “Cadell and Anarawd had diverse interests, but in essentials, Cadell is a good man. I believe I could be happy if I were married to him.”

Rhiannon kept silent for a moment, wishing things were different for both of them. “He is grieving a brother just as you are grieving a bridegroom,” she said softly. “Mayhap there can be some bonding in that.”

“That is my hope.” Gwenllian sighed. “No matter what lies ahead, we all need hope, do we not?”

They entered the tower and started up the stairs. The pendant Leif had given Rhiannon shifted against her chest as she moved. She bit her lip. Gwenllian was correct. She must cling to hope. Hope that Owain Gwynedd would listen. Hope that the message she’d given Iago would reach Leif. And hope that upon its receipt, Leif would know how to act.

Seemingly of its own volition, her hand moved to her chest, her fingers tracing the shape of the silver wave beneath her gown. Desperately, she wished that Cadwgan’s dastardly scheme could be undone and that she would be spared from marriage to such a man. And deep in her heart, she prayed that Leif would be the one to put an end to both.

The passage was empty.

Rhiannon walked to the door of Gwenllian’s chambers. “I will leave you here so that you may rest,” she said.

“You have my thanks,” Gwenllian said. “For everything.”

Rhiannon kissed her cheek. “I shall see you ’ere long in the great hall, and you will be refreshed and resplendent, as always.”

“As always?” Gwenllian raised her eyebrows. “You seem to be suffering from a very poor memory.”

“Even if that were so, I have been told that a poor memory is often considered a great asset.”

With a small laugh, Gwenllian opened the door. “You are good for me, Rhiannon.”

Rhiannon smiled. “Rest well.”

She waited until the door closed behind her cousin before turning back the way she had come. Descending the stairs quickly, she crossed the inner courtyard to the south tower. A maid exited, a large pitcher of water in her hands. Rhiannon hurried to catch her.

“I am looking for the king,” she said. “Do you know where I might find him?”

The maid bobbed a curtsy. “I believe he and Prince Hywel are with Prince Cadell, miss. In the solar.”

Rhiannon glanced upward. The solar was located on the top floor of the

tower and comprised Deheubarth's royal family's living quarters. Since the solar was far enough removed from the rest of the castle to provide a modicum of privacy, it was not surprising that the men had chosen to meet there. "I thank you," Rhiannon said.

The maid bobbed another curtsy and hastened away.

Rhiannon entered the tower and started up the stairs, her anxiety mounting with each step. Her footsteps echoed off the stone walls, announcing her arrival before she passed through the archway at the top. Two guards stood at attention on either side of a heavy wooden door. Her heart sank. She'd known it would take skillful negotiation to persuade the king to grant her an audience; she'd not considered that she may be prevented from getting word to him in the first place.

Running her sweating palms down the sides of her gown, she squared her shoulders and raised her head. The guards were watching her.

"Good day," she said, approaching with more confidence than she felt.

Both guards bowed.

"I am here to speak with Owain Gwynedd."

The older guard did not flinch. "The king is currently unavailable."

"Then I will speak with Prince Hywel," Rhiannon said.

"I fear he too is unavailable."

Rhiannon took a deep breath and attempted to keep her voice even.

"Mayhap you do not understand. I am not requesting admittance. I am telling you that I must be admitted immediately."

The younger guard shifted nervously, but the older one appeared unperturbed.

"I beg your pardon, miss, but we were told to admit no one."

"Your name?"

"Tudur, miss."

"Very well, Tudur. I would have you know that I am not here to cause you to needlessly break rules. Indeed, if my conscience would allow it, I would not be here at all. As it is, no matter my discomfort or yours, I must relay certain vital information to the king directly."

Somewhere below, a door creaked and footsteps sounded on the stairs. A man's low voice echoed through the stairwell.

"The servants know nothing. I shall discover what the king is about myself."

Rhiannon's breath caught. Cadwgan. And he was not alone. She scoured

the antechamber. Window slits allowed in light but were too narrow to hide her. The only door was the one behind the guards, leading to the solar. Two elaborately carved chairs leaned against one wall and were the only furnishings in the small room. In short, there was nowhere that offered any measure of concealment.

Cadwgan appeared, his retainer, Madoc, at his rear. Rhiannon suppressed a shudder. There was something about the short man that scared her. The lack of light in his eyes reminded her of the Viking who had killed her father.

“Well met, Rhiannon.” Cadwgan’s wariness was chilling.

She forced a smile. “Indeed. Had I known you intended to visit the south tower also, I would have crossed the courtyard with you.” In truth, she would have avoided the place altogether, but she hoped God would forgive her for the fabrication, given the circumstances.

“Why are you here?” Cadwgan asked.

“To speak with Hywel. I thought he may wish to know what we saw at the market.” That, at least, was partially true.

“Was there something in particular that you thought might interest him?” Suspicion lingered in his eyes.

“The honey.” The moment the words tumbled out of her mouth, she regretted them. She’d used the children’s purchase of honey the last time she’d been scrambling for an excuse. Warmth crept up her neck, and she silently prayed it would not flood her face. “Honey has been a great favorite of Hywel’s ever since he was young. I remember once, when I was visiting the llys with my mother, that I came upon him in the corner of the stables, eating it by the spoonful out of a jar.”

Cadwgan eyed her strangely, and she shut her mouth. She was babbling. Barely resisting the urge to run her damp hands down the sides of her gown again, she attempted another smile.

“I confess, I did not know Hywel had such a fondness for sweets,” he said.

“Oh, yes. All sorts of sweets.” She waved one hand toward the door in a desperate attempt to redirect the conversation. “Unfortunately, these guards will not allow me to speak with him, so Hywel will miss his opportunity to visit the market before we quit Dinefwr.”

Cadwgan moved closer to the door, eyeing the older guard severely. “Are Owain Gwynedd, Prince Hywel, and Prince Cadell yet within the solar?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I shall join them.”

The older guard stiffened. "I was told to refuse entry to all, my lord."

Cadwgan glared at the man. "I am the king's cousin."

"Yes, my lord."

Although her own objective had been thwarted by the guard's steadfastness, Rhiannon could not help but admire his tenacity in the face of Cadwgan's withering glare.

Cadwgan cursed. "Move aside."

The younger guard flinched, but the older one appeared stoically unaffected by the threat. "As I said, my lord, my orders are to refuse entry to all."

"Your disrespect shall not go unpunished," Cadwgan growled.

The guard inclined his head but made no move.

Cadwgan cursed again and turned on his heel. "Come, Rhiannon. There is nothing for us here."

Rhiannon descended the stairs in Cadwgan's wake, thankful when they reached the bottom and emerged into the inner courtyard and the dimming light of early evening. She glanced at the sky. Clouds had rolled in since they'd returned from the market, a perfect reflection of Cadwgan's stormy silence.

"I believe I shall return to my chambers until it is time to convene in the great hall," she said.

He eyed her thoughtfully. "Allow me to escort you there."

Rhiannon would have far preferred to go alone, but this was not the time to irritate Cadwgan further. "You are most kind," she said.

Given his recent treatment of the guard, it was a blatant falsehood, but Cadwgan appeared to be oblivious to the incongruity. Besides, if delivering her safely to her chambers set his mind at ease, so much the better. She had no desire to give him any further reason to question her motives.

He offered her his arm, and as she set her hand upon it, she caught the slight nod he directed at his retainer. Madoc slipped away. It appeared that she was not yet considered a great enough threat to require more than one chaperone.

Chapter 32

THE LEAVES ON THE TREES lining the road to the castle quivered. Up ahead, a rabbit darted into the underbrush and a blackbird took off in a flurry of feathers.

“The wind’s picking up,” Knud said.

“Aye.” Leif guided his horse closer to the hedgerow and glanced at the bank of dark clouds rolling across the sky, a warning sign he’d come to recognize in his years at sea. “There’s a storm coming.”

Knud groaned. “Indoors in the dungeon or outdoors in the pouring rain.” He gave Leif a longsuffering look. “Might I suggest that our accommodation options this night could use some improvement.”

“You make a fair point.” Leif’s lips twitched. “I shall leave it to you to ask Cadell for a bedchamber at the castle. I daresay he’ll be of a mind to oblige after we have fully interrupted his evening meal.”

“I am not sure which of us is more witless,” Knud said. “You, for embarking on this fool’s errand, or me, for going along with it.”

The castle gates were now in sight. Guards stood on either side of the arched entrance, watching their approach.

Grateful that he’d donned his finer tunic, Leif raised his chin. “Consider this an opportunity to see inside one of the grandest castles in Deheubarth,” he said.

Knud kept his eyes forward and drew himself up in his saddle. “I daresay dungeons look much the same no matter the edifice, but I shall bear that in mind.”

“Who goes there?” One of the guards stepped forward, spear in hand.

Leif reined his mount to a halt and called out his response. “I am Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin. My companion, Knud, son of Svend, rides with me.”

“What business do you have at Dinefwr Castle?”

“I have an urgent message for Prince Cadell of Deheubarth and Owain, king of Gwynedd.”

The guard eyed him distrustfully. “We were not told to expect anyone from Dyflin.”

“Neither the king nor the prince is aware of my coming, but they will both be most anxious to hear the news that I bring.”

The guard hesitated only a moment longer. “You will wait here,” he said. Leif watched as the guard consulted with his associate. The other man

nodded twice before disappearing through the entrance. Taking a defensive stance in the center of the entrance, the guard eyed them silently.

“Do you think he realizes that if we had wished to storm the castle, we would have done it by now?” Knud murmured.

“I would have thought he knew that if we had wished to storm the castle, we would have brought a few more men,” Leif replied.

“Mayhap you should tell him.”

“Or we could simply do as he asks and wait.”

Knud shifted restlessly. “I do not like waiting.”

“If it keeps us out of the dungeon, it is worth our time.”

That, it seemed, was motivation enough. Knud said nothing more until the clatter of hooves and clink of hauberks announced the arrival of a dozen guards on horseback.

“And so it begins,” Knud whispered, one hand sliding to the knife at his waist.

The men rode out through the entrance and circled Leif and Knud. An older guard, carrying himself with a confidence that came with rank, approached Leif.

“Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin.” He inclined his head, his expression wary. “I am Euron, marshal to Prince Cadell. I have sent word of your arrival to the prince. My men and I will accompany you into the inner courtyard while we await his response.”

It was no royal welcome, but it was more than an instant dismissal or an arrest.

“As you wish,” Leif said.

Signaling his men, Euron wheeled his mount around and started back the way he had come. Knud glanced at Leif, his eyebrow raised.

“We’re going in,” Leif said in Norse.

Knud gave a brief nod, and as they nudged their horses forward, Cadell’s guards fell in behind them.

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To Rhiannon’s dismay, she was seated beside Cadwgan once again. She had hoped to reach the great hall in time to pull Hywel aside even if she were unable to approach Cadell or Owain Gwynedd. Unfortunately, Cadwgan had arrived before her and had insisted that she take her place at the table before any member of the royal family entered the great hall.

Gwenllian had come in on Cadell’s arm. Her smile, although not glowing,

had been reassuring, and Rhiannon experienced new hope that ultimately, all would be well with her cousin. Even Cadell seemed more at peace with his situation than he had the night before. Indeed, his attention did not deviate from Gwenllian until a guardsman entered the room and approached the head table to speak with him.

At Rhiannon's side, Cadwgan raised his goblet but did not bring it to his lips. He watched the guard bow before Cadell before the man stepped closer and lowered his head to exchange a few quiet words. Cadwgan's eyes narrowed. Rhiannon glanced at the king and Hywel. They too were watching the unexpected interaction occurring at the other end of the table.

"Why would one of the castle guards feel the need to consult with Cadell in the middle of a banquet?" Cadwgan muttered.

Before Rhiannon could respond, the guard stepped back, bowed again, and exited the great hall at a brisk walk. Cadell immediately turned to Owain Gwynedd, who was seated at his right. The two men consulted briefly, and when they separated, the king was frowning.

Rhiannon set down her knife and slid her trembling hands beneath the table. She had no way of knowing exactly what the guard's visit was about. Reason told her it was something serious; instinct told her it involved Leif.

A low buzz of conversation interspersed with laughter continued among those seated at the other tables in the great hall. Servants wandered between them, carrying platters, replenishing goblets, and clearing away empty bowls. At the head table, however, a sense of disquiet descended.

Cadwgan leaned forward so as to talk past Rhiannon. "What news, Hywel?"

On her left, Hywel shrugged. "I have yet to be told. From the little I overheard, I would surmise that Cadell has some unanticipated visitors."

Rhiannon swallowed. It might be a nobleman traveling through Dinefwr from a neighboring kingdom. Or perchance a marcher lord wishing to speak with the new prince of Deheubarth. Her thoughts whirled, searching for any scenario but the one that placed Leif in a room filled with armed knights and surrounded by castle guards.

"If that is the case," Cadwgan said, "he must consider himself a person of much worth to interrupt the king's meal."

"True." Hywel eyed the main doors curiously. "Or he comes bearing news of great importance."

Rhiannon hands were so tightly clasped her fingers hurt. She forced

herself to relax her hold.

“It seems that word of fresh skirmishes with the Normans in the Marchlands reach the king daily,” she said. “Mayhap they have spread into Deheubarth.”

“Aye.” Hywel nodded. “It could be that.”

Cadwgan appeared unconvinced. He took a swig of ale and set his goblet down with a firm thud. Rhiannon started. With a raised eyebrow, he studied her, his penetrating appraisal sending alarm skittering down her spine.

“Methinks you know more about these visitors than you are sharing, Rhiannon.”

“How could that be, my lord?” Rhiannon met his cold eyes. “If someone has come, it is a recent occurrence, and I have been seated beside you this entire time.”

“Your suspicious nature does you no favors, Cadwgan,” Hywel said, a hint of anger in his voice.

“So you say,” Cadwgan responded, his eyes flashing. “But I would counter that it has served me well. It has kept me alive, which is more than can be claimed by others within our family.”

Hywel’s forehead creased, his expression perplexed. “You consider Rhiannon a threat to your safety?”

“Only a fool places his full trust in another,” he retorted.

A vision of her father gazing adoringly at her mother when she entered the great room at Bryn Eithin filled Rhiannon’s mind, and she fought back tears. Her parents had known deep love and complete trust. Until her mother’s untimely passing, theirs had been a marriage filled with joy.

Her fingers found the brooch she’d pinned to her gown. At first, she had been unsure of her future with Cadwgan, but ever since Owain Gwynedd had voiced his intention to announce their betrothal, she had known dread. Now, both unsettling emotions had been replaced by a new and firm conviction. No matter how far she had to go to escape the nobleman’s machinations or the king’s decree, she would never be Cadwgan ap Gronw’s bride.

Before she could dwell any further upon this realization, the great hall’s main doors swung open to admit half a dozen armed guards. All chatter in the room ceased. Every eye watched the two men who walked in their wake toward the head table. Another half dozen guards followed, effectively surrounding the visitors. Cadell’s marshal stepped up and bowed to those seated at the head table.

“Your Highnesses, I present to you Leif, son of Jarl Ottar of Dyflin.”

With their hands on the hilts of their swords, the guards at the front moved aside to allow Leif and Knud to approach the head table.

A few of the ladies in the room gasped. The sound was followed by a low rumbled murmur from the knights. At the head table, there was deafening silence. Rhiannon stared at Leif and reminded herself to breathe.

The man who had blended in with commoners in the tref was gone. Taller than most of the guards in the room, Leif approached the king with confidence. His tunic was the same deep blue as his eyes and was elaborately embroidered around the neck and sleeves. A small purse and knife hung at his girdle, and his blond hair remained loose, falling below his shoulders.

“Prince Cadell,” he said, bowing to the ruler of Deheubarth and lord of the castle. “I carry with me the greetings of my father, Jarl Ottar of Dyflin, and the Norse people of Ireland.”

Cadell accepted the salutation with the inclination of his head.

“Well met, Owain, king of Gwynedd,” Leif said, executing a second bow.

“A Viking who speaks Gaelic,” Owain Gwynedd said. “Unusual, indeed.” He studied Leif guardedly. “What brings you to Dinefwr Castle, Leif, son of Jarl Ottar? It is not often that your people venture so far inland.”

“I made the journey as a Norseman in search of truth,” Leif said. “I am come to the castle to deliver that truth to those who need to hear it.”

“And what truth might that be?”

“The name of the man responsible for the murder of Prince Anarawd of Deheubarth.”

Owain Gwynedd stiffened. Rhiannon glanced at Gwenllian. Her face was pale. Beside Gwenllian, Cadell sat perfectly still, his eyes not leaving Leif.

“I believe that truth was determined weeks ago, Viking.” There was steel in Owain Gwynedd’s voice. “You are come too late, and I would suggest that you quit the castle before that endeavor is also attempted too late.”

“If you are referring to the false accusation of guilt heaped upon the head of Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd,” Leif said, “I would respectfully suggest that you have yet to discover the truth. Cadwaladr came to Dyflin to request the assistance of my father in proving his innocence. Based on what I have learned since arriving in Dinefwr, I can now attest that the so-called proof of your brother’s guilt is nothing more than a deception.”

“How much did my brother pay your father to have you deliver these lies?” Owain Gwynedd growled.

Leif raised his chin a fraction. “He has paid him nothing. My father was unwilling to harbor a murderer, no matter his lineage, but Cadwaladr was so sure that the truth could be uncovered, he offered my father two thousand head of cattle to send a delegation to Deheubarth.”

Owain Gwynedd snorted. “Your father has been twice duped. Cadwaladr cannot pay one cow, let alone two thousand head. He has lost all claim to land and wealth in my kingdom.”

“Cadwaladr’s properties are not my concern,” Leif said. “I stand before you simply to declare that he is innocent of blame in the death of Prince Anarawd. What you choose to do with that information is your right.”

The king remained silent, the flexing of the muscles in his jaw the only indication of his discomposure. Time stood still. Cadwgan’s hand slid from the stem of his goblet to the hilt of his knife. Owain Gwynedd’s gaze shifted from Leif to Cadell.

“Prince Cadell,” he said. “I believe it is time that your guards take these foreign agitators away.”

Chapter 33

ALL EYES IN THE ROOM turned to Cadell. Leif sensed Knud's questioning look, but this was not the time to attempt a translation. This was the time to offer a silent, fervent prayer.

Cadell acknowledged Owain Gwynedd's suggestion with a slight nod. He leaned forward, his arms on the table, his expression unreadable. "I was given to understand that you had vital information for me, Leif, son of Jarl Ottar. Information that should be relayed without delay. Is that correct, or did you come here simply to propagate whispers and spread unease?"

Leif met his eyes. "If the wrong man had been accused of my brother's murder, I would want to know it."

It was obviously not the defensive response Cadell had expected. He took a moment to regroup. "Do you believe that the man who murdered my brother is capable of murdering again?"

"I do."

Something that looked suspiciously like agreement crossed Cadell's face, and for the first time, Leif considered the new prince's tenuous position. If Anarawd had been killed in his own bed in this very castle, Cadell had surely considered the matter of his own safety. With no obvious motive in play, he would wish to be certain that the murderer had been correctly identified and properly dealt with.

Cadell straightened his shoulders. "Very well," he said. "Before my guards escort you to the dungeon, I will hear what you have to say."

Owain Gwynedd scowled. Hywel appeared genuinely curious. Leif did not dare look any farther down the table. He had caught a glimpse of Rhiannon when he'd entered the room. A vision in a pale-yellow gown, with her dark hair twisted in an elaborate plait around her head, he had felt her gaze upon him several times, but he could not look upon her. Not without someone else—particularly Cadwgan—taking note. Indeed, the less Cadwgan knew of what brought Leif to the castle, the safer it would be for everyone.

"Might I be so bold as to request a private audience to discuss the matter with you and Owain Gwynedd?" he asked.

Cadell frowned. "Do not attempt to push my willingness to hear your argument beyond this moment, Viking. Say your piece before I reconsider my decision."

Leif inclined his head. "As you wish, Your Highness." He had done what

he could. There were guards enough in this large hall. The responsibility for Cadwgan's response to what Leif had to say must now fall upon the Cymry. He fixed his attention on Cadell. "It is my understanding that the primary reason Cadwaladr was blamed for Anarawd's death is because his knife was discovered with the prince's body," he said. "Cadwaladr claims that his knife—one that was unique because it is a Norse-made blade—went missing a few days before the death. He assumed that he had lost it; he now believes it was purposely stolen."

"It comes as no surprise that he would make such a claim," Cadell said.

"True," Leif said. "But his assertion was given more credibility when I spoke with one of the best bladesmiths in Dyflin only this morning."

"How did you manage that?"

"My companion and I stumbled upon him at the Dinefwr market. There, we learned that a nobleman had come to his stall a few short weeks ago, claiming to have owned a Norse-made knife for a matter of days." Leif paused. "I would venture that it was just long enough to admire it before committing a murder and leaving it behind." Cadell grimaced, but before he could object, Leif continued. "Apparently, this nobleman had been so enamored by the weapon, he desired a replacement. The bladesmith sold him one and returned to Dinefwr with the hope that this particular nobleman might recommend his work to another."

"Who was the nobleman?" Cadell asked.

"His name was Gaelic and began with a C."

Cadell stiffened. "That is ludicrous. One cannot accuse a man of murder due to the first letter of his name."

"Agreed." Cadwgan's angry voice drew everyone's attention to the other end of the table. "Surely we have listened to this drivel long enough."

"Prince Cadell has shown you more courtesy than I would have done, Viking," Owain Gwynedd warned. "You had best have more to offer him than that."

An instant dislike of Cadwgan. Intuition. A personal knowledge of Grom's integrity. As valid as all those things were in Leif's mind, none of them would sway these men. He needed something more. He needed the proof that had caused Rhiannon to send young Iago to the inn.

For the first time since he'd entered the great hall, he looked her direction. She met his eyes. The air crackled between them, and her shoulders tensed. Leif balled his fists. He could not ask it of her. Not here, with Cadwgan

seated beside her. He turned away. Chair legs scraped against the floor. Leif swung back around to see Rhiannon come to her feet. She clutched the back of the chair with one hand and faced the king.

“There is more,” she said.

“Sit!” Cadwgan’s furious hiss traversed the room.

Rhiannon ignored him. “The groom who assisted the two men wearing Cadwaladr’s tabards the night of the murder was unable to see their faces due to the hoods they wore. With regard to their appearance, he knows only that one was tall and one was short. But when he gave them the horses’ reins, he saw their hands. The short man was missing half of the forefinger on his right hand.” She pointed to a table on the far side of the room. “Seated at that table are Cadwgan ap Gronw’s retainers. The shortest of them is named Madoc. He is missing half of that very digit.”

Rhiannon had scarcely finished speaking when two men at the distant table leaped to their feet and bolted for the door.

“Guards!” Cadell shouted.

The men who had been surrounding Leif and Knud scattered, some racing toward the fleeing men, others circling Cadwgan’s remaining retainers, who had risen to their feet, swords in hand. Leif and Knud reached for their knives.

More chairs scraped the floor, and Gwenllian screamed. “Rhiannon!”

Leif’s attention flew to Rhiannon, and his blood ran cold. Cadwgan stood behind her, one hand wrapped around her arm, the other holding a Norse blade to her neck.

“What manner of treachery is this?” Owain Gwynedd roared.

“Treachery?” Cadwgan swung to face him, his eyes flashing wildly. “If you wish to discuss treachery, Sire, I would have you turn your thoughts inward to the time you and your brothers conspired to kill your own uncles that you might extinguish a dynasty and seize my family’s inheritance for yourself.”

“So that is the poison you have ingested, is it?” The king rose to his feet and met Cadwgan’s glare with one of his own. “Cadwallon killed your father and his brothers in a battle to strengthen the kingdom of Gwynedd and unite all Cymry.”

“Such platitudes are easily spouted when one has everything to gain and nothing to lose, but mayhap the time has finally come to own that greed has cost you dearly.” Cadwgan’s lip curled. “Having you believe that your

brother Cadwallon was a casualty in battle all those years ago was a masterstroke. It was far easier to have no suspicion regarding his death fall upon my grandfather's house when our revenge had only just begun. Cadwaladr's removal, however, needed to produce more pain." He smirked. "A gutting loss laced with betrayal seemed appropriate."

Fury colored Owain Gwynedd's face puce, but Cadwgan continued, undaunted. "Your brother has exposed his true cowardice by fleeing to join the Vikings," he said. "He is all but lost to you. And unless you allow me safe passage out of this castle, Rhiannon will be the next member of your family to die."

Gwenllian's sob cut through the silence in the room, and Leif realized that at some point during Cadwgan's speech, the scuffle between the guards and the vile pretender's men had ceased.

Keeping his knife at Rhiannon's neck, Cadwgan dragged her toward the end of the table. Leif recognized the terror in her eyes and took an instinctive step toward her.

Knud grabbed his arm. "No," he whispered. "Our time to act has not yet come."

Leif wavered, taking a moment to consider his actions more carefully. His friend's lack of understanding of the Gaelic language notwithstanding, Knud had gauged the situation rightly. There was no accounting for what Cadwgan would do should he perceive a new threat. Leif gave a curt nod, and Knud released his arm.

"Cadell," Cadwgan barked. "May this come as a warning to you and the king: should any one of your guards attempt to prevent my departure, you shall have Rhiannon's blood on your hands." He yanked his captive forward. "Open the doors!"

At a signal from the prince, a footman hurried to the great hall's wide doors. Cadwgan did not hesitate. Dragging his captive across the room, he made for the exit. Rhiannon kept her face forward and her chin up, although whether that was out of bravery or awareness of the blade against her skin, Leif could not tell.

He flexed his fingers, itching to reach for his own knife. "Have courage, Rhiannon," he whispered. "Have courage."

His murmured words were too softly spoken for her to hear from the doorway, yet as she approached the great hall's threshold, her gaze shifted. For one brief instant, their eyes met, and as clearly as if she had expressed

herself aloud, Leif heard her plea for help. His nod was almost imperceptible, but hope—raw and desperate—flitted across her face. And then the door slammed closed between them.

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The moment they entered the passage, Cadwgan swung Rhiannon around and shoved her against the door. “Lock it!” he ordered.

Unable to turn her head, Rhiannon reached out one hand and ran it across the door’s surface, fumbling to find the key in the keyhole. Cadwgan pushed her a step to the left, and her fingers connected with a smooth metal bow and shank. Could she withdraw the key without engaging the bolt? She clasped it in her hand, attempting to jiggle it free. Metal scraped on metal.

“Turn it.” There was no mistaking the menace in Cadwgan’s voice. “Now!”

Fighting back tears, Rhiannon rotated the key. The bolt slid into place with a sickening thud. She dropped her hand, but Cadwgan did not move.

“The key comes with us.” He lowered his head, the warmth of his breath on her neck making her hair stand on end. “After all,” he hissed, “we would not want an unsuspecting servant to set the guards free, would we?”

Rhiannon averted her eyes from his sneering face, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her hope for the guards’ expeditious release crumble at his taunting. Her lack of response seemingly irritated him, because he tightened his grip on her arm and shook it.

“Take the key. We are leaving.”

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Leif and Knud had reached the nearest window before the solid clunk of the key turning in the lock had brought everyone else in the room to life.

Knud pushed back the shutters and peered into the darkness. “It’s a fair distance to the courtyard,” he said.

A gust of wind carried rain into the room. Behind them, Owain Gwynedd and Cadell were shouting orders. Knights and their squires were on their feet. Some of the guardsmen were pounding on the door with an assortment of weapons whilst others had set to work binding the arms and legs of Cadwgan’s abandoned retainers.

Tossing his cloak to the floor, Leif climbed onto the windowsill. “The wet stone is not so different from a wet longboat’s mast,” he said.

“Aye.” Knud’s tone was grim. “But we have ropes on the longships. And a cold dousing in the sea is likely the worst outcome if we fall.”

Leif refused to consider his fate if he landed on the hard-packed earth far below. “You do not need to do this.”

“We have no time for this discussion,” Knud said. “Go. If I fall, I wish to have you beneath me.”

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Cadwgan yanked Rhiannon toward the tower. Pain pulsed up to her shoulder, but she kept her fingers clenched around the key to the great hall. As long as it was in her possession, the possibility of freeing the trapped men remained.

“Why are you taking me with you?” Rhiannon’s voice was strained. “I will only slow your escape.”

“Incorrect, my dear Rhiannon,” Cadwgan said. “You are my sole means of escape.” They started down the spiral staircase. “Do you truly believe I would have departed that room alive had I not had a dagger to your throat?”

“There is no one here now. You can lower your weapon.”

He snorted. “Do you take me for a fool?” Light from the torch burning in the sconce above her head illuminated his contemptuous expression. “I shall not soon forget your betrayal, Rhiannon.” He shifted the knife a little higher. “My blade at your neck ensured Owain Gwynedd’s compliance. I believe it will also guarantee yours.”

Cadwgan may be no fool, but neither was she. Rhiannon knew full well that her life was worth nothing to this man once he was beyond the castle walls. She took another stumbling step into the darkness.

“Faster!” Cadwgan barked as the pale glow of light from the torch at the base of the tower came into view. He tugged on her arm, and she missed a stair. She fell forward and felt the sharp prick of Cadwgan’s knife. A cry escaped her.

“You clumsy wench.” He tripped down two or three more stairs before regaining his balance and pulling her closer, the whites of his eyes shining in the darkness. “Do something like that again and I take off a finger.”

A vision of Madoc’s damaged hand floated before her, and Rhiannon battled a wave of nausea. She did not wish to know the cause of the retainer’s missing digit. The blood currently trickling down her neck was sufficient proof that Cadwgan was capable of doing all that he threatened to do.

Chapter 34

LOWERING HIMSELF OUT OF THE window, Leif slid his legs back and forth against the castle wall, searching for a toe hold. His right foot caught a depression between the stones. He pressed his toe against it and released his grip on the windowsill with one hand, searching for a new handhold. He located a crack. Grit pressed into his fingertips. Taking a deep breath, he released his hold with the other hand.

The palms of his hand slid on the wet stone, his fingers seeking another crevasse even as his foot did the same.

“I’m coming out . . .” Knud’s voice disappeared in the wind, but Leif sensed movement above his head and lowered himself another arm’s length.

Leif’s foot slid, upsetting his tenuous balance. Thrusting his arm out, he clawed at the stone, grasping at an uneven edge as his toe pressed against another groove. Somewhere below, a door opened. Leif froze. Cadwgan. Knud must have heard the creaking hinge above the blowing rain, for all movement above Leif ceased. Leif pressed his cheek against the wet stone, focusing on his breathing as he clung to the wall.

Hurried footsteps passed directly below him. Leif did not look down. There was no need. Even though some of the torches that had lit their way when he and Knud had first entered the inner courtyard had been doused by the storm and the area was shrouded in darkness, he knew Rhiannon was there. Offering up a heartfelt silent prayer that he would reach her in time, he closed his eyes and strained to hear the footsteps until they were lost in the wind.

A sprinkle of grit landed on his arm, and Knud’s grunt accompanied a gentle thud. His friend was moving again. Refocusing his attention on his own perilous position, Leif bent his knee and began searching for another handhold.

Rain dripped off his hair and ran down his face unchecked. His tunic and hose were soaked through. It mattered not. His desperate desire to reach Rhiannon overwhelmed all other thoughts and kept him moving steadily downward. Another rattle of grit accompanied a muffled Nordic curse. Leif paused long enough to know that Knud had caught himself before searching for yet another foothold.

Leif’s fingers were cramping, and his knees were screaming in protest when the torch illuminating the entrance to the tower came into view.

Grateful that this light still shone to show him the way, he glanced down. At last, the courtyard floor appeared as a solid surface rather than a dark void. Gauging his distance off the ground by the angle of the torch, Leif released the stone he'd been clutching and pushed off the wall with his feet. He tumbled to the courtyard.

"How much farther?" Knud's voice was hoarse.

Not bothering to brush the mud off his wet clothing, Leif strained to make out Knud's silhouette on the wall. "Climb down another three body lengths before you attempt a drop."

Counting the passage of time in pounding heartbeats, Leif watched as Knud's shadow traversed the last portion of the wall before landing with a splash in a nearby puddle.

"Quickly," Leif said.

Scarcely waiting for Knud to straighten, Leif took off across the courtyard with Knud at his heels. They had almost reached the entrance to the outer courtyard when the pounding of feet sounded behind them.

"Leif!" The man's voice was breathless, but as Leif swung around to face the newcomer, he reached for his knife.

"Who goes there?" he called.

"Hywel ap Owain."

Owain Gwynedd's edling emerged from the darkness.

"Is the door to the great hall open?" Leif asked.

Still catching his breath, Hywel shook his head. "I followed you down the wall." At Leif's stunned silence, he gave a hollow laugh. "I may not have raided an abbey, Norseman, but I have climbed a castle wall a time or two in my youth."

Snapping himself out of his shock, Leif rapidly reassessed their situation. Neither he nor Knud would have any authority with the guardsmen at the castle gate. Hywel, on the other hand, could issue orders. "Go to the gatehouse," he said. "Have the guards close the gate. Cadwgan must not leave the castle. Knud and I will go directly to the stables, but if Cadwgan is already in his saddle, the guards may be needed to stop him."

To Leif's relief, Hywel did not question his demand.

"It shall be done," Hywel said. "And no matter what happens to Cadwgan, do whatever you must to save Rhiannon."

Leif did not bother to reply. He simply took off running toward the stable, with Knud beside him.

Rhiannon's wet gown was clinging to her legs, flapping as she walked and weighing down her every step. She and Cadwgan had reached the outer courtyard, and despite Rhiannon's desperate hope that they would encounter someone along the way to whom she could somehow pass the key, they had met no one. With the noblemen and their retinues supposedly enjoying their meal in the great hall, the castle laborers and servants had taken shelter from the rain.

Two guards patrolling the castle walls maintained their steady march high above her head, but even if Rhiannon were to risk calling out to them, they were too far distant to be of assistance. Not with Cadwgan's knife yet at her throat.

The stable, a black silhouette against the dark sky, loomed ahead of them. Across the way, a light shone from the kitchen, casting shadows over the nearby oven and well. The sound of young girls' voices reached her, muffled by the clatter of pans. The scullery maids were in the kitchen still.

For a moment, Rhiannon considered tossing the key at the kitchen door. But if one of the maids heard it and left her chores to investigate, Cadwgan would undoubtedly put an end to the innocent girl's life. Passing the key to a stableboy during the rush and confusion of saddling mounts in the dark would seem to be the soundest option left to her.

"The key." Cadwgan's low voice cut through her thoughts. He pushed her sideways. She stumbled, pain racking her weakened body. "Hold out your hand and let me see it."

Numbly, Rhiannon raised her arm. It trembled.

"That way," he said, jerking his head to the left. "Over the well."

With dismay, Rhiannon realized that she was now standing alongside the low stone wall that surrounded the castle well. She took a stumbling step back. Cadwgan's grip tightened, and she felt the prick of his knife again. She gasped.

"I said over the well." He ground out the words.

Rhiannon raised her arm once more.

"Now. Release it."

Tears filled her eyes, but she forced her clenched fingers to relax their hold. For one heartbeat, time froze, and then the key slipped from her hand. Light from the candle in the kitchen window caught the polished brass as it spun once before disappearing into the abyss below. Moments later, there

was a faint splash.

“Well done, my dear.” Cadwgan dragged her toward the stable. “And now, I believe the time has come to change our tactics slightly.” Forcing her up against the large wooden doors where the roof’s overhang protected them from the driving rain, he lowered his knife so that it hovered over her heart. “When we enter the stables, I shall tell the stableboys that we desire two mounts because we are to be married at dawn.” His teeth glistened in the torchlight. “A fitting end to the day, do you not think?”

Rhiannon raised her chin. She refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her distress.

“Why burden yourself with an unwanted wife?” she said. “After what occurred in the great hall this evening, I do not believe that my relationship with the royal family will grant you any leverage whatsoever.”

“True. But marrying you now will provide me another equally appealing outcome.”

Rhiannon bit her lip. She did not wish to know how else this evil man wished to use her.

“You are not curious?”

She looked away.

“A shame,” he said, “for I shall tell you regardless.” The knife in his hand hovered in the air. “Simply put, Rhiannon, marrying you will hurt the king. Not only will his pride be damaged because he approved the wedding and then did not have the power to prevent it, but also, losing someone he has become fond of to someone he now considers an enemy will not sit well at all.” He chuckled. It was a humorless laugh. “I daresay, he will also have to navigate his wife’s and daughter’s response to his failure to save you.”

Rhiannon was starting to feel lightheaded. She leaned against the door, willing herself to remain upright. “I shall never marry you,” she said.

Cadwgan grabbed her arm again. Burning pain seared through her. “Oh, but you will.” He leaned closer. “When we enter the stables, I will ask for the observant groom whose tongue is too loose for his own good. If you do not follow my every direction, he will die.”

The ground shifted beneath Rhiannon. She closed her eyes, praying that she could maintain her faculties long enough to do her part.

“Come!” Cadwgan pushed open the stable door and shoved her inside. “And remember, my knife may no longer be at your neck, but it remains as deadly as ever.”

Rhiannon stumbled into the dimly lit space. The air was filled with the odor of horses and the rustle of hooves against the straw-covered floor. Cadwgan kicked the door. It swung back the way it had come but did not close all the way. The draft rattled the tack hanging on the wall and caused the candle on the shelf above to waver. A young boy with straw stuck in his dark hair staggered out of the nearest stall.

“Evenin’, m’ lord,” he said. “Miss.” He inclined his head.

“We require two horses immediately,” Cadwgan said. “And I wish to speak with the groom who assisted the men fleeing the castle the night Prince Anarawd was murdered.”

If the boy was surprised by the request, he hid it well. “Yes, m’ lord.” He backed up a pace. “I’ll fetch Dai and then get to work saddlin’ yer horses.”

“Be quick about it,” Cadwgan snapped.

The stableboy disappeared in a flurry of thin legs. In a nearby stall, a horse shifted, bumping the wooden sides of its enclosure. On the other side of the narrow aisle, another horse nickered. Cadwgan peered into the shadows, the increased tension in the hand he had wrapped around her arm his first show of unease. Rhiannon bent her knees slightly, attempting to stave off the faintness threatening to overtake her, grateful that Cadwgan’s rough treatment was keeping her alert and standing.

Voices—one young and insistent, the other low and rumbling—approached.

Cadwgan bent his head so that his mouth was at her ear. “Remember. His life is in your hands, Rhiannon.”

Not wishing to give Cadwgan the satisfaction of seeing the fear in her eyes, she closed them, waiting until Dai’s heavier footsteps rounded the nearest stall.

“You wished to see me, my lord.” Dai stepped forward, and Rhiannon opened her eyes in time to see recognition flare in his. “Miss Rhiannon,” he said, inclining his head.

“Ah, so you know each other,” Cadwgan said. “How convenient.”

“Convenient, my lord?” Dai looked from Rhiannon to Cadwgan and back again, his confusion obvious.

“Indeed. You will know exactly which horse is best suited for my betrothed.”

Panic coursed through Rhiannon’s veins. As much as she did not wish to facilitate Cadwgan’s escape, she could not be the reason something happened

to Dai. Heledd had almost lost him once already. Somehow, she must warn him of the danger without alerting Cadwgan to it.

“Will you be riding far, my lord?” Dai asked.

“We will. And we have no time to waste.” Irritation tinged Cadwgan’s words.

“Our departure is being made in such haste, I was unable to say farewell to your wife, Dai,” Rhiannon said. “Please offer my regrets, along with my thanks to Myfanwy for her assistance whilst I was at the castle.”

Dai blinked. Rhiannon hardly dared to breathe. Would he openly question her memory or her sanity? Or would he know that Rhiannon could no more forget Heledd’s name than her own? Cadwgan’s knife was back in its sheath hanging from his girdle, but Dai’s gaze flitted to the nobleman’s hold on her arm, and the candlelight picked up the tightening of his jaw. “I’ll tell her, miss. I know for a fact that Myfanwy was right glad to be of service.”

Rhiannon’s knees almost buckled with relief. Dai understood. Cadwgan, however, was losing patience.

“We have no time for idle chatter. Bring us our mounts.”

“Yes, my lord. I’ll have them out to you straightway.”

Dai started back the way he had come. He signaled the boy who had greeted them when they’d first entered the stable and spoke to him in low, urgent tones. The boy nodded a few times before darting around the mounting block toward the doors. Cadwgan saw him coming and stepped directly into his path.

“Tell me, what is it that has you leaving the stables at this hour?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I . . . I was just . . .” The boy stammered. “Goin’ fer more water.”

“Fetch it after we leave,” Cadwgan said. “Until then, I suggest you saddle me a horse faster than you have ever saddled a horse before.”

The stableboy fled, and Cadwgan swung Rhiannon to face him.

“What did you do?” he growled.

“I have been at your side, and you heard every word I uttered.”

He shook her, and the world began to spin. “If I discover that you have deceived me—”

His threat was interrupted by the arrival of Dai leading a black stallion. “Your mount, my lord,” he said.

Chapter 35

THE STABLE DOOR WAS AJAR. Leif pressed his ear to the gap, straining to hear what was happening within over the blowing rain without.

“Make haste, boy.”

Cadwgan’s shout identified him immediately. The nobleman was clearly agitated. It was hardly surprising. He had no way of knowing how quickly those trapped in the great hall would be rescued. Leif smothered his relief that he and Knud had reached the stables in time, with the sobering realization that an unnerved villain was the worst kind of villain. Particularly when a hostage was involved.

“Do you hear them?” Knud was at his elbow.

“Aye. It appears that they are readying the horses.”

“Our ability to apprehend Cadwgan diminishes considerably once he is in the saddle,” Knud warned.

Leif needed no reminder. Even if Hywel alerted the guards in time, it was unlikely that any of them would be mounted. All the horses were in the stables. “We are going in,” he said.

“Do you have a plan?”

“Not yet, but once we enter, neither will Cadwgan.”

Knud groaned. “If you could muster one before he does, I would be most grateful.”

“I will bear that in mind,” Leif said, slipping his fingers around the door and easing it open enough to admit him.

A candle on a nearby shelf illuminated a small circle. Cadwgan stood within its light, his hand on Rhiannon’s arm. They both had their backs to the door, watching as a young boy finished cinching a saddle to a pale-colored mare. Behind the mare, the older groom Leif had seen the first time he’d visited the castle and at the river stood holding the reins of a tall black stallion.

The mare nickered, tossing her head in protest as the stableboy threaded the bit into her mouth.

“Steady, girl,” the boy said.

A draft swirled around Leif’s wet ankles, and he knew Knud had followed him in. The stallion’s nostrils twitched, and he skittered nervously. High strung, Leif noted. And already aware that he and Knud were in the shadows. The older groom placed a calming hand on the horse’s neck and shifted to his

right, turning his head so that he could better see the door. Leif was impressed. The old man understood horses far better than the stableboy or the rider.

“She’s ready.” The stableboy stepped away from the mare. “Will you be wantin’ the mountin’ block, miss?”

“There’s no need for that, lad,” the older groom said. Was he purposely speaking so loudly that he might be heard from the doorway? “I can assist Miss Rhiannon. We have known each other many years.”

Leif’s thoughts reeled. Many years? Had this groom worked at Rhiannon’s former home? Had he been there when the Vikings had attacked? Certainty that the old man had witnessed that tragic event sank into Leif’s heart. And with it came two more alarming realizations: first, if they were old friends, this was undoubtedly the groom who had given Rhiannon the information about Cadwgan’s men. Second, if he were to discover who Leif and Knud were, he would as likely kill them as aid them.

He glanced at Rhiannon. Was it his imagination, or was she swaying?

“I . . . I . . . would be g . . . glad of your aid, Dai.”

At her weak whisper, the groom stepped toward her, and Leif reached for his knife.

“I think not.” Cadwgan raised his hand, and the candlelight caught the sheen of his blade. “Indeed, we have no further need of you whatsoever, old man.”

“No!” Rhiannon cried, throwing her weight against Cadwgan.

Leif bolted across the short distance between them. He heard Knud’s pounding feet behind him, but he did not look back.

“Over here, Cadwgan,” Leif shouted. “Or do you aim to attack only those who are unarmed?”

Cadwgan pivoted, swinging his knife in a wide arc as he moved. Leif leaped back, and Cadwgan shoved Rhiannon aside to lunge at Leif. “I should have killed you the first time, Viking,” he roared.

“I daresay it would have made your life easier,” Leif said, crouching low as he circled to his left. “But I prefer to complicate it.”

††††

Rhiannon pulled herself onto her hands and knees, desperately seeking the strength to rise to her feet. Another shadow flitted past, and she heard Dai’s angry curse followed by a thud.

“Whatever your depraved objective, Viking, you will not succeed!”

“No, Dai.” Her feeble voice was lost in the vast space. She pressed her hand to her throat. It was wet. And not from the rain.

On trembling limbs, she crawled forward, following the muffled thuds at her right. Somehow, she must let Dai know that Leif and his companion were allies rather than enemies.

“‘Ere, miss.” The stableboy darted out of the shadows. “I can ’elp you.” He bent down and grasped her injured arm. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she stifled a cry as he tugged her upward.

“I must find . . .” She took a ragged breath. “I must find Dai.”

Taking her hand, the boy led her haltingly toward the stalls. She could see nothing, but a few more grunts and some coarsely uttered Norse words told her the lad was guiding her aright. The crack of splintering wood brought the stableboy up short. Rhiannon stumbled into him.

“Dai! Stop!” Her faint voice was just loud enough.

“Come no nearer, Miss Rhiannon. Not until I have finished off this Viking.”

“No.” She sobbed. “He is come to help us.” Rhiannon had no idea how Leif and Knud had escaped the great hall, but she had no doubt their appearance was a direct answer to her prayers. “Cadwgan orchestrated Prince Anarawd’s murder. He kidnapped me and intends to kill you.”

Dai stepped into the light, a broken broom handle in his hand, his eyes guarded, his face glistening with sweat. “Cadwgan killed the prince?”

Shock rang through his panted words. But before Rhiannon could respond, Knud emerged from the darkness. Dai raised his makeshift weapon, and Rhiannon lurched forward to stand between them.

“Stop,” she begged. “Please. You must help Leif.”

Knud may not have understood every word, but he grasped her meaning. Offering Dai a heated look and a scowl, he backed away and disappeared behind the horses.

“It was not Cadwaladr?” Dai lowered the stick in his hand, a haggard expression on his face. “But his men were here, in the stables—”

“Cadwgan’s retainers wearing Cadwaladr’s colors.” She grasped his arm with trembling fingers. “There is no time to explain. You must believe me and go for help. The king, the prince, and their retinues are locked in the great hall. The key. Cadwgan forced me to drop it in the well.”

“Tegyn!” Dai called. Instantly, the nervous stableboy reappeared at his side. “Run to the smithy. Tell Gethin to take his tools to the great hall

directly. He must remove the hinges on the door and release Prince Cadell and his men.”

There was a crash. Rhiannon started, and a horse whinnied anxiously.

“Make haste, lad,” Dai urged. The stableboy scampered away, and Dai turned his attention to Rhiannon. “You must hide, miss. It’s not safe for you out here in the open.”

He was right. And with most of her strength gone, she was of little use to Leif, Knud, or Dai. But how could she hide, not knowing whether Leif was . . . She refused to finish the thought. There had been noises—the slither of stealthy feet, the creak of wood, and the recent clatter near the door—but neither Leif nor Cadwgan had spoken since their initial encounter. And now Knud had seemingly vanished also.

“What of—” she began.

A few paces away, the mare snorted and skittered backward, her tail swishing high. Raising the broken stick in his hands, Dai inched closer to the mare. “Who goes there?”

Something clattered to the floor. Dai swung around, and a shadow materialized from behind the horses.

“Dai!” Rhiannon’s warning came too late. Cadwgan stepped into the light, the spade that had been in his hand already airborne. It hit Dai across the shoulders. With a moan, the old man dropped to his knees. Rhiannon staggered backward, but she was not fast enough. Cadwgan was at her side in an instant.

“It appears that we will be taking one horse rather than two, my dear.” Resuming his former grip upon her arm, he spoke through gritted teeth. “And we are leaving now.”

††††

Favoring his injured leg, Leif inched around the two horses. Cadwgan’s knife had come far too close to causing serious damage. As it was, a torn hose and surface cut had distracted him enough to lose sight of the villain. It had cost all of them dearly. The old groom was on the ground, and Cadwgan had Rhiannon in his clutches again. Attempting to quell his mounting desperation, Leif scoured the darkness. Where was Knud? His friend had undoubtedly witnessed Cadwgan’s last move, as it had occurred within the candle’s glow. How would he counter it?

Remaining completely still, Leif watched Cadwgan. His sleeve flapped loose where Leif’s knife had caught it, but whether he had drawn blood, Leif

could not tell. Cadwgan showed no obvious signs of discomfort as he dragged Rhiannon toward the horses.

On silent feet, Leif reversed his course. The stallion snorted, and Leif caught movement near the horse's rump. Knud. The mare unexpectedly startled, skittering sideways with an anxious neigh. Cadwgan cursed, changing direction so as to avoid the animal, allowing Leif to arrive at the stallion first.

"I will take care of the horse; you take care of Rhiannon." Knud's soft voice reached him over the mare's continued shifting. "That is the plan."

It did not constitute much of a plan, but it was more than Leif had offered, and at this point, all he cared about was removing Rhiannon from Cadwgan's clutches.

"Get up." At Cadwgan's brusque whisper, Knud melded into the darkness. Leif held completely still. He could no longer see Rhiannon's face, but her breathing was labored.

"I . . . I cannot. I have not the strength."

"You will mount this horse." Anger hardened Cadwgan's voice, and Leif clenched his fists, barely suppressing the desire to plant one on the nobleman's jaw. He was three steps too far distant. Until he knew exactly where Cadwgan's knife was located, he could not risk him injuring Rhiannon because he sensed Leif's incoming blow.

The stallion snorted and shook his head. The straps rattled, and then there was a loud slap. The horse screamed, and suddenly, his white front hooves were punching through the air. Rhiannon cried out, breaking free of Cadwgan's grasp as the nobleman cursed and stumbled backward. The stallion's hooves hovered above them, and Leif dove for Rhiannon, wrapping his arms around her as he knocked her to the ground and rolled clear of the frantic stallion.

There was another slap, and the horse reared a second time, snorting and pawing the air as he danced on his hind legs.

Cocooning Rhiannon within his embrace, Leif rolled again. His leg hit the wall. Swiveling another half turn, he pressed Rhiannon's head to his chest and turned his back on the mayhem occurring behind them.

The stallion's hooves dropped with a sickening thump. Cadwgan's shriek filled the stable, and then it was gone, and all that remained was the shifting and snorting of a stable full of nervous horses and Dai's soothing voice calming the stallion out of its frenzy.

In Leif's arms, Rhiannon was shaking. Footsteps approached. Leif looked up to see Knud standing over them, a candle in hand. His friend's grim nod told Leif everything he needed to know.

"You will need to translate when Cadell's men arrive," Knud said, setting the candle down beside Leif. "Dai has his hands full with the horses and with the stableboys who appeared from the upstairs room after I struck the stallion."

For the first time, Leif became aware of young voices coming from the stalls and the distant shout of men somewhere outside the stable. "Hywel has sent the guards."

Knud glanced at the stable doors. "Stay with Rhiannon. I can point the men to Cadwgan."

Leif waited until Knud's footsteps faded before running his hand down Rhiannon's silky hair. "It is over, Rhiannon," he said, reverting to Gaelic. "You are safe."

Slowly, she raised her head. Her eyes, full of tears, met his. "Cadwgan is gone?"

"He will never hurt you again."

She raised a trembling hand to her mouth to stifle a sob, and for the first time, Leif saw the blood. It covered her neck and had turned the front of her yellow gown red.

"You are injured!" Horror at what Cadwgan had done surged through him, leaving his voice hoarse.

"I fell on the stairs. His . . . his knife was at my throat." The tears in her eyes spilled over.

Understanding came with painful clarity. Rhiannon's unsteady gait and weak voice. Her lack of strength. It was a miracle she had remained standing to the end of her ordeal.

Drawing his arm out from under her, Leif eased her gently onto the floor and scrambled to his feet. A stinging pain accompanied the movement of his left leg. He ignored it. "Come," he said, bending over to scoop her into his arms. "You are in no fit state to walk, and you must see a healer straightway."

"No, Leif." She set a restraining hand on his arm. "It is not fitting that the son of Jarl Ottar should be required to carry anyone."

"On the contrary," Leif said, undeterred. "If the lady is willing, the son of Jarl Ottar may carry whomever he chooses." He raised an eyebrow,

purposefully omitting that he would not willingly relinquish her transport to anyone else. “May I convey you to your chambers, Rhiannon?”

A spasm of pain tightened her face, and she placed a hand at her throat. “I would be most grateful.”

Urgency gave his arms fresh strength. Lifting her gently, Leif settled her against his chest and started toward the stable doors.

“Dai!” he called.

The old groom appeared instantly and hobbled toward him on stiff legs. “Miss Rhiannon,” he said with concern. “Is she well?”

“She needs a healer,” Leif said.

In the candlelight, Dai’s face appeared almost as pale as Rhiannon’s. “Take her to Heledd,” he said. “She will know what to do.”

“Yes,” Rhiannon murmured. “Heledd.”

Leif turned to go, and the stable doors flew open, admitting Hywel and a host of armed guards. The men spread out, swords in hand. A muted gasp came from a stableboy in the nearest stall. Disregarding all but Hywel, Leif approached the edling with Rhiannon in his arms.

“Cadwgan is dead,” he said. “Killed by a panicked horse. My companion stands over his body. He speaks no Gaelic, but Dai can tell you what you need to know. Rhiannon has been injured, and I must take her to Heledd immediately.”

Hywel’s attention flew from Leif’s face to Rhiannon’s bloodied gown. “You,” he yelled at the nearest guardsman. “Locate the castle laundress, Heledd, of whom Leif speaks, and send her to Miss Rhiannon’s chambers directly.”

The guardsman took off at a run. Offering Hywel a grateful nod, Leif exited the stables right behind him.

Chapter 36

THE DULL ACHE IN HER neck would not leave. Rhiannon moaned and turned her head. The rustle of the straw mattress penetrated her conscious, and with it came a flicker of panic. She was no longer with Leif. Her last memory was of being in his arms, her cheek pressed against his firm chest, enveloped in a warm sense of safety and belonging.

“Leif,” she whispered.

Someone approached the bed and took her hand. “Miss Rhiannon?”

Rhiannon forced her heavy eyelids open, blinking against the bright sunlight as the person at her bedside came into focus. “Heledd.” Unexpected tears pricked her eyes. “You are here.”

The elderly lady smiled gently. “I’ve been here from the moment the Norseman walked into the room with you in his arms, bach. Prince Cadell gave my responsibilities to another until you are well enough to be on your own.”

Rhiannon slid her other hand free of the blanket and tentatively touched the cloth wrapped around her neck.

“The bleeding has stopped,” Heledd said. “The moisture you feel is the salve I applied after cleaning the wound. It will take several weeks for the cut to heal completely and for you to regain your strength, but if you are diligent in applying the salve, I believe it will heal fully.”

Gratitude overwhelmed her. “Where would I be without you?”

“Where would we both be without that tall Norseman?” Heledd shook her head somberly. “I never thought the day would come that I would express thanks for a Viking. But Dai told me what he did for you. What he did for Dai.” Her chin trembled. “We have much to be grateful for.”

Rhiannon’s hand moved from her neck to her chest. Her soiled gown was gone. Someone had dressed her in a clean shift. She slipped her fingers beneath the linen fabric and found the thin chain she’d been seeking. Drawing it out into the open, she wrapped her fingers around the silver wave at its base. “Leif gave me this,” she said, unfurling her fingers so Heledd could see.

“I noticed it when I helped you out of your bloodied clothes.” Heledd’s smile held a hint of sadness. “For one who met you so recently, he knows your heart well.”

It was true, and Rhiannon could not explain it. They came from different

lands and cultures. Their first encounter was under the worst possible circumstances. And yet, their connection was as real as it was incomprehensible. Her eyes were drawn to his whenever he was near. He made her heart beat a little faster and her spirit soar a little higher. She felt safe in his arms.

Her grip on the pendant tightened as the ramifications of this bewildering revelation settled upon her. She wished to wear Leif's jewelry. She wished to come to know him better. She wished to be with him.

She glanced at the beams of light stretching across the wood floor from the slits in the window shutters. It had been evening when Leif had carried her from the stables. It now looked to be past noon. With Cadwgan's involvement in Anarawd's death uncovered, Leif would be anxious to return to Ireland to inform his father and Cadwaladr. "Has Leif quit the castle already?" she asked.

"Not unless he did so within the hour." Heledd crossed to the pitcher of water on the small table in the corner and filled a goblet. "He has come by your chambers three times since daybreak, asking about you. Princess Gwenllian, the queen, and Prince Hywel have also visited." She set the goblet down and helped Rhiannon rise to a sitting position in the bed before handing it to her. "All four were disappointed to hear that you had yet to awaken. I daresay each will make another attempt to see you before nightfall."

Rhiannon took a sip of water. Leif would leave soon. She knew it in the same inexplicable way that she had sensed he would come after her when Cadwgan had taken her from the great hall. An unanticipated loneliness settled upon her. She could only hope that he would visit her chambers one more time before then.

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Leif stared at the door to Rhiannon's chamber. If he was unable to speak with Rhiannon this time, he would be forced to leave the castle without seeing her. Knud had been willing to wait until midday but no longer. Even now, they would be hard-pressed to travel the distance they needed to cover before darkness fell.

Raising his hand, he knocked, and moments later, Heledd opened the door. She greeted him with a smile. "Good day, sir."

"How is she?"

Heledd pulled back the door. "She is awake, and I believe she would be glad of your company."

Leif crossed the threshold, his eyes focused on the bed in the corner. Heavy green-and-gold tapestries hung around it, but on one side, the fabric had been pulled back to expose Rhiannon sitting up against the dark-wood headboard. A gray wool blanket was pulled up to her waist, and her dark hair tumbled past her shoulders to cover her white shift and pillows. A strip of cloth was wrapped around her neck. Her face was pale, her brown eyes luminous, and Leif was quite sure he'd never seen anyone so beautiful.

He cleared his throat, attempting to do the same for his thoughts. Did he tell her he had scarcely slept last night for thinking of her? That over the last few days, her welfare had become more important than his own? Or did he simply say farewell and wish her a speedy recovery, knowing that his past would forever lie between them?

"I thank you for permitting me entrance into your chamber." It was not eloquent and fell short of expressing his feelings, but at least the words were coherent.

Her smile was shy, hesitant even. "I am glad you are come. When I realized that I had awoken so late in the day, I feared that you were gone already."

"I must be on my way shortly," he said. "Knud is at the stables, readying our horses."

She nodded and then flinched. Her wound was paining her still. "Now that you have uncovered the truth about Anarawd's death, I daresay you are anxious to return home."

Did he imagine the regret in her voice? His gaze fell upon the silver wave glistening against the white of her shift, and his heart knew fresh hope. "Not so anxious as you might imagine," he said. "Would that I could stay long enough to know that you are fully recovered."

"You have done so much already. Without your and Knud's arrival at the stables . . ." She paused, emotion choking her voice. "Will you tell me how you came to be there with the great hall's door still locked?"

"We exited the window and climbed down the castle wall."

She gasped. "But you could have fallen to your death!"

His eyes met hers, and as though drawn by an unseen cord, his feet moved toward her. Dropping to his knees beside the bed, he took her hand. "The chance of reaching you before Cadwgan fled the castle was worth the risk."

Her lower lip trembled. "I . . . I prayed you would come."

"That is likely why we descended the wall successfully."

She dropped her gaze. "I shall miss you when you are gone."

With his other hand, he reached out and gently ran his finger down her smooth cheek. "I am honor bound to return to Ireland so that my father and Cadwaladr may learn what happened at Dinefwr Castle, but I shall think of you every day."

She turned her cheek so that it rested against his hand, and in that moment, Leif knew that leaving her would be one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

"I have spoken with Owain Gwynedd," he said. "He is prepared to fulfill his brother's pledge to provide my father with two thousand head of cattle upon Cadwaladr's return to Gwynedd." He managed a small smile. "I believe Cadwaladr will be accompanied by a great many Viking longships."

"And will you be within one of them?"

Her eyes were filled with hope, and his heart lifted.

"Aye," he said, pressing his lips to her hand before reluctantly releasing it and coming to his feet. "I shall be there, Rhiannon. I give you my word."

Chapter 37

Six Weeks Later

CARRIED BY THE FOAMING EDGE of the wave, the glistening shell tumbled onto the sand at Rhiannon's feet. She waited for the water to recede and then picked it up. Turning it in her hand, she examined the delicate cream-colored structure. How far had it traveled before reaching the shore at Aberffraw? As far as Ireland?

The sea breeze tugged at her hair and shawl, urging her up the beach. Walks along the water's edge in the early hours of the morning had always been something she'd enjoyed. Now they were a treasured time of reflection and communion. Sometimes she thought on Leif and wondered where he was and what he was doing. Other times, she thought on God and on the miracle that had sent Leif to her rescue and Heledd to nurse over her until her wound had healed.

Owain Gwynedd had delayed his departure from Dinefwr Castle for ten days to ensure that Rhiannon was well enough to travel. At first, she had fretted that the king and his entire retinue were waiting upon her. But when Gwenllian visited Rhiannon in her chambers at the end of each day, she had shared tales of her outings with Cadell—rides into the forest, walks along the river, and visits to the market—and the warmth in Gwenllian's eyes and voice had convinced Rhiannon that staying a little longer had not been without benefit for her cousin also.

The journey back to Ynys Môn had been long, and although Rhiannon's strength was much improved, she had been grateful to drop into her bed at the llys at the end of it. She had been even more grateful to be beside the sea once more.

Some days, she dipped her fingers in the cold water, imagining the waves carrying her touch all the way to Leif. Occasionally, a seagull would fly overhead, its raucous cry as incomprehensible as the Norse tongue, and she would wonder what the bird would tell her if she could only understand.

Other times, the breeze would carry the lowing of cattle from the pastures beyond the trees that bordered the beach, and she would be reminded of the unprecedented gathering of livestock on the island. Drovers from Ceredigion and Dyffryn Clwyd had been bringing in cattle for almost a month. The fields were full.

Rhiannon reached the end of the bay and turned to watch the sun lighten

the dusky sky. She wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes on the distant horizon, wondering what was just beyond her view. And then she saw them. A row of faint dots lining the edge of the water. Her breath caught. Were they ships?

Holding perfectly still, she strained to make out more detail. The waves rushed in and out; the wind blew. Gradually, the dots grew larger until, at last, Rhiannon made out the square of a sail above the dark hull of the boat in the center of what was the largest gathering of seagoing vessels she'd ever seen. For one long heartbeat, her feet were affixed to the sand. Moments later, they had wings.

She raced across the beach, scrambling over the sand dunes that separated her from her horse. Gasping for breath, she tore at the reins she'd wrapped around a branch of a tree at the edge of the wooded area. Her mount snorted and pulled back on the straps.

"Quickly, Rascal," she said, placing her foot in a stirrup and heaving herself into the saddle in one swift motion. "There is no time to lose."

After waiting in the protection of the trees for the best part of an hour, Rascal responded to the touch of Rhiannon's heels with the eagerness of a horse anxious for a long run. He thundered down the path that cut through the trees, emerging onto the track that ran alongside the pasture full of cattle and led directly to the llys. With her shawl flapping wildly below her shoulders, Rhiannon lowered herself in the saddle and urged Rascal on.

The guard at the gate saw her coming. Well used to her more sedate morning rides, he must have sensed that something was amiss, for he opened the gate without waiting for a shout. She clattered past him, into the courtyard.

Up ahead, the stable door opened, and one of the stableboys appeared, leading Hywel's stallion by its straps. Surely if his horse had been readied, her cousin was close by. She reined her horse to a halt.

"Hywel!" Her shout was muted by her panting.

Hywel stepped out of the stables, pulling on his riding gloves as he walked. "Rhiannon," he said, his forehead creasing when he noticed her disheveled appearance. "Is something amiss?"

"The Vikings," she gasped. "They are coming."

He reached her in five rapid steps and took her reins. "How soon will they be at our shores?"

"I cannot say exactly how fast they are traveling. Upon spotting them on

the horizon, I left the beach to alert those at the llys. By the time I reached my horse, the outline of the ship at the head of the fleet was clearly visible.”

Hywel gave a succinct nod. “You have done well, Rhiannon. I shall inform my father immediately. We shall be ready when they arrive.”

✚✚✚

They’d furlled the sail. With the shore in sight, forty Vikings were now manning the oars of the largest longboat in Leif’s father’s fleet. Cadwaladr and two of his men sat in the center of the boat with Leif’s father. Cadwaladr’s other men were scattered among the accompanying vessels. Leif sat in the bow beside his brother, Bjorn, his oar moving in unison with the others even as his eyes scanned the people standing on the beach, searching for the one person he wished to see most.

“It appears that we did not catch them unawares,” Bjorn said. “Do you recognize anyone?”

“The older gentleman wearing the purple cloak is Owain Gwynedd. Beside him, the fellow with brown hair, is his edling, Hywel. I assume the other men are members of the uchelwr.”

“And the women?”

“The one in the green gown is the queen. The one to her right is her daughter, Gwenllian. Next to her is the queen’s niece, Rhiannon.”

Leif allowed his gaze to settle on Rhiannon, and it was all he could do to maintain his slow but steady pace at the oar. She’d been in his thoughts almost constantly since he and Knud had ridden away from Dinefwr Castle. He’d prayed for her recovery and had ached to be with her again. If it had been his choice, he would have returned to Gwynedd as soon as he’d delivered his message to Cadwaladr, but his father had insisted that they wait for the return of the Vikings who had been abroad. Given how much livestock Owain Gwynedd had pledged to assemble, the extra time had likely been needed. Unfortunately, awareness of that truth had not made the postponement any easier to bear.

Ten more pulls and the hull skimmed the sand. The familiar vibration traveled down the longboat, and with well-practiced precision, the Vikings stowed their oars. Several of the men leaped out, wading through the thigh-deep water to drag the longboat onto the beach. Leif glanced behind him. A dozen more vessels were rapidly approaching. Nine of them were the sturdy karve longboats built with wider hulls to take cargo and livestock. Three were faster, narrower longships, carrying men and provisions. Leif’s faering was

nowhere to be seen, but Leif had full confidence that Knud had followed his request to follow after the other boats and would bring the faering to shore successfully.

The longboat ground to a halt. The Cymry watched silently as Leif's father and Cadwaladr exited the vessel. Leif and Bjorn followed them onto the sand, walking behind them as they started up the beach. Leif's eyes found Rhiannon's. The air hummed between them. She swallowed. He saw the movement and the pale pink line that marked her throat where Cadwgan's knife had broken her skin. A little below her scar, the late-morning light reflected off the silver pendant hanging around her neck. He smiled. Her answering smile was instant.

"Welcome to Ynys Môn, Jarl Ottar of Dyflin." Owain Gwynedd's greeting was accompanied by a polite incline of his head. He then turned to his brother. Myriad emotions flitted across his face before he settled on something that appeared remarkably like relief. "Cadwaladr. I am glad you are come."

"Would that you had had more faith in my trustworthiness weeks ago," Cadwaladr said, his expression guarded. "But I am grateful to have my feet planted on Gwynedd's soil once more."

"Leif." At his father's pointed reminder, Leif translated the Gaelic conversation. His father nodded approvingly, and Owain Gwynedd spoke again, gesturing toward the distant tree line.

"We are to go with him to his court, I assume," Leif's father said.

"Aye. He wishes to continue our discourse there." Would Rhiannon accompany the men to the llys? Leif glanced at her. The warmth he'd seen in her expression only moments before was gone. Her face was ashen, the fingers of one hand clasped tightly around Gwenllian's arm. Gwenllian spoke to her. Rhiannon shook her head, released her grip on her cousin, and stumbled back a few paces.

What had caused such a dramatic reversal in her mood? Swiveling, Leif scoured the area that had drawn her attention. Understanding came like a sickening punch to the abdomen. Rune. The vicious man who had killed Rhiannon's father and stolen her mother's jewelry was walking up the beach not more than half a dozen paces behind Leif.

"Leif." This time, it was Bjorn's voice that pulled Leif's attention back to his duties. "We must follow the Cymry."

Rune laughed at something. A loud, raucous laugh. Leif's stomach

curdled. His responsibility was to attend his father and the king, but how could he leave Rhiannon now?

Owain Gwynedd, Hywel, and their men were already leading his father and Cadwaladr to the waiting horses. Leif looked back at the women. Gwenllian and her mother stood alone. A trail of small footprints led away from them, and as Leif's gaze followed them up the beach, he caught a flash of blue as Rhiannon disappeared beyond a distant sand dune.

"Tell Father I shall join you shortly," Leif said, and before Bjorn could object, he hurried to join the waiting women.

"Forgive my unsolicited approach," he said, bowing to the queen and Gwenllian. "I must attend to my father's and the king's needs straightway, but before I go to the llys, I must know what has become of Rhiannon."

"You are the one who rescued her from Cadwgan's clutches," the queen said.

"I am."

"I have yet to thank you. Rhiannon is like a daughter to me, and I tremble to think what would have happened to her had you not escaped the great hall at Dinefwr Castle."

This was not the time to share the depth of his feelings for Rhiannon. Rhiannon deserved to be the first to hear it. But if the queen considered his past efforts worthy of praise, he was willing to use that to his advantage. "If you feel that you owe me anything at all for my part in Rhiannon's release, I beg you to tell me where I might find her now."

The queen frowned. "When she left us, she expressed her wish to be alone."

"I am willing to honor that," Leif said. But only until he had arranged for his father's accommodation. After the heart-wrenching shock Rhiannon had just received, being alone was the last thing she needed.

The mother and daughter exchanged a silent communication, and then Gwenllian spoke. "Rhiannon usually finds solace at the seashore," she said. "But when she is particularly troubled, she visits the graves of her parents."

That was it. The surety that seeing Rune had sent Rhiannon to her father's burial plot distilled upon him, along with a new measure of urgency to reach her quickly.

"Where is that located?" he asked.

"Her parents are buried in the small cemetery at the church of Sant Cwyfan." Gwenllian turned to point at the grassy headland jutting out into the

sea beyond the bay. “If you look carefully, you can see the church’s roof at the end of the promontory.”

“I thank you for your trust,” he said.

“You earned it at Dinefwr, Leif, son of Jarl Ottar,” the queen said. “Although I would suggest that you return to the king before he is given any cause to question the confidence he has placed in you.”

Grateful for the queen’s perception, Leif inclined his head. “With your approval, I shall take my leave.” He stepped away, his thoughts racing. If he wished to locate Rhiannon, he would need to do something to postpone the counsel Owain Gwynedd, Cadwaladr, and his father were planning to convene as soon as they reached the king’s court. Such a counsel would require an interpreter, and unless Leif was mistaken, he was the only one available.

Kicking up sand as he cut across the sand dunes, he spotted his father and Bjorn first. A groom was approaching them, leading two fine-looking horses.

“Bjorn!” he called.

His brother turned, a frown on his face. “Where have you been? You know full well that Father and I cannot understand a word these Cymry utter.”

“I am working to repair a breach in relations,” Leif said. He made no further clarification. If Bjorn chose to believe that the crisis involved dealings between the Norsemen and Cymry in general, so much the better.

Bjorn’s expression changed from irritated to wary. “Do I need to put our men on alert?”

“I believe the opposite is our best course of action. I intend to tell Owain Gwynedd that Jarl Ottar and his men request a time of rest before negotiations begin in earnest. Entering into such discussions refreshed will enable us to gain the most from our meeting.”

Bjorn stroked his beard thoughtfully. “There is wisdom in your plan. Have you spoken to Father about it?”

“Not yet. If you wish to do so, I shall make the request of Owain Gwynedd.”

“Very well.” Bjorn’s eyes darted to the man already astride his black mount. “But you’d best be quick about it.”

Leif needed no urging. He approached Owain Gwynedd and executed a bow. “If I may be so bold, Sire, Jarl Ottar respectfully requests a two-hour postponement of the planned meeting between the Norsemen and the

Cymry.”

Owain Gwynedd lowered his brows. “And why is that?”

“That he may fully recover from the long voyage before entering into serious negotiations.”

The muscle in the king’s jaw twitched. He was not pleased. But it would be difficult, if not impossible, to deny the Norsemen their request if he wished to maintain the impression that he was a welcoming host. “I bid you tell Jarl Ottar that his request has been granted. Upon our arrival at the llys, servants will conduct him and his men to their quarters, where they may repose.” He raised one eyebrow. “I shall expect all those involved in the negotiation proceedings to be present in the great hall at the start of the none hour.”

Schooling his features to prevent his relief from showing, Leif bowed again. “It shall be done, Sire.”

Chapter 38

LEIF APPROACHED THE SMALL CHURCH cautiously. Not unlike the one he attended in Dyflin, the stone structure was modest in size and unadorned. A narrow path led to the arched entrance, but the dark-wood door was closed. He hesitated. It was possible that Rhiannon had gone inside to pray, but as the day had warmed since this morning's cool temperatures, he thought it more likely that she had remained outdoors.

Following the path around the building, he found himself in a small cemetery. A few trees, bowed from their battle with the prevailing wind, broke up the grassy area, and a few hardy shrubs grew in between the graves marked by stone crosses.

A blackbird took off from the church roof in a flurry of feathers. Leif paused to watch as it sailed over a small figure dressed in a blue gown seated on the grass at the foot of one of the stone crosses. Her head was lowered, her dark hair covering her face, but he knew her immediately.

"Rhiannon." He kept his voice low so as not to startle her.

Pressing the corner of her shawl to her damp cheeks, she scrambled to her feet. "Leif. What are you doing here?"

He heard the accusation in her tone, but attempted to ignore it. "I asked the queen where I might find you."

"I told her and Gwenllian that I wished to be left alone." There was no mistaking her anger now.

"So she said." Leif took another step toward her. "But I happen to believe that no one should be left alone after experiencing the shock and anguish you must have felt on the beach."

She looked away, the grief on her face like a knife to his heart.

"Rune was not aboard my vessel," he continued. "It was only when I heard him coming up the sand behind me that I realized he was part of my father's entourage."

"Rune? That is the name of the celebrated Viking?" she asked bitterly.

"There is nothing about Rune that I would wish to celebrate."

"Then tell me this." Her voice broke. "Why is it that this Rune—a man with so black a soul that he would murder an old man intent only upon saving his daughter—laughs as he sets foot on the sand of Ynys Môn while his victim lies buried in a cold grave?"

He ached for her. Ached for the part the Vikings of Dyflin had played in

tearing apart her small family. “I do not have the answer you seek, Rhiannon, but this I know: one day, Rune will have to answer for what he did.”

“When?” She clenched her fists, her tears falling anew. “When, Leif? You are the son of Jarl Ottar. Surely you have sufficient influence to act against so heinous a crime.”

Leif winced. Rhiannon had lived through a terrifying Viking raid, but she likely did not realize that raids were often far more violent than the one she had witnessed. He looked out across the cemetery to the vast sea beyond. It was a view much like the one he’d shared with Father Robert when he had plied the priest for answers to similar questions.

“A Christian priest taught me that there will be many times when life appears unfair, when those who do evil seem to profit and those who do good are left to suffer. He told me that I must turn such injustices over to God. That as much as I willed it otherwise, only He could make such things right.” Leif turned back to her. “I cannot stand before you and say that I found Father Robert’s counsel easy to accept. Indeed, it took many weeks before I was willing to admit that the resentment I felt when Vikings such as Rune received accolades for returning to Dyflin with ill-gotten gain was hurting no one but me. But over time, I have learned for myself that Father Robert spoke truth.”

“But why would God allow such heartache?”

He shook his head helplessly. “I have much yet to learn about God, but I have recently wondered whether He allows some to hurt so that others may offer aid. The Jesus of whom Father Robert speaks went about doing good. If no one was ever in need, there would be little opportunity to give service.”

She wiped her cheeks with her shawl again. “I do not think I can do what He asks.”

“You already have. I witnessed your kindness to Gwennllian after Prince Anarawd was killed. Although your cousin’s loss was more recent, it did nothing to negate yours, yet you set aside your own grief to help her with hers.”

Her sorrowful eyes met his. “I miss my father every day, but some days, the emptiness I feel without him is so great, I come here to speak with him.” Her chin trembled. “Would that he could speak to me also.”

“What would you have him tell you?”

She sniffed. “There is so much . . . I would not know where to begin . . .”

Leif reached for her hand, grateful when she did not pull away. “Although

I never had the privilege of knowing your father, may I suggest that he would tell you how inordinately proud he is of you, that your beauty runs far deeper than the loveliness that meets the eye of all beholders—it radiates from the goodness of your soul. And that more than anything else, he wishes you to be happy.”

Her watery smile tugged at his heartstrings. “You forgot the part where he tells me that my hair is unruly and then chastises me for having sand on my gown.”

A lock of her hair blew against her face. With gentle fingers, Leif lifted it away, marveling at its silkiness. “Perhaps,” he said, “but I happen to appreciate both those things. They tell me that you and I share a similar love for the wind, the waves, and the seashore.”

She stilled. “That may be, but it does nothing to negate the fact that you are a Norseman and I am Cymry.”

His people had killed her father. Rhiannon had not verbalized the condemning statement, but it hung over them as real as the most menacing storm.

“I am a Norseman,” he said, “but that does not mean that I would behave as Rune does any more than you being Cymry means that you would emulate Cadwgan.”

She raised her other hand, and her fingers softly touched the scar at her throat. She trembled.

Leif released her hand to draw her into his arms. “Do not dwell on the dark memories, Rhiannon,” he said. “That time is past.”

Releasing a deep breath, she closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against his chest. “Why do I feel that I am where I am meant to be whenever I am with you, Leif?”

He heard her confusion, recognized her vulnerability, and yet he was filled with gratitude. It was time to match her ingenuousness with his own. “Mayhap it is because your heart hears the whispers of mine.”

She looked at him then. “What does it say?”

“It says that no matter their differing heritage, Leif, son of Jarl Ottar, falls more in love with Rhiannon ferch Iorwerth every time he is with her, and he wishes to be at her side always.”

Her dark eyes, full of wonder, met his. “But you are—”

He pressed a finger to her lips, cutting off her argument before she could fully voice it. “You have filled my dreams from the first time I set eyes on

you,” he said. “Now that I have come to know you better, you fill my waking thoughts also.” He lifted his finger from her mouth and ran it across her cheek. “Truth be told, it has been somewhat torturous.”

“Torturous?” she whispered.

Slowly, he lowered his head until his lips were a breath away from hers. “Aye,” he murmured. “Completely torturous.”

She leaned in. It was the invitation he’d longed for. Softly, gently, he kissed her, expressing all the tender feelings he’d left unsaid. And she responded. Shifting slightly, her fingers found the hair at the base of his neck. A tremor coursed through him. He drew her closer, deepening the kiss. She sighed, melding her body to his. And he was lost. No storm at sea had ever affected him thus. Love for this brave, beautiful woman washed over him in a tidal wave, leaving his heart hammering and his legs shaking. There was no hope of recovering from this. He never wished to.

Sometime later, Rhiannon’s soft voice penetrated his conscious mind. “Leif?”

“Hm.”

“I do not know how you escaped your duties at the llys, but regardless of the poor reception I offered when you first arrived, I am glad that you joined me.”

His duties at the llys. With a groan, Leif raised his head. The shadows cast by the trees had shifted. If he wished to arrive at the great hall at the time appointed by Owain Gwynedd, he would have to run. “The official meeting between my father, Owain Gwynedd, and Cadwaladr was postponed, but if I am to be there before it begins, I must go now.”

She nodded and drew back. “It would not do to lose favor with the king.”

Given what Leif desired of him, Rhiannon could not have spoken truer words. As loath as he was to leave her, it was vital that he make a good impression upon Owain Gwynedd.

“When shall I see you?” he asked.

“There will be a banquet this evening.” Her forehead creased. “But I imagine your father’s men will be in attendance.”

His heart sank. There was no doubt Rune would make his presence felt at such a gathering. The man was insufferable. “I daresay.”

“Then I shall remain in my chambers,” she said. “Mayhap, one day, I shall have the fortitude to be within the same room as Rune, but that day has not yet come.”

With a heart filled with admiration and understanding, Leif cupped her face in his hands and kissed her once more. “On the morrow,” he said. “At daybreak on the beach. Rune will be sleeping off his stupor at that hour.”

“I shall come. The guards are well used to me going to the seashore at dawn.”

He smiled. He had known it without being told. “Until then, Rhiannon.”

She nodded. “Go quickly. Owain Gwynedd is not one you would wish to displease.”

He took two steps back, and then he turned and began jogging along the path that led to the llys.

††††

Rhiannon stood at the window of her bedchamber. The sun had set, and darkness was rapidly consuming the courtyard below. Torches flickered at the entrance to the great hall, illuminating a small area surrounding each scone and providing a beacon for those making their way to the banquet. Men’s voices floated up to her, most of them speaking in a foreign tongue. Never, since she had relocated to Ynys Môn, had the royal llys housed so many foreigners. And never had she so desperately wished them gone. All but one.

She closed her eyes to the men below as the memory of being in Leif’s arms assailed her. His words had touched her more than she could say, but his kiss . . . She took an unsteady breath. The protective wall she’d attempted to build around her heart had come tumbling down the moment his lips had touched hers. She pressed a hand to her stomach. He had all but confessed his love for her, and she could no longer deny her feelings for him. But what could be done? Surely Leif realized that their situation was untenable.

A knock sounded on the door of her bedchamber, and Rhiannon’s musings scattered. Taking a moment to calm her racing heart, she smoothed her hands down her blue gown and faced the door. “Enter,” she called.

The door opened, and Gwenllian walked in. She was dressed in her newest gown of deep red. A gold girdle hung around her waist and reflected the gold thread woven along her gown’s neckline and wide cuffs. Her hair hung down her back in an elaborate plait.

“Are you ready?” she asked. “I thought it might be best if we faced the Vikings together.”

Rhiannon managed a smile. “You look lovely, Gwenllian.”

If Gwenllian heard the compliment, she chose to ignore it. Instead, she

studied Rhiannon with a frown. “Why are you not dressed for the banquet? Have you given no heed to the lateness of the hour?”

“I am not going to the banquet,” Rhiannon said.

Gwenllian’s frown deepened. “This is no ordinary gathering, Rhiannon. The jarl of Dyflin and his men will be there.”

“Of that, I am all too aware.”

There must have been something in her voice, some hint of how difficult this was for her, because in an instant, Gwenllian’s expression changed to one of dismayed comprehension.

“The Vikings,” she gasped. “Oh, Rhiannon, forgive me my thoughtlessness. Their arrival must have stirred up terrible memories.”

“They did. Seeing the man who killed my father again was a numbing shock.”

Gwenllian’s face paled. “He is here?”

“He is. And that is why I felt compelled to leave the beach so abruptly and why I cannot attend the banquet.”

“You must tell Father,” she said. “He will have the man’s head.”

“I confess, over the last few hours, I have considered doing that very thing more times than I can count, but think on the likely consequences of such an action, Gwenllian. Rather than having Cadwaladr’s return be reason for the hostilities between the Norsemen and Cymry to ease, they would worsen. Do you not think the Vikings would seek revenge on Owain Gwynedd for committing such an act at a time of supposed reconciliation? What form would that take? More raids on Gwynedd’s coast? More loss of innocent life?” She clasped her hands tightly. “I am attempting to quell my own desire for retribution, to look beyond my own pain, in order to minimize what might be inflicted on others.”

“That is all very noble, but a man such as that should not be seated at a table in the king of Gwynedd’s court,” Gwenllian protested. “Neither should his presence prevent yours.”

Rhiannon took her cousin’s hand and squeezed it gratefully. “I am perfectly content eating in my room. You know that I do not care to dress up or attend these kinds of events as you do.”

Gwenllian’s frown had returned. “He should not leave here unpunished, Rhiannon.”

Rhiannon sighed. “Leif believes that the murderer will ultimately pay for what he has done, even if the punishment is not meted out by the king.”

“Leif? You have spoken to him of this?”

“He came to the cemetery.”

For the first time, Gwenllian looked mildly uncomfortable. “He asked where he could find you. I know you asked to be left alone, but his concern for you appeared sincere.”

“I believe it was,” Rhiannon said.

Gwenllian studied her much as she was wont to examine new bolts of silk, searching for something a casual passerby might not see. And then slowly and deliberately, the corners of her mouth turned upward. “You have feelings for him,” she said.

Willing the warmth in her cheeks to subside, Rhiannon caught her lower lip with her teeth. It was the wrong thing to do. The memory of Leif’s kiss came flooding back.

Gwenllian’s smile widened. “Have you fallen in love?”

“No.” Her response was too quick.

Gwenllian laughed. “It is nothing to be ashamed of, you goose. Since he obviously cares deeply for you, you have reason to feel joyful.”

“I want to be happy, truly I do, but Leif is a Norseman. He has participated in raids with other Vikings. He was there when my father—” The lump in her throat choked her words.

“He learned Gaelic from an Irish priest, did he not?”

Rhiannon nodded mutely.

“And did he come to accept the doctrines he learned along the way?”

“He . . . he claims to be a Christian. He has spoken of Jesus with me.”

Gwenllian’s grip upon her hand intensified. “He is a good man, Rhiannon. Believe me, such creatures are more rare than they ought to be. Leif has already proven his trustworthiness, bravery, and honor. That he has singled you out does him further credit.” She smiled again, but this time it held a trace of sadness. “I saw how he held you when he carried you, injured and bleeding, to your chambers at Dinefwr Castle. He exhibited the same tenderness Anarawd showed me. You are precious to him. If you reciprocate his feelings, do not allow his heritage or yours to come between you.”

“What would my father say if he had utterance?” It was the question that had tortured her ever since Leif had left her standing at her parents’ gravesite.

“He would have you follow your heart.” Gwenllian was firm. “Think on it, Rhiannon, if the Vikings had not come to Bryn Eithin that night, you would likely have married Cadwgan with no knowledge of his blackened heart.

Your father would have been forced to witness your unhappiness. I believe it would have destroyed him, for he always placed your happiness above all else.” She raised her eyebrows knowingly. “Including allowing you to spend endless hours barefoot on the beach long after you should have outgrown such pursuits.”

Rhiannon smiled at the memory. “He was overly indulgent with me.”

“He knew you like no other, and he believed that, ultimately, you would choose wisely.” She took a deep breath. “You proved it when—regardless of prior expectations or fear of the unknown—you listened to your heart and forbore from marrying Cadwgan immediately after your father’s death.” She looked at her pointedly. “Have you put aside your worries long enough to listen to your heart now?”

For the first time since she’d returned to the llys, Rhiannon allowed her thoughts to wander back to her walks along the beach when she’d searched the horizon for any sign of Leif’s return. Weeks of disappointment over a sea clear of vessels contrasted with the thrill she’d experienced this morning at the sight of the Viking ships.

She’d scoured the incoming longboats, searching for the handsome, blond Norseman and had spotted him at the front of the first vessel the moment it had entered the bay. That was when her breathing had become unexpectedly difficult. Leif had disembarked soon afterward, and then breathing had become all but impossible. But it was when his eyes had met hers, and she’d known that he’d been looking for her as desperately as she’d been watching for him, that her heart had ceased to function as it should. Its erratic behavior had continued when Leif had pulled her into his arms in the cemetery, and if its current thumping was any indication, the vital organ had something very important to say.

“I . . . I love him.” The words took her by surprise, but the moment they were spoken, surety of their truthfulness settled upon her. “I love Leif.”

Tears pricked Rhiannon’s eyes, and Gwenllian grinned.

“I am grateful that you needed no further persuading,” she said. “I could not in good conscience abandon you here in such a state of muddled ignorance, but I believe it is now safe for me to take my leave.”

Rhiannon smiled through her tears. “I am most grateful.”

Gwenllian reached for the door handle. “I shall miss you at the banquet, but I admire you for the choice you have made.”

“You have helped me with a far greater one.”

Gwenllian nodded reassuringly. “It will be well, Rhiannon. You shall see.”

Chapter 39

THE AIR WAS STILL. DEW glistened on the leaves of the trees and beyond the sand dunes, the waves beat a steady rhythm against the shore. Rhiannon cinched her horse's straps around the lowest tree branch and drew her shawl more securely around her shoulders. The first rays of sunlight were peeking over the craggy tips of Eryri. It would not be long before the sun's warmth frightened away the chill of night.

Turning away from her horse and the woodland, she took the path between the sand dunes until it opened onto the beach. The tide was turning. Some of the Viking boats were pulled up on the sand, whilst others bobbed gently in the water, their timbers creaking with the shifting of the sea. With no obvious sign of life on the beach, Rhiannon's steps faltered. Where was Leif? Had she arrived before him?

Unwilling to call out for fear that she would awaken any guards who had been left on board the vessels, she started toward the other side of the bay. The serpent figurehead on the bow of the closest longboat stared down at her with wooden eyes. Rhiannon shuddered and looked to the next ship. This one bore the head and shoulders of a fierce dragon. She picked up her pace, passing the monster just as Leif appeared from behind the next vessel.

He saw her coming and slowed his steps, the warmth of his smile banishing her fear of mythical creatures or sleeping Vikings.

"Come," he whispered, taking her hand and drawing her away from the ships.

He said nothing more until they were far enough from the vessels to be out of earshot. It seemed that she had been correct about the guards.

"Are you willing to scramble up the rocks?" he asked.

Rhiannon eyed the rocky promontory. "That is not something most ladies would be willing to consider."

"True. But I have come to discover that you are not like most ladies."

She cocked her head to one side and eyed him impishly. "I am not sure that such a statement should be considered a compliment."

He slid his arms around her and turned so that his back was to the ships and she was hidden from the view of anyone onboard. "I cannot think of a higher one," he said.

"If I were to be completely truthful," she said, "I believe I have clambered over far too many rocks for my conduct to be considered seemly."

He chuckled. "I stand by what I said." He brushed her lips with his. "Climb with me? I have something I wish to share with you."

This was likely not the time to admit that his brief kiss had all but turned her legs to jelly. "It cannot be shared here?"

"You cannot see it from here." She gave him a puzzled look, and his expression softened. "Trust me once more."

She realized it then. She did trust him. Completely.

Stepping out of his embrace, she set her foot upon the lowest boulder. "Would you care to race?"

His laughter followed her up the uneven ground strewn with boulders and crab grass. Her feet slid twice—once on a dewy clump of sea pinks and once when a piece of sandstone gave way beneath her. Each time, Leif was there to steady her, and when she reached the top, the thrill of what she had accomplished mingled with her wonder at the magnificent view. Lowering herself onto the damp grass, she tucked her gown around her ankles and gazed out at the Viking ships gathered in the bay below.

Leif sat beside her and threaded his fingers through hers.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"That I have never seen so many ships."

He smiled ruefully. "It takes a great many vessels to transport two thousand head of cattle."

She swung to face him. "Is it certain, then? Owain Gwynedd has accepted Cadwaladr back and has paid your father what was promised?"

"Aye." Leif rubbed the back of his neck. "There were times last evening when I wondered if all parties would remain at the table long enough to settle upon anything. Cadwaladr was on his feet the instant the king attempted to excuse razing his castle to the ground. But Owain Gwynedd is a skilled negotiator, and with a promise to restore his brother's lands and to provide the pledged livestock to my father, Cadwaladr was wise enough to return to his seat."

"I daresay it will take time before the brothers have full confidence in one another again, but I am glad that they have taken these first steps to heal the rift that tore them apart," Rhiannon said.

Leif nodded. "I believe my father is pleased with the outcome also. Owain Gwynedd claims that his men can have all the cattle to the longboats by day's end."

"And the boats will sail for Dyflin immediately afterward?"

“Aye.”

Rhiannon’s heart sank. “It is too soon,” she said.

A smile tugged at his lips. “You wish to share your beach with all those Viking longboats longer than that?”

“Not the longboats. Just one Norseman.”

All trace of amusement left him. “If having me stay is something you truly desire,” Leif said, “there may be a way.”

“Tell me,” she whispered.

Leif hesitated, as though choosing his words carefully. “You are undoubtedly aware that both my father’s and Owain Gwynedd’s positions of power are only as strong as they make them. No matter their personal attachment to family members, their focus rarely strays from the truth that all family members’ marriages must be used to their advantage. Allegiances born of blending two governing families are highly prized, and with Cadwgan gone, it stands to reason that Owain Gwynedd will soon be seeking a new match for you.”

Rhiannon stared at him. She needed look no farther than Gwenllian’s situation to recognize the truth of Leif’s words. Why had she not considered her own position in like manner?

“When the meeting between Owain Gwynedd, Cadwaladr, and my father concluded last evening,” he continued, “I petitioned the king for a private audience. Despite the lateness of the hour, he graciously agreed to meet with me after the other men retired to their beds.”

He paused. A butterfly flitted past, and Rhiannon fancied she could hear the beat of its fragile wings in the ensuing silence. She met Leif’s eyes and recognized a vulnerability she had never seen before. He cleared his throat.

“I asked that he consider the benefits he and the kingdom of Gwynedd would reap if he were to arrange a marriage between the son of the jarl and the niece of the king.”

Rhiannon’s heart began to pound. “What did he say?”

“He acknowledged that an allegiance such as the one I suggested would undoubtedly protect his people from Viking raids in the future. It would also increase the likelihood of trade between our two nations and give him a powerful ally abroad.”

“But I am not the king’s daughter,” Rhiannon said. “Surely my marriage could not possibly have such influence.”

“It would seem that Owain Gwynedd disagrees.”

“He . . . he gave his approval?” She was beginning to wonder if her heart would survive this encounter.

“He did.” He tightened his grip on her hand. “I would have you know how deeply I have come to love you, Rhiannon. Our time together at the cemetery gave me hope that if I could secure the king’s consent, you might agree to be my bride, but I will not force you to accept my hand. The choice must be yours.”

Tears pricked Rhiannon’s eyes. How different this was from her summons to the great hall when she’d been informed that she was to marry Cadwgan. The dread that had settled in her stomach that day was gone, replaced by feelings of hope and joy.

Above her head, a seagull cried, and as she watched it sail over the headland and out to sea, a tear escaped and ran down her cheek. She may never fly, but Leif had offered her a new, equally rare gift: the freedom to choose love.

“When Cadwgan held me captive at Dinefwr Castle,” she said. “I knew you would come. Each morning since our return to Ynys Môn, I have walked this beach, watching for your return. I was unaware of how desperately I needed you yesterday until you came again.” Another tear fell. “I am beginning to believe that I have been waiting for you all my life.”

He slid his fingers free of hers to cup her face in his hands. His thumb gently wiped the moisture from her cheek. “If you will it, this day shall mark the end of your waiting and mine.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “That is what I wish.”

He lowered his head, and his lips claimed hers. Her arms slid up around his neck, her fingers finding his hair. He sighed and murmured her name once, twice, thrice before deepening his kiss. And Rhiannon was swept away by the wonder of the love they shared.

It was the seagulls’ cries that eventually penetrated her befuddled mind and brought awareness of the dew soaking through her gown. She shifted slightly. Leif responded, drawing back enough to gaze upon her with glazed eyes. She smiled, reaching up to touch his face. He turned his head to kiss the palm of her hand.

“You have yet to see what I wished to show you,” he said.

“Is it nearby?”

He nodded and scrambled to his feet. “Come.”

Rhiannon took his outstretched hand, and with mounting curiosity, she

walked beside him across the uneven strip of grass to the other side of the small headland. He paused at its edge, and she looked down to see a boat lying at anchor in a narrow inlet. Its shape proclaimed it to be a Viking craft, but it was significantly smaller than those in the bay.

“Whose boat is that?” she asked.

“Mine,” he said. “It is the one Knud and I used to travel to Gwynedd and Deheubarth on our previous visits.”

“But I saw you arrive on the large longboat.”

“My father requested my presence there,” he said. “I asked Knud to sail this one into the inlet so that it would be removed from the other ships and the Vikings attending them.”

“Why did you wish to keep it apart?”

“So that your first experience going out to sea might be accomplished in the quiet of the early-morning hours without unnecessary distractions or spectators.”

She stared at him, scarcely believing her ears. “You mean to allow me to sail with you?”

He chuckled. “Unless I am horribly mistaken, you very recently agreed to wed a Norseman. Mayhap I should have mentioned that sailing is a vital part of Norsemen’s lives. If you are willing, I would wish to have you experience that with me.”

Joy brought her onto her toes to press a kiss to his lips.

“Every young lady should be so fortunate as to marry a Norseman,” she said.

He wrapped his arms around her. “Will you remember that when I return home dripping saltwater with every step?”

She tipped her head to one side, eyeing him anxiously. “Will your father require you to participate in raids after we are wed?”

He shook his head. “Although my decision to eschew Viking raids many months ago did not please him, my father has come to accept it. As has my brother. My time at sea will be spent fishing, exploring, and traveling to distant markets.”

She smiled. “So long as you return home safely, I shall be happy.”

“I had thought that we might set sail this very morning,” he said.

Apprehension as real as it was unwanted rippled through her. “You wish to leave for Dyflin straightway?”

The tenderness in his expression took her off guard. “Your courage is

boundless, Rhiannon, but I will not ask that of you.” He placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “I meant only that we should catch the morning tide and sail north a little distance.”

“North?”

“Aye. North.” His eyes met hers. “Before Owain Gwynedd and I parted last evening, we came to an understanding. On condition of our marriage, I offered to stay here to train his craftsmen in the art of Norse silversmithing. In exchange, he has granted me ownership of property located a little farther up the coast.” He smiled gently. “I pray that you will desire to visit Dyflin one day, to see the beauty that is there and meet the good people who live amongst the Vikings. But until that time—should it ever come—I would wish to live in the kingdom of Gwynedd with you.”

Gratitude vied with bewilderment.

“You have given me everything I could possibly desire,” she said, her heart filled to overflowing.

“Then we are evenly matched, my love.”

He pulled her closer, and before she could ask anything more about his boat, his silversmithing, or their future home, his lips claimed hers again, and all other considerations faded into insignificance.

Author's Note

IN THE 1100s, IRELAND WAS dotted with large Viking settlements, and the country we now know as Wales was divided into multiple kingdoms. The largest of those kingdoms was Gwynedd, and at the time of this story, it was ruled by Owain the Great, who was more commonly known as Owain Gwynedd.

Owain was a strong ruler and devoted much of his energy to increasing his influence and landholding through battles and alliances. To that end, he negotiated the marriage of his daughter, Gwenllian, to Anarawd, the prince of the neighboring kingdom of Deheubarth.

Unfortunately, on the eve of his marriage, Anarawd was killed. Although historical details are scant, most historians believe that Owain's brother, Cadwaladr, was behind the murder, particularly since he and his retainers fled to Ireland immediately after the incident.

Owain was understandably furious. He'd lost a valuable alliance, and it appeared to have come at the hands of his own brother. He sent his son, Hywel, to raze Cadwaladr's castle and confiscate his land. Cadwaladr stayed in Ireland for a year before returning to Gwynedd, protected by a fleet of Viking longboats. Negotiations ensued. Owain and Cadwaladr made peace with one another, and the Vikings returned to Ireland with a prize of 2,000 head of cattle.

This remarkable account has all the makings of a good story, and upon reading it for the first time, my imagination took flight. Cadwaladr's escape to Ireland certainly pointed to his guilt, but did his reconciliation with Owain Gwynedd afterward hint that he had been unjustly accused? Was it possible that Anarawd's murder was committed by someone else entirely?

I began digging. It did not take long to uncover the story of Owain Gwynedd's and his brothers' involvement in the deaths of their three uncles from the House of Tegeingl. The few remaining members of that family, including Cadwgan ap Gronw, quickly sought retribution by killing Owain's brother, Cadwallon. There can be no doubt that Cadwgan harbored ill will toward Owain Gwynedd and Cadwaladr, but was it enough to kill again? If so, Cadwgan's desire for revenge would make him another possible suspect in Anarawd's murder.

Leif and Rhiannon are fictional characters, but I have attempted to stay true to the names, dates, and locations surrounding Anarawd's murder,

Owain Gwynedd's response, Cadwgan's history with the royal family, and the Viking involvement. Medieval historians may take exception to my decision to paint Cadwaladr as innocent, and I apologize to Cadwgan ap Gronw and his descendants if I have unjustly maligned him. I hope they will forgive me for taking this creative license and for painting him as a convincing villain. His contribution to this story was invaluable.

About the Author



SIAN ANN BESSEY WAS BORN in Cambridge, England, and grew up on the island of Anglesey off the coast of North Wales. She left her homeland to attend university in the U.S., where she earned a bachelor's degree in communications, with a minor in English.

She began her writing career as a student, publishing several articles in magazines while still in college. Since then, she has published historical romance and romantic suspense novels, along with a variety of children's books. She is a *USA Today* best-selling author, a Foreword Reviews Book of the Year finalist, and a Whitney Award finalist.

Sian and her husband, Kent, are the parents of five children and the grandparents of three beautiful girls and two handsome boys. They currently live in Southeast, Idaho, and although Sian doesn't have the opportunity to speak Welsh very often anymore, Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch still rolls off her tongue.

Traveling, reading, cooking, and being with her grandchildren are some of Sian's favorite activities. She also loves hearing from her readers. If you would like to contact her, she can be reached through her website at www.sianannbessey.com, her Facebook group, [Author Sian Ann Bessey's Corner](#), and on Instagram, [@sian_bessey](#).

Praise for Sian Ann Bessey

“*The Call of the Sea* is a work of fiction in the historical fiction and romance subgenres. It is suitable for the general reading audience and was penned by author Sian Ann Bessey. The book follows a young woman named Rhiannon, who witnesses her father’s murder at the hands of Viking raiders the day before she is to be wed to a stranger. As she travels to find meaning in her suffering, she meets Leif, a young Viking who was part of the raiding party and witnessed the murder. Guilty at his own inaction, Leif joins Rhiannon as they seek out the source of the conflict whilst growing closer.

I absolutely fell in love with the feudal world in which this story takes place and the beautiful vistas, and surroundings in which the events of the story unfold serve to make the heartbreak and challenges faced by Rhiannon and Leif all the more bittersweet. Author Sian Ann Bessey has a gift for painting beautiful scenery with words alone, transporting readers to a world far away and lost to time. Such a setting would be wasted, however, if it weren’t also accompanied by three-dimensional characters and a sweeping tale to take place in it. Fortunately, *The Call of the Sea* delivers on both fronts, with Rhiannon and Leif both going through emotional growth over the course of the story that is wonderful to watch unfold. The romance that begins to blossom as they face adversity together is excellently paced and always feels like a completely organic development between the two, culminating in a historical romance that understands both the beauty of the world in which it lives and the nature of love’s growth.”

—Readers’ Favorite five-star review

“Filled with captivating Viking adventures, this story’s twists and turns are as wild as the stormy sea!”

—*InD’tale* Magazine

“History buffs will be gratified by Bessey’s inclusion of real historical events and figures.”

—Publishers Weekly

“A beautiful tale filled with romance and history. Fans of medieval literature won’t be able to put it down.”

—Jennifer Moore, author of *The Blue Orchid Society* series

“Author Sian Ann Bessey does a great job keeping up the novel’s pace and giving readers wonderful characters to live vicariously through.”

—*Deseret News*

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