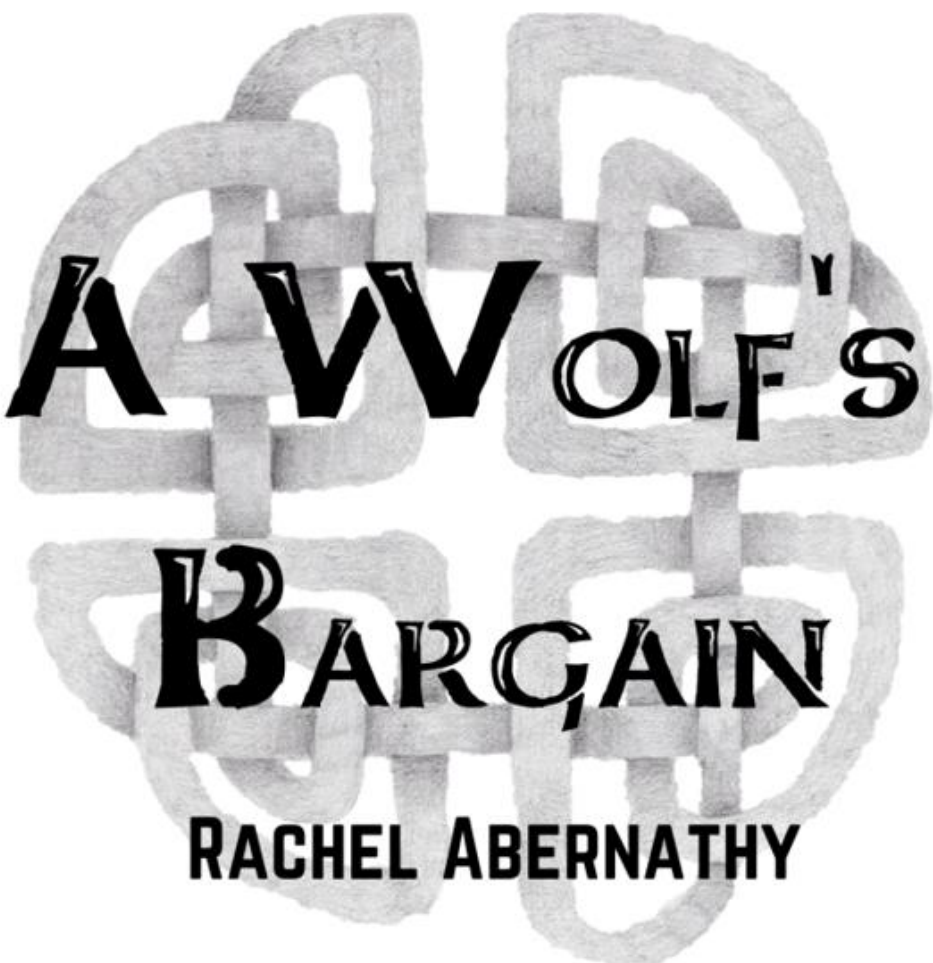


a wolf's BARGAIN

A Monster Brides Romance

RACHEL ABERNATHY



**A WOLF'S
BARGAIN**

RACHEL ABERNATHY

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Edited by Judy McCrary/Evil Commas

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Dedication

For all the girls who just wanted to lead the Big Bad Wolf on a merry chase through the woods. I see you, Sis.

Chapter 1

Cora

Summer in Ireland had always been Cora's favorite season. She was sure that elsewhere in the world, there were beautiful sights in other seasons, but to her, there was nothing more lovely than the warm breeze rolling through the grasses on a bright summer day.

Not that she had much time to enjoy such things. Ever since she'd officially come of age, her father had made sure that she had plenty of responsibility. He claimed it kept her from going on 'reckless adventures' across their lands.

He called them reckless. She called them the closest thing to freedom she had.

As a lord's daughter, she was bound to the needs of her people, and those needs never seemed to involve galloping over the hills with the wind in her hair.

Even this ride, this momentary reprieve, was a reminder of her station and her age. As a child, she might have slipped away for a few hours unnoticed. But now? She was lucky her father let her travel to the village with just one guard. Supposedly, he was meant to keep a watch out for her because of recently increased attacks from King Edwin of England and run-of-the-mill highwaymen, but the gray-haired guardsman looked ready to fall asleep in his saddle at any moment. Cora wondered if he'd make it another hundred yards before slipping off. It'd be poor manners to laugh if he did, but she wasn't sure she'd be able to help it.

Her lower back ached from sitting with a perfect posture, but even here, away from everyone else, she was expected to play her part. Deirdre, her elderly lady-in-waiting, never wasted an opportunity to remind her of the expectations of the world around her.

Sit straight.

Speak softly.

Never argue.

Walk slowly.

Chew quietly.

Never let on that your fingers hurt after a day of pricking them on needles for the sake of your embroidery.

And never, ever, let anyone know that the Captain of the Guard took time every Tuesday to teach you how to use a sword and buckler.

She had the impression that since her mother's death, her father—and Deirdre—felt the need to overcompensate in her education. Everything she did had a purpose—even her daily rides on Epona had a purpose. Apparently, a lady should take every opportunity to practice good form and posture.

Cora often daydreamed of running away and joining the wildlings and faeries of the forests just for a bit of fun.

Behind her, the guard snored so loudly that his horse startled. It reared back, almost knocking old Cormac from his saddle. He woke with a shout, arms wheeling to keep his balance. Cora shook her head as he gripped the reins, wide-eyed and frantic. “My Lady! Are we under attack?”

“No, Cormac,” she said with a laugh. “No brigands, thieves, or highwaymen to be seen. So sorry to disrupt your nap!”

Cormac bristled, his bushy mustache twitching with indignation. “A seasoned guard such as myself would never be so lax in his duty! I was enjoying the sun and the breeze, that's all. It's a fine day.”

“A lovely day indeed,” she agreed, a playful smile curving her lips. “But we'll be in the village soon. Perhaps you might... appreciate the day a bit later?”

“Aye, Lady. Never fear, I'll keep a sharp eye. Never know when you'll come across a thief or one of those wildlings.”

Cora rolled her eyes and smiled. “Ah, yes. I'm sure Cillian Fane himself will leap from the bushes, a wolf's head on his shoulders, just to test if you're enjoying the sun too much.”

Cormac scoffed. “You jest, Lady, but Fane and his wolf men are no laughing matter. You know, I heard -”

“I don’t care for rumors, Cormac, or for bonfire stories meant to frighten children.”

Strange men with frightening abilities, such as the infamous Cillian Fane and his wild wolf changelings, were popular among the guards at night. Even as a child, Cora had dismissed the stories of men transforming into wolves during a full moon. It had seemed too unbelievable, too strange. Besides, the world was frightening enough as it was. One didn’t need to believe in wolf-men to see that.

Of all of her duties, visiting the surrounding villages was the one she dreaded the least. There were no physicians available, even if their people could afford their services. Most were lucky to have a midwife nearby, or a hedge witch handy with healing herbs. Her mother had seen it as part of her duty to the people of their lands to attend them and provide what medicines and resources she could. After she’d died, Cora had happily taken her place.

Her father claimed the visits were key to their standing as the lords of Ossory, and she supposed that was true. Many lords preferred to lead from great halls and distant castles, never bothering to know the people who worked their lands. Fergus Kilkenny believed a ruler was strongest when his people’s loyalty came from love and respect rather than fear. He supported her work because he felt it inspired trust and good faith between him and his people. Cora worried that one day he might suggest an actual physician would serve them better. Without the weekly time outside of the castle, she feared she’d waste away with boredom.

They were still a way off from the village when something in the distance caught Cora’s attention. The main road to the nearest village wasn’t often busy. Today, she and Cormac had been alone, with nothing but the sun and the breeze to keep them company. It was strange, then, when she was sure she heard the sounds of shouting somewhere far off. A small figure ran out from the forest ahead, racing as though pursued by the Devil himself.

“Hold, My Lady.” Cormac scanned the open field with suspicion. “Something’s not right.”

Cora pulled her mare to a stop, shifting nervously in her saddle. Cormac drew his sword, but it was soon clear that he wouldn’t need it. A young boy bounded through the long grass, waving his arms wildly. When he came close enough to make out his features, Cora gasped and called out to him.

“Niall! What are you doing here? Your mother will dig your grave herself if she finds you so far from home!”

The boy, Niall, stumbled to a halt next to her horse, panting as though he’d run the entire way from his family’s farm at the edge of the village. His wild, wheat-blond hair clung to his head with sweat. “Lady Cora, you must help!” he begged between heaving breaths. “Englishmen. The village. They attacked without warning. My da, he went to stop them! My mam told me to run—to get help! Please, Lady, we need help!”

“Lady, we should leave now,” Cormac said, coming up beside her. “If they are in the village, they may come this way next.”

It wasn’t the first time Edwin’s men had attacked an Irish village, but they’d never come to her father’s lands before. Cora’s heart lurched when images of the village people flashed through her mind. There were no warriors there. No guards. The people of that village were farmers and herdsman, and after a terrible sickness two winters before, they had few enough grown men as it was. They would be defenseless against trained men with weapons.

Cora shook her head. “There’s no time! If there are wounded, I can help them! Niall, run for the castle and find Captain Éogan. Tell him what you’ve told us—they’ll send men immediately!”

“Yes, Lady!” Niall dashed off without another word, dust flying beneath his feet.

“Lady, I must insist! If what the boy says is true, I cannot allow you to do this! If the Englishmen were to—”

Cora tightened her grip on Epona's reins and glared at her escort. "Cormac, those are our people! They need us! Who knows when reinforcements will come? People are dying now! If you're so worried about my safety, I suggest you come along and protect me!"

Without waiting for Cormac's reply, Cora dug her heels into Epona's flank and rode for the trees.

••••

CORA SMELLED THE SMOKE before she saw it. The forest path that marked the last leg of her journey had always been peaceful, and she'd often wished it would last longer than it did. Today, she prayed for the end to appear as the path flew by under Epona's feet.

She tried to ignore the images that flashed through her mind of the carnage that might await them. Ruthless Englishmen with blood-stained swords, mothers crouched over their children, and fathers and sons meeting iron and steel with pitchforks and hunting knives. Angry tears burned her eyes, but she wiped them away and urged Epona to run faster. There was no time for tears, no time for weakness, fear, or hesitation.

Cormac cursed behind her. He'd been trying to overtake her, to cut off her path to the village, but Epona was young and strong, and his old mare could barely keep up.

"My Lady, stop!" he roared. "We must go back! Please, Lady!"

Cora ignored him, her gaze fixed on the road ahead. They were close. So close that she could hear cries up ahead. Her breath hitched when she saw black smoke curling into the sky. The border of trees outside the village couldn't hide the billowing clouds or the bright flames that spread across thatched roofs.

When Epona broke through the tree line, Cora pulled her to a stop so quickly that the mare reared up in surprise. She stared wide-eyed, her mind struggling to make sense of the scene before her.

Bodies lay littered on the ground like forgotten bundles of wheat, blood pooling in the dirt beneath them. Every home had been set on fire, as had the fields beyond the village. Animals ran through the chaos, screeching in fear as they trampled bodies and dodged crumbling buildings. A child wailed somewhere nearby, screaming for its mother. It was all that Cora had feared and more.

Swallowing down the bile that rose in her throat at the scent of smoke and blood, Cora quickly scanned the area. There was no sign of the English attackers, only the evidence of their presence in the chaos left behind.

She turned to Cormac, who stared in shock at the carnage and destruction. He formed the sign of the cross and said, “Holy Mother preserve us—they had no chance... no warning.”

“Why would the English do such a thing?” she asked bitterly. “These weren’t soldiers in a battle! They were farmers! Shepherds! Women and children and old men! What could they have done to deserve this?”

Cormac sighed. “They did nothing to deserve it, lass. This was a message. King Edwin... he wants the lords to know that he’s a threat. That at any moment, he could strike.”

“Do you think they’ll be back?”

Cormac thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No. They’ve done their job. Burned the village and the fields and likely ran off with anything of value. There’s nothing left here but trouble once your father arrives.”

Cora nodded, steeling herself against what lay ahead. “Then we’d best get to it. There are survivors who need care and dead who deserve a proper burial.”

“Aye, Lady.”

The deep breath she took to steady herself only filled her lungs with the stench of death and smoke, and as they rode toward what was left of the village, she wondered if it was an omen.

Chapter 2

Cora

She'd only been a child when her mother died, but Cora remembered that day with perfect clarity. She remembered the acrid smell of burnt herbs and her mother's blood as the doctor bled her again and again to remove the sickness from her body. Hours later, when her mother's eyes had closed for the last time, her face had been as white as snow. Cora had buried her face in her mother's neck and sobbed until her throat was raw. There had been nothing in that moment but agony and the smell of blood.

That same agony enveloped her like a heavy cloak as she made her way through the village. The first burnt-out husk of a home belonged to an elderly woman and her two small grandchildren. Dried blood and ash streaked their skin, evidence of what they'd endured. She'd sent them away when the invaders came, and they'd run right into a thicket of thorny bushes to hide. When they'd seen her collapse after being struck, they'd left their hiding place and come back to protect her. That they hadn't died alongside her had been a miracle unto itself.

It was the same everywhere she turned. Over and over, she'd clean one wound to be presented with three more. She'd sew a cut closed only to find the body of someone who'd bled out before she could get to them. She used every bit of the comfrey and willow bark she'd brought along. Brewed pot after pot of tea. Pressed cups into hands until she couldn't remember the faces that went with them. The pointless and all-encompassing agony squeezed in all around her like a fog. So many dead or injured. So many without hope or answers or anything at all except for the knowledge that everything they held dear was gone.

She worked for what felt like years without rest. How could she stop when there were still people in need? She'd cried the first time she recognized one of the bodies. By the tenth, she was numb. The ache settled in her chest like a stone,

but there were still people in need. Still more hands reaching for her and more blood to wipe away.

By the time she heard her father's horses in the distance, she and Cormac had seen to most of the survivors. They thundered into the village like the devil himself ran behind them with Lord Fergus in the lead. He brought them to a quick halt once they reached the village center. When his eyes found her, Cora saw the same hopelessness that threatened to consume her.

For a moment, she imagined running into his arms. As a child, any time life had been too difficult, the night too dark, or the sadness too great, her father had been the port in her storm of uncertainty and fear. She'd struggled since childhood with nerves, and the near-constant shaking in her hands during times of trouble infuriated her to no end. As a child, her father would take her hands in his and stroke them until she calmed. The urge to revert to old habits was strong after a trying day.

Before she could decide, her father dismounted and strode toward her. "Cora! What are you doing here, lass? Where's your escort?"

Cora pointed toward the village's makeshift cemetery. "He's there," she said tiredly. "They've been digging new graves for hours."

Her father ran his hands over her face and hair as if assuring himself that she was still whole. She brushed his hands away and frowned. "I'm fine, Father. These people were not so lucky."

"You shouldn't have come!" he protested. "Why didn't you ride for home? The boy said the attackers were Englishmen. What were you thinking, girl? What if they'd taken you?"

Cora smoothed her skirt, dusting away the mud and ash as best she could. There was no helping the blood—her shirt was likely beyond saving with all the bloodstains—but it still felt like she ought to try. It hadn't mattered before—no one had cared a whit when she was busy setting bones and wrapping bloody injuries. In front of her father, though, she felt that

somehow the signs of her labor were evidence of a sin rather than a badge of honor.

“The invaders were gone by the time we arrived,” she said. “I was thinking that our people here needed help. There was no time to waste with so many injured.”

Some of the relief in her father’s eyes shifted to anger. “But you didn’t know they’d be gone, did you? Christ Almighty, of all the fool things! If they had seen you—if they’d known who you were—you could be on your way to England by now to be held for ransom! I’ll see Cormac thrashed for letting you anywhere near here!”

“No!” Cora clenched her fists to calm the trembling. “It wasn’t his doing! I was the one who ran off. Once we were here, what else could we do but help? Look around you—all those who died—”

“And you could have been one of them!” her father bellowed, his voice echoing in the surrounding air.

“My Lord?”

What was left of the village’s population had gathered around them at her father’s arrival. Battered, ash-streaked, and bloody, they knelt before their lord. One of the older boys—one of only two fighting-age lads left—lifted his head. His lip was split, and his clothes were torn and bloodied, but he didn’t seem to notice. “Begging your pardon, My Lord, but the Lady Cora... she saved my mam. One of the English bastards snuck past me and...” he paused, his throat working as though the words were painful to say. “They got my da, and my younger brother. My mam was hiding in the house when they found her. Cut her up, they did, Sir. I thought she’d die in my arms. But Lady Cora stopped the bleeding. Got her all bandaged up, and now she’s only sleeping. Not dead, Sir, only sleeping.”

Her father stared at the boy, the anger fading from his expression until all that was left was a tired sort of resignation. He gestured to one of his men. “Spread out and see what needs to be done. Load up anyone who’s left. Bring the wounded to the castle and find transport to take the able-bodied to Waterford. They’ll find lodging and work there.”

“What of our homes? Our livestock? What of our lives here?” This time, the question came from a woman old enough to be Cora’s mother. Her long, dirty gray hair hung loose down her back, and she clutched a small rosary in her hands.

Her father sighed and shook his head. “My apologies, Madam, but you can’t stay here. Your homes are gone, your animals have fled, and your fields are burnt to ash. It’ll be at least a year, maybe more, before this land will recover from the fires. There’s nothing left for you here. You must leave.”

Tears streaked down the woman’s face, but she nodded in agreement.

Things moved quickly after that. Her father’s men carried everything from children to a few frightened chickens to a cart they’d salvaged from the wreckage of the village. They loaded those too injured to make the journey to Waterford onto makeshift pallets and dragged them behind the soldiers’ horses. Cora helped where she could, ignoring the looks her father gave her as she moved from person to person. Though he hadn’t said as much, she knew he would have preferred her to run. He’d have accepted their people’s lives as forfeit as long as she’d been safe.

But she couldn’t be safe. Not as long as the Englishmen were bold enough to attack a village so close to their homes. There was nowhere in all of Ossory safe as long as Edwin’s troops threatened war with every violent act.

When they were finally mounted and headed for home, Cora directed Epona next to her father’s horse. They rode in silence for several long minutes, but finally, she asked, “Would you really have had me run? Even knowing that I could help?”

Her father sighed heavily and ran a hand down his face. “*A stór*, someday you will learn there are things a man never gambles with. There are things too precious to risk losing, no matter the cost to keep them. You are my dearest and only daughter, and if anything had happened to you, I—” he paused, cleared his throat, and continued. “It’s my duty to keep you safe, lass.”

“And it’s my duty to serve my people,” she argued. “You’ve said so yourself. They needed help, and I could provide it. Isn’t that what you’ve trained me for all these years?”

Her father snorted. “I didn’t train you to take on Edwin’s bloody army all by yourself, now did I?”

They went quiet for a moment, lost in their own thoughts and lulled by the sound of hoofbeats on the worn road. Finally, her father spoke again. “I hear what you’ve said, Cora. I hear so much of your mother in your words that I can hardly be surprised that you follow her actions as well. But keeping our lands safe is my duty, not yours.” He fixed her with a hard stare. “You’re not to do something so reckless again. I will reach out to our allies and request aid in repelling the English. With any luck, one of the other lords will have men to spare.”

“If they don’t?” she asked, simply for the sake of being ornery.

“Well then, I suppose I’ll have to look into other avenues, won’t I? But I will find a way to protect our people. Don’t you doubt that.”

Her father’s promise ringing in her ears, Cora turned her thoughts from the village. If they’d already had reinforcements to protect their land, she wouldn’t have had to be there. The English might have been beaten back so badly that they would never set foot in Ireland again.

But then, she thought of Niall running away from the village—away from his family—for help. They’d all died. Not a single member of his family had survived the attack, and now Niall had no one left in the world. Cora bit the inside of her cheek, willing herself to ignore the sharp ache in her chest at the thought of the wild-haired little boy.

She prayed her father would find a plan soon.

Chapter 3

Cora

Cora marched up to the door to her father's study, a look of grim determination on her face. Though there were certainly details of his duty as lord of Ossory that he didn't share with her, he'd always been open with her regarding the responsibilities he shouldered for their people. She'd played in his study as a child; listened to his negotiations with neighboring lords as she rocked her dolls in her lap. She might not be a son, but her father had never treated her as though she were incapable of understanding what it took to lead a community like theirs.

From the moment they'd returned from the village after the English attack, he'd avoided her. She'd tried to corner him for days. She'd waited interminable hours as he heard petitions and questions only to have her own ignored. The food she'd brought him had been graciously accepted, but her presence had been promptly rejected. No matter what she did, he refused to discuss what had happened or how he planned to move forward.

For him to be purposefully dismissive like this was unlike him, and she didn't like it. Not only were there rumors of war with the English, but their people had been attacked! She'd seen it—been right in the thick of the aftermath. How could he expect her to simply forget it and move on? How could he wave her away like she was some... some simpering lady with a fan in her hand and air in her head?

She lifted her hand to knock on the door and demand—vehemently request—answers. As her hand descended, she heard voices. Though muffled, it was easy to pick out her father's voice, along with that of his steward, Daniel. Rather than crouching at the keyhole to be caught like a nosy child, Cora made her way to the servant's entrance nearby. Many of the rooms had small side doors used by their maids and other staff, and as a child, she'd familiarized herself with them all.

The door opened without a sound, leading her into a small alcove just out of sight of her father's desk.

This close, it would be much easier to hear the conversation. Even better, the alcove was covered by a tapestry. She could see into the room, but the shadows hid her from sight. So long as she was quiet, she'd be able to listen and watch without detection.

The first thing she noticed was her father's face. Though Fergus Kilkenny was by nature a serious man, he'd always had an easy smile for her. He kept his emotions well hidden from the world, and she'd always liked that she got to see pieces of him that weren't visible to others. Now, her father's face was drawn and tired in a way she'd never seen before. He stared at a letter in front of him, forehead creased with worry. Daniel paced in front of his desk, running trembling hands through his thinning hair.

“What will we do, My Lord? Without aid—”

The fist her father unexpectedly slammed against the hard surface of his desk effectively silenced his steward. Cora barely covered her mouth in time to stifle a startled gasp.

“I am well aware of what will happen without aid, Daniel. You think I haven't considered it? I've thought of little else since I sent the bloody letter. I'd hoped he'd be swayed by the coin, but apparently not.” He sighed, his face drawn as though in pain. “The hard truth is that without the support of the other lords or Fane and his wild-men, the English will overrun Ossory like rats in a grain house.”

“Is there no one else, My Lord? No one else who might answer?”

Her father's shoulders slumped, the anger from his outburst fading into hopelessness. “No one who would make any difference. This rebellion will die before its birth. Each of the lords has resolved to see to their own lands, and none are willing to spare their own lean forces to protect another. Some have even sent missives to Edwin himself, hoping to negotiate some sort of peace to avoid his wrath. I'd hoped that perhaps with someone as notorious as Cillian Fane at our backs, they

might reconsider. All together, we might stand a chance. But alone?”

Her father paused, and Cora clenched her fists as the tension squeezed at her heart like a vise.

“It’ll be a massacre.”

The men fell silent. Cora fought the urge to burst from her hiding place and demand that they not give up. That they keep fighting. It’d be worth her father’s anger at her intrusion if they’d listen to her. She’d almost worked up the courage when Daniel spoke again.

“Surely there are other ways to encourage an alliance. After all, Fane and his army of wildlings are only free until the lords tire of paying his price. Those luchthonn... they’ve roamed these lands for years as little better than hired thugs and mercenaries. They’re talented warriors, but the rumors... well, he must know it’s only a matter of time before the lords turn him and his kind away. Perhaps another letter to subtly remind him of that while we pursue other alliances? A more stable alliance... one based on marriage? That might turn a few heads.”

Cora bit the inside of her cheek to hold back her protest. Marriage? No—they wouldn’t.

He *couldn't*.

Her father sighed heavily, rubbing a hand down his face. “I’d thought of that. Cora came of age last summer, and at least three of the lords have sons of marrying age. I haven’t given it much thought till now—Cora’s feelings on marriage are as keen as a cat’s to water. And since Brigid died, well, I admit that it’s been helpful to have her near. She’s good with the common folk in town, like Brigid was.”

Anger warred with fear in her heart, and the sensation left her too hot and too cold all at once. It was as though fire and ice had collided in her chest, leaving her breathless and raw. It wasn’t uncommon for daughters to be married off for an alliance’s sake, but her father had never even hinted that he might consider such a thing. He’d taught her to fight. To shoot.

To hunt. When other girls were busy with their sewing, she was off practicing sword forms with her father's captain.

Her father had given her tools and skills no other lord would think to give a lowly daughter. He'd complain, sometimes, that her mother would be ashamed to see how wild she'd become, but he always followed it with a soft smile and a teasing tweak of her nose.

Now he'd marry her off like some sort of broodmare to some simpering, spoiled lordling who needed someone to wipe his arse after using the privy?

"My Lord... Fergus... it may well be the only way. The fever last winter—we lost many good men. And with no allies to call on and a rejection from Fane? A smart match might save us if Edwin makes good on his threats of conquest."

Cora's thoughts whirled. Her anger disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared, replaced with the acidic burn of guilt. Could a marriage really save her people? And if it truly would, could she be selfish enough to refuse? She thought of the young man in the village that morning. He'd been so ready to run off to fight in a battle that would likely claim his life. He wanted to protect his mother. His family. His home.

What if this was the only way she could protect *her* home?

The room had gone quiet. Cora risked moving the tapestry just enough to see a bit better. Her father was slumped over his desk, head buried in his hands. Daniel knelt next to him, a hand on his arm. They were both thankfully still too distracted to notice her, so she used the opportunity to slip back out the door. There was no need to hear more.

She wandered the castle aimlessly, unaware of where she went or anyone around her. When anyone spoke to her, she mumbled some request for their pardon and kept walking. Her father's words ran through her thoughts over and over until they jumbled all together.

Marriage.

War.

Criminals.

Massacre.

Over and over until she thought she might scream.

When she finally came out of her stupor, Cora found herself curled up in the corner of Epona's stall. The rough scratch of hay under her legs was uncomfortable, and her limbs felt heavy, a testament to how long she'd been there.

Across the stable, one of the stablehands bent over a stall with a shovel. Every few seconds, he scooped a pile of waste from the stable floor, tossed it into a nearby wheelbarrow, and bent to do it again. Once he'd cleaned out the stall, he grabbed a pitchfork with fresh hay and tossed it in for whatever horse would occupy it next. When he'd finished, he straightened, wiped an arm across his brow, and looked her way.

“Ah, finally back with us, Lady?”

Cora stood slowly, grasping the stall walls for support in case her legs gave out. They trembled like she'd just climbed a mountain but didn't collapse. “How long have I been here?” she asked.

The boy, Bran, set his pitchfork aside and leaned against Epona's stall. His auburn hair stuck to his sweaty forehead, and Cora wondered what her own must look like. She tried to discreetly pat it down, but Bran just smiled as though he knew what she was doing.

“Twenty, maybe thirty minutes. You wandered in all dazed and quiet. Didn't answer when I called to you. Just walked right into the stall and sat down in the hay. Thank your stars I'd already cleaned that one out! But you weren't bleeding or in pain that I could see, so I just...” he trailed off, rubbed the back of his neck, and shrugged.

“You just what?”

Bran's cheeks went pink, and he said, “I just figured you needed somewhere safe and quiet for a spell, so I left you alone and kept watch. Made sure no one would bother you. No one was running around like you'd gone missing, so I didn't think it'd do any harm.”

“Bran, I... thank you.”

His face went as red as his hair as he waved her thanks away. “Weren’t no trouble, Lady. Are you all right, then?”

Cora let go, testing the steadiness of her legs. “Yes, I’m fine. I was just... thinking about something. As you said, I just needed some quiet for a moment.”

“Must have been something serious to put you in such a state.”

Cora nodded but kept silent. Bran was a kind lad, but she couldn’t tell him what she’d heard. If he thought she was considering something dangerous, he might feel compelled to tell someone else. She couldn’t risk it with the way stories spread like wildfire amongst the staff.

Wait... stories.

“Bran!”

She startled them both with her shout. Bran nearly fell into his wheelbarrow, and she scrambled for the wall to keep her footing.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Cor—Lady! I’m right here! No need to shout like that!”

“Sorry, Sorry! I just—what can you tell me about Cillian Fane?”

Bran frowned. “What would a lady like yourself need to know about a scoundrel like him?”

Cora’s thoughts raced for an excuse. “I heard some of the kitchen girls talking. Gossiping, really. They were telling stories about him that sounded, well, quite frightening. And then they said he might be close by, and I—well, I was afraid.” She tried to school her features into a convincingly worried expression to sell her story.

Bran stepped forward and reached a hand out in comfort before thinking better of it and pulling it back. “Ah, Lady. Don’t be troubling yourself with kitchen gossip. Fane and his wildlings are nothing for you to fret about.”

She took a step closer to him and looked up at him through lowered lids. “Please, Bran. I think if I could just hear the truth

—anything you could tell me—I’d feel so much better. I know it was just gossip, but I was so worried.”

A small part of her felt guilty for manipulating Bran this way. She’d known he was sweet on her for months—everyone knew everything around the castle. But she’d never done anything to encourage him before now.

Bran’s expression turned soft. He boldly laid a hand on her arm and squeezed. “Of course, Lady. I’d hate for you to worry needlessly. What would you like to know? I’ll tell you what I’ve heard from the guards and village folk.”

He answered all of her questions.

Every one.

As he spoke, she listened.

And as she listened, she began to form a plan.

Chapter 4

Cora

Epona let out a soft nicker as they made their way through the trees. There didn't seem to be any paths to follow, and the pouring rain and thick mud had hidden any signs of human presence.

Something rustled in the bushes. With Bran's stories of wild wolf-men fresh in her mind, Cora pulled the horse to a stop as she scanned the foliage for danger. For a moment, there was nothing but quiet. Then a little red fox ran in front of them, his bushy tail a bright beacon in the dimming daylight, and Cora laughed at herself, shaking her head at her fear. Bran was wrong. He had to be. Cillian Fane was a man and nothing but a man. Whatever he'd done to make people like poor Bran believe he was anything more—well, it was all rubbish and stories.

His men were only men. Men who'd benefited from the fear their reputations had brought them, no doubt. After all, poor villagers and stable hands knew little of the outside world and were quick to believe in magic and the like to explain what they didn't understand. Cora told herself that the only wolves in these woods were the kind her father hunted every winter. Thin, mangy, mean things that went after sheep and whose pelts fetched a decent price at the market.

There was nothing else. There were no magical men who walked about in wolf skins here. They were men. Dangerous men, certainly. Men she'd have to convince of her worth to make her plan work.

But men all the same.

She repeated the words until they matched the beat of her horse's hooves in her mind. She continued to watch the trees but forced herself to ignore any other rustling sounds. If it were Fane or his men, she wouldn't let their first impression of her be a trembling, fainting maiden who started at every noise.

It was difficult to navigate in the fading light. The few details she'd overheard from her father and his steward hadn't been completely clear, but she finally spotted a bright spot in the distance—a fire.

The wolf-men's encampment. It had to be. They'd been a few hours' ride from her home the whole time! Anger burned in her heart. She remembered her father's attempt to help their people. He'd been so desperate, he'd asked for Fane's help—offered to pay him, even—but the dirty criminal had refused!

Cora slowed her mount as she pulled in a deep breath to steady herself. She'd have to be calm. Controlled. If she wanted to earn Fane's respect, she couldn't be an ordinary lord's daughter. She'd have to be someone else. Thoughts of Boudica, the warrior queen, straightened her in the saddle. She might not be a queen or a warrior, but she could be strong.

The firelight grew brighter as she approached. Cora gasped when two men seemed to materialize out of the shadows. They carried no torches but moved through the early evening gloom as though it were daylight. When one met her eyes, his own seemed far too bright in the low light.

“Ye must be lost, little lass,” one rumbled.

He was a large man with a thick neck and a full, dark beard. When he grinned, Cora noticed more than a few missing teeth. She sat up straight in the saddle and tilted her nose into the air. “I am not lost, Sir. I'm here to see Master Fane on urgent business.”

The other man, much thinner and frail-looking than his friend, laughed sharply. “Oh, business, is it? And just what kind of business might a beauty like yourself have with Old Fane? I might have a bit of business with you myself if that's what you're calling it!”

Cora scowled at the man's insinuation but had no chance to respond before the first man reached over and walloped the other upside the head. “Mind your tongue, Thom. Know you were born in a gutter somewhere, but even you can tell the difference between a lady and a whore, can't you?”

Cora looked back and forth between the two men. Vulgar as they were, these two were clearly the gatekeepers to Fane's camp. She'd have to get through them to find him. She cleared her throat and waited until the two men looked up. "Good Sirs, please. I'm here to see Cillian Fane. Please take me to him."

The men cackled, their laughter rough and grating like stone. The smaller one—Thom—grinned and said, "You'll find no sirs here, lass. No highborn dandies for your manners. Only us beasties here."

Cora thought again of Bran's stories and allowed herself a moment of nervous fear before shoving it away. These were rough men—soldiers and criminals. Nothing more.

They only meant to frighten her, and if she flinched like a frightened rabbit, they'd assume their assumptions about her to be right.

She straightened her back, sat tall in the saddle, and looked them straight in the eyes. "Well, Sir, I am no beast. And I've traveled too far to be made a joke by wildling watchmen. Either take me to Cillian Fane or let me pass so I may find him myself."

The smile the large guard gave her was strange, full of teeth and insolence. He bowed—too deep and meant as a jest—and said, "As you wish, my lady. But don't say we didn't warn you, aye?"

Cora stiffened, then asked, "What do you mean by that?"

The guard glanced up the hill toward the group of tents—the largest of which sat right in the center of the camp. "Fane don't take kindly to strangers. Takes even less kindly to them what show up unannounced at nightfall. So we'll take you to him as you ask, lady, but we make no promises about how he'll receive you."

The men cackled at their own humor before beckoning her deeper into the camp. Cora remained on her horse, thinking it wise to have any high ground she could manage, even if it was only the physical high ground of Epona. They passed dozens of men—more men than she'd expected. Dressed in rough-

spun tunics and animal skins, they appeared just as wild as Bran's stories. They gathered in groups around small fires hung with roasting meat and large pots of stew, but most looked like it'd been some time since their last decent meal.

The men watched her as she passed. Dozens of eyes seemed to track her every movement, and Cora forced herself to remain straight and tall in her saddle. She refused to meet their eyes. Instead, she fixed hers on the large tent ahead. A large fire roared in front of it, and it was clearly the focal point of the entire camp. Three times the size of any other tent, the rough fabric had seen better days. Large pelts covered thinner areas of cloth, and it was evident that the poles supporting the structure were freshly cut. It suggested that Fane hadn't been there long and likely didn't intend to stay long either.

She'd have to change that.

She *had* to.

Failure wasn't an option if her people were to be saved.

Despite her resolve to remain calm, her heart raced as they approached the tent. She dismounted, ignoring the way her guides looked her up and down. She was a head shorter than even Thom. As they passed the large fire, Thom promised to guard Epona while his companion led her into the tent.

A group of men were crowded around a large table in the center of the tent. Small braziers lit the area, placed well away from anything that might catch fire. While not as bright as the halls of her home at night, it was more than enough to make out the features of the group before her. Most had long hair and beards that likely hadn't seen a comb in years. Like the men outside, they were dressed in rough linen clothing and well-worn leather boots, but unlike the others, the pelts around their shoulders were thick and well-kept. The skins were secured with a golden pin over their heart, and Cora wondered idly if they'd had to hunt the beasts themselves.

At first, they didn't seem to notice her. They argued back and forth around the table, gesturing to things on the map that she couldn't see. After a few moments, the guard cleared his throat and called out, "Fane! Someone to see you, Sir!"

The room went quiet, and the crowd around the table parted like Moses himself had split them down the middle. They all stared at her, but Cora didn't bother to notice any of them. Her only concern was the man across the table. He stood out from the rest, the thick wolf's skin around his shoulders blending into his own wild, ebony hair, making it hard to separate man from beast. His beard was longer than a proper gentleman might wear, but somehow it suited him.

He'd been leaning against the table when she'd entered, and when he straightened to his full height, he towered over the other men in the room. Her father had once told her that a genuine leader was always easy to pick out. There was something about the way they held themselves, and it was always noticeable across a room.

Cillian Fane held himself with all the dignity of a king despite his surroundings. He looked her up and down, and Cora couldn't help but wonder what he saw. Most likely, he was not as struck by her presence as she was by his unless he found some sort of wonder in short, audacious women.

Cora had pictured their conversation beginning in many different ways. She'd imagined scenarios where she'd barged in, shameless and proud, and demanded his compliance. She'd also had just as many imaginings where he'd laughed her out of his tent and back to her home. She couldn't have said which version she thought to be more likely. Still, when he finally spoke, it was nothing she'd even thought to expect.

“Are you lost, Lass?”

Cora refrained from snorting disdainfully at the idea that she'd simply wandered into his camp. Fane might rule over a pack of heathens, but she needed those heathens, and treating him with disrespect would get her nowhere.

“I'm not simple, My Lord, and neither is my horse. I know very well who you are and where I am. My name is Cora Kilkenny of the Ossory Kilkennys. My Father is Fergus Kilkenny, the lord of the lands you've so boldly settled on. The man you so cruelly denied your aid.”

Cillian Fane might as well have been a statue for all the reaction he had to her introduction. A single heavy brow arched, but the rest of his face remained impassive.

“And you’ve some thoughts on this matter, have you, Lady Kilkenny?”

His tone was cool but still somehow gave the impression that she’d amused him. Cora fought the urge to smooth her dress or adjust her cloak. It was difficult to stand still in front of him. She wondered if he knew.

“Aye, I do. As I’m sure you know, Edwin of England has declared an intent to cross the channel and take this land. The lords of these lands will defend themselves as best they can, but they are divided. Ossory will need help if the English attack again. There’s no mistaking that. We’re a sizable kingdom, but we’re no match for King Edwin’s forces should he cross the sea between us. Your men are the best, and you’ve sold your services before. I’m sure my father’s offer was generous. Why would you deny us?”

Fane listened patiently, not interrupting as she’d thought he might. Instead, he stared, watching her as though he could see her thoughts through her eyes. Like his guardsmen, Fane’s eyes seemed too bright for the low firelight, and he’d fixed them on her in what could only be called a predatory manner. It reminded her of a wolf in the woods as it cornered a rabbit. His eyes were an uncommonly bright shade of blue; in other circumstances, she might have called them lovely. As it was, it was hard to look at him and not feel like prey.

Finally, he blinked. “My men aren’t common whores to be sold off to every man with coin, Lady Kilkenny.”

Cora blushed at the vulgar term but said nothing.

“They’re warriors. The best, as you so kindly noted. And aye, we have accepted payment for some of those battles. All of them, point of fact. But you’re mistaken if you think that I’m under obligation to accept any fool’s money in return for my blood.”

He paused, shrugged his great shoulders, and said, “Your father’s offering was insufficient. Simple as that. So I wonder why his daughter finds herself in my camp—alone—so late at night. Is your hope to offer something else? Something he didn’t?”

Cora lifted her chin defiantly and asked, “What would it take? What do you want, if not our coin?”

She knew what he *could* ask.

Sheltered as she’d been, she wasn’t naïve. She knew, in all reality, that if he tried to take that in the middle of the floor of this room, no one would stop him.

It was a risk she’d accepted when she’d entered the camp.

It was also why she had a small blade hidden in her skirts. Cora had no intention of being any man’s easy prey, least of all The Wolf King’s.

Fane shook his head and smiled. It was a stiff smile, and it only made her more nervous.

“That’s not what I asked, Lady Kilkenny. You’ve come here—entered my home—to change my mind. You must have considered what you’d bargain with. Tell me what you’ve brought to my table. Or did you mean for my men to die for charity?”

Not for the first time, Cora wondered if she’d been a fool. She’d let her pride and her love for her father lead her into a situation where she had no true power. Despite having only one thing to offer, she’d marched in with confidence, as though her victory was certain.

And if he didn’t want it? If he didn’t want the only thing she had to give? Where would she be then? She’d wandered into a wolf’s den. Had she really expected him to let her waltz in and out?

Low murmurs broke out around her. She’d delayed too long. “I—” she started, faltered, and started again, raising her voice over the others. “I offer an alliance with the Kilkenny family.”

The murmurs turned to chuckles.

Cillian Fane's wintry smile turned sharp and mocking. "Is that right? By whose authority do you bring this offer, Lady? Surely not your father. Unless Fergus has taken to inviting women to sit on his war councils?"

Cora clenched her fists, forcing her anger aside. He expected an over-emotional female. If there was any hope of gaining his compliance—and his respect—she'd have to remain calm.

"By my own authority. I offer an alliance through marriage."

There was a moment of tense silence before all hell broke loose within the tent. The room exploded into a cacophony of overlapping voices. One voice rose above them all.

"ENOUGH! Out! The lot of you!"

The men obeyed, their murmurs following them out the door. One man, a giant with long, golden hair, stayed behind long enough to whisper something in Fane's ear. He nodded, and the man left without another word.

Then they were alone, the silence almost deafening without all the noise. What had seemed such a small, crowded space suddenly felt as enormous as her father's great hall. Fane stood behind the large map table, and the separation felt significant somehow.

Cora shifted uncomfortably but remained silent. She'd made her offer. To say more before he responded would only weaken her position.

Finally, he spoke. "I asked you before, Lass, and I'm not yet convinced of the answer. Do you know where you are? Do you know who it is you've offered yourself up to, like the saintly lamb you are?"

Cora scoffed. "I am no lamb, Master Fane. I'm a grown woman and well aware of your reputation. But the fact remains that—"

“And what reputation is that?” he asked. “Tell me, Lady Kilkenney, what have you heard?”

Fane rounded the table, slowly stalking toward her. Cora’s words caught in her throat as he approached, crowding her space. In the low light, he seemed inhuman. The wolf’s pelt around his shoulders made him seem larger and wilder than he was, and the way he surrounded her left her feeling like a rabbit caught in a snare.

Still, she refused to take a step back.

“Some say you and your men were blessed—or cursed—by the old gods. That none can best you in battle. That you fight like—” she paused, remembering Bran’s stories.

Fane leaned in, so close now that his breath warmed her cheek.

“Like what, Lass? What do they say?”

Every second in Fane’s presence left her more ill at ease. Cora didn’t understand why he insisted on this line of questioning, but it made her uncomfortable.

She swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat and said, “Like a pack of wild wolves. They say that you become beasts on the battlefield—as wild and fierce as the wolves themselves.”

Fane’s lips tilted into a mysterious smile. “And what do you think of that, knowing you’ve offered yourself to the King of the Wolves?”

Cora leaned closer, but only a little. They were already indecently close.

“I *think*,” she hissed, “that you need this alliance, Master Fane. You may be fierce, but without the support of the surrounding kingdoms, you and your wildlings will be treated as nothing but nomadic mercenaries at best. Criminals and brigands at worst. When they don’t need you, they’ll hunt you, Wolf King, and hang your pelt with all of their other trophies.”

Fane said nothing, but this close, Cora could see the way the muscles in his jaw ticked. The low creak just below her

vision was undoubtedly him clenching his fists in his thick leather gloves. Still, she pressed on.

“With me at your side, with my father’s name behind you, you gain legitimacy. Honor. You want payment for your services? Men—*kings*—will offer you your weight in gold if they feel they can trust your name. As for me, well...”

She dared to lean forward a hairsbreadth more—so close that she could feel his breath on her face. “I told you I’m not a lamb, and I’m hardly afraid of wolf stories.”

For a moment, the room was silent. Neither spoke, and he remained so close that Cora entertained the wild idea that he might kiss her. It was a dangerous thought, but she couldn’t help but wonder what his beard would feel like against her cheek.

Cora stepped back. Though her heart beat like a drum behind her ribs and her cheeks warmed at her thoughts about the man before her, she couldn’t afford to show any weakness. When warmth spread unexpectedly below her belly, she had the sneaking suspicion that he could make her very weak indeed.

A mysterious smile spread across Fane’s face until his teeth showed. If they seemed sharper than they ought to be, she blamed it on the low light.

“The thing about stories, Cora Kilkenny, is that sometimes they turn out to be true.”

Before she could ask what he meant, Fane unclasped the pin securing the wolf skin around his shoulders. She watched, awestruck, as he set the pelt aside on the table and boldly pulled his shirt over his head. Then, despite her indignant screech, he reached down and tugged his boots off his feet!

He stood before her, bare but for his trousers, and grinned. As she searched for words, he picked the skin up from the table and readjusted the thick, black fur, tugging a piece up to rest on his head.

She opened her mouth to question him, but her words died halfway out of her mouth. Without warning, Fane groaned,

twitching as though he were in pain. The fur over his head spread, stretching over his limbs. Cora's eyes widened in horror as she watched him change...into something else.

Bones popped, and skin seemed to melt into dark, thick fur. Muscles stretched, and limbs shifted until they were longer and larger than before. Through it all, Fane's groans and snarls grew deeper, rougher, and more animalistic.

It seemed to take ages and no time at all. When it was over, Cillian Fane was gone. In his place stood a beast with fangs, claws, and bright, cobalt eyes. It was the largest wolf she'd ever seen.

Cora blinked once. Twice. As though closing her eyes would erase what she'd seen.

But it didn't.

No matter how many times she closed her eyes, the wolf was still there when she opened them. Everything seemed to have frozen, but then the wolf unexpectedly rose up on its hind legs as though it were a man. Fully upright, the wolf was taller than even the largest warrior in her father's company. Its shoulders were broad and powerful, leading down to long, thick arms tipped with wickedly sharp claws.

Before she could take in more, the beast took a step toward her.

Fear flooded her body. Primal instinct demanded that she run from the predator in front of her before he caught her, and she obeyed.

She didn't make it very far.

She'd no sooner burst through the flaps of the tent and out into the camp than a pair of arms caught her around the middle. Panic overtook reason as she struggled against her captor.

"Let me go!" she shrieked.

Cora thrashed and kicked as hard as she could, but it did her no good. The iron-like arms held firm.

"Release me! Please, it's coming!"

The tent flap fluttered, and then it was there.

Cillian Fane. The wolf creature.

Her heart pounded as it made its way toward her. She knew she would die now and wished she'd kissed her father before she'd gone.

In what she knew would be her last moments before she'd be thrown to the giant beast, she dared to look into its eyes.

Blue.

Uncommonly blue, just like—

“Peace, Lady. You're in no danger here.”

The man behind her spoke in a soft and unexpected tone, almost too quiet to hear over the sound of her own heartbeat. She might have believed him, except that the wolf creature suddenly snarled and bared its teeth.

There was nothing but darkness after that.

Chapter 5

Cillian

The girl crumpled against Cathall, the tension and terror still present on her face even in oblivion.

Good. Cillian expected that when she woke, she'd have learned a thing or two about the 'wolf stories' she'd been so quick to dismiss. He'd always found a good dose of fear set most men straight. She would be no different.

Still, he'd found her fear of his change bitter and distasteful. His beast hadn't enjoyed it either, which was strange. The feral thing lived for the hunt, and the tang of sweat and pheromones was part of the thrill. Prey was always afraid, and it made the chase that much sweeter.

This girl, though—Lady Cora of the Ossory Kilkenny's—wasn't prey. At least, not in the way he'd expected. He'd meant to frighten her, certainly. She'd barged into his tent without invitation, as fiery and wild as the hair that ran down her back. Most fine ladies he'd seen—granted, there hadn't been many—kept their hair hidden away. This one tried to keep hers contained in a thick plait down her back, but pieces escaped. The total effect made her seem much less of a proper lady but, at the same time, more real.

Cathall hefted her into his arms to keep her from falling to the ground. Cillian's snarl surprised them both. The beast within understood little about humans, but he recognized that the small, bold female had offered herself as a mate. In the beast's mind, that meant she was his already. What did he care about human tradition or ceremony? She'd shown bravery by coming here, and she was lovely—both traits the beast held in regard. That was enough. After all, he had no mate. Why shouldn't he have her? In his opinion, the man had waited far past a proper age to take a mate. If one practically fell at his feet, and such a pleasing one at that, he ought to take her before another could.

Cillian himself wasn't so easy to convince, but the wolf was stronger while he wore its skin. A powerful bond existed between a luchthonn and his beast. From the first time the man underwent the change, they were connected. It was a balance as old as the luchthonn themselves. Two halves that existed as a whole.

Once in the wolf's skin, Cillian's suspicions and human concerns faded into the background. The man meant to frighten her—teach her a bit of respect, perhaps. The wolf was curious about her. If she hadn't run from him, he might only have approached her for an inquisitive sniff. But she had run, and her fear, distasteful as he found it, triggered the instinct to hunt.

Now, with her tucked in another male's arms, man and wolf warred for control. The wolf insisted that their second ought to have left their female alone. Let her lie on the ground where he could curl around her and protect her until she woke. He would show her he was no threat to her. That his claws, teeth, and powerful body would make him a suitable mate.

Cillian resisted on principle, despite the way this form muted his thoughts and desires. The wolf's desires were obvious, but the man needed time. He had no need for a wife - had avoided them, in fact, for years. A wife—a noble wife at that—was a complication. One that he needed like an arrow to the head. The lass was beautiful, certainly, but that was only skin deep. She might be a right hag, or she might use him for her ends while contemplating his murder when the task was complete.

That being said, there was wisdom in what she'd said, damn her. His men were powerful, and his reputation reached all throughout the Irish territory. In the past, some luchthonn had protected the kings and their lands, but most had severed those ties after years of exploitation and broken promises. Cillian had made a name for himself as a mercenary of sorts, but he knew that many who called him the Wolf King saw him as little better than a common criminal. A marriage into the nobility would offer his people stability and legitimacy. It would allow him a chance to negotiate in ways that no

luchthonn ever had. A marriage to Cora Kilkenny would make him less of a myth and more of a man.

Cillian considered all of this as he watched Cathall carry the limp woman to his tent. He pictured what might happen if he were to be standing at her bedside—well, his bedside—when her eyes finally opened. Would she shrink away in fear?

He followed the pair inside. Once safe in his tent, Cillian shed his wolf's skin. As gruesome as it would have seemed to her, it was as natural as breathing for him, and he wanted to wait as a man for her to wake. Back in his own skin and master of his own mind, Cillian frowned ruefully at the tattered leathers at his feet. Any other time, he'd have simply removed them before the change. The men of his camp thought nothing of seeing a man's cock or arse before the change. But a sheltered noblewoman? The lass might have fallen over dead.

Cillian looked up in time to see Cathall lower the woman onto his bed-roll.

“Was it wise to show her so much, so fast?”

Cathall's question wasn't insolent or unwarranted, but it still irritated Cillian. “You'd have preferred I tossed her out on her arse, I suppose?”

Cathall straightened, glancing down at the unconscious woman. “There a reason you didn't? I've known you since we were both nippin' at our fathers' heels, Cillian. I've never known you to suffer anyone barging into your den unannounced, woman or man. And what she offered—it's ridiculous! You could have just sent her back to her father without showing her what you are. If she runs home, sobbing about the terrible beasties...”

Cillian chuckled. “You talk as though the whole county will descend with torches and pitchforks, brother. You forget—the lords that buy our allegiance know enough of the truth to squash any fool stable hand who might try to raise the rabble against the ‘heathen wolves.’ Even if she told anyone what she saw, they'd dismiss her as a flighty, frightened female easily tricked by smoke and shadows. Nothing more.”

Cathall frowned and crossed his arms. “Then why show her? It makes no sense, Cillian. You’re right, most wouldn’t believe her. But it was still a risk—an unnecessary one. So I ask again, as your pack brother and your second, what were you thinking?”

He’d been thinking that he wanted to see how far her bold facade would go. Despite her brazen entrance, the woman had reeked of fear. He’d wanted to know if that bravery would crumble when faced with a monster.

Cathall would say those were all terrible reasons, and he wouldn’t be wrong. If one of his men had revealed his gift for such petty reasons, he’d have bloodied him well.

Cillian grasped at the first excuse that came to mind. “I suspected she might be a witch. I meant to frighten her into revealing her power.”

Cathall raised an eyebrow. “A... witch. And what about her gave you that impression?”

“Ever known a lord’s daughter to show up in our camp with no entourage? No guards? Not even a fucking note? What kind of woman marches in the way she did, making the claims she made, with no proof of what she says?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me a witch. And you think she came here to—what—trap you into a marriage for some sort of awful ritual or some other rot? I don’t suppose you’ve fallen off that great beast of a horse recently, have you?”

Cillian bristled at Cathall’s tone and stared him down until he looked away. “Watch your tongue, pup.”

Cathall rolled his eyes. “I’m as much a pup as you, Cillian. You might be the alpha wolf, but we’re brothers. I trust you with my life, and I’ve never known you to take a risk like this. Just tell me you have a plan, and I’ll let it go.”

“I do. When she wakes, we’ll deliver the lass and the good news to Fergus himself.”

“You mean to accept her offer, then? To marry her? You can’t be serious! What’ll the other clans think—the elders? You’re an alpha, Cillian, not just some bastard runt! You’re

meant to pick a mate from one of the other clans, not some spoiled *dall* noblewoman.”

Cillian growled in warning. *Dall*, or blind, was the luchthonn term for those not of magic blood. Humans rarely accepted the existence of magical creatures, and those who did were often mistrustful and cruel. Many of their brethren had died at a stake or been run through on a pike after being accused of witchcraft. Because of this, those of magic blood had taken to calling humans blind for their inability to see the world as it truly was.

It bothered Cillian to hear Lady Kilkenny referred to as a *dall*. She was a foolish woman, yes, but not blind. She understood the dangers that her people faced, and she’d come to him with eyes wide open in order to save them.

“Don’t call her that. And if I’m so bloody important, it shouldn’t be a problem for me to do as I like, should it? Let the clans talk—I’ll bring them all to heel if needs be. I’ve told you I have a plan. Now, let that be the end of it.”

Cathall’s expression implied he had more to say, but out of respect for their positions, he lowered his eyes and nodded.

“What happens if you’re wrong about this deal? If she did this without Lord Kilkenny’s blessing, what makes you think he’ll honor it?”

Cillian glanced down at the woman still asleep on his bed. The beginnings of a plan formed in his mind, and he smiled at the possibilities ahead. “Oh, I think he’ll honor it. A bargain is a bargain, after all.”

Chapter 6

Cora

“O i! Lassie! Time to wake up now!”

The odor of old ale and a smack against her cheek jarred Cora from the deep sleep she'd been floating in. She jerked up, flailing an arm out in surprise. She struck something—a person if the surprised shout was anything to go by.

“Sweet Mother Mary, Lady, control yourself!”

A familiar face filled her vision, though it took her a moment to place it. Thad? Thane? Thom? No—Thom had been the other one. How did she know this man? He wasn't a member of their staff—how did she know him?

Cora's stomach dropped the moment her memory returned. Everything from the day before came back in a rush. The attack on the road. Her father's study. Bran. Her stupid, stupid plan.

Cillian Fane.

An offer.

A wolf.

Then nothing.

Her stomach roiled without warning. A moment later, she heaved. There was nothing in her stomach to expel, but that didn't stop her body from trying.

“Here now, Lass. You'll be alright. There's a girl.”

A large hand patted her shoulder. When the spasms passed, Cora lifted her head to find the guard from the night before—the one who'd led her to Fane. He looked older in daylight, with gray peppering his dark hair and beard. The lines at the corners of his eyes crinkled as he gave her an awkward smile.

“Where—where am I? Who are you?”

The man straightened and gave her a quick bow. “Name’s Dúngal. I’m one of the luchthonn under Fane. He sent me to fetch you.”

Sharp teeth and bright blue eyes flashed in her mind’s eye. It was a warm morning, but Cora couldn’t stop the shiver that ran through her body at the memory of what she’d seen. “Fetch me? Fetch me for what? Tell me where I am!”

Dúngal scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. “You’re in the luchthonn camp. Don’t you remember coming here last evening? I brought you in myself, Lady. Surely, you remember.”

Of course, she remembered. Till the day she died and the good Lord took her soul away, she’d remember what she’d seen. That didn’t mean she believed it had been real. “I—yes. Yes, of course. My apologies, Master Dúngal. I must have bumped my head last night. I can’t even remember how I got here.”

Dúngal shuffled and scratched at his neck again, averting his eyes. “I couldn’t speak to that, Lady. Look, Fane sent me to fetch you. Best we get on our way before he thinks I’ve gone and lost you instead.”

The last person in the world Cora wanted to see was Cillian Fane. Even if everything she’d seen last night had been some sort of trick, the man had to know some sort of evil magic to make it appear so real. And she’d—oh God, she’d offered him her hand in marriage. She’d practically begged him!

Her bravado from the night before had fled, leaving in its place a certainty of the danger that awaited. If Cillian Fane was looking for her now, it couldn’t be for anything good. Still, angering him further by hiding in a tent wouldn’t make things better. Cora smoothed her skirts and her hair and faced Dúngal with a solemn smile.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way you’d take me to my horse? I could slip away with no one the wiser.”

Dúngal's grin made him appear years younger, and his surprised laughter filled the small tent. "Not for all your father's gold, Lady. Fane would have my bollocks, and I'm quite attached to them right where they are!"

Well, there went any chance of a quiet escape. Still too confused by the events of the previous night to formulate a proper plan, Cora followed quietly... for now. Perhaps Fane meant to let her go himself? After all, he hadn't sounded convinced by her arguments. If she pretended she hadn't seen the man turn into a giant wolf creature the night before, perhaps he'd allow her to leave with her life. She sent up a quick prayer promising the Almighty that if she emerged alive, she'd never doubt such stories again.

Outside, men milled around the camp like ants in the grass. Each one had a task of some sort, and no one sat idle. Some sharpened weapons, while others carried firewood or tended to horses. A few even sat chatting around buckets as they scrubbed piles of dirty clothing. Cora watched, fascinated, as they went about their work. Most stopped to stare at her as she passed, their expressions curious rather than aggressive or predatory in the way she might have expected. Dúngal greeted a few as they walked by, but they never stopped. All too soon, Cora found herself in front of Fane's tent again.

She must have hesitated a moment too long, because Dúngal cleared his throat and tilted his head toward the tent. "Off you go, Lady. He'll be waiting for you."

Cora stared at the entrance, half-sure that it had all been a dream. If it had actually happened... if Fane and his men could really become—

"Master Dúngal?"

"Aye, Lady?"

"I've not gone mad, am I?"

Dúngal smirked and replied, "I couldn't say, Lady. Most people are at least a bit cracked, I've found."

"But I didn't—that is, I didn't imagine last night, did I? He really can...." Cora trailed off. What would happen if she

asked if his leader could magically turn into a wolf? Would he laugh her claims away? Would he think her mad then?

Dúngal took pity on her. “If you saw a man one minute and a wolf the next? I wouldn’t call you cracked. Just very lucky.”

“Why would you say that?”

Dúngal’s pale blue eyes flashed dangerously, and he bared teeth that looked much sharper than they should have been. “Because you woke up this morning.”

Suddenly, her guide seemed much more dangerous than he had before. She hadn’t noticed last night, but he wore a fine, thick wolf’s pelt about his shoulders just like Fane did. The little gold pin holding it in place shone in the early morning sunshine. Her muscles tensed on pure instinct, the primal response of a smaller animal recognizing a predator.

As quickly as the danger had appeared in his expression, it disappeared. Cora blinked, muscles still tight and ready to vault her into movement, as he gave her an amiable smile. “Come now, Lady, none of that. If you were in any real danger, you’d have met it already. And it wouldn’t have been from the likes of me.”

“Why’s that?” She congratulated herself on keeping her voice steady.

His smile widened, cheerful and friendly. “Coz I likes you, Lady. Takes bollocks of pure steel to march up to a man like Cillian Fane and demand an audience. Not every day you see that from a man, let alone a young lass.”

Despite the spike of fear still present, as though someone had run an icy finger up her spine, Cora managed a smile. Dúngal nodded, content with that, and led her toward the tent’s entrance.

She parted the cloth and entered Fane’s tent, immediately noticing that, unlike the night before, there was no one there but Fane himself. He was dressed much as he had been before, with his dark hair pulled away from his face and tied with a cord at the base of his skull. Other than the fresh shirt and

trousers, he appeared exactly as he had right before... the last time she'd seen him as a man.

Fane looked up from a piece of parchment on the large table. "Ah, there you are. I thought maybe you'd given Dúngal the slip."

Nodding to her guide, he thanked him and sent him on his way. Once again, Cora found herself alone with the Wolf King, and all she could picture was the snarling beast he'd been the night before. Her heart raced, and she dug her fingernails into her palms. Every instinct demanded that she run away from the dangerous man in front of her, but she held herself still, remembering a central truth about wolves.

If you run from a wolf, it will hunt you down.

She'd worked so hard to maintain her brave facade last night, and it had served her well. It wouldn't do to fall to pieces now. She'd already fainted in front of him, but she imagined that could be overlooked given what she'd witnessed. After all, it wasn't every day a man changed into a wolf like a bloody bonfire story come to life.

"No, Master Dúngal was kind enough to speak with me as we walked. I'm afraid I slept later than intended."

Cillian gave her a knowing half-smile. "You say that as though you intended to sleep here at all. As I recall, I had to carry you to that cot myself, Lady. Let's not lie to each other for the sake of manners."

Cora held back the sharp words that danced on the tip of her tongue. She imagined the enormous beast he'd become carrying her in his arms and only barely resisted the urge to heave again. Dúngal had been right—she'd been lucky just to wake up.

"My apologies. It's not every day that one sees... such unusual things. Thank you for your hospitality."

Her governess, Deirdre, would be proud of her manners. God alone knew how much of Cora's childhood had been spent trying to beat good manners into her—occasionally with a large kitchen spoon.

Fane scoffed and sneered. “Unusual things? Is that what you’ve called it in your head, Lady Kilkenny? Just unusual things? Like a pig flying through the sky or an unexpected snow in July? I asked you for honesty, not useless niceties.”

Cora gritted her teeth. What was it about this man that infuriated her so easily? Her father had hounded her for years about her temper, but it had never been so hard to contain as it was in the two times she’d spoken with Cillian Fane.

“Honesty, is it? Shall I be honest and tell you that what I saw last night was the most horrifying thing I’ve ever seen? That I never quite believed all that the priests said about demons and devils and such until you became... whatever that thing was?”

Fane’s sneer faded into something unreadable. “A demon, was it? I’ve been called many things in my life, Lady, and you’re not the first to use that particular word. A pity though, considering the bargain you’ve struck.”

Cora’s mouth went dry. “You can’t mean to—you didn’t accept!” After everything that had happened last night, she hadn’t even considered that he might still agree to her proposal.

Oh Sweet Mother Mary, her proposal! She’d offered marriage to a literal beast, and he meant to accept!

Fane’s smile seemed easy—as though they were discussing something as benign as the weather rather than marriage.

“After careful consideration of your argument, I’ve decided you were correct. An alliance with your father—with any of the Irish lords—would be beneficial to my people. You spoke the truth when you said that many view us as little better than mercenaries or criminals despite our services in their lands. Our marriage would pave the way for my people’s prosperity and respect among our countrymen. So yes, I will accept your proposal.”

The room spun, and for one awful moment, Cora thought she might faint again. She laid a hand on the edge of the large table to steady herself. Somewhere nearby, someone beat on a drum. The noise was so loud that she couldn’t hear anything above it. Her vision narrowed until all she could see was his

face and those icy blue eyes. They had looked the same when he'd changed.

By some miracle, she didn't faint. When the drumming faded, she realized it had been her own pulse pounding away in her ears. Suddenly, a large gloved hand covered hers. Cora wasn't sure when he'd moved. The immediate temptation to rip her hand away was only slightly beaten out by a fear of angering him if she did.

It was her father's face in her mind's eye that settled her. She remembered the way he'd looked in his study, so tired and hopeless. It reminded her of why she'd come to Fane's camp—why she'd made such a foolish offer in the first place. Regardless of what he was, Cillian Fane was still her people's best chance at survival when the English returned. It had been a miscalculation on her part to assume that the stories Bran had told her in the stables were pure gossip and fantasy. It had been another to believe that just because she no longer wished to go through with her offer, he'd allow her to take it back.

“Are you well, Lady?”

Fane's voice shook her from her thoughts. Cora nodded and slowly removed her hand from beneath his. “My apologies, Master Fane. You'd not seemed keen on the offer last night, so this comes as a bit of a... surprise.”

His smile widened into something almost boyish. “Just full of surprises, aren't I? Well, you'll have plenty of time to come to terms with them on the journey home.”

“Home? You're taking me home?” She'd been fully prepared to be kept prisoner in the wolf-men's camp when she'd arrived. Theoretically, yes, he needed her for a marriage ceremony, but there had been no agreement that it would take place at the castle. Hope filled her chest. Perhaps there was still time. Perhaps her father would know how to save her from the mess she'd made.

If he couldn't, she wasn't sure what she'd do.

Chapter 7

Cora

It hadn't even been a day since she'd seen her home, but when Cora caught sight of it over the crest of a hill, it was as though she was seeing it for the first time. It seemed impossible that so much could have happened since she'd left, and yet everything still looked exactly as it had before. She stared at the stone walls she'd known since birth and wondered if she'd gone mad.

Wolf skin wearers were real. The luchthonn were more than the wild men of stories. She'd seen a man change into a nightmarish creature and then back again, and yet the sky was just as blue as it had always been. The birds circled the village in the distance just as they always had. Their farmers bent low in the fields just as they did every day.

How was it possible for the world to continue when the very ground beneath her feet had shifted?

She stared at the road ahead, somehow seeing everything and nothing all at once. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she half expected the flowers on the side of the road to sprout wings and fly away. As a child, she'd imagined that the flowers of the field could sing. It had been one of her favorite games, and suddenly, she wondered if it could be true. After all, the idea had to have come from somewhere. If men could become wolves, why couldn't flowers sing?

Ahead of her, Fane surveyed the land from the top of his great black stallion. A small, rebellious voice in her heart wanted to ask him if the horse could change too—a cat, maybe? No, perhaps a fish!

Fane and his men rode through her homeland as though they had every right to be there. There was no caution—no hands clutched around weapons or eyes watchful for her father's guard. They laughed and joked with each other the whole way, talking around her as though she wasn't there at all. She'd liked it at first, content to plan what she'd say when

she saw her father. Now that they were nearly there, she wanted someone to tell her what would happen. Did they intend to just ride through the gates without so much as a by-your-leave? Would they attack the nearby village if they were denied? What would happen if her father wouldn't let them in?

People watched their passing with expressions that ranged from surprise to terror. Mothers ran for their children, pushing them towards their homes like frantic hens while men clutched their pitchforks and scythes to their chests. Several crossed themselves when they caught sight of Cora in the midst of the wildling band, their mouths moving in silent prayers. Cora fought the urge to scoff when one woman fell to her knees, hands clasped at her chest as she pleaded loudly to God for deliverance of their lady from the evil men who'd kidnapped her. God had not saved her last night. God had not struck the beast Fane had become down in his tracks. It stood to reason that if God had any interest in her current predicament at all, he'd decided not to interfere. The priests claimed that God would smite wicked men who displeased him. If that were true, how could such a man as Cillian Fane exist? Was he a demon? Could that be the answer to his unbelievable abilities?

She'd never considered herself to be particularly religious before this. She'd spent most mornings in mass trying not to fall asleep in her chair, and though her father paid lip service to the priests of the church, religion had never been a defining part of their home. Still, with no other explanation, Cora latched onto any idea that might make sense out of what she'd seen.

When the company finally approached the gate of her home, they were met by the head of her father's personal guard. Éogan had served her father long before her birth and, until meeting Cillian Fane, had been the most frightening man she knew.

“What business do you have here, Fane? These are peaceful lands—nothing here for the likes of you and your wildlings.” Éogan held his great broadsword in front of him, a silent threat to Fane and his men.

Fane leaned back in his saddle, clearly unbothered by the old warrior. “Put that toothpick away, old man. I have business with your master; if you’d be so kind as to fetch him—there’s a good lad.”

Éogan bared his teeth, digging the point of his sword into the ground. “I’m no lad, boy. And My Lord Kilkenny asked for your aid—against my suggestion, I might add. You refused, so as I see it, you’ve no business here at all. Go back to your woods, Wildling. You’re not welcome here.”

Before Fane could open his mouth to antagonize Éogan more, Cora nudged Epona out from the middle of the company. The old guard gasped, his eyes wide, when she brought her horse to a stop next to Fane’s stallion. “Éogan, he speaks the truth. Please, let us pass and inform my father that I must speak with him immediately.”

“My Lady Cora—Blessed Virgin be praised! Where have you been, lass? We’ve been looking everywhere for you!” Éogan glared at Fane, curling his lip in disgust. “And what are you doing with these scoundrels?”

Cora straightened in her saddle and hoped she’d sound more in control than she felt. “I’m afraid that’s information for my lord father and no one else. I ask you again, let us pass and fetch him. We—that is, I have matters to discuss with him.”

Éogan stared at them for a long moment before calling to the gate guards, “Open the gate! Lady Cora has returned to us!”

The gate creaked and groaned as it opened, a testament to how rarely it was actually closed. More often than not, her father left it open to make himself more available to his people. The fact that it had been shut was a sign that something wasn’t right.

With the gate fully opened, she guided Epona inside. Once in the courtyard, they dismounted. Cora thanked the stable hand who helped her down. The poor lad who approached Fane withered under his stern expression. “You’ll treat that horse like he’s the king of all Ireland, you hear?”

The boy nodded, trembling under the weight of Fane's glare. His company followed behind as they walked to the main hall. Though her father wasn't as wealthy as some of the other lords, it was startling to see the men's muddy trousers, worn animal skins, and ragged beards next to the well-kept finery of her father's household.

A moment later, Éogan returned. "I've summoned Lord Kilkenny. He'll receive you in the main hall shortly." He swept disapproving eyes over the small company. "Your men are to wait in the courtyard until your business is concluded, and..." he paused to look them up and down. "Should there be any trouble at all, you'll be escorted from the castle grounds faster than you can blink."

Cora expected an argument—something about how the company would stay right where they were so that he could look sufficiently menacing surrounded by his wildlings. To her surprise, Fane nodded in agreement.

He gestured to his second in command, a man she'd learned was called Cathall, and calmly instructed, "Keep the lads away from the kitchen girls—we won't be long. And best take this."

He unbuckled his sword belt and handed his large arming sword to Cathall. He smiled charmingly at Éogan and said, "Wouldn't want our dear hosts to worry about our intentions, now would we?"

Cora realized Fane's voluntary surrender of his only weapon must have seemed strange. It wasn't uncommon for men to wear a sword or dagger in the house of a friend, let alone somewhere where they weren't trusted or wanted. Éogan watched the exchange suspiciously as though trying to puzzle out what trick Fane must be playing.

Éogan didn't know what Cora knew—that Cillian Fane had no need of a sword when he could become a beast with sharp teeth and claws at a moment's notice.

The men were led from the main hall, leaving Cora alone with the infamous Wolf King. He wandered the hall, eyeing the tapestries and decorations as though they were of great

interest. He seemed completely at ease, and it made her nervous. At the gate, Éogan had made it sound as though she'd run away from home like a child. Fane had questioned her offer last night, and she'd assured him of its validity. What if he doubted it now?

Thankfully, her father didn't keep them waiting. Only minutes after Éogan had escorted Fane's men out, her father and Daniel ran into the room. "Cora! By all the saints, girl, where have you been? I've had men out looking everywhere for you!"

Her father took her into his arms, running a hand up her back as though to make sure she was real. Tears pricked the corners of Cora's eyes, and she didn't bother trying to stop them from falling. "I'm sorry to worry you, Father," she said, fighting to speak clearly past the sudden burn in her throat. "I wanted to help, and I—"

"Your daughter came to my camp last evening with a proposition. I accepted and have come to negotiate in good faith." Fane's voice cut off whatever explanation Cora might have given. He approached them, still totally at ease despite the heated glare from her father.

"What's the meaning of this? What proposition?"

Fane looked at Cora expectantly, and she realized that he meant for her to explain. Of course, he did. He probably found it amusing to make her squirm. He probably hoped she'd stutter and stumble and sob her way through her story like a frightened little girl. Well, he'd be disappointed.

She wiped her eyes and stepped away from her father. "I heard what you said to Daniel in your study—that a marriage might provide safety for our people if the English invade. I cannot fight in that battle, Father, but I can help by forging an alliance. You reached out to Master Fane for help..."

"For help! For protection in exchange for coin! Not for my only daughter's hand! Christ Almighty, what have you done, Cora?"

Cora dug her fingernails into the soft flesh of her palm. “I did what needed to be done. Fane and his men can save our people, Father. You said it yourself! What else was there to offer but myself? What else do we have to offer?”

It was an opening—one she hoped that her father would notice. Perhaps if he offered Fane more money, or land, or anything else, she could still get out of her disastrous agreement. It was a fine line to walk, trying to defend her decision while praying that her father might be able to help undo it.

Her father’s shoulders slumped just as they had when she’d hidden in his study the day before. He stared at her, anguish etched into every corner of his face. All hope she had of his help disappeared in an instant. There would be no rescue from the Wolf King.

Fane chose that moment to speak. She’d almost forgotten that he was in the room, listening to everything they said. She’d been so focused on her father that he hadn’t mattered. Now that she understood there would be no way out of her bargain, he mattered quite a bit.

“Well, now that we’ve gotten all that out of the way. Shall we discuss the terms of this arrangement, then? Preferably before we’re old and gray.”

Cora frowned. “What terms? We’ve already agreed on the terms.”

Fane continued as though she hadn’t spoken at all, completely ignoring her question. “Now, your daughter has offered her hand in exchange for protection for your people and lands in the likely event of Edwin and forces dropping by for a bit more than a cup of tea. If I were a man without honor—as you and yours seem to think—I wouldn’t point out that she failed to mention the terms of that protection. If I were the villainous sort, I’d leave a handful of men behind with strict orders to scarper off if the tides of battle changed. Then I’d ride off into the sunset with my swooning bride, safe in the knowledge that I’d met my part of the bargain.”

“*Swooning?* How dare—”

Her father's hand at her wrist stopped the scathing words before they could leave her mouth. Shame fanned the flames of her anger as the realization of just how foolish she'd been. She'd been so naive. She'd had such grand, vainglorious plans of solving all of their problems, but the awful truth was that Fane was right. She'd gone in so blinded by her own pride and desperation that she'd made mistakes that she might now be unable to amend. After all was said and done, she might have to marry the man—the monster—in front of her and still leave her people unprotected.

Her father squeezed her wrist as though he could hear her thoughts. He'd gone pale but showed no other outward sign that he'd been bothered by Fane's words. "What is it you want, Fane?" he asked. "You're already taking my daughter—my blood. What more could you want? Money? I offered you that. Land? Precious jewels?"

Fane casually crossed his arms and smiled. "I want to bargain for an arrangement that benefits us both. You need my help to keep your lands safe. It's Edwin now, but what about next time? Think he's the only *eedjit* with eyes on this land? You've not got the trained manpower to protect yourself, and it's only a matter of time until some knob with half a brain takes notice. Hell, Fergus, my men and I could take the lot by force if the fancy struck us. Lucky for you, I've never had a yearning to lead peasants and rot away in a castle."

Her father didn't so much as twitch at Fane's stark appraisal of their circumstances, but hearing him speak so candidly about taking their home sent shards of icy fear running up Cora's spine.

Her father wrinkled his nose as though he'd smelled something bad. "Oh aye, lucky indeed. And what is it you've a yearning for, then?"

Fane turned his stare on Cora. "Land. Our own land, separate from any ruling or oversight from your lordship. My people enjoy a fair bit of freedom and access to the wilds, but no lord or king has ever allowed the luchthonn to settle on their lands. We've roamed like wolves for eons, but a man

wants a den to call his own. Especially when he's got a lovely wife to come home to."

Fane's playful wink in her direction nearly sent Cora into a screaming rage. It wasn't enough that he'd frightened her out of her mind by revealing the truth of his... curse, or whatever it was. Wasn't enough that he'd allowed her to make an absolute fool of herself without any of this 'good faith' he'd shown her father. Now he'd antagonize her in front of her father and use her mistakes to gain Kilkenny lands for himself. If her father hadn't been holding her wrist, she might have lobbed one of her shoes at his head. It wouldn't hurt him, but it'd feel fantastic just to see his cheeky smirk wiped off his face for a moment. She'd show him a *swooning* bride!

Her father scoffed. "And I'm meant to believe that if I give your people land to call their own, you'll show up anytime there's a need and protect us like your own? And that after your remark of leaving a few lads to—what was it—scarper off in the midst of a battle if the tide turns?"

"Believe what you like, Kilkenny. I've not deceived you in any way in our dealings—I made no promises and was clear in my rejection of the previous offer. I've come in good faith to see an agreement made that gives us both what we need. You need protection, and the Luchthonn are the best. I need land for my people and a marriage to secure the alliance between our two peoples."

Her father released her wrist and stroked his beard thoughtfully. "What need have you of this marriage if you get your lands? Is that not enough to lend us your sword arms when there is need?"

Fane's expression turned sly and decidedly wolfish. "Now, now, Fergus. You'll be getting more than a few lads with spears and swords, and you know it."

Cora glanced at her father curiously as she rubbed where he'd gripped her so tightly. Did he... was it possible that he knew about Fane and his men? About the monsters? And if he did, why in heaven's name would he have tried to employ the man rather than send all the knights of Ireland after him?

Surely the priests would declare it witchcraft or the work of demons. How could her father know and still want Fane's help?

"A subject best spoken of in private," her father said stiffly.

Fane rolled his eyes and lazily gestured toward her. "Christ, Fergus, she already knows. No need to play stupid for her sake."

Her father's eyes widened as his calm demeanor disappeared in an instant. "How? What did you do to her?"

"I let her walk into my camp and then out again. More than I usually grant people who show up without manners or sense."

Her indignant huff seemed to amuse him. Cora fought the urge to pull her dagger and stab him in his smirking face, allowing herself to imagine the satisfaction she'd feel as he tried to fend her off.

Her father grabbed her shoulder, shaking her roughly. "Tell me what he did, lass. Did he hurt you? How did you see...the beast?"

Her murderous thoughts came to a screeching halt at her father's question. "He... after I'd made my offer. He asked me what I knew of him, and I told him the stories I'd heard from others. He showed me—quite clearly—that they were not simply stories."

"Did he harm you, lass? Did the beast harm you?"

"No. He showed me his true form, and I...I didn't take it well." Fane's snort annoyed her, but she ignored him just as he'd ignored her. "But no, he didn't harm me. I was taken somewhere safe to rest, and by morning, I was well again."

Her father was silent for several minutes. When he spoke again, it was with barely restrained hostility. "Your word that she'll be safe and treated well?"

Fane straightened, his serious expression mirroring her father's. "Aye, Fergus. She'll be safe. Won't have a castle and

all that anymore, but she'll be cared for."

Her father nodded, and Cora's stomach sank with every second that passed. Somewhere in her heart, she'd hoped that her father would refuse. She'd gone to Fane of her own will, but after seeing the monster that hid below his skin, she'd held onto a small, selfish bit of hope that she could take it all back.

But she couldn't. And with that realization, any argument or protest she might have made slipped through her fingers like sand. One look at her father told her what he'd do. He was the lord of the lands. It was his responsibility to care for all its people. And if he could do that—not just now, but anytime—in exchange for a bit of land and a lowly daughter? All the better.

She wasn't surprised when he met her eyes, the anguish and regret back in place. "Cora, you know what you must do. What is needed. Can you forgive me, lass?"

No.

Yes.

Before she'd gone off and tried to save the day, she might have blamed him for using her marriage to meet his ends. But she'd done this to herself. She'd never forgive *herself*. She'd be old and on her deathbed, still cursing the day she rode into Cillian Fane's camp.

Fane stepped forward, a large hand extended in front of him. "So, do we have an agreement, Fergus?"

Her father stared at the hand for several long moments before he placed his hand in Fane's. "Aye," he said, his voice choked with emotion. "We do."

Chapter 8

Cora

As a little girl, Cora had imagined her wedding. Most girls did, after all. But it had always felt a bit like a dream—something too far off to concern her much at the time. Even when she'd grown old enough to understand the power of a marriage contract, she'd avoided the thought of it. They were at peace. Their lands were prosperous, and their people were content. As far as she knew, there was no need to marry her off, so she simply didn't worry about it.

There was no ignoring it now. Not with Deirdre pinning her into her mother's wedding dress. Deirdre had been her mother's attendant first, but when she'd passed, the cheery, matronly woman had stayed on to help raise Cora. Cora had never kept secrets from Deirdre before. She'd gone to her for everything, from her first kiss and heartbreak to her first monthly cycle. Deirdre's silence and furrowed brows as she pinned Cora's dress in place hurt just as much as her father's anger. She'd hurt them both, and they'd both shown their grief in their own way.

In Deirdre's eyes, Cora had all but sold her life to a devil. The older, superstitious woman believed Cora had likely written her own death warrant. And what was worse, she'd done it all in secret. She'd said nothing to anyone before running off and offering herself as the sacrificial lamb for her people.

“Stop that wriggling, My Lady, or I'll stick you well.”

The pins in her mouth muffled Deirdre's words, and it eased some of the tension in Cora's heart. It had been a common threat when she'd been young and unable to keep still. Several times, Deirdre had made good on the threat and pricked her sharply.

“My apologies, *seanbhean*.”

If she hadn't been watching Deirdre's face, she would have missed the slight, betraying twitch of her dear friend's lips. "Watch your tone, Lady, or this old woman's hands might shake uncontrollably and prick your arse. Old age, you know. Can't be helped."

They shared a moment of laughter before it faded away like a sweet summer breeze gone too soon. Deirdre returned to her work, and Cora stared out the window. The room went quiet until Cora whispered, "Do you hate me terribly?"

Deirdre sighed, her hands dropping away from the hem she'd been pinning. When she spoke, she sounded every inch the old woman that she was. "Ah, *A stór*, I could never hate you. My heart aches for you, child, and for what you'll face. I wish for anyone else to take your place in this wolf's den. I love you as my own, Lady. How could I hate you? I only... I only wish you would have told me. That you wouldn't have had to bear this burden on your own."

Tears blurred Cora's vision, and she blinked until they fell down her cheeks unhindered. "I had to, Deirdre. It was... it was the only way."

"Was it, now? And who told you that?"

"I—" Cora searched for an answer and failed.

"You went and convinced yourself that someone ought to play at being a hero, and you volunteered yourself, my love. And now you've made a promise that you must keep. I only fear that you will come to regret it."

Cora thought of the way Fane had looked at her on the ride back to her father's home. He'd watched her with those icy eyes, and while she wouldn't say she felt safe, she was reasonably certain that he wouldn't murder her on their wedding night. For now, he needed her alive.

He'd said little to her during the journey home, but when he had, it had been—well, not kind, but not cruel or aggressive. He'd been trying, she thought, to put her at ease, and he didn't have to do that. When not speaking to her, he'd

smiled and joked with his men. He hadn't seemed quite as cold as he had when she'd barged into his tent.

He'd been a right arse when he'd approached her father. His threats had seemed authentic enough, and Cora knew he could make good on them. Who was the real Cillian Fane? The cold, dangerous king of the wildlings? The cruel, biting negotiator who'd agreed to her terms only when they suited him best?

The monster who still haunted her dreams?

Sometimes she thought she'd dreamed it all. She told herself that she must have imagined the beast he'd become at his camp. It was fatigue—nothing more. But then she caught sight of the wolf skin around his neck and remembered everything. She considered telling Deirdre what she'd seen but decided against it. It was her love for the old woman that kept her mouth closed. Deirdre already had her own thoughts about Cillian and his men, and she likely believed the stories about him the way most people believed in angels. They'd say on a Sunday mass that the winged messengers from heaven were real, but it wouldn't stop them from attacking if they met one on the road.

Deirdre didn't need to know her fears were accurate. To know the truth about Fane and his luchthonn would only frighten her. Cora forced a smile to her lips and laid a hand on Deirdre's shoulder. "If I must marry, I want to help those I love the most. Cillian Fane and his men will protect our people. For that, I will go to him with a happy heart. Besides, it could be worse. I could marry some simpering dandy who couldn't lift a sword without breaking a nail!"

Deirdre covered Cora's hand with her own. "No, *A stór*, you've chosen someone far more dangerous than that." She cleared her throat and patted Cora's hand before turning back to her work. "Still, what's done is done. You've already agreed, and you will honor that agreement. I only pray he sees what a treasure he's found."

••••

CORA PRAYED THAT A pretty dress and flowers in her hair would be enough to hide the way her knees shook.

Rare as her childish imaginings of her wedding had been, she still recalled what she'd wished for. She'd pictured a beautiful gown and flowers woven through her hair. A hundred candles filling the great hall with a soft, warm light, and everyone she loved crowding around to wish her well.

Her reality would be quite different. She would wed Cillian Fane outside, in the middle of the night, with only her father for support. Cillian had insisted. Apparently, his people required that all weddings take place under a full moon. Their choices were few. The next full moon was only two days away. Her father suggested waiting until the following month, but Cillian refused.

A day after her conversation with Deirdre, Cora waited at the entrance of her home. She paced back and forth in front of the door, wringing the stems of the bunch of wildflowers one of the kitchen girls had brought her. Her hair hung loose and wild down her back—another one of Cillian's demands. A woman of her station would often be married with elaborate braids and jewels on her dress. Her husband-to-be had requested a plain dress and for her hair to be left free for their bonding. Her father had tried to argue, but it had done no good. Cillian Fane was nothing if not stubborn, and he'd made his expectations for their farce of a marriage clear. She would come to him like some sort of poor forest fairy under the full moon, and somehow that would satisfy the traditions of his people.

Footsteps behind her distracted her from her thoughts. Her father approached, his face solemn and drawn as though he hadn't slept in days. Perhaps he hadn't. God knew she hadn't slept herself since before she'd sold her soul to the devil.

“Are you well, Da?”

It wasn't often that she called him that. For propriety's sake, he required her to refer to him as “Father” or “My Lord.” He hadn't been “Da” to her since childhood. It seemed appropriate at that moment.

He tried to smile, but only one side of his mouth obeyed. “Aye, *A leanbh*. You remind me of your mother tonight.”

Cora tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and grimaced. “I’d hope she was a wee bit more excited about her own wedding.”

Her father laughed and brushed his knuckles against her cheek. “Oh, I’m sure she was plotting her escape right until the very end.”

Cora’s eyes widened in surprise. “Surely not! I thought you were a love match?”

Her father’s smile turned sad. “I loved your mother from the first moment I saw her. I spotted her at a county fair and knew there would never be another for me. It wasn’t so easy for her, but I’d like to think that by the end, we made each other happy.”

Cora had been young when her mother died, but she still remembered the few times she’d come across her parents locked in an embrace. Her mother had never appeared to be anything but madly in love with her husband, and suddenly, that was all Cora wanted for herself.

Was it too much to hope for when she’d agreed to marry a man like Cillian Fane? Would she ever know love like her parents, or would she be sentenced to a life of icy stares and frightening monsters?

Cora gathered up her courage and kissed her father’s cheek. “You made her happy, Da. I know it. May God bless me enough to know the love of a man like you.”

Tears gathered at the corner of her father’s eyes as he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “Oh, my darling girl. ‘Tis my only prayer now, that you will know love. What you’ve done... you’ve sacrificed for our people. I pray that somehow, some way, you will not be completely unhappy. “

If it wasn’t a typical prayer for a bride, that was fine. She wasn’t a typical bride. This wouldn’t be a typical wedding.

The bells in the church tower rang, jolting them from their moment of peace. It was time. Her father straightened his back

and gave her a hard look. “Chin up, Cora. Hold your head high and show no fear, no matter what you feel. Let him see your strength. You’ve chosen to do a very brave thing for the sake of your people. Do not let him forget that.”

Cora tightened her grip on the wildflowers and nodded, thankful for her father’s presence. He’d seemed so angry before, but now she couldn’t imagine being in this moment without him. She thanked God for whatever clarity he’d found to allow him to forgive her. When he offered her his arm, she took it gratefully.

“I’m ready.”

They left the main hall together, heads held high. She was to meet her future husband outside their gates, which required her to walk past their entire household on her way out. They’d all gathered to watch their lady meet her fate. No doubt some thought it would be her death. Some of the kitchen girls openly cried, tears slipping down their cheeks as they struggled to hold back their sobs. Men and women who’d known her their whole lives crossed themselves and kissed their fingers before raising them toward her. Deirdre stood off to one side, pale and stoic. Cora stopped long enough to kiss the old woman’s cheek before she continued her long march to the gates.

Halfway there, Cora spotted Bran leaning against the stable door. He clutched a pitchfork in his hands, and even from a distance, she could see the way he trembled. The agonized, enraged expression on his face worried her. She’d never even seen Bran frustrated at anyone. He’d always seemed the very picture of calm, but now he looked as wild as the wolves she’d promised herself to. Suddenly, she feared he might do something foolish in his anger.

She leaned toward her father and whispered, “Father, might you have one of your stewards check in on Bran tonight?”

Her father frowned, glancing toward the stables. “Bran? Whatever for?”

“He... not that I ever encouraged it, but he—” Cora trailed off, unsure of how to explain without embarrassing the sweet man.

“Ah. Had designs above his station, I gather. Yes, I’ll send Daniel to talk to him later. Last thing we need is for the lad to go off half-cocked and get himself killed.”

Cora nodded. “Thank you, Father.”

He patted her hand, and they continued their journey toward the gates. When they reached the boundary of her childhood home, the gates opened without a word from either of them. The two night watchmen waved a silent goodbye, and Cora lifted her bouquet to wave back.

Outside of the walls, everything suddenly felt different. She’d managed her nerves well enough before, but outside of the safety of her home, the ramifications of her decision loomed ominously. She thought of the monster she’d seen and the way it had looked at her like she was little more than a rabbit in its path. Would she see the beast again? If she did, would she survive a second meeting?

Finally, she saw her groom and his men. He’d only brought a handful of men with him, along with an elderly man that she assumed was the priest meant to marry them. Every step took her closer, and every moment gave her another chance to question her choice. What would Cillian do if she ran now? Would he chase her? Would he let that awful creature free and run her to ground like the foxes her father’s hounds tracked every fall?

By the time they reached Cillian and his men, Cora thought her heart might pound right through her chest. The only thing keeping her on her path was her father’s steady presence at her side.

Even in the low light, Cora knew the exact moment that he saw her. Bright blue eyes reflected the moon’s light and held her gaze as she approached. She wanted to look away, to hide from him and his damned eyes, but she didn’t. To look away would be to show weakness, and she’d promised her father that she would be strong.

The old man spread his arms in welcome while Cillian and his men glowered like a murder of crows. “Ah, Lord Kilkenny, My Lady, welcome! ‘Tis a fine night, is it not?”

“Would be a better night in a church with actual light to see by. I don’t approve of marrying off my daughter in a farmer’s field, Fane, or in a pauper’s dress as though she comes from nothing. You insult her, Sir, and me.”

Cillian said nothing; he only nodded toward her father and rolled his shoulders beneath the great wolf skin. Cora couldn’t help but be reminded of the forest gods Deirdre used to describe in her stories. Like them, the man before her was wild and untamed, and it was impossible not to recognize the danger of being in his presence.

The old man smiled and shook his head. “On the contrary, Lord Kilkenny. This is the way all luchthonn make their vows. The moon covers all in her light, and we are called to face her without ornamentation because her eyes see all men as they are—not as they dress themselves up to be. The looming trees require no jewels. The mighty river boasts no riches. The beasts of the wood wear no rings or buckles, and yet the moon sees them and shines her light upon them. Why should men think themselves different?”

Before her father could respond, Cillian huffed impatiently. “By the time you’ve finished, it’ll be dawn. Can we get on with it?”

Her father frowned at Cillian’s rudeness, but the old man only laughed. “Pardon him, my lord. Males are always—shall we say—eager at bonding ceremonies. Especially on a full moon!” He winked at Cora conspiratorially and said, “It bodes well for the wedding night to have a fervent groom!”

Cora paled at the mention of her wedding night. She’d grown up near livestock and understood how their young came to be. Poor Deirdre had even explained the basics of the marriage bed when her monthly cycles began. She knew what was expected of her as a wife but hadn’t allowed herself to consider the wedding night when forming and executing her brilliant plan.

The old man beckoned her forward, and she reluctantly released her hold on her father's arm. She walked to her groom like a criminal headed for the gallows and hoped no one would notice her trembling hands in the low light.

The old man smiled as though he hadn't noticed the tension in the air. As far as she could tell, he assumed this to be a happy joining, and she hoped it was a good omen that at least one person at her wedding was joyful.

“Gather close, friends, and witness the bonding of the two before you. Cillian Fane and Lady Cora Kilkenny have come forth to be made one before our splendid mother. Her light illuminates the darkness of night, and so shall it light your path as you journey forward together. You have come here without adornment, artifice, or lies, and in that simple truth, you will be joined. Our luminous mother sees all of her children, and by the light of her eyes will your bond be blessed.”

It was unlike any mass Cora had ever attended and utterly different from any wedding ceremony she'd heard either. She'd never thought of the wild wolf-men as having any sort of religion, but both Cillian and his men listened attentively as the old man spoke. Her father shuffled uncomfortably, almost as though he expected God to send a bolt of lightning to strike him down for being a part of such talk.

The old man turned to Cillian and said, “Cillian Fane, as the male, you have the honor and responsibility of protecting your mate and any offspring you may produce with your life. I charge you to love her, provide for her, and carry her burdens as though they are your own. You will offer her the first meat of your kills and the last breath in your body until the day your bones return to the earth. Do you accept this charge?”

Cillian's voice was firm and clear when he said, “Aye. I accept this charge.”

The old man nodded and turned to Cora. “Cora Kilkenny, as the female, you have the honor and responsibility of protecting your mate and any offspring you may produce with your life. I charge you to love him, support him, and carry his burdens as though they are your own. You will offer him the

first meat of your kills and the last breath in your body until the day your bones return to the earth. Do you accept this charge?"

Cora clutched the wildflowers to her chest to keep her hands from shaking. "Aye. I accept this charge."

Cillian took one of her hands in his own without so much as a glance her way. The old man gestured at their joined hands, then raised his own above them. "A bond is a partnership, my friends. Remember that though male and female have their roles to play, neither is more valuable nor more worthy than the other. As bond-mates, you will walk your life's path together. Embrace each other's strengths and allow for weakness. Above all, remember that love is the greatest strength and the greatest gift in the world. May your bonding be blessed, and let nothing separate that which has been brought together."

It was a beautiful, if strange, speech. Cora was convinced that the old man either did not know of their situation or was touched in the head. He talked of love and partnership as though their marriage was anything more than a bargain they'd made. There had been no talk of love, no romance, and she doubted there would be much of anything resembling respect from her husband. There would be no 'walking life's path together.' They would exist together. If he would keep his word and protect her people, that would be enough.

The old man tied their clasped hands together with a thin leather cord and held them between his own gnarled hands. He smiled at them as though this were some grand celebration rather than her proverbial funeral. "By the light of our glorious mother and the witness of all those present, I proclaim you, Cillian Fane, son of the luchthonn, and you, Lady Cora, daughter of Ossory, to be bond-mates. You must now seal this union with a kiss."

Cora lifted her face toward her husband. He offered a small smile, and before she could wonder what it meant, he kissed her. His lips were warm and surprisingly soft, and the scratch of his beard wasn't as uncomfortable as she'd expected. He cupped her cheek with his free hand and held her

close. Warmth spread through her body and pooled pleasantly below her belly. She hadn't expected to enjoy the kiss, but when her husband pulled away, she had the strange thought that she might like it if he did it again.

A cheer went up from Cillian's men, hailing their leader and his new wife. The old man stepped forward and removed the cord. Cillian took it, stuffed it into a small pouch at his waist, and whistled sharply. One of his men approached with a saddled horse. Before Cora knew what was happening, he'd already lifted her onto the horse and swung himself up behind her. She found her father, pale and solemn, in the small crowd. While the men cheered and hollered, he said nothing. He stood among the other witnesses and glared at her husband. If Cillian noticed her father's expression, he didn't react. Instead, he wrapped an arm around her middle, took the horse's reins in the other, and called out, "I'll be back soon to discuss the details of our agreement, Lord Kilkenny."

With that, he dug his heels into their horse and guided it toward the dark woods ahead. Cora looked behind them as best she could, silently bidding her home farewell as cold tears spilled down her cheeks. Not for the first time, she wondered if this had all been a mistake.

Chapter 9

Cillian

Cillian held his new bride in place as his stallion, Crow, carried them deeper into the woods. Crow needed little direction from him; the spoiled beast always knew the fastest way to get back to his food and bed. The full moon was barely visible through the trees, but that didn't matter to Cillian. Even in the dark, a luchthonn could see the path ahead of him. As a wolf, he could see as well as he could in daylight, but his human vision was still better than what he'd been told was normal.

He tried to ignore the way the woman in his arms trembled. She'd put on a brave face for the ceremony, but he'd noticed how pale she was, and her expression had stayed so consistently placid that it had to be purposeful. She played the part of the quiet, submissive bride well.

He knew better. He'd seen the fire that burned below her skin when she'd marched into his tent, bold as brass, and demanded that he marry her and protect her people. His bride was no meek lamb, but she'd changed as soon as he'd shown her the wolf. It was to be expected, he knew. There was a reason that most luchthonn hid their wolf form except in battle. Most outside of their clans believed the luchthonn to be demons or the result of some witch's spell. Those that knew the truth were usually too afraid or too desperate for their help to tell the secret. Oh, the rumors ran wild, of course. There was more than one reason he was known as the Wolf King in the surrounding counties, and everyone had their own beliefs about him and his men.

It shouldn't have mattered that she was afraid. It was understandable. Smart, even. People often were afraid when forced to accept the existence of creatures like him. But still... perhaps it was foolishness on his part, but a man didn't go into his own wedding night hoping for a frightened bride. If he'd done what was expected and married a woman from one of the other clans, he'd be hunting her tonight. There was no way to

ask Lady Cora Kilkenny—Cora Fane, he reminded himself—to let him hunt her through the woods. She'd run off and never come back.

His wolf mourned the hunt. It had thrilled the beast to bond with the lovely female, but he didn't understand why she feared them. In his mind, if she would allow them to hunt her, she would see how worthy they were as mates. He didn't understand human fears and thoughts, and Cillian had no way to explain. They didn't communicate in words so much as feelings and ideas, and Cillian tried to make the wolf understand why it wouldn't be right to hunt his bride. A lurchthonn bride reveled in the wedding hunt. She led her new mate on a grand chase. At the end, both bride and groom would fall into a happy heap somewhere in the woods and fuck till their eyes crossed.

The idea of laying out the woman in his arms in a bed of tall grass sent a hot bolt of desire through his body. The ride through the woods had already driven him half mad with the way her arse rocked back against his cock. It wasn't her fault, and sure as hell, he didn't think she did it on purpose. Somehow, that made it better... or perhaps worse. He couldn't decide. All he knew was that the way her body moved against his was the sweetest sort of torture he'd ever endured.

Cillian wondered if she'd thought about their wedding night before offering herself so brazenly to him. He imagined not—she seemed the sheltered type. Most highborn women were, and he'd never had any interest in educating them. Cora Kilkenny wasn't the first woman to be offered to him in exchange for services—though she was the first to offer herself. He was approached by several lords who believed they could change his mind by offering their daughter or wife for a roll in the hay, but he always said no. Human women held little interest for him, and his wolf found them uninteresting at best and repulsive at worst.

Which made his reaction to his bride even more surprising. From the moment she'd marched into his tent, skirts swishing and a mouth sharper than his claws, both he and the wolf had taken an unusual interest in her. As soon as his surprise at her

entrance had faded, he'd been struck with the image of bending her over his war table, maps and missives all sent flying to the floor. He'd imagined wrapping her thick, dark braid around his fist and guiding her smart mouth to his cock. It wouldn't be easy to fuck the fire out of a woman like her, but he found himself eager to try.

He tried to imagine what she would be like. Would she be shy? Angry? Would she fight him? He hoped she wouldn't cry. She'd fainted when she'd seen him change, and she'd been fairly subdued since then. Would she lie there like a dead fish, hoping that he'd finish faster? Cillian grit his teeth at the thought of blank stares and listless limbs.

No.

She might not be thrilled about their marriage—in fact, he was sure she wasn't. Despite the moon priest's enthusiasm, she'd faced her own wedding with all the excitement of a prisoner sent to an executioner's block. And she likely had her own ideas of how the night would go, but he'd be damned if his first taste of her would be marred by some misplaced sense of martyrdom.

Light flickered in the distance, and Crow picked up his pace. Cillian tightened his grip on his bride—on Cora—and pulled her back against his chest. Cora no longer trembled in his arms, but he didn't miss the way her heart pounded like a drum, the beats so strong that he could almost feel them spread through his body like ripples in a pond.

They'd ridden in silence the whole way, but when they passed the two night guards at the makeshift gate, Cillian couldn't resist the urge to lean in and murmur, "Welcome home, Madame Fane," into Cora's ear.

She didn't reply, only glanced up at him with wide eyes. Several of his men waved and called out greetings and congratulations, and several threw their heads back in a howl. Cillian chuckled and shook his head at their enthusiasm. Even by his people's standards, he'd waited a long time to take a wife. As strange or unorthodox as they might find the match, his men seemed happy that he'd bonded. Even those who were

not lurchthonn understood enough about them to know that a wolf would always be better with a pack—with a mate.

Cillian led Crow to his tent and dismounted easily once they arrived. He reached up to help Cora, but she favored him with a baleful stare before sliding down, landing on the ground with a soft thud. Cillian shook his head at her willfulness and wondered what she'd do if he growled at her as he would have any of his men who'd dared to be so needlessly defiant. He hoped she wouldn't faint again.

One of their young men, a sturdy lad by the name of Corcc, ambled up and bent his head in respect. He offered to take Crow to the stables, and after a moment's consideration, Cillian agreed. Usually, he'd tend his own horse, but tonight there were more important things than Crow's never-ending appetite.

Cora stiffened when he nudged her toward the tent, but he didn't remove his hand. If he had his way, he'd be touching her far more intimately soon. The faster she became used to his hands on her body, the better.

Cora eyed his bed roll as though it might attack her. She wrapped her arms around herself and looked at him warily. "Where am I meant to sleep?"

He wondered if she thought there was another option. "In my bed," he replied, nodding toward the pile of furs and blankets.

"Oh."

Her cheeks darkened, and a desire to lick her struck him hard. He wondered if she was as warm and soft as she appeared. The wolf agreed, insisting that the faster they had their mate underneath them, the happier she—and they—would be. Wolves were stubborn when they'd set their minds on their prey, and this woman had caught the wolf's interest like no one else ever had. Given the chance, the beast would have him lick her from head to toe to catalog every sweet inch of her skin.

Cillian ran his tongue over his teeth and shook the urge away. Cora looked ready to bolt as it was. It wasn't likely that she'd look at him dragging his tongue across her cheek with favor.

She looked around the tent, her emotions shifting on her face. Hesitation, a bit of fear, and then resolve. Just as she had at their wedding, Cora pulled her shoulders back and faced him as though he were the devil himself. She settled her back against the large table he'd dubbed his 'war table,' as though its sturdy legs would hold her up.

Her attitude bothered him more than he wanted. It wasn't as though they were a love match—hell, the last woman he'd claimed any sort of loving feelings toward had been his mam. Still, that didn't mean he wanted his bride to fear him on their wedding night.

He wanted to make her burn, to show her he could be more than the beast she expected. To show himself that she was just a woman—that fucking her wouldn't be the life-changing experience he feared it might be.

“Have you ever been with a man?” he asked.

Cora started, accidentally knocking a cup off of the table she'd leaned against. “I—of course not!” She narrowed her eyes and asked, “And you? Have you been with a woman?”

Bollocks. His first instinct was to lie. A new wife likely wouldn't want to hear that her groom had known pleasure before her. Still, it wasn't his habit to avoid the truth. So he nodded and said, “Aye, I've enjoyed a woman's company a time or two.”

Cora looked away, and Cillian noticed the way her fist clenched at her side. “Of course. And is it your intent to continue 'enjoying company' now that we've wed?”

A bold question, though he shouldn't have been surprised. It was commonplace for a nobleman to have a woman or two in nearby villages even after he'd married, but that was the way of human men. Apparently, their wives just accepted it as a part of life. A luchthonn woman would tear her mate's skin

from his body if he attempted such disrespect, and from what he'd seen of his new wife, she had more than a little wolf in her despite being human.

“Of course not. Now that we're bonded, you will be the only one I take to my bed.”

If she was surprised by his answer, she didn't show it. She simply nodded and gestured toward the bed roll. “Well, we'd best get on with it, then.”

Cillian couldn't help the laugh that rumbled from his chest. “Come now, wife. Surely it won't be so bad as all that. Am I so terrible to look on that you'd face your wedding night like the bloody gallows?”

He approached her slowly, eyes trained on her for any sign of plans to flee. He half hoped she would. It wouldn't be a true hunt, but the idea of chasing this beautiful creature down in his wolf skin caused his cock to harden further. She didn't run, however. She faced him with all the bravery and defiant fear he'd come to expect from her.

Cillian brushed the back of one hand down her cheek, stopping to tuck a stray piece of hair behind her hair. “It doesn't have to be terrible, lass. In fact, I'd wager my skin that it might be quite enjoyable.”

Cora forgot her nerves long enough to snort and roll her eyes. “All men think so highly of themselves in bed, don't they? I know my duties, husband,” she said, emphasizing his name as though it was bitter in her mouth. “No need to blow sunshine up my skirts in that regard.”

Cillian grinned and pressed against her, forcing her up against the table. “Oh, I'll be seeing to those skirts soon enough.” He leaned in, murmuring, “Other men might be content to bed an unwilling woman, but I'd just as soon have my mate panting beneath me, begging for my mouth or my cock.”

Cora's cheeks darkened even further, the delicious pink color spreading down her neck. She shot fiery arrows with her eyes, but her voice shook when she spoke. “I don't beg.”

No, she'd probably never begged for anything in her life. She was too proud, his stubborn wife. "Ah well, we all must have goals in life, mustn't we?"

Despite her having the welcoming nature of a feral cat, Cillian couldn't resist leaning in further and running his nose up her neck. His cheek brushed hers, and he didn't miss the way she gasped softly at the touch. "I'm going to kiss you now, wife. Are you ready?"

Another man wouldn't have bothered to warn her. Hell, part of him would have liked to see how she reacted if he'd surprised her. She'd be all claws and teeth about it, he just knew it, and the part of him closest to his wolf was more than excited by the idea. But a larger part of him—the strategist, the commander—wanted to know how she'd react as an informed opponent. Would she fight him? Surrender?

She did neither. She stared him down as though daring him to follow through. As though she could handle whatever he gave her and still come out her imperious, stubborn self.

He'd just see about that.

Their first kiss felt more like the opening moves of a battle than romance. Strike, parry, counter-strike—every slide of her lips against his was an act of war. His blood raced beneath his skin, and the wolf howled his approval. Heat spread down his limbs as he licked at her lips, breaching her first line of defense.

Her taste—gods, her taste was indescribable. He groaned into her mouth, tangling their tongues as he buried his fingers in her hair. Thank all the old gods that he'd insisted she wear her hair down that night. Instead of fighting with her braids, he twisted his fingers into the soft strands and held her close. The unexpected image of wrapping the curly, silky locks around his cock as she stroked him caused his cock to jerk in his trousers. Suddenly, his clothes all felt too tight.

"Lass," he murmured between kisses, "want to feel you. Touch you."

Cora pulled away, her eyes decidedly less fiery than they had been only minutes before, her lips plump from his kisses. Her flushed cheeks and panting breaths tempted him like a starved man before a feast. Cillian dove at her neck, licking and sucking at her sensitive skin until she writhed against him. His cock throbbed with every sound that escaped her lips. He knew she was trying to stop them, could feel the way she clutched at his arms and bit her plump, kiss-swollen lip. It made the moans and gasps he tore from her mouth all the sweeter. She wanted him despite the walls she'd tried to erect between them, and he'd be damned if he wouldn't pull the truth from her.

She ought to have known better. A wolf with the scent of his prey would never stop. Never give up. Cora was his prey. If he could not hunt her in the night air as he'd like, he would chase her pleasure until he had nothing but her taste in his mouth and the sounds of her pleased screams in his ears.

“Too hot,” she said, her voice a breathless gasp. “Why is it so hot?”

Cillian nipped at the base of her throat; his hands tugged at the laces of her dress. “Means you've got too much on. Let me see you, love.”

With the laces loosened, her dress pooled at the front, giving him a mouthwatering view of her barely covered breasts. Before she could try to cover herself, Cillian abandoned her throat to nuzzle his face against the tops. He tugged at the dress, baring her pale, luscious skin to the cool night air. Their height difference made it difficult to explore her properly while they both stood, so Cillian hauled her up on the table and knelt between her legs.

“What—? What do you think you're—oh!”

Cillian smirked against her breast. He pulled her soft, rosy nipple into his mouth and teased it with his tongue and teeth while she moaned above him. He drug his beard across her breasts, drawing in deep lungfuls of her sweet scent as he went. It was enough to drive a man mad, the way she smelled. He'd never had such a powerful reaction to a woman's scent

before. It bothered him—or it would if he wasn't so fucking distracted.

Even as he feasted on her breasts, covering them in reddened patches where his beard scraped and marks from his teeth, he allowed his hands to roam further down. Cora shuddered when he swept his hands over her hips and pushed the dress to the floor. She stood before him in nothing but her skin, fingers twitching as though she wanted to cover herself. She even made to shield her pussy from his view with a hand, but he pushed it away and pulled her lips down to his. His bite was sharp on her lip, but he soothed it with his tongue. “Don't hide from me, *Muirnīn*,” he growled between kisses. “You made this bargain... offered yourself to me.”

Cora squealed when he pinched a nipple between his fingers and protested, “I didn't offer this! I gave you a marriage, not—not this!”

Cillian reared back, incredulous. Cora's glare was back, somewhat lessened by the dark flush in her cheeks and the red marks all over her breasts. She wanted him—what he'd done. He could smell just how much she wanted it, and he was half tempted to tip her back, toss her legs over his shoulders, and feast on her pussy until she changed her song.

“And did you expect us to live as nuns in this marriage?”

Cora looked away, crossing her arms over her breasts with a scowl. “No, I—I didn't think... I didn't think you'd desire me in that way. We are practically strangers, after all.”

Cillian resisted the urge to move her arms himself, as well as the frustrated snarl that threatened to escape. He'd worked too hard up to that point—wouldn't do to scare the lass now. “Aye, but not the first strangers in the world to wed, and certainly not blind.”

“I don't understand.” Her hands loosened—just the smallest bit, but he noticed.

Cillian inhaled, holding it in a moment to both find his patience and revel in the way her scent gave her away. She could play coy all she liked, but her scent didn't lie.

“Lass—Cora—you are my wife. You promised before the goddess herself to care for me. Do you mean to break that vow already?”

“No, of course not!”

Cillian returned his hands to her hips and rubbed up and down her curves. It was a slow, gentle motion meant to soothe and excite in equal parts. Despite her protests, Cora’s arms loosened more, and her eyelids slid shut.

“There now, *Muirnīn*, it’s not so bad as that. I would take no pleasure in forcing you. Let me in—let me show you.”

“Show me?”

He dropped kisses across her middle, allowing one of his hands to drift closer to the tempting warmth between her legs. His other hand slipped beneath his trousers to take hold of his aching cock. The bloody thing was hard enough to pound a tent spike, and the mild relief from his own hand kept him focused. Without it, he might mount her on the spot and fuck her until they both collapsed.

“Cillian? Please, show me what?”

He stared up at her from between her legs and rasped, “Everything.”

Cora met his eyes, that stubborn fire still present in the haze of pleasure. She swallowed thickly, then reached down and cupped his cheek. “Show me,” she whispered.

Cillian nodded, rising to his feet to shed his own clothes. He quickly threw his tunic and trousers to the floor but carefully folded his wolf’s skin. He placed it next to her on the table where he could see and reach it if needed. Cora blushed at the sight of his cock bobbing between his legs, but he liked that she snuck glances anyway. Liked that, even in a small way, she was taking something for herself. He wanted her to take everything—to enjoy his body just as he wanted to enjoy hers.

Cillian took hold of his cock, grazing the head against her pussy. Her arousal coated him, making the slow strokes slick and teasing with each pass. She moaned with each stroke,

especially when he pressed the head against her clit as he slid up and down.

“Cillian—I—oh! Oh, it feels so...”

Her words seemed to escape half-formed, each attempt fading into a low moan that only made him move faster, harder, until the table shook beneath them. Lightning and fire sparked and burned beneath his skin, not unlike the first time he'd taken his wolf's skin. That had been an experience like no other before it, and now the tiny woman beneath him threatened to unravel him with just the feel of her pussy—and he wasn't even in yet!

Suddenly, the need to be inside, the need to know if she felt just as heavenly on the inside as she did the outside, overwhelmed him. He slowed his strokes until they were slow and gentle again, trying to bring them both down from the frantic edge he'd taken them to.

Cora lifted her head, pupils blown wide with desire. “Why—is that *it*, then?”

Cillian laughed and shook his head. “No, lass, that's not it. But I'll not have my wife's first fuck be on the same table where I write my letters. Never be able to look my men in the eye across it again, would I?”

She yelped when he pulled her into his arms but still wrapped her arms around his neck. He carried them quickly to his bed roll and laid her out on the furs he kept out for the coldest nights. Without giving her time to protest, he followed her down, notching himself between her thighs. He kissed her hungrily, using the distraction to slide a hand between them and slip a finger inside. When she moaned and arched against him, he added another. “That's it, lass, let me in,” he murmured between kisses. Her cries grew louder as he stretched her body to fit him. Finally, drawn to the edge of his sanity by her smell and taste, he removed his fingers and pressed his hips to hers.

“Brace yourself,” he warned, resting the head of his cock against her entrance.

She nodded, muscles tensed as though she was expecting a blow. Cillian used his thumb to tease the small bundle of flesh above her cunt. She bit her lip, whimpering as he rubbed it in gentle circles, but obeyed. Cillian eased his cock into her with slow, even strokes. His wife was small—a fact easily forgotten with her large mouth—and he was large even for his own people. He'd hurt her if he wasn't careful. The wolf snarled at the idea of causing her pain, pushing forward in his consciousness until the snarl escaped his mouth.

“Cillian?”

Her eyes, soft with concern for the first time since he'd met her, soothed the wolf. They slid closed when he pushed in further but opened again when he stilled. They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment, connected in the most primal way a man and woman could be. The feel of her pussy wrapped around his cock threatened to drive him mad if he couldn't move, but it seemed important to hold her gaze as long as he could.

“Are you well?” he asked softly, clenching his fists beside her head.

She nodded, running her fingers up and down the lengths of his arms. “Yes, I'm fine. No—no pain. But I need... Cillian, please, I need—”

He hushed her with a deep kiss, sure that if he tried, he'd be able to taste her desire. “Shhh, wife. I know what you need. Look down. Watch as I give it to you.”

His first thrusts were slow and smooth, meant to allow her the chance to accommodate him. When she dug her fingernails into his arms and whimpered his name, Cillian couldn't resist picking up the pace. It felt so good—too good—when he bottomed out, burying every inch of himself within her warmth. Her cries rose again, and Cillian shifted his arm so that he could balance on one and keep his thumb at her clit. Faster and faster they went, bodies crashing together in pleasure again and again. He grit his teeth to keep the howl that threatened to escape at bay. She was perfect, from the way her hair fanned out around her to the way she arched her body

to meet him at every thrust. They came together as though they'd been lovers for years; fingers dug into each other's skin, and voices raised in pleasure. As the fiery desire grew hotter and tighter in his body, Cillian abandoned restraint and hooked her legs around his elbows. Her legs spread as wide as he could manage, and her cries became desperate shrieks as he pounded into her.

"That's it!" he coaxed. "You feel that? It's coming now. Get ready, wife—I'm going to fill this incredible cunt. You're going to be so full of me you'll drip my seed for days!"

Cora tensed, her legs wrapped tight around his waist as he murmured into her ear. "Cillian, it's—I feel like—"

Cora's sentence faded into a loud moan as she came, her pussy convulsing around him so tightly that he couldn't hold back a shout of surprise. His climax exploded through his body, coating his veins in fire and his mind in bliss. They clutched at each other in a need to anchor themselves in the overwhelming pleasure. Cillian wondered how he'd gone his whole life without knowing that it was possible to feel so overwhelmed by a woman. He also wondered how he'd keep himself from fucking her into the floor every single day now that he knew.

The flames under his skin cooled as long moments passed with only the sounds of their heavy breathing to break the silence. Cillian kissed his wife again, tasting her, caressing her, more slowly than before. Where their kisses before had been war, these kisses felt more like a gift—something given unexpectedly and wholly perfect. He rolled off of her, then turned on his side to face her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm... that was wonderful."

Cillian couldn't help the smug grin that spread on his face. "Well, didn't I tell you? So we can forget that nun business, yes?"

Cora blinked at him, her expression incredulous. For a moment, she said nothing, and he worried that he'd insulted

her somehow. Then, out of nowhere, she laughed—great belly laughs that shook her whole body and drew tears from her eyes. Her laughter was contagious, and Cillian joined in heartily. Her joy warmed something in his chest, easing a tension he hadn't known was there. His wife, sated from the pleasure he gave her, smiled and said, "Yes, we can forget about the nuns. I suppose you're not so hopeless that we'll need to send you off to marry God and serve man."

"Well, that's good to know. I'm shite at servicing men."

Their shared laughter filled the small space. For the first time in a very long time, Cillian allowed himself to sleep unconcerned with what the day would bring.

Chapter 10

Cora

Cora woke slowly, drawn from her sleep a bit at a time by the gentle notes of birdsong and pale early morning sunshine. The gleaming light spilled through gaps in the tent, warming her skin in patches. Somewhere nearby, men were talking, and their indistinct murmurs invaded her dream.

She didn't want to wake up. All night long, she'd dreamed of soft, lazy kisses and the smooth slide of bodies moving against each other. Phantom hands and lips had caressed her body and brushed over sensitive skin. She'd writhed with nameless, faceless lovers, losing herself in the pleasure they gave as long as she could.

Something rustled nearby, chasing away the last vestiges of her dreams. She blinked, wincing at the morning sun in her eyes. Someone laughed behind her.

"Not much of an early riser, I see. We'll have to fix that."

Cora whirled to find the source of the voice. Cillian Fane stood near the bed, tying up the laces of his trousers. The events of the night before came rushing back, and she realized that the nameless, faceless lovers in her dreams hadn't been so faceless at all. Her face flushed at the idea that she'd felt his long dark hair, rough beard, and talented fingers all over her body as she slept.

A cool breeze fluttered through the tent. Her nipples tightened in response, reminding her she'd fallen asleep last night completely naked. She scrambled for the blanket, pressing it to her chest as though it would undo what he'd already seen.

"Aw, come now, wife. Don't be like that."

Her mind stumbled over the word 'wife' like a stone. She was a wife now. She was Cillian Fane's wife. The world felt upside down and inside out as she tried to make sense of her

new reality. And Fane, damn him, didn't seem bothered by it at all.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, eyes averted to anywhere but him.

"Yes, you do, lass. I know you do because we wolves have special mind-reading gifts once we've married. I can see all your thoughts."

Cora's eyes widened. He couldn't be... There was no way he could...

"You... you... I don't believe you!" she exclaimed. But she mentally screamed the worst curses she could think of—just in case.

Her husband—*husband*—grinned like a mischievous child. "Well, that's good because it's a lie. I don't need to read your mind to tell what you're thinking."

She scowled, wishing for something large to throw at him. "Oh? What am I thinking, o wise husband?"

"Oh, I'd wager good money you're cursing me to a life of knots in my tail and piss in my ale. Something evil like that. Am I right?"

The corner of her mouth twitched. "Something like that."

"Ah, so she can smile. I was beginning to worry."

It occurred to Cora that their conversation might be easier if they were both clothed, so she scanned the floor for her dress. When it failed to materialize, she asked, "Where are my clothes, Master Fane?"

Fane snorted. "First off, there'll be no more of that 'Master Fane' shite. We're married, lass. I've seen your bare arse and a fair sight more than that. You'll call me by my given name, aye?"

She wondered how long she could blush without it becoming permanent. "There's no need to be vulgar, M—Cillian," she said.

Cillian stalked toward her with a predatory smile. Cora scooted backwards, clutching the blanket to her chest. He followed her until her back hit the tent. She glanced around nervously, realizing there was nowhere else to go. Cillian leaned over her, pressing closer and closer until their noses touched. Cora held her breath, fear and anticipation warring for dominance in her heart.

“What if I like being vulgar with you?” he whispered.

She resisted the urge to shudder at the way his lips brushed hers when he spoke. “What if I’d like *you* to be vulgar with *me*?”

The cool morning suddenly felt too warm. She was sure she must be red down to her toes. “I—” she stuttered, words failing her. “I don’t—”

Cillian sighed and stepped back. He adjusted the front of his trousers, fixing her with a look she couldn’t interpret. He glanced away and grabbed a shirt, tugging it over his head. When it became clear he didn’t intend to continue, she bent to search the floor beneath the large table.

Nothing.

When she looked up again, she found Cillian staring at her. “I meant what I said, you know.”

When she didn’t reply, he continued. “Last night. I won’t hurt you. Have no intention of forcing a woman into my bed.”

Cora nodded but stayed silent. Cillian opened his mouth as if to continue, then shook his head and crossed the room without a word. He lifted a bag from a large basket, and Cora’s heart skipped a beat when she recognized it as her mother’s. Only one person in the world would have sent it to her.

“Where did you get that?” she asked.

Cillian shrugged dismissively as he handed it to her. “Some old hag who said she was close to you in the castle. Said she’d packed you a bag so you’d have something to start with.”

Cora opened it carefully, as though one wrong breath might send all of her possessions flying away.

Paper and quills, fresh and ready for use.

A dried bouquet of her favorite wildflowers to remind her of home.

An extra pair of shoes.

And last but not least, *clothes*. Her own clothes!

Cora wasn't sure if God heard prayers to bless people for things like this, but it couldn't hurt to try. It felt silly to cry over bits of fabric and paper, but she couldn't stop the tears from coming. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not sure what's wrong with me."

Cillian was quiet for a long moment. Then a smile spread on his face, and he announced, "Get dressed, then. We've got things to do."

"Like what?" she asked. She'd known her duties as the lord's daughter. She knew them so well that she could have done them fast asleep. She had no idea what Cillian might expect from her.

Other women of her station would go into their marriage prepared to oversee a household or some sort of charitable work. Cillian and his men didn't seem the types to bother with dusting the fixtures or polishing the sconces.

Cillian adjusted the gold pin securing the wolf skin on his shoulders and cinched his sword belt tighter around his waist. "Time for you to meet the lads, for starters. After that, we'd best find something to keep you busy here. My father always said a woman without a purpose would make it her purpose to be a pain in the arse. So, in following his wisdom, I suggest we find you a task."

Every time she thought she might like him, he went and opened his mouth and ruined it.

"I'm assuming your father had a terrible marriage, then. Or a very patient wife?" she asked, turning away from him to dress.

“Oh, my mother was a saint, to be sure. I’ve never met a more fearless woman—and handy with a weapon to boot! My father thought the world of her. Worshiped the ground beneath her feet, he did.”

Cora lifted her head at his tone. “Did she die?”

Cillian shook his head. “No, she’s still alive and well. She still lives with my father’s clan. A hunt went bad a few winters back, and he caught the wrong end of a big buck. Bastard all but skewered him.”

“I—I’m sorry. My mother died of sickness when I was young.” She wasn’t sure why she told him. Camaraderie, perhaps? Evidence that they had at least one thing in common?

“Sorry, lass. I didn’t know.”

They fell into silence then. Cora wondered if he felt as out of sorts as she did. He’d seemed so much larger than life when she met him. Since then, he’d been a whirlwind of contradictions. She’d had a picture in her mind of what Cillian Fane the Wolf King would be like, and she’d expected him to be cold and hard. Cruel, even. She hadn’t expected a man who’d be patient with her on her wedding night or apologize for her mother’s death.

After they were both dressed, he led her outside. It was still early, but people were already busy. Some men banked fires, while others took on domestic tasks like washing and mending. Cillian led her toward a group of men seated on logs around the remains of last night’s fire. Cora noticed they each wore a wolf skin around their shoulders as Cillian did, with the same gold pin. They passed pieces of bread and strips of meat around, laughing and chatting amicably as they ate. Whatever she’d imagined of the wolf-men of Bran’s stories, she hadn’t expected them to seem so... normal.

The moment the men spotted them approaching, they erupted into loud cheers. Several stood, congratulating Cillian with a thump on the back. A few offered crude suggestions for their marital life, which Cora did her best to ignore.

Once they'd settled, Cillian wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to his side. "*Deartháireacha*, say hello to my wife, Cora. Cora, these are my brothers."

Cora stared at the group of men in shock. "Brothers? What, all of them?"

Laughter rippled through the group, except for one man. He sat at the edge of the group and scowled into his drink. Cillian chuckled and said, "Not as you'd think it, no. The luchthonn live in family groups and raise their pups together. Blood or not, we are clan and pack. In all the ways that matter, we are brothers." He thumped the scowling man on his back. "Even Eoin here, though he'd just as soon use us for rugs most days!"

Eoin's scowl deepened. He shrugged Cillian's hand away, baring his teeth in an animalistic snarl. The teasing laughter disappeared, leaving behind an uncomfortable silence. Some stared at Eoin in shock, while others cast worried glances toward Cillian.

Cillian's cheerful demeanor disappeared, replaced by something cold and hard. He stared into Eoin's eyes and held his gaze without so much as a blink. No one said a word, but even Cora understood the power play at hand. She'd seen shades of it over the years in soldiers and merchants around the castle. Anytime a fresh-faced recruit got too big for his drawers, Éogan would put him soundly in his place. More than once, she'd watched her father intimidate a merchant set on cheating them out of money or resources.

This was more, somehow. Something about Cillian's expression froze her in place. He'd treated her with such kindness that morning that she'd almost forgotten who and what he was. For the first time since she met him, he looked exactly like his moniker—a king, and a feral one at that. Truthfully, when she'd first approached him, she'd expected him to be this way—brutal and fearsome. But he hadn't been, to her surprise, and she wasn't sure why the sudden shift bothered her as much as it did.

It took only moments for Eoin to look away. He rose to his feet without a word and bowed stiffly to Cillian before stalking away.

“Ah, to be young and stupid again,” an older man in the group said, shaking his head. “I miss the days of having more balls than sense.”

The tension broke like a wave on the shore. With a few good-natured jabs about the man’s balls and lack of sense, the men resumed their conversations.

Cillian’s expression remained cool and calculating as he watched the young man walk away before glancing down at her. “My apologies,” he said, gesturing toward a nearby log with a small smile. “A seat for you, My Lady?”

A few minutes later, it was as though the strange interaction had never happened. The men joked and jostled each other, passing food around the circle and introducing themselves one by one. Cora surprised herself by enjoying the easy camaraderie and did her best to push her curiosity aside.

It was easier said than done.

Chapter 11

Cora

There were no other women in the camp.
Not a single one.

It was a testament to how distracted she'd been the past few days that she hadn't realized until then. It was only when Cillian had given her a task to "keep her busy" that she'd noticed it at all. After hearing about her visits to the Ossory villages, he'd suggested that she use her skills to aid his men. At first, she'd been happy—relieved, even—to have something familiar to cling to. Surely, she'd thought, losing herself in caring for others would be a welcome reprieve from her husband and the uncomfortable thoughts he inspired.

The reality was not so simple. At home—her father's home—she'd cared for those with minor illnesses and injuries in the surrounding villages. The villagers would come to her for fevers, cuts, and infections. On occasion, someone with a broken bone might be brought to her, but serious illness and injuries were rare. Not because they didn't happen, mind, but because those who suffered them rarely lived long enough to be brought to the castle. The English attack had been by far the most brutal test of her skills, and it wasn't something she wished to repeat.

The first morning of her assignment, two young men carried their friend to her after an unfortunate encounter with a bear. Blood soaked the makeshift bandages they'd wrapped around the deep gashes. It was immediately clear that the injuries were too severe to heal on their own. She'd called for supplies only to be presented with her next challenge—there were none. Well, to be fair, there was no end of linen strips or alcohol to numb the drinker's pain. But herbs? Salves? Horsehair threads or catgut to sew wounds? There was nothing.

She'd scrambled to help the boy, forgetting her proper manners in favor of shouting at his friends to hurry and find

her whatever they had to help her. One had plucked a hair from a very unhappy horse's tail, and the other had swiped a needle from someone mending their clothes. Hot water was easy enough to come by, and with the help of the two boys and multiple prayers, she saved him.

Afterward, still fuming, she'd searched for her husband only to find that he'd left that morning with a handful of his men. Some lord or another had hired them to track a band of highwaymen a day's ride away. He hadn't said a word to her about being gone. Not that he owed her anything at all, but she'd assumed, what with being his wife, that he might at least tell her if he'd be gone for days.

Apparently not.

Determined to make do on her own, Cora searched for resources herself. The women in her father's kitchens always had useful herbs and ingredients on hand. She'd thought it would be a simple enough matter to search out the camp's women and borrow some of their stores.

She'd been wrong.

Which led her to her current realization.

There were no other women in the entire camp.

Not a single one.

Cora scanned the camp with new eyes, suddenly noticing things she'd missed before. Men stood around a cook pot, stirring and tossing in a potato or carrot. One man sat outside his tent, idly mending clothes and shoes. Another balanced a small bucket between his legs and scrubbed at a pair of trousers. All trousers. Not a skirt to be seen.

She wondered if she ought to be afraid. Her husband had left her, a solitary woman, in a camp of fifty men with no chaperone or other female presence at all. Was she in danger? The scowling man, Eoin, came to mind. Might he turn that anger on her without her husband there to stop him?

"Lady, are you well?"

Cora looked up to find a young man—one of her patient’s friends, she thought—staring at her. He sported a short, patchy beard and had the gangly, uneven limbs of a boy on his way to manhood. A small, thin fur covered his shoulders—but not a wolf, she realized. Something smaller—a fox, maybe? There was no gold pin holding it in place like Cillian and his ‘brothers’ wore, and she wondered if there was more meaning behind it than she’d thought.

The poor lad shuffled nervously, and Cora realized she’d been staring at him. “Oh, my apologies!” she said. “I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Are you sure? You’ve been staring at that rock for ages. Some of us were worried you might be ill.”

Cora opened her mouth to dismiss his words but stopped when an idea struck. “What’s your name, lad?”

The boy straightened, his chest puffed out as much as it could. “Seamus, Lady. Of the Fáelad clan. Cillian—your husband—he’s one of my cousins.”

Cora smiled warmly and said, “Oh! Well, that makes us family, doesn’t it? It’s a pleasure to meet you, Seamus.”

Seamus blushed, the color reaching all the way to his hair. “Did you need something, Lady? You have been here for quite a while, and I—we, me and the others, that is—thought you might need help.”

Cora looked behind him to see a pair of young men with similar uneven beards and scraggly pelts. As soon as they realized she’d spotted them, they glanced away as though they hadn’t been staring.

“Actually, some help would be wonderful,” she said, gesturing at the basket she’d found to hold her nonexistent supplies. “My husband has tasked me with serving the ill and injured here, but I need herbs and other resources to do it. Do you know where I might find comfrey and feverfew in camp? And some catgut?”

Seamus glanced back at his friends, then shrugged apologetically. “I don’t think we have anything like that here, Lady. The luchthonn don’t need much in the way of healing, and the *madraí*... well—”

“Forgive me. What do your dogs have to do with the need for medicines?”

“Oh! No, Lady. It’s what we—us from the luchthonn tribes—call the human men in our numbers.”

Cora blinked slowly. “Right. Of course. And how many... *madraí* are there here?”

Seamus shrugged again. “I dunno. Twenty maybe?”

“And they’re never injured? Never sick? And why wouldn’t the luchthonn need healing? Are they gods that nothing harms them?”

The longer their conversation went on, the more uncomfortable Cora became. If his expression was anything to go by, Seamus shared her discomfort. “We just—well, we heal quickly. I’m not sure why. And sure, the *madraí* get hurt and sick. But, usually, the other *madraí* see to them or they just... you know, die.”

It wasn’t fair to the lad to take her frustration—her anger—out on him. She repeated that thought to herself until the urge to shout receded. Finally, she cleared her throat and said, “I see. Well, my husband—your cousin—has tasked me with changing all that. I’ve some skill in this area, as you saw earlier, but I need supplies. Are you familiar with the forest to the east of camp?”

“Aye, Lady.”

“Good. Thank you for answering my questions, Seamus, truly. I’m afraid I know nothing about this world, but I’d like to learn. Do you think you and your friends might travel with me into the forest? If you do, as well as answer a few more questions, I promise to make you the tastiest stew you’ve ever eaten for your dinner.”

....

CORA COUNTED ON THE fact that young men never seemed to stop eating, and if the interested shine in Seamus's eyes was anything to go by, she'd judged correctly. He hesitated for a moment, then nodded. A hopeful smile curving on his lips, he asked, "Would you... if I caught you a hare or two, would you add it to your stew? Rabbit's my favorite."

"Seamus, you keep me away from any bears in those woods, and I'll put whatever you like in."

The more Cora watched her guides make their way through the forest, the more she was reminded of a litter of hunting pups. Like the dogs, the boys had more energy than sense, but they teased and pestered each other just like pups who nipped at their litter-mates' ears. As soon as the initial awkwardness had faded, they'd lobbed question after question at her about life in a castle and the herbs she needed to find. She'd never considered that her former life might be as alien to them as theirs was to her.

"Lady, pardon me, but you lie," Seamus accused after she'd described the large hall where they held harvest feasts and grand celebrations. "Why would anyone need a whole room for that? Why trap yourself with all those walls when you could just celebrate outside? Sounds awful to me."

Cora laughed, shaking her head at his expression. "Do the luchthonn not use buildings at all? Do you all live in tents?"

"Well, no, not really," he replied. "There are houses and such at *Clann Abhaile*, the Clan's homeland, but none of the roaming packs ever build anything like a house."

Cora scanned the ground for the purple flowers that marked the comfrey plant. It was hard to focus on her task when every word out of the boys' mouths only raised more questions. "What's the *Clann Abhaile*? What do you mean, the roaming packs?"

One of the other boys held up a heather flower a few yards away. "Lady, is this what you need?"

"It wasn't what I was looking for, but we can certainly use it. That little plant brings down swelling and infections!"

The boy narrowed his eyes at the unassuming flower. “This thing? My mam’s sheep eat this all the time. You’re telling me it’s good for us too?”

Cora nodded, grinning when she spotted the oval leaves of the comfrey plant. “You’d be surprised what common plants and herbs can do. Not all of us can heal so quickly as you mighty men. We need all the help we can get.”

The boy preened for a moment at being called a mighty man before considering the heather in his hand again. Seamus shook his head and helped Cora gather more of the comfrey leaves. “My mam says that all the luchthonn came from a treaty between a man and a wolf long ago. A great evil threatened their homes, so they joined together to save them. Through that treaty, the first wolf-skin wearer was born. Don’t ask me how he was born—I don’t know, and I’d just as soon not think about it. It’s a legend, isn’t it? But he was born and grew into a fierce warrior. He defended his people with the claws and fangs of a wolf and the heart and spirit of a man. When he married, he and his wife formed the luchthonn clan. Over the years, that clan spread into various packs, but all come from the same great clan. *Clann Abhaile* is where most of our people live now. Our elders, and most families with young pups, live there for safety.”

Cora nodded, plucking the comfrey leaves absent-mindedly as she struggled to make sense of it all. With every new explanation, Seamus turned her world upside down. How was it possible that such beings could exist without people knowing?

“I don’t understand,” she said, tucking the leaves into her basket. “Why don’t you all live in this clan home? Why leave at all? If it’s safer there, why have these... these packs at all? The stories people tell about you—about the wildlings—don’t they worry you? What if people find out the truth? Wouldn’t that be dangerous for you?”

Seamus shrugged. “The packs bring in good coin. This life is good for the males of our kind. For those of us who haven’t had the change yet, it’s a way to train and make use of ourselves. The packs keep us out of trouble, and we make a

living doing what comes natural. No one's forced to join up, but most do until they're ready to take a mate and settle down. And as for the humans, well, look around you, Lady. This land is full of magic. The humans might pretend it's not, but it is. And their spirits know it even if their heads don't. Most are happy to ignore what they can't understand, and it's not as though we make a habit of changing our skins in the town square. The *madraí* who come to us aren't told the truth until they're found to be trustworthy. The lords who might know won't tell because they'd have to admit they knew when they hired us, and they won't do that."

"So you're counting on the fact that people don't want to believe you're real? That's it?"

Seamus's smile turned sharp and decidedly wolfish. "You think people want to believe someone like Cillian, or Cathall, is *really* a monster? They're frightening enough as men, don't you think?"

"I suppose that's true. People get comfortable in their way of thinking. It's... it's difficult to find out that what you've always thought to be true... isn't."

She thought of Bran and the 'truth' he'd told her about Cillian and his men when she'd still been building her brilliant plan. He'd whispered the rumors of men changing to wolves as though frightened that speaking the words too loud would make them real. But he didn't *believe* them—not really. If he had, he'd have sounded terrified rather than excited when he described the beastly way the wildlings fought or the way they turned into giant, ferocious wolves after eating the still-beating hearts of their enemies. So much truth hidden in the fantasy.

One of the other boys sauntered up and dropped his bounty into Cora's basket. "You think you've seen it all now, Lady? You haven't seen anything. Just you wait 'till the elders hear about this agreement Cillian's made with you. Things are sure to get interesting for everybody then."

Before Cora could ask what he meant, Seamus drove an elbow into his ribs. "Piss off, Rossa!" he snapped. "Nothing's going to happen, and you know it."

Rossa glared at Seamus as he rubbed his rib but chose to run off in search of more comfrey rather than try to take revenge.

“Don’t mind him,” Seamus said, “He lives to cause trouble any way he can. Most of us think his mam dropped him on his head as a pup.”

Rossa’s words hadn’t seemed like something to dismiss, but Cora didn’t press him. She could always ask Cillian... if he ever decided to come home.

Chapter 12

Cora

Days passed in the luchthonn camp as they did anywhere else. Of all the things she'd learned in the past two weeks, that was the most surprising. The tales of her husband and his men were remarkable, but the truth of their day-to-day existence was much less so.

The luchthonn ate and drank like other men; they swore, bathed—sometimes—and bled. In the early days, she'd imagined terrible creatures like the one Cillian became wandering the camp morning and night. She'd been sure the men would be coarse and vile, the epitome of every nightmare she'd had leading up to her wedding. The luchthonn were meant to be cruel and without honor because that's how the stories described them.

She'd quickly realized that the stories were, as Cillian would say, a load of horseshit.

While the men of the luchthonn were hardly saints, they weren't so different from the soldiers at the castle or the village farmers she'd known all her life. It was a slow realization, one built on instance after instance where she expected them to act in one way, only to be surprised when they did something different.

For example, the true reason for the absence of other women. At first, Cora had wondered if they did not permit men and women to be together outside of marriage or their clan home. The priest at her wedding had believed in some sort of moon goddess—maybe there were rules of their religion that kept men and women apart?

Seamus had set her straight on one of their forest visits. There were no women in the roaming packs because they were too busy protecting the clan home. Cora had listened, enraptured, as he'd described the fierce warrior women who guarded the gates to *Clann Abhaile*. She remembered how Queen Boudica had been her inspiration on the night she met

Cillian and wondered if the legendary queen had been part wolf herself.

It surprised Cora how quickly her new routine, her new *life*, became familiar. When she walked through the camp in the mornings, men would call out greetings like she'd known them all her life.

“Good morning to you, Lady! Fine weather for one of your jaunts, eh?”

“Madam Fane! It were yarrow root you've been wanting, weren't it? One of the lads found some near the creek!”

“Happy morning to you, Lady! Thanks for looking at that cut for me—bloody horse clipped me good!”

On and on it went. If she'd expected them to treat her like an outsider, she'd been mistaken. Almost to a man, they seemed happy she'd come to the camp. Eoin was the only notable exception, though from what she could tell, he didn't care for anyone.

She'd asked Cillian about the sullen man she'd met the day after their wedding. He'd rolled his eyes and said to “pay the surly bastard no mind.” She'd asked Seamus after that. He'd shrugged, claiming that he didn't know much except that Eoin was a fine warrior who kept to himself. All Cora knew for certain was that any time she passed Eoin, he scowled as though she'd spit on his shoes.

Cathall, the large blonde who'd held her when she'd tried to run from Cillian's wolf, appeared in front of her. His greeting drew her thoughts away from Eoin's frosty demeanor.

“Hello, Lady! Off somewhere important, are you?”

Cora smiled warmly and replied, “I'm sure my patients would think so. Some of the younger lads made themselves sick on a bad batch of ale. I'm bringing them some rosemary to help, but it can wait if you need me. A little extra time might drive the lesson home, don't you think?”

Cathall returned her smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Cillian's second-in-command always treated her with

respect, but Cora felt he hadn't yet passed judgment on her. He spoke to her—smiled, even—but it always felt stiff and forced.

“You're a harsh mistress, Madam Fane,” he said, “But you're right. A little more suffering will encourage them to be more careful next time. Would you care to watch today's training?”

“Oh, I'm not sure,” she said, offering an apologetic shrug. “I'd hate to be a distraction.”

For the first time, Cathall's smile was genuine. “In that case, you must come! Your husband is in the ring today, and a distraction will be just what his opponent prays for!”

A large group of men surrounded the makeshift sparring ring. Her father's guards sparred in a wide ring bordered by a short wooden fence. The ring in the luchthonn camp was smaller and only marked by a thin rope at its edges. The guards had always treated sparring like military drills. Éogan was a harsh taskmaster, and he drove his men until they perfected whatever skill they needed. The two men currently in the ring were far less rigid. They danced around each other like there was a maypole between them.

Cathall gestured toward the crowd just as the two men crashed together like a pair of quarreling dogs. “Would you care for a closer look, Lady?”

Cora nearly declined. Her patients were waiting, and she was sure that Cillian would say that a sparring ring was no place for a lady. She hadn't told him about Éogan's lessons. Hadn't told him about the afternoons she'd spent watching the men run their drills while she mimicked them with a stick or wooden sword. Suddenly, she missed the crash of shields and the heavy cracks of the half-staffs.

“Yes, I think I would.”

If her answer surprised him, Cathall didn't show it. He nodded, leading her closer to the ring. They nudged men out of the way, pushing forward until they broke through to the inner circle.

Two men faced off in the ring. One held an arming sword in one hand and a buckler in the other. The second, a much larger man, hefted a heavy claymore like it was a twig. They circled each other carefully, each looking for a weakness in their opponent's guard.

Someone from the crowd yelled, "Get on with it, you lazy bastards!"

The rest of the men roared in agreement, and suddenly, the two men collided. The harsh scrape of the claymore against the buckler hurt Cora's ears. She leaned closer to Cathall and shouted to be heard over the din of the crowd. "Why do they use their real weapons? Isn't this training?"

"Of course!" he answered. "Why would they use anything else? These are the weapons they'll use in battle. To train with anything else would be foolish!"

Cora stared at the two fighters, awestruck by their ferocity. The man with the claymore clearly had brute strength and size on his side, but his opponent didn't seem worried. A one-handed sword and buckler were far easier to maneuver. The smaller man dodged the heavy swings of the claymore with ease, skirting around the edge of the ring.

The round went on for ages. As one man landed a hit, the other found a weakness or dodged a strike. It wasn't until the smaller man took a blow to the head from the claymore's pommel that the match was called. Blood dripped into the dirt below, and the loser held one hand to his head as he shook the winner's hand with the other.

Cora asked Cathall if the men would need her help with their injuries, but he waved her question away. "They're luchthonn; they will heal quickly. Now, if a *madraí* gets in the ring, they might need you afterward."

Either he didn't know about the many luchthonn she'd healed in the past weeks, or he thought it impossible for a human, a *madraí*, to come out the victor. Something inside rankled at his words, some vain pride. It wasn't the first time she'd heard one of the luchthonn dismiss their human 'brothers.' Even the name they'd given them—*madraí*, dogs—

was the lesser form of their own wolves. Not all agreed, but it was enough. The fact that they'd had no healing resources for them before she'd come was telling. Many of the luchthonn seemed to treat the *madraí* like her father treated his hunting dogs—valuable if needed for a task, but not nearly as important as a man.

Cora wondered why the human men put up with it. Even thinking about it heated her blood. Frustration built under her skin until her hands shook. She stuffed them into her apron pocket and hoped Cathall wouldn't notice.

Cillian appeared in the middle of the ring, all swagger and confidence. "All right, lads, who's in the mood to bleed?"

"I'll fight you!"

The crowd went silent as all eyes fell on her. All around her, the men stared and gawked, but she ignored them. The only person who mattered was the man in the middle of the ring.

He looked her up and down, shaking his head as though she were a riddle he couldn't solve. A moment of silence passed, and Cora waited patiently for him to respond. The air crackled with tension, waiting for someone to break it. Finally, he grinned and swung his sword up to rest on his shoulder. "A brave challenge, wife, but this isn't a knitting circle."

Heat flooded Cora's cheeks as the men laughed around her. Cathall took her arm as though to lead her away, but she shook him off. "I didn't ask for a needle, husband. Give me a sword. Or are you frightened of a little woman like me?"

Sounds of surprise rippled through the crowd. Some men looked concerned, while others leaned closer, drawn in by the growing spectacle. Across the circle, two men slid coins between them.

Cillian scoffed. "Enough, lass. You'll only hurt yourself trying to pick up the blade."

Cora smiled sweetly. "Then it'll be a short match, yes?"

The whispers grew to murmurs, pulling Cillian's attention away as he considered the surrounding crowd. His men were

invested, listening with rapt attention to every word. There was no easy way for him to dismiss her without losing face, and by his darkening expression, he knew it.

“Mark me, woman,” he said, his voice as hard as stone. “You asked for this. When you’re bloodied and bruised, I’ll not hear a word about it. Do you understand?”

Cora nodded. The temptation to goad him further was strong, but she ignored it. Instead, she scanned the circle and called out, “Would anyone have a sword and buckler I might borrow? Seems I left mine in my other gown.”

At first, no one moved. They all glanced warily at their leader as though judging how angry he’d be if they responded. The man who’d been fighting when she arrived stepped forward, a nervous smile on his face. “Here, Lady. Take mine.”

Cora smiled and thanked him before stepping into the ring. The process of fitting the buckler gave her shaking hands something to do, and she hoped no one noticed that her nerves had caught up to her. She pictured Éogan and all of his lessons in the castle courtyard. She’d never be a warrior, but he’d made sure she could hold her own against the other guards. Men and women could both die on a blade, he’d said, so it only made sense that she knew how to defend herself.

The sword in her hand was heavier than the ones she’d used before, but there was no helping that. She slid her hand to the center of the hilt, gripping it tightly with her thumb forward and her fingers bent just like Éogan had taught her. The buckler around her arm was light but sturdy when she pulled it close to her chest.

Cillian watched her, eyes trained on her every move like a hawk fixed on a rabbit. He lifted his sword from his shoulder, shifting it in his hands as he widened his stance. “Keep that buckler up,” he said as he started a slow walk around the perimeter of the ring. “I’ll control my hits, but that won’t help if you drop your defense.”

Cora smiled, mirroring his circuit around the ring. “Thank you for the advice. I’ll try to keep it in mind when I win.”

The crowd roared around them. To her surprise, just as many cheered for her as for Cillian. Cries of “Get ‘im, Lady!” and “Kick his arse!” blended with calls for Cillian to put her in her place.

Before she could tune them out, Cillian attacked. She raised her buckler on instinct, deflecting his blow only a moment before it would have struck. It was a gentle strike, but it still vibrated all the way up her arm.

He was going easy on her, just as she’d known he would. She’d counted on the fact that he’d underestimate her. Like the man in the last fight, she would never win based on brute strength. Her only advantage came in his miscalculation of her skill.

Cillian hesitated after the blow, and Cora wasted no time delivering a counterstrike. He leapt away from her sword, dodging its arc more gracefully than she’d expect from a man his size. Rather than chase him, she waited. Patience. Patience and concentration were her strengths against this opponent.

He came at her a second time, feinting to one side before swinging from the other. She was ready. Narrowly dodging the blow, Cora reached out and tapped his exposed arm with the flat of her sword.

The crowd roared, their raucous shouts echoing around her. Cillian stared at her sword, then at her. To her surprise, he grinned and tilted his head until Cora heard an audible crack. “You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you, wife?”

It didn’t escape her notice that he’d said something similar about himself after their wedding. Cora returned his smile. “Dear husband, you’ve no idea how surprising I can be.”

Something hot and hungry flashed across his expression—something she hadn’t seen in the weeks since their wedding. Most days, she only spoke with him in the early morning and late at night before bed, and he seemed content with that. Up till now, she’d appreciated that he hadn’t pressed her for more physical intimacy. Still, it’d be a lie to say that she hadn’t missed the heat in his eyes after that first night.

There was certainly heat now. Cillian re-centered himself and said, “I look forward to finding out, *A Mhuirín*.”

The unexpected endearment distracted her, and Cillian rushed her before she could open her mouth. Strike after strike, blow after blow, his hesitation replaced with an energy she found difficult to match. Over and over, she lifted her buckler to block his swings. After the first few, her arm ached from bracing against the blows. She looked for an opening—any opening—to use.

Éogan’s voice echoed in her ears, instructing her to dodge, to parry, to strike. She held her own, but his size and speed made it difficult to gain any ground. For one chaotic moment, they were equals. She couldn’t break his defense, but neither could he get past hers.

The longer the match went on, the more her muscles ached. Cillian was a trained warrior who’d survived countless battles. She was competent enough, but training in a courtyard wasn’t enough to beat him.

But victory hadn’t been her aim, and the sweat dripping from her husband’s brow suggested she would be victorious in her own right. Just by holding her own, she’d proved him wrong. The luchthonn women and the warrior queen flitted through her mind between blows—a reminder that she was not alone. Another strike came down on her buckler, and Cora barely resisted the urge to howl like she imagined they would.

It was a combination of her fatigue and his skill that ended the match. She miscalculated a blow, reacting to the swing just a second too late. His sword knocked her buckler from her hand. The force sent her reeling. Unable to keep her balance, she tumbled to the ground.

Cillian’s sword was at her throat before she could blink. The crowd fell silent around them as he stared down at her, his enormous blade buried in the ground next to her head. Cora took deep, heaving breaths as she held Cillian’s gaze. The heat in his eyes had only grown over the course of their match, and the throbbing between her legs proved that she hadn’t been immune. She pictured him covering her body with his own

there on the ground. He'd kiss her, bite at her lips, and conquer her there as he had in their battle.

But of course, he didn't. Instead, he shook his head and yanked his sword free from the ground. Then he extended a hand with a smile. Cora took his hand, gasping as he pulled her to her feet. Their spectators howled in appreciation, their shouts so loud they rang in her ears.

Cillian brushed the dirt from her cheeks. "I thought I married a lady. You didn't think to tell me I'd mated Boudica herself? It might have been nice to know."

Warmth spread through Cora's body at the mention of her idol. "But husband, that would ruin all the fun," she teased, running her hands over her hair.

Suddenly aware of their audience, Cora took a step back. She bowed, acknowledging his victory. As the men rushed them, patting her back and ruffling her hair, she couldn't help but notice that Cillian never looked away.

Chapter 13

Cillian

“Cillian? Will you help me, please?”

Cillian looked up from the letter he was holding and set it back on the table. Cora sat across the room with a brush in one hand and a leather strap in the other. Sunlight glinted off her hair, reminding him of fresh earth in spring. He'd always loved the smell of grass and earth in springtime. As a boy, he'd loved to lie in the new grass and bury his nose in it, soaking in the smell of sunshine and new life. The sudden image of Cora with a rounded belly and dark hair free down her back took his breath away.

Cora arched an eyebrow, and he realized he'd left her waiting for an answer. Cillian cleared his throat and nodded, taking the brush in hand. “I'll just brush it out, shall I?”

Cora nodded, straightening her back as he pulled the brush through a small section of her hair. “After it's brushed, I'll need your help with the braid.”

“Not that I mind helping, wife, but don't you braid your hair every day?”

She smiled and gestured to a small bouquet on the bed. “One of the boys brought me those flowers to thank me for fixing him up. I thought they might look nice in my hair.”

Cillian nodded in agreement. Her hair was silk in his hands. On their wedding night, he'd taken every opportunity to run his fingers through her beautiful hair and marvel at its softness. He'd thought about it often since then. He imagined it flowing down her back as she walked, in a braid wrapped around his fist as he fucked her, draped over his chest as she slept on his chest—he'd imagined it all.

But he'd been careful not to push her. On their wedding night, he'd said that he wouldn't force her, and he'd meant it. When she'd flinched away from him the very next morning, he'd taken it to mean she wasn't ready. So, he'd given her

space, hadn't he? He'd given her time. Hadn't pressed or forced her hand. It'd been like walking through fire some days to resist the growing urges in his heart, but he'd kept his distance. Any time he was tempted to try again, he remembered that flinch. The way she'd pulled away from him.

Things had been different between them since the day in the sparring ring. It happened slowly at first, so slowly that he might have missed it had he not been watching. The first time Cora smiled at him in that soft, gentle way, he thought he'd imagined it. Then, after he'd helped her onto her horse one afternoon, she'd done it again.

Day by day, the smiles turned into more. Before, they'd spoken little. Conversations had revolved around camp and his men's needs. She would talk about the herbs she needed or how one of the men was coming along after an injury or illness. It was never anything personal, and it always faded into quiet in the end. Now, she asked him questions about himself as they readied for the day and answered when he questioned her in return.

Before, they were careful not to touch while lying in the dark. Now, they lay side by side, the distance all but gone. They'd even stayed awake a few times, whispering in the darkness about the day or whatever new correspondence her father had sent.

The warmth between them built slowly. Every day, he pressed a little harder, went a little farther, and she'd not yet rejected him.

He ran the brush through her hair until it shone. Halfway through, she'd started moaning whenever he swept the brush over her scalp, and he'd been hard as a rock ever since. By the time he finished, his self-control hung by a thread.

Cora braided the flowers into her hair with practiced ease. Cillian watched, fascinated, as she tucked the stems into the silky strands. She looked like a forest nymph from an old story, and he could picture her laid out under a tree, tempting men with fresh fruit and music.

“How does it look?” she asked, turning her head to show him both sides. Unable to resist, Cillian leaned in and kissed her cheek. “It looks lovely,” he said, smiling at the way she blushed.

Her sweetness tempted the wolf. His mate called to him with her smiles and her warmth. The flowers mixed with her scent, creating images in his mind of taking her in a field of flowers. She’d be so lovely like that—dappled with sunshine or glowing in the pale light of the moon. No matter how he had her, she would be the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

Cora rose, her cheeks still pink, and clasped her hands together. “Thank you for your help,” she whispered.

He heard her just fine, but her whisper gave him an excuse to step closer. He crowded her, letting his hands fall to her hips. As he leaned in, her eyes widened, and her heart began to race. Whether in surprise or fear, he didn’t know, but it was enough to stop his advance. Cillian pulled away, forcing down the urge to kiss her until she made those lovely noises again.

“I—I should get going,” she said. “Seamus says he knows where to find elder trees nearby. Their bark is poisonous, of course, but the berries are wonderful for you. Not that I think you’d eat tree bark. I don’t really know who tried that first to find out it was poisonous—probably a man. But the berries are good for—”

Cillian’s will crumbled as he leaned in to quiet Cora with a kiss. She whimpered as if in pain but fisted his shirt in her hands. He wrapped her in his arms, careful not to jar the lovely flowers in her hair. Pulling her hips to his, he ground his cock against her. Cora opened her mouth in a needy moan, and he slipped his tongue in to tease hers.

This wasn’t a battle the way it had been their first time. Rather than having to coax her into the kiss, he’d simply taken it. He’d half expected her to haul back and hit him for it—after their match, he fully believed in his wife’s capacity for violence.

But she didn’t.

She attacked his lips, pulling him so close that there was hardly air between them. Cillian wedged a leg between her thighs and pushed it up and against her core. Cora's whine was almost feral, and his wolf howled in anticipation. Using his hands on her hips, Cillian guided her to rock against his leg. She followed his lead, clutching at his shirt as she writhed against him. He imagined her beneath him, squirming as he impaled her on his cock. She'd look like this—just like this—except he'd have all of her. There'd be no fear or hesitation because she would want him, too. And she did want him; she had to. She wouldn't do this—wouldn't allow him to do this—if she didn't.

Cillian's cock throbbed, and he ached to bury it inside her. It'd take no time at all to shove his trousers down, toss her on the bed, and ruck up her skirt. Properly motivated, he felt he could be inside her in under fifteen seconds.

He found himself quite motivated indeed.

Cora's moans grew louder, spurred on by his wandering hands. One kneaded her breast, teasing the nipple through her dress, while the other gripped her arse and forced her core against his thigh harder and harder.

Tearing his lips from hers, Cillian bit her ears, jaw, and neck as he brought her closer to her climax. "That's it, *A Mhuirín*. Ride me, beautiful girl. You're so close, aren't you? I want to hear you, love, but not too loud. Can't have the others knowing how lovely your cries are, can we?"

Cora's head thrashed back and forth as she rocked against him. When she went stiff and cried out, Cillian gave into the howling wolf within and surged forward to take her neck between his teeth. He bit down, digging his teeth into her soft flesh. She whimpered, caught in the throes of pleasure, and held his mouth to her neck. "Cillian—oh yes!"

Her high faded slowly as she sagged against him, deep heaving breaths ruffling his hair as she rested against his head. Cillian licked at her shoulder where he'd bitten her. It hadn't been hard enough to break skin but was more than enough to leave an angry red mark.

He would swear his cock could punch a hole through his trousers. He wanted to yank them down—wanted to spread her legs and have her warm and wet around him by his next breath. But when he looked into her eyes, still half drunk on her climax, he saw hesitation. He saw worry. It was a bucket of icy water over a fire.

The warmth that had spread through his body cooled. His cock throbbed as if to remind him that it needed seeing to, but he ignored it. He cleared his throat, releasing her and moving a safe distance away.

“Cillian, I—”

“Don’t need to explain,” he said with a rueful smile. “You’ve made it clear you don’t—”

Cora rushed forward, cutting him off with an angry huff. “For the love of God, will you let me finish? Just—give me a moment, will you?”

Cillian waited, fists clenched at his side, his erection still far too insistent to allow for good manners. Cora laced her trembling fingers together and inhaled. He’d noticed long ago that her hands often shook when she was frightened or uncomfortable, but he’d never asked about it. She hid it well and didn’t seem keen to talk about it herself. As she breathed in and out, the shaking slowed until her body was still again.

Finally, she met his eyes and spoke. “I’m sorry.”

“For what, lass? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She shook her head and placed a hand on his chest, her face tilted downward. “There are things that are... difficult to talk about, but I feel I must. I want you to understand because I... well, I hope because you feel the same.”

Cillian hooked a finger beneath her chin, raising her gaze to meet his. “Whatever it is you need to say, say it.”

“I didn’t want to marry you.”

Oh. Well, that stung, didn’t it? He’d known—of course he had. She’d offered herself in exchange for his protection for her people. They were hardly a grand romance in a fairy tale.

He supposed he hadn't been overjoyed with the situation himself at first, but he'd warmed to it—and to her. Obviously, she didn't feel the same. The wolf whined in the back of his mind.

His expression must have given him away. Cora shook her head and wrung her hands. "I'm saying this all wrong, aren't I? I only meant that, at the beginning, I was afraid. I didn't want to marry you—I didn't want to marry anybody! But it was all I had to give, and I was desperate. I told myself that the stories about you were fancy and rumors, but then they weren't stories! They were real, and you were real, and I was so afraid, Cillian. And then, before I could blink, we were married, and we... we... I hadn't thought I'd like it. Not with anyone, but especially not with you. But I did, and that frightened me too! I'm frightened of everything if you haven't noticed. And then, the very next morning, you pulled away. You only spoke when you had to. You avoided me if you could. Left me on my own for days after. I didn't know what to think. All I knew was that I'd married a man who could become a creature from my darkest nightmares, and I was alone."

Cillian flinched away from her words. He'd thought he was doing the right thing by leaving her alone, but he'd been so wrong. Instead of giving her the space to come to terms with their marriage as he'd thought, she'd interpreted his distance as a lack of interest. The wolf didn't understand everything that was happening, but it knew that he and his mate were both in distress. In his opinion, the only thing that would solve their problems was contact. Lots and lots of physical contact. A picture of an enormous wolf curled around a tiny woman with dark chestnut hair flashed into Cillian's mind. The wolf wasn't always right when it came to the nuance of human interactions, but this time, he thought he might be.

He stepped forward, wrapping his arms around her. "I'm sorry, lass. That was never my intention. I only wanted you to feel safe, and you were afraid of me, so I thought it best to give you time. I told you I wouldn't force you."

Cora shook her head. “And you haven’t. But I’ve had enough time. I’m still—this is still frightening, Cillian. I won’t deceive you and claim that everything’s all right now, but I want to try. I want us to try.”

Cillian stood very still, afraid that the wrong move or word would shatter the moment. “Are you sure that’s what you want?” he asked. Hope flickered in his chest, but he refused to acknowledge it until she agreed.

Cora nodded slowly. “I don’t know if this can be a happy marriage, Cillian. I don’t know if we can love each other. But I—I would like to try.”

He smiled, leaning in to brush a kiss against her lips. “I don’t know, either. There’s never been a match like ours, and I don’t know yet if a peaceful—a happy—marriage is possible between our kinds. But I would like to try as well.”

A thought struck him, and before he’d thought it through, he’d pulled away and reached out his hand to her. “Do we have an agreement, Madam Fane?”

Cora grinned and nodded. “I believe we do, Wolf King.”

Chapter 14

Cora

Cora lifted her ladle to her mouth. She blew across it to cool the steaming stew before taking a bite. After the unexpected conversation with Cillian the day before, she'd wanted to do something kind for him. Cooking had never been one of her gifts, but a stew seemed easy enough. Seamus certainly hadn't complained when she'd made good on her deal weeks back. The camp's cook, a large, portly man called Artúr, had unknowingly given her the idea last night at dinner. He'd lamented the evening meal, complaining about the lack of meat in his stew. She'd enjoyed the vegetables just fine, but several of the men agreed, complaining that men needed meat to be strong. One had hooked a finger in his own mouth and pointed at his blunt teeth, claiming that a wolf's teeth would fall out without enough meat. That several of his own teeth were missing seemed of little consequence to those who agreed with him.

Early this morning, she'd asked Seamus to trap some morning hares for her. He'd brought them to her only a few hours later, beaming with delight when she explained why she needed them. Thank heavens she had. She'd given no thought to how she was going to skin and clean the animals, but Seamus helped in exchange for a bowl of stew.

With Seamus's rabbits and one of Artúr's pots, Cora set to work. She'd spent enough time around the kitchens as a girl that she felt confident she could make something passable. At least, she didn't think she'd poison anyone. Cora carefully sipped a spoonful after a moment. If anyone died because of her cooking, it ought to be her.

By mid-day, the stew bubbled continuously over the fire. Evidence of her struggle with her task littered the front of her dress. Blood from the rabbits, orange from the carrots, and green from the herbs she'd chopped all stained the fabric, but she didn't care. The stew smelled wonderful and tasted even

better. Once Cillian arrived for their mid-day meal, she'd be able to surprise him with something she'd made herself!

Last, Cora laid out spoons and bowls. She tied a wildflower to Cillian's spoon and wondered if he'd find the gesture silly. After several minutes of back and forth with an imaginary Cillian, she left it. If he didn't like the flower, maybe he'd overlook it in favor of the stew.

Cora stood and wiped the sweat from her forehead just as a group of men jogged past. She tried to catch a few words of their conversation, but they were gone too quickly. A commotion caught her attention as she bent to ladle stew into the bowls. The camp was always noisy, but not this much. She straightened, a bowl of stew in hand, and craned her neck to see what was happening.

A crowd approached their tent—men and women on horseback mixed with Cillian's wildlings. Unlike the men in camp, the newcomers wore fine clothes made of good leather and sturdy cloth. If not for the wolf skins around their necks, she'd have thought them to be nobility.

At the head of the group, Cillian walked next to an old woman on a white horse. His expression was difficult to read from a distance, but he didn't look pleased. The old woman sat atop her horse with all the regal bearing of a queen. That couldn't be right—there were no queens in Ossory, and she knew of no queens from anywhere at all that might come to call on the luchthonn.

Cora was so distracted by the scene that she forgot herself. They approached Cillian's tent—her tent—and stopped just a few yards from where she stood, bowl of stew still in hand. Cillian helped the woman dismount. For as old as she appeared, the woman slid to the ground with ease. They looked up, both noticing Cora at the same time. Cillian gave her a stiff smile, while the old woman's expression might as well have been carved from ice.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “I've been looking for you.”

“Have you? I've been here. I didn't know we were expecting guests.”

Cora set the bowl down and wiped her hands on her skirt. Suddenly, she was aware of just what she must look like to their visitors. Her hair sat in a frizzy mop atop her head, strands sticking to her forehead and cheeks after bending over the hot pot. Streaks of blood and vegetable juice stained her dress, and a thick glob of the stew clung to her sleeve where she'd spilled it.

The old woman looked Cora up and down with an unreadable expression. Whatever she saw, she didn't seem impressed. Embarrassment burned under Cora's skin. She patted her hair, desperately trying to tame it. It was no use. She'd meant to change her dress and fix her hair before Cillian arrived to eat, but she hadn't had the chance.

Cillian cleared his throat, his expression still cool and stiff. "You've been hard at work today, love. Why don't you grab a fresh frock, and we'll join you inside when you're ready?"

His tone was deceptively mild, but she'd spent enough time around him to notice the anger hiding just below the surface. Whoever the old woman and her companions were, her husband wasn't happy to see them.

Cora nodded, mumbled a quick apology to their guests, and ducked into the tent. As she ran into the tent, she wondered if her stew would be ruined.

In her whole life, Cora had never cleaned herself so quickly. Thankfully, they had a bucket of fresh water in the tent for drinking, but Cora dunked a cloth in it and scrubbed her skin until it turned pink. There was no help for her hair without a decent wash, so she wove it into a thick braid to keep it contained. With a clean dress and fresh apron, she was as presentable as could be, given the circumstances. Her heart sank in her chest at the idea that it wouldn't be enough. Had she embarrassed Cillian? Whoever those people were, they were clearly important. But what did they want?

Cora straightened their things as best she could in two minutes, then forced herself to walk back to the entrance. She thought of her mother and the way she'd made people feel

welcome in her home. Despite her worries, Cora forced a smile and swept back the flap to their tent.

“My Lords and Ladies, please, come in! You are welcome in our home.”

She smiled at each of them as they walked into the tent without a sound. The old woman was the last, and she scrutinized Cora the way one might appraise a horse. Somewhere inside, something rankled.

Cillian followed behind her and took a moment to lean into her. With his hand in the middle of her back, he whispered, “Show them no fear, wife. All will be well.”

Easier said than done.

Cora followed the group inside and took her place by Cillian’s side. He had no throne or other seat that marked his place as leader, but he took his place at the head of his war table with confidence.

His voice echoed around the room. “Elders of *Clann Abhaile*, it’s an honor to have you in our home. To what do we owe this pleasure?”

Elders? Cora’s heart sank, and her stomach felt ready to revolt at a moment’s notice. What were the luchthonn elders doing here? Had anyone else known they were coming? Had Cillian known? It had to be bad. If Cillian’s expression was anything to go by, it was something awful.

An older man, hair speckled with gray, stepped forward, his disapproving eyes sweeping the room before he spoke. “The clan leaders have heard some disturbing rumors concerning you, Cillian Fáelad. So disturbing, in fact, that we came immediately to speak with you. Given the serious nature of this discussion, I would ask that only—” he paused, glancing at Cora, “necessary voices be present.”

“All necessary voices *are* present.”

Despite his deceptively mild tone, Cillian’s response put everyone in the room on edge. Cora knew her husband well enough to know he preferred to lead through loyalty rather than fear. It was the thing she admired about him most. He

cared for his men, and despite their rough and often animalistic tendencies, he had their respect.

The only notable exception to that respect was Eoin, who slouched in the back against the wall. His eyes glittered with interest at the exchange, and a satisfied smile curled his lips. Cora's suspicion that the elder's visit was not by accident grew as she glanced back and forth between her husband and Eoin.

The man at the head of the table looked unrecognizable from the one she had come to know. His predator's gaze swept over their visitors, and without saying a word, he gave the impression of a wolf being held back by a piece of string. She rarely saw the hard, frightening warrior she'd heard about in Bran's stories, but she certainly saw him now.

The old woman Cillian had talked to outside stepped forward. The other elders fell silent, watching the woman closely. She didn't seem as angry as some, but that didn't mean she was on their side. The woman laid a hand on the old man's shoulder. "We didn't come all this way to fight, Bradán. Stand down. We're only here to talk, aren't we?"

The old man huffed angrily but dipped his head in acknowledgment. Cillian spread his arms and smiled. "Then, by all means. What rumors made you travel all this way? Is it the one about how my men and I turn into feral beasties during the full moon every month? I quite liked the poetry of that one, myself."

It was clear by their expressions that the elders didn't care for her husband's humor. Cora forced herself to remain still and wait. She didn't know why he wanted her here, but he had a reason. She suspected they were there because of her, but until they'd all stop circling each other like... well, like wolves, she'd never know for sure.

The old man scoffed and said, "How can you jest at a time like this? After what you've done? Did you really believe that we would just—what—accept this farce?"

"What farce would that be, Elder? What have I done to vex you so? Last I knew, my pack brought a great deal of coin into

your hands. Our blood and fangs have served you well, and you've never complained until now."

The man looked straight at Cora, his anger almost tangible against her skin. Ordinarily, she would have been terrified. To have such ire directed at her should have had her knees knocking beneath her dress. But strangely, she was not afraid. Nervous, certainly. It was becoming quite clear that her presence bothered the elders, and it wasn't hard to imagine why. But Cillian wanted her there. Cillian had said she was a necessary voice. His support and strength gave her strength, and rather than wilt beneath the man's glare, Cora met it with one of her own.

"Begging your pardon, Sir," she said, "Have I offended you somehow?"

The man's lip curled in a sneer. "Your very presence offends me, human. You have stolen what was not yours to take."

It was tempting to play the fool—to make him spell out what was clear to anyone in the room—but Cora resisted. "You speak of my marriage, I assume? I assure you, I didn't steal him away like a maiden in the night. He went to the altar of his own accord, as did I."

Nervous chuckles rippled through the room, but they disappeared at the man's low growl. "It was a mistake!" he snapped. "Your husband had no right to enter a union—let alone such a perverse one as this—without consulting us!"

Cillian's angry snarl quieted the crowd before Cora could answer. He leaned forward on the table, his teeth bared. His eyes flashed as he reached for the gold pin over his heart. "You'll keep a civil tongue when you speak to my wife, Elder, or I'll remove it myself."

The old woman stepped between the two men. She raised her hands in a sign of peace while she cast disapproving glances at them both. "Cillian, that's enough!" she barked. "You know better than to speak to an elder this way."

Before Cillian could protest, she turned to the elder. “*You* will remember we are guests in this camp. Cillian is the alpha here, and you will show him respect.”

A moment passed, then both men nodded in agreement. The old woman turned her attention to Cora. Again, she looked her up and down, an unreadable expression on her face. “Quite a lot of fuss over you, isn’t it? Do you even understand why?”

Under normal circumstances, Cora would be terrified. A small corner of her brain insisted that she should be terrified. But she wasn’t. She was furious.

“From what I can see, it’s because your elders are inexplicably threatened by short, human women.”

The corner of the woman’s mouth twitched but resettled a second later. She turned her attention to Cillian and said, “We received word that Cillian Fane, alpha of Clan Fáelad, had taken a wife. Imagine our surprise when none of the women of our clan knew anything about it?”

“Am I to send a message every time I take a piss, too?”

The woman arched a single imperious brow but otherwise seemed unmoved by Cillian’s comment. “You had to know how this would look, Cillian. A human woman? Married to the most well-known alpha of his generation without so much as a whisper to the other clans? You didn’t give the women of *Clann Abhaile* so much as a sniff when you visited last. There were many fine choices there.”

Something sharp and ugly writhed in her heart at the idea of Cillian married to one of those women. Warrior women. Women who could be wolves like him. She imagined him smiling at her—this other woman—and barely resisted the urge to growl.

Cillian glanced her way and smirked. “Cora made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

The old man spoke up again, still clearly upset. “What could she have possibly offered to make you go against your

own kind? The luchthonn have never mixed with the humans before!”

Cillian’s sharp laugh echoed in the tent. “You were in a roaming pack yourself once, Elder. With all due respect, you’re telling me that no one ever enjoyed a visit to the local villages in all that time?”

The man sputtered and snarled. His reaction was all the answer that was needed. The old woman cleared her throat and gave the man a pointed look. “I think we can all agree that casual... encounters are not the same as lifelong bonding. But that’s neither here nor there. I too am curious about this offer.”

Cillian sighed in annoyance but explained the circumstances of their marriage. He described the situation in her father’s lands and the threat of Edwin’s invasion. His description of her arrival and offer differed somewhat from her own memory of the event. She noticed that he conveniently left out the part where he nearly frightened her to death.

The old woman listened, occasionally interrupting with a question. “I’m not sure I understand the benefit for you—for the luchthonn—in this agreement. What is it you hope to gain from this alliance with Ossory?”

Cillian gestured around the room and replied, “Look around you. Even with the *madraí*, our numbers grow smaller each year. Meanwhile, the humans multiply like fucking rabbits. When our elders were young, it didn’t matter that the luchthonn roamed in packs because there was enough room to go around. Now, it seems every piece belongs to some lord or another, and they’re just as likely to chase us off as they are to hire us. Those that only know rumors won’t let us near for fear the stories are true. Those that know the truth won’t let us near because they fear what they don’t understand. We need a home for the roaming packs—a place where our males are safe between their jobs. A place where there’s no risk of pitchforks and priests.”

He paused, then nodded toward Cora. “My mate is the daughter of Lord Fergus Kilkenny of Ossory. Our agreement came with the condition that he allow the luchthonn to settle

here undisturbed. This land is ours forever. In exchange, he charged the luchthonn as Ossory's solemn protectors. We'll guard the borders and protect the people as though they're our own for as long as we claim this land."

The old woman nodded thoughtfully. She said nothing for several moments, then turned to the older man who'd been so outspoken. "A slightly better deal than he would have gotten by mating your girl, isn't it?"

The man scowled but remained silent. Cora tried and failed to keep a self-righteous smile from her face. When it seemed everyone was waiting for someone else to speak, she stepped forward.

"I know that ours is not the usual union—for humans or luchthonn. Necessity, not love, was the foundation of the match. It has not been a... smooth transition. I have had much to learn about your people. But I've found happiness here, and I consider this pack my own. You may disagree with what we have done, but the fact is that you can't change it. What's done is done, and though I may not wear the wolf's skin, I think you'll find that I'm quite willing to fight for my home and my mate."

The elders stared at her as though they hadn't noticed her before. As though she hadn't been real.

She was damn well real now, wasn't she?

Cillian grinned from across the room, his eyes shining with pride. Heat flared, a tangible thing despite the distance between them. They hadn't been intimate since their wedding night, but Cora hoped that would change soon.

It had to.

Cillian clapped his hands together and asked, "So, any other questions? Or can we all go back to minding our own bloody business?"

Most of the elders nodded and filed out of the tent. The old man said nothing, just bowed to them before making his way outside.

Finally, the tent was empty except for the old woman, Cillian, and Cora. When everyone was gone, she looked at them and smiled, the ice in her expression melting for the first time. “You never could resist a spectacle, could you, lad?” she asked.

Cillian shrugged and drew the woman in for a fond embrace. “I’m not the one who showed up at your house and questioned your sanity, am I?”

They laughed as Cora looked on, nonplussed. When Cillian noticed her expression, he smiled and reached out his hand. “Ah, I suppose some introductions are in order, aren’t they?” He gestured toward the woman with his other hand. “Cora, I’d like you to meet my mother, Aoife.”

Chapter 15

Cora

“**Y**ou could have told me she was your mother!”

Cora followed Cillian through the dark woods that night. Moonlit patches acted as guiding touchstones for her feet through the dark. Cillian led her confidently, as though the lack of light was no trouble at all. She realized that it likely wasn't and wondered what the world looked like through his eyes.

“Ah, but if I'd told you, you might not have been so beautifully brave. You'd have been too worried about making a poor impression on your mother-in-law. So really, it's good that I didn't.”

Cora rolled her eyes. “Insufferable man,” she muttered.

Cillian laughed, ducking under a branch ahead. “It all worked out, didn't it? You made a fine impression on the elders. Not only are they sending some guardians from *Clann Abhaile* to help with the English, but you thrashed Elder Bradán so soundly in your little speech that I doubt any of the elders will darken our door for a long while.”

Cora huffed, then squawked as she stumbled on a root. Cillian chuckled as he helped her regain her footing, and she wished she could see well enough to throw something at his back. A pinecone, maybe—nothing damaging, just enough to make her point.

“Can you see as well at night as you can in the day?” she asked.

Cillian glanced back at her, a playful smile on his lips. “Just about. Certainly well enough to see that spider in your hair.”

Cora tore her hand out of his and frantically brushed at her hair. When she found no spider, she glared at Cillian and swatted his arm. “You awful man! I hate spiders!”

Cillian chuckled and brushed the back of his knuckles against her temples. “Ah, lass. Don’t worry—I’ll keep you safe from all the spiders in Ireland.”

“I can manage just fine with a big stick, thanks. I’ve never needed a wolf to kill a spider before.”

“Ah, but you’ve never seen the giant ones deep in the woods, have you?”

Cora’s eyes went wide. “You—you’re lying! Cillian Fane, you tell me this instant that you’re lying!”

Cillian grinned, and Cora decided she liked the way the playfulness made him appear so much younger than he was. He’d always smiled easily with her—especially when saying something that infuriated her—but there was something about this smile. The one he had when they were alone. Something she thought, she hoped, was just for her. At first, she’d ignored it. She hadn’t wanted his warmth because she’d been blinded by her fear. Too sure that the beast was only a breath away from the surface.

“And if I was? What would you do, Madame Fane?”

Cora’s heart skipped a beat whenever he called her by her married name. Though they’d been married several weeks, it was still difficult to see herself as anyone’s wife. They’d shared a tent since the wedding, and of course, there had been the consummation. Cora would never admit just how much that night played through her mind when she crawled into her cot at night. She’d done her best to hide the way the memories heated her skin and caused her heart to race, but she suspected Cillian knew. He’d never pushed her. Never pressed for anything physical past the kisses he would leave on her hand with mocking lips each morning.

She wanted more.

God help her; she wanted her husband. She wanted the Wolf King who’d bedded her that first night when she’d been so stubborn in her refusal to show any sort of enjoyment. She wanted the man who’d brought her pleasure with just his thigh

and his words. Wanted his certainty and the way he'd overwhelmed her with his body and his voice.

Cillian's loud, deep inhale shook Cora from her thoughts and reminded her that she hadn't answered. Cillian's stare pinned her in place, and she forgot what he'd asked.

"I—sorry, what?"

He moved closer and took her wrist in his large hand. "Distracted, wife?"

Her pulse thundered in her ears at the rough rumble of his voice. Desire sparked beneath her skin, raising goosebumps on her arms. After the nearly palpable heat between them in the tent earlier, she'd hoped he might—that they might—explore it more.

"Of course, I'm distracted. You've dragged me out into the wilderness in the middle of the night, and I can hardly see the nose on my face. Now you're telling me there might be giant spiders frolicking about! Who wouldn't be distracted?"

Cillian leaned in suddenly and ran his nose up the sensitive skin of her neck as he took in another breath. "I don't think spiders are what's got you smelling so sweet, My Lady. Not unless you've been thinking about spiders each night in our tent. Are you sure you're not thinking of something else?"

Cora bit her lip to hold back the moan that nearly escaped at his touch. When he spoke, his beard scraped against her skin teasingly. She fought against the sudden urge to pull him closer and force him to drag his beard across her breasts. He'd done that on their wedding night before taking her breast in his mouth, and she still remembered the way she'd panted for more.

"I'm not sure what you mean, My Lord. Perhaps your sense of smell isn't as keen as you think."

"Cora."

He so rarely used her given name. She'd almost forgotten how much she liked the sound of it. The way he rolled the 'r' of her name sent shivers across her skin, especially when he said it like it was the most holy, most precious word he'd ever

spoken. He spoke her name like men spoke prayers to the Almighty, and she held every time he'd said it in her heart.

Cillian pulled back enough to look into her eyes, and before Cora could get the words out to ask why he'd said her name that way, he kissed her. Heat raced through her body like a winter wildfire. If a single spark could set an entire forest alight, Cillian Fane could set her body on fire with a single kiss.

Cora buried her hands in the soft, thick wolf's skin at his shoulders, using it to pull him closer. He responded with a deep groan that vibrated into her chest and left gooseflesh all over her skin.

Closer, closer. Please, God, don't let go!

She spoke the words in her mind, but Cillian pulled back as though he'd heard them. Cora opened her mouth to protest, but it quickly faded into a moan when Cillian grasped her hips and bit sharply at her throat.

"You must be a witch, *Mo Chroí*," he growled. "How else could you bewitch me so?"

At any other time, she'd have a smart remark about what spell she'd cast on him if she could. But now? With his warm breath and teeth at her neck, and his hands pulling her closer until she could feel the hard length of his cock against her belly? "Cillian—Cillian, please don't stop."

Thick fingers wrapped around her braid and tugged her head back. The kisses on her neck grew rougher and sharper until she gasped at a particularly painful bite. "Easy, love, easy," she coaxed, combing her fingers through his hair. "You'll break me if you're not careful."

Cillian pulled away, his eyes twin flames in the night. "Won't ever break you, lass. Don't know that anyone could."

He sucked in a breath and loosened his grip on her hair. "But you're right. We should stop—"

Panic doused the heat in her blood like a bucket of icy water. "Wait, no! That's not what I meant! I only—"

Cillian laid a hand over her lips, silencing her protests with a strained smile. “Peace, wife. I didn’t mean for good. I brought you out here for a purpose, believe it or not, but you’re enough to drive a monk off from his vows.”

Cora wondered why, after all they’d done, it was his words that brought pink to her cheeks. Perhaps it was because Cillian had not shown himself to be a man of many words where she was concerned. To hear that he found her desirable felt like a victory.

“Wh—what did you bring me here for if not—well?” Her blush deepened as she searched for the words to ask the right question.

Cillian grinned in that playful way that caused the throbbing between her legs to start up again. “It’s an ancient tradition among my people. Most would claim that it ought to have happened the night of our wedding, but I didn’t think you—we—were ready.”

“Ready? Ready for what?”

“The hunt.”

His words shouldn’t frighten her. She knew him well enough by now to know that he wouldn’t hurt her. So why did those two tiny words send her shivering?

“As luchthonn, we bond with the wolves who have bound their spirits to ours. We share our bodies and our minds with them, and we accept their nature as our own. A wolf is a predator, a hunter, and it is our custom that a new husband proves his worth and skill in a hunt.”

Cora tried to step back, but Cillian’s grip held her in place. Unease soured the desire she’d felt only moments before. “I don’t understand. Do you mean to bring me a rabbit like a barn cat brings a mouse to its master?”

Cillian smiled at her question, but it didn’t ease her nerves. “No, wife. I’ll be hunting something far more precious than a mouse or rabbit tonight.”

The hungry look on his face sent her heart racing. “And... if you catch what you’re hunting?”

His grin widened, baring his teeth. She shivered, remembering how they'd felt at her throat. It should have felt dangerous, but it had been exciting.

“When, Cora—when I catch you, you will know we are both worthy of you.”

Cora opened her mouth to argue about the fairness of such a task but snapped it shut when Cillian loosened his belt and let it fall to the ground. The wolf skin came next, draped carefully over an arm while he removed his shirt. He tugged the skin over his head and bare shoulders, looking for all the world like some sort of dark forest god. The sight of him made her knees weak.

“Cillian, I—I can't—” She tried to speak but gave up when the thoughts in her head wouldn't slow enough to form a sentence.

“The first time you witnessed this, I took pity on you.”

His boots came off next, joining the pile of clothing on the forest floor with a dull thud. When his hands went to the ties at his trousers, her mouth went dry. “What do you mean?”

Slowly—too slowly—he tugged at the laces, letting them hang loosely on his hips. “You were trying so hard to be brave. I wasn't sure how you'd react to the wolf, but I knew the sight of my cock would send you running clear back to your castle.”

Cora found enough nerve to roll her eyes. “Come now, Cillian. Don't be so hard on yourself. You're not as ugly as all that.”

His laughter echoed off of the trees, and she reveled in the sound. It was a rough, heavy sound, like the man himself, but she cherished it all the same. Without warning, he pulled her against him and whispered in her ear, “Oh, Little Rabbit, I think I'll enjoy chasing you down.”

“I am no rabbit, Cillian Fane,” she snapped, catching his ear in her teeth for a sharp bite. “I am your wife.”

Cillian reared back, the shock on his face lasting only a moment before shifting into something far more predatory. “Then run, wife. Run from the wolf!”

He'd no sooner released her than she tore herself away and ran deeper into the woods. She heard the pops and snaps that she remembered from the first night they'd met—the night she'd offered herself to him. Those sounds meant the wolf was coming, and the thought of the enormous beast she'd seen spurred her legs to move faster.

She crashed through the brush, not caring how much noise she made as she went. It would do her no good—the wolf would hear everything. Her only chance to evade him would be to put as much distance as she could between them while he gained his bearings in his animal skin.

A lone, sharp howl shook the surrounding air, and Cora fought the wild, strange urge to howl back. There was nothing to fear from the beast who made that sound. He was her beast, come to find her. She'd been unprepared the first time he'd changed. She hadn't known such a thing could be possible. Now that she did, there was a wicked sense of pride that such a wild beast could desire her. That he'd found *her* worthy.

Cora made her way through the dimly lit trees as quickly as she could in her long skirts. The fabric caught on a thorny bush as she ran by. She tore the fabric free without a care for how she'd mend it later. She fought to get as far as possible before he caught up, hopping small logs and splashing through puddles.

Before long—only minutes, in truth—she heard the hard thud of enormous paws against the ground behind her. Fear raced through her veins like sparks of lightning, pushing her even faster. A low branch scraped her cheek, but she didn't stop to wipe the blood away, too focused on getting away.

She heard his breath as he ran behind her. The rhythm of his footfalls told her he was running on all fours. He'd mentioned before that he moved faster that way but couldn't maneuver as easily as he could on two legs—something about the lengths of his limbs. She couldn't remember exactly, but she hoped she remembered right as she veered to her left. He snarled from somewhere behind her, and there was a crash that suggested she'd been correct. She allowed herself a small,

victorious smile but otherwise kept her focus on the ground ahead of her.

Her success was short-lived. Within moments, his pounding footfalls were behind her again. He came up along her left side, and she realized he was trying to force her to change direction again. In the dim moonlight, she couldn't see him, and she nearly tripped when she felt the brush of a large, furry body against her skirt.

She allowed him to herd her to the right, noticing the way the night grew bright up ahead.

A clearing—he was leading her out of the woods.

Excitement sparked beneath her skin as she watched the tree line come closer with every step. He would catch her—as if there had been any doubt—but he would finish the hunt out in the open, where they could see each other.

Cora gasped as she broke through trees as though she'd been underwater and could finally draw breath. The thrill of being hunted by her beast filled her heart until it had to escape somehow. She gave into the urge that had taken her in the woods, threw her head back, and howled to the moon as she ran across the moonlit clearing. If anyone had been around to see her, she might have been too ashamed to give into such a strange impulse. But there was no one save her husband and the moon to witness her insanity. For the first time in her life, she felt free.

When she lowered her chin, he was in front of her. She threw her arms up in self-defense as she tried to slow down and skidded to a stop just before crashing into his colossal frame. Cora stared up into the icy blue eyes of the wolf. He'd run on four legs, but now that he'd caught her, he lifted himself onto two.

For a single moment, she considered giving up. He'd caught up to her, after all. But then she caught sight of a large stick lying in the grass. Impulsively, she grabbed it and raised it above her head.

“Well, come on then! Did you think I’d give up that easily? I keep telling you I’m not a fucking rabbit!”

The wolf reared back, teeth bared and ears flattened. His growl was a warning, but Cora knew she was in no danger. Wild or not, he wouldn’t hurt her.

Well, if she landed a hit with the big stick, he might. Some risks were worth the potential outcome. If she managed a shot before he tore the stick—and possibly her innards—away, she’d consider herself successful.

The wolf hesitated, his ears twitching as though he couldn’t make sense of her.

“You coming or not, you overgrown throw rug? I’m ready for you. You said you wanted a hunt? Well, this prey’s fighting back!”

The wolf snarled and advanced. He lunged for her, and Cora wondered if she’d made a mistake but swung with all her might anyway. If she died, at least they could say she went out with a weapon in her hand.

The dull thud and low growl were the only clues that she’d connected. Against all logic, she’d decided that swinging with her eyes closed was the very best way to face the monster she’d challenged. If she survived the night, it’d be a miracle from God himself.

She opened one eye in time to see the wolf shaking his head and pawing at his muzzle. The surprised laughter escaped her mouth before she could think better of it. Pride warmed her body, and she couldn’t help the smug tone of her voice when she called, “Who’s the predator now, husband?”

Her pride disappeared the instant that the wolf lifted his head, blue eyes aflame and sharp teeth bared. The growl that echoed from his chest turned her legs to useless jelly, and fear quickly replaced any self-confidence she might have had. The wolf advanced, hackles raised. Cora dropped the branch, afraid that she might have gone too far. She realized she’d never asked how far the bond between Cillian and his wolf went.

What if she'd just angered a feral beast? What if the man had no say in what the wolf did with its teeth and claws?

She backed away slowly, hands outstretched. "Cillian—Cillian, can you hear me? I didn't mean—I wasn't trying to hurt you! I thought it was a game! Please, Cillian, that's enough!"

Cora tripped on her own skirt and went sprawling to the ground with a frightened screech. In that instant, he was there, a snarl echoing in the quiet night as he covered her body with his own. She lay still, afraid that any sudden movements would be her last. This close, his low growls sent vibrations through her skin until she wasn't sure how much was him and how much was her own frightened shivering.

She squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to look into his eyes if he struck. "Cillian, I'm sorry. Please, please don't do this."

Suddenly, a warm, wet tongue slid up her cheek. Her surprised shriek sent a flock of nearby sleeping birds into the air. He licked her over and over, his tongue bathing her face, her shoulders, and even her hair.

Relief flooded her veins, so overwhelming that tears slid down her cheek. The wolf huffed and licked the tears away before returning to her impromptu bath.

"Cillian! That's enough, now!" she said, her tone half reproach and half nervous laughter. "You great beast! I'll smell like a dog all night!"

The wolf pulled back and sat on its haunches. If wolves could look smug, she'd swear this one did. Perhaps it was the man in him. "Oh, that's fine then, isn't it? Scare your poor wife half to death, why don't you? I thought you were going to eat me!"

Before that moment, she'd never have believed that a wolf could smirk. Slowly, she got to her feet, brushed the dirt and debris off of her dress, and approached him. "Now, you sit there like a good dog, eh? Any more of that foolishness, and I'll find a bigger stick!" She lifted a hand to show her intent,

watching for any sign that her touch wouldn't be welcome, but the wolf remained seated and calm.

Carefully, she reached up and buried her fingers into the thick fur near his scruff.

“Oh... it's so soft! I wasn't—well, I don't know what I expected. Good to know we can actually make a decent rug out of you if you misbehave too much.”

The wolf huffed again and bumped her shoulder with his enormous head. The last time she'd seen Cillian in this form, she'd been too afraid—too shocked—to really appreciate the beauty of it. His jaws might be large enough to fit around her head, but the white and gray fur around his muzzle was soft. His eyes were the same icy blue that they always were, but somehow, they were brighter despite the dim moonlight. Thick, dark fur fell like his own long hair around his shoulders, and she gave in to the impulse to run her fingers through the strands.

He was nothing short of magnificent. There was enough of a human shape to his chest and limbs that he seemed familiar, but no one would ever mistake him for anything but a wild beast.

“It was a good hunt,” she whispered, rubbing her cheek against the soft fur near his ears. “If I must be chased, I'd like it to always be you.”

The fur she'd nuzzled quivered against her cheek for a moment, then fell away. It was a strange sensation, and Cora jerked back in time to see the wolf's face become her husband's again. He tugged the wolf skin off of his head, letting it fall to the ground at their feet.

“Oh, I'll chase you, *Mo Chroí*. Till death comes for me, I'll chase you.”

Strong arms circled her, pulling her close. The excitement of the chase still buzzed under her skin, making her reckless and impatient. On their wedding night, she'd had the many rules of her world echoing in her mind. She'd been afraid to enjoy herself because she'd been told all her life that a wife

ought to be coy and obedient in the bedroom. Husbands didn't appreciate a greedy wife or one who'd seek her own pleasure. They'd call her difficult at best, wanton at worst.

Whoever had come up with those rules had never met her husband. Her wolf had shown his worth in the hunt, and she intended to enjoy being caught and devoured.

Chapter 16

Cora

On their wedding night, Cillian had taken his time with her, coaxing her arousal like a small flame from a pile of kindling. She'd needed that from him, though she wouldn't have known how to ask. Thankfully, he'd seemed to know without having to be told and had tempted and teased her until that tiny flame became an inferno. It had been a slow process, one full of hesitation on her part as she fought her desires. When she'd finally surrendered, it had felt like a raging river breaking through a dam. A stronger force had overpowered her, and she had been helpless against the whirling, surging chaos he had created in her body.

This was nothing like her wedding night. There were no soft kisses or teasing touches. There were no tender words to pull her out of her fear. From the moment she'd taken her first step away from him, she'd known how the night would end. Desire had throbbed, warm and thick, under her skin at the thought of what was to come. Her blood had raced through her veins as she moved through the trees, heated by the chase. By the time he'd caught her, she'd been ready to tackle him to the ground herself. Now, she was glad that she hadn't. The anticipation built with every word and heated glance, making the wait as sweet as it was painful.

Cillian's kiss was almost frenzied when he bent his head to hers. He didn't use gentle nips or slow teasing with his tongue like before. She answered his rough groans and wandering hands with her own. She cupped his cheeks, fingers buried in his beard so that he couldn't pull away. He bit at her lower lip, drawing it between his teeth. The initial discomfort of his brief bite quickly changed into a hot and urgent feeling between her legs.

"You fancy this dress?" he asked between kisses.

"What?" she replied breathlessly, sure she'd heard him wrong. "What do you mean?"

He tugged the laces in an oddly alluring way. “This dress, lass. Is it a favorite?”

“I—I don’t know. Yes? I like it well enough. Why are we talking about my dress?”

He growled, the sound similar to what he’d done as a wolf. “You’d best remove it fast, then. Make me wait much longer, and I might just rip it off. I can smell how wet you are—how much you loved the hunt. Did you know that? Did you know that every time you think an especially pleasant thought about me, I can smell it?”

Cora shook her head, moaning when he cupped a breast and squeezed it through her dress. His talk of ripping up her clothing shouldn’t be arousing. It was wasteful—and possibly painful—but in her mind’s eye, she could see it all. The way he’d take hold of the dress and rip it from top to bottom. The way her breasts would spill out, and her thighs would quiver in anticipation.

There was only one thing keeping her from allowing him to make good on his threat. While Cillian could frolic back to camp as a wolf, she would be forced to run naked through the woods like a goblin.

“Fine, fine. Have some patience, you beast.” Her fingers worked the ties and laces as quickly as possible, slowed only by the way he brushed his nose against her ear.

Cillian laughed darkly, his hot breath against her face sending shivers up her spine. “I am a beast, wife. I hunted you as a beast and caught you. Do you expect patience when I can practically taste how eager you are?”

Cora swallowed around a sudden lump in her throat; her fingers unable to hold their grip on the ties of her kirtle. He’d mentioned ‘tasting’ her before. On their wedding night, he’d said he’d toss her legs over his shoulders and feast on her. Cora had replayed those words in her mind more times than she could count. Without fail, the images they created had her pressing her thighs together for relief. Now she moaned when the image shifted. Suddenly, the Cillian in her mind stared up

at her from between her legs, his teeth long and sharp and his eyes the bright, glowing blue of his wolf.

“Oooh, my darling wife liked that... is it the beast you want, *Mo ghrá*, or my mouth?”

How was she meant to answer that? It must be a sin to even admit she'd thought of either of those things, let alone both of them together. “I—I want—”

“Tell me, Cora,” he whispered, his lips pressed against her ear, his hands busy with the last ties at her chest. “Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you. I'll give you anything, lass. Everything I have is yours.”

He sounded as though he was the one losing control. He undid the last lace and all but tore the thick kirtle away, tossing it in a heap on the ground. In a matter of moments, the rest of her clothing was gone as well.

She'd been naked on their wedding night, but it had felt different now. She'd been so afraid and so determined not to let him see it. Her nakedness had been one drop in her bucket of concerns that night, and it seemed silly to worry about it now.

Now, she wondered. The pale moonlight gave his skin an almost otherworldly glow, and she imagined for a moment what it might be like if she were *luchthonn* as he was. Would she glow too? Would he prefer it if she did? Her hands trembled where she'd laid them on his chest, and she gasped when he took them into his own and laced their fingers together. The frantic energy in his eyes cooled to something almost reverential.

“I've never been much for worship, Cora. I'll honor the moon as much as the next wolf, but it's never guided my life. But tonight, I must believe that our lady is real because only a goddess could have blessed me with the woman before me.”

He kissed her forehead, her nose, then her lips. “You are the most beautiful woman in all the world, *Mo ghrá*. Ask, and I will worship at your altar until dawn.”

When they'd faced her father, Cillian had called her his 'swooning bride.' She'd wanted to beat him with his own sword at the time for insinuating any man, let alone him, could make her swoon. It shouldn't have been possible to be so wrong about a man, yet here she lay, swooning.

Still, it hadn't been his softness that had set her body on fire tonight. It hadn't been beautiful words and feelings that swelled in her heart, begging her to give them voice.

It had been a beast.

A chase.

A hunt.

And God help her, but she wanted that again. She wanted everything he'd promised. Everything he'd teased and tormented her with. There would be time for sweet nothings in the morning, but for now, she wanted her beast, her wolf, back.

Rather than speak, she surged forward, hoping to bruise his lips with her kiss just as he had hers. She swallowed his surprised groan with a triumphant smile. He'd told her to ask for what she wanted, but she couldn't. It was too much to put it all to words—too hard to break away from him long enough to voice it. So, she showed him instead. She took one of his large hands in hers, pressing it to her breast. He squeezed the soft flesh, then surprised her with a pinch on her aching nipple.

She took the other and slipped it between her legs, showing him how she wanted to be touched. When he moved of his own accord, she moaned, bucking against his hand. She shuddered at the sharp points of pleasure spreading like ripples in a pond.

"Fuck, lass—Cora—that's it, girl, ride my hand," he ordered between kisses. He slipped two fingers inside her without warning, and Cora squealed at the unexpected invasion. It didn't hurt the way it had the first time, and the uncomfortable stretch only lasted for a moment before it melted into pleasure.

Part of her considered arguing that what he was doing felt nothing like riding. A larger, more sensible part elected to do as she was told. She ground against his hand, forcing his fingers deeper inside. The pressure was too much and not enough at the same time. The meat of his palm brushed the small bud of flesh above her entrance every time she pressed against him, driving her closer and closer to the edge.

Suddenly, she was empty again, the fullness of his fingers gone right when she needed it most. Betrayal warred with need in her heart, but before she could protest, her beast was on his knees, shoving her legs apart. “Told you I’d feast on this cunt,” he said, his tone rough and animalistic. “Best brace yourself.”

She started to ask what he meant, but she lost her words in the high, needy cry he tore from her lips with the first rough swipe of his tongue. It was everything she’d imagined—it was more. He devoured her, just as he’d promised, and she was sure no prey had ever enjoyed their death so much.

Her climax came quickly as she writhed against him, with fingers buried in his hair and one leg slung over his shoulder. How could it not? His tongue, his lips, his teeth—everything he did took her to new and sharper heights until there was simply nowhere else to go but over the edge and into the abyss. She might have called his name—she wasn’t sure. Her mouth wasn’t in her control just then; she might have simply cried and moaned like a dog in heat. She thought he might like it if she did.

Soon, the haze of pleasure cleared. His touches, which had been everything she needed only moments before, became too much for her sensitive flesh. Cillian pulled away, his lips and beard wet with her arousal, and Cora ran her fingers through his long hair, smoothing the errant strands she’d used as an anchor. He smirked up at her, squeezing her arse in his hands and nipping playfully at her hip. “Enjoyed that, did you? I knew you would.”

Cora pretended to consider for a moment before shrugging dismissively. “It’ll do, I suppose. If that’s really the best you can do.”

Cillian's grin turned sharp and predatory. He slid her leg off of his shoulder and rose to his feet, towering over her. "Oh, it'll do, will it? Does my cheeky wife think she could do better?"

He gripped his cock, sliding his hand up the shaft. A thick drop of liquid gathered at the tip, and Cora had the unexpected desire to taste it. She knew it was something people did, of course. Until now, she'd always found the idea of sticking a man's cock in her mouth to be humiliating—or, at the very least, unsanitary. She wondered if Cillian had some sort of animal magnetism that was to blame for her sudden interest.

Cora rose on her knees and covered his hand with hers. With no actual idea of where to start except for the obvious, she opened her mouth and slid his cock between her lips.

Cillian hissed through his teeth. "*Fuck me*, lass! No fear at all in you, is there?"

Oh, there was plenty of fear. Fear that she'd do it wrong, somehow. That she'd accidentally bite him. Fear that she wouldn't be able to bring him pleasure like he'd brought her. But if he thought her fearless? Bold? Who was she to argue?

Not that she could with a mouth full of cock.

She bobbed her head, taking a little more of him in her mouth each time. She ran her tongue along the underside of the shaft, licking along a large vein as she drew back. Cillian shuddered, twining his fingers into her hair. The pressure on her scalp tingled pleasantly, and she moaned softly around him.

Cillian gripped her tighter, cupping her jaw with one hand. "That's it, love," he urged. "Take as much as you can. Christ, the look of you! Do you know how often I've dreamed of this?"

She preened at his words, drawing more of him in until she felt the tip of his cock at the back of her throat. It was uncomfortable, and she knew her jaw would ache before long. But the sound of her husband, the great Wolf King himself,

praising her mouth and the pleasure she gave him made her feel powerful.

Applying the same principles he'd used on her, Cora used everything available to her to bring him closer to his own climax. Her hand slid up and down the thick shaft as she licked and sucked the sensitive head. She almost pulled back when she accidentally scraped the side with her teeth, her eagerness making her sloppy. Cillian didn't seem bothered; he only growled, urging her to take him deeper.

She tried everything she could think of. Every angle, every pressure, and every motion she could imagine. He seemed to love it all, tightening his grip on her hair whenever she did something he liked especially well.

Cillian's breathing grew ragged. His stream of encouragement faded into deep moans and rough growls. Pride warmed her heart as she realized how close he was, how close she'd brought him. She hadn't expected to be aroused by this act. Hadn't at all expected how hot and wet she would feel just by chasing his pleasure. She ached for friction—for something to fill the emptiness inside.

Suddenly, he pulled away, dropped to his knees, and kissed her so hard it took her breath away. "You're a wonder, *Moghra*," he murmured against her lips. "A bloody witch, I swear it, but a wonder."

Cora returned his kiss, desperate to chase the heat surging through her veins to its end. "Then why'd you stop me? Let me—"

He kissed her once more, biting sharply at her lip before flipping her onto her hands and knees. "Can't stop now," he warned. "M gonna take you on the ground like a bloody beast because that's what you wanted, isn't it? You were so hot as you ran, so wet that I could have followed you to the ends of the fucking earth with only that scent."

She barely had time to register his hands at her hips before he was inside her, hot and thick and everything she'd needed. She dug her fingers into the earth below, desperate for some anchor in the chaos. Her knees chafed against the ground, but

the growing pleasure easily overpowered the minor discomfort. He gripped her hips, fingers digging into her as he took her again and again. “This is what you wanted,” he repeated, his voice little more than a snarl. “Tell me, wife. Tell me you thought about me fucking you into the ground as you ran from me. Tell me you wanted the beast tonight.”

“I did!” she cried. “I wanted it! Please, Cillian, I’m so—I want to—” Her words, hurried and slurred, faded away as he thrust harder, faster, until she thought she might faint or burst into flames.

After all the teasing and anticipation, her broken cry when she climaxed was as much relief as it was pleasure. She shuddered through the waves as they crashed through her, every thrust a peak until they ebbed and passed. Through the haze of her own climax, she heard Cillian’s shout as he pressed himself close, muscles twitching as he spent himself inside of her.

Cillian slumped against her, rolling to the side at the last moment before he crushed her. They curled into each other in the soft summer grass. Sweat dripped down her face, blessedly cool against her overheated skin. Their heavy breaths blended with the other night forest sounds, the hoot of an owl, and the chirp of crickets.

It was utterly peaceful, and Cora thought that if she never had to leave this place, this moment, she’d be happy for the rest of her life.

Chapter 17

Cillian

Cillian stared at the letter, his eyes scanning the paper as though reading it again might change the words on the page.

English boats spotted off coast in Waterford. 200 men.

Expected arrival in 4 days.

Lord Kilkenny awaits reinforcements.

Come quickly.

“Cillian? Are you well, love?”

Cora’s gentle hand on his shoulder did little to quiet the storm building in his mind. He’d thought they’d have more time. The elders had been favorably impressed with Cora during their visit, and they’d promised to send *Clann Abhaile’s* guardians as reinforcements to his own men. They hadn’t yet arrived, and though his own men were able warriors, the more luchthonn on their side, the better their chances.

He held the letter out to her. “A message from your father.”

Cillian waited, watching her face pale as she read. She looked up, her brows drawn in tight. “So soon? I thought—I thought we’d have more time.”

He shook his head. “It could have been any time. Edwin’s cracked if he thinks he’ll have surprise on his side. Chances are, he’s trying to cow your father and the other lords into submission. Two hundred men aren’t an army, but it’s more than your father could muster on his own.”

Cora’s eyes flashed angrily. “My father will not kneel to him.”

“Of course not. We’ll keep your people safe, *Mo ghrá*. I promise.”

Cillian pulled her close, wrapping her in his arms. She shuddered, digging her fingers into his wolf’s skin as they

embraced. “And you?” she murmured. “Who keeps you safe?”

“Do my ears deceive me?” he teased. “Is my wife actually concerned for my safety? Surely not—unless she still desires to deliver the death blow herself? Something about mounting my head on a stick?”

Cora scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Stop it, you great buffoon! This isn’t a joke!”

He kissed her head, then her lips. “No, love. It’s not a joke. But I’ll not have you worrying yourself into an early grave on my account. I’ll be fine.”

They stood quietly for a moment, holding each other as though there would be no other chance. Cillian held her tight, memorizing the feel of her in his arms. He’d never feared death before. Never flinched at the idea of a fight. All his life, he’d run toward danger and laughed in the face of death and pain. He’d never had anything to lose before.

When they parted, Cora looked up at him with glassy eyes, her mouth fixed into a stubborn frown. “Do you mean to leave today?”

“Aye. The sooner we get there, the better. We’ll need all the time we can get to plan for the battle ahead.”

She nodded and straightened her dress, erasing any sign that she’d been upset. “How many will go with us?”

Cillian raised a brow. “What do you mean by ‘us,’ lass? You’ll go to *Clann Abhaile*. My mother’s expecting you.”

“The hell I will!”

With her clenched fists and wild eyes, Cora resembled a wolf more and more each day. “Cora, listen. The elders will keep you safe and—”

“It’s my home, Cillian! I’ll not sit idly by knitting hats while you ride off to protect my people!”

“It’s too dangerous!”

She pressed close, her nose nearly touching his. “Do you think I married you so I could hide away while my people

fought for their lives?”

He frowned and crossed his arms, not at all bothered by her proximity. “No, I think you married me because you knew I could win this battle. And I can, woman, without you there to distract me!”

“I WILL NOT BE LEFT BEHIND!”

Cillian’s snarl drowned out her shout, his angry growls filling the tent. He laid his hands on her shoulders and held her still. “You are *my mate*! I’ll not risk your life to some bloody Englishman’s blade. You’ll do as you’re told and go to *Clann Abhaile* until I send for you!”

“I will not,” she seethed. “I will not be left to sit and simper away like some... some frightened child. I asked you to help me protect my people. What kind of person will I be if I run away when they need me?”

Cillian yanked her forward, ravaging her lips in a violent kiss. She fought him for a moment with balled-up fists against his chest but soon returned his passion with sharp bites and heady moans. He buried his hands into her hair, twisting the thick locks around his fingers as he nipped at her lips. All too soon, they pulled apart, their lungs desperate for air. Gasping for breath, Cillian rested his forehead against hers and stroked her hair.

“Alive, lass,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “You’ll be alive.”

Cora collapsed against him, a single sob escaping her throat. She grabbed the wolf’s skin at his throat and held it tight, burying her face in the thick fur. The wolf rumbled in the back of his mind, upset at his mate’s distress. Cillian nuzzled the top of her head, dropping light kisses over her hair.

“What if you die? What will I do then, Cillian?”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to worry about the fur all over your things anymore.”

Cora lifted her head so quickly that she knocked him in the jaw. He’d tried to lighten the mood, but the return of the fire in her eyes suggested he’d been unsuccessful.

“Now’s not the time for your jokes, Cillian Fane!”

“You’re right, *Mo ghrá*. It’s not,” he agreed, rubbing his jaw. “The point still stands. I don’t want you anywhere near this fight. If Edwin has sent two hundred men, he means for it to be a bloody affair. I won’t have you in the middle of that.”

Cora fixed him with a look he’d become quite familiar with. It was the same look she’d had the very first night he’d met her, the night she’d barged into his tent and demanded he marry her and protect her lands. She’d worn it again when she’d challenged him in the sparring ring, and he’d tried to put her off. It was the same look she’d had on her face when the elders claimed their marriage illegitimate.

Whenever his wife wore that expression, his life changed.

“Cillian, you can’t keep me away. Ossory was my home. My people! You can put me on a horse to *Clann Abhaile* if you like. Put a dozen men on guard! I’ll escape and ride straight back. You know I will!”

Cillian sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Cora, I don’t—”

“I won’t go near any battles,” she protested. “Let me ride with you to my father’s castle. I’ll stay there behind the walls and assist however I can with preparations and resources. Would that be good enough for you?”

He wanted to say no. Wanted to tie her to her horse and send her far away. As confident as he was in his men, battles changed like the tides. He’d been in skirmishes before that should have been easy victories, yet they’d nearly claimed his life. No one could truly predict how a battle would go. Lord Kilkenny’s walls were strong, but that was no guarantee. All it would take would be one soldier—one arrow or blade—and she’d be gone, her light snuffed out.

His life would be over.

He realized that he hadn’t yet said the words to her. They’d grown much closer in the past weeks, but still, the time had never seemed right. He thought she knew. In a way, he said it each time he called her by his preferred name, *Mo ghrá*—my

love. But he'd never truly said the words, and neither had she. He considered telling her now. Perhaps, if he did, if he professed his love, she'd do as he asked.

“Cillian? Please.”

It wasn't the time. He wouldn't cheapen those words by using them as a bargaining tool in an argument.

“Very well,” he said. “You'll go as far as the castle. And you'll stay there until the fighting is over, and I come for you myself. No heroics, no running off to rescue any lost lambs. Understand? You stay behind those walls.”

Cora nodded, wiping tears from her cheeks. She leaned up on her toes and kissed him, soft and sweet. They embraced a moment more, separating when a hard knock at the door shattered the quiet.

Cathall entered, a grim smile on his face. “If you're done, Cillian? We've begun preparations already. With any luck, we'll be on the road in two hours.”

Cora's cheeks went red. Cillian wondered if she hadn't realized that people could hear their argument. It was a good thing Cathall interrupted them. Given more time, Cillian might have convinced his wife to make amends in more exciting ways.

“Good lad,” he said, adjusting the wolf's skin around his neck. “Let's get to work.”

••••

CILLIAN WATCHED HIS wife as they rode toward her father's castle. She'd been quiet for most of the ride. It wasn't hard to puzzle out why. His brave mate—she'd packed their belongings up quickly and efficiently without a word of complaint. She'd watched with a blank expression as their tent was torn down and the canvas stowed away for travel. She'd even walked around with food and water for the men as they worked.

She'd done it all with clear eyes and willing hands.

But Cillian knew his wife. Knew what to look for. No one else would have noticed the way her breath hitched when his war table—only ever a large slab of wood on a stump—was chopped into pieces and cleared away. They wouldn't have seen how her hands trembled ever so slightly when she glanced around the camp from atop her horse.

He noticed.

He'd left her in peace during the journey through Ossory, but as they drew closer to her father's castle, he watched her more closely. When the walls of the castle came into view, Cillian guided Crow to walk next to Cora's mare. She stared ahead, her brows drawn together.

"Are you well, wife?"

At first, she said nothing. When she glanced at him, it was as though she hadn't even noticed him beside her.

"It's just strange, that's all."

"What's strange?"

"The last time I made this journey, I was so happy to see those walls." A small, rueful smile spread on her lips. "I hoped my father could save me from you."

"From my dashing good looks? My charm? Perish the thought, love."

Cora snorted, shaking her head. "Must you always joke? I would have thought someone called 'The Wolf King' would be more serious." She deepened her voice on his moniker, a teasing light in her eyes.

"Ah, see, that's a common mistake. Wolves are actually quite playful in the wild. You ought to see the pups chase each other about, trying to nip at each other's tails. And yes, I'll bloody well joke all day long if it keeps a smile on your face."

She smiled, as he'd known she would, but it only lasted until she looked back toward the distant castle.

"It feels different. Like I've never seen it before. Is that strange? I know it's the same. It's the same stone. The same people. Why does it feel so different?"

“Because you’re different. You’re not the same as you were when you left here.”

Cora pursed her lips together in thought. “I suppose that’s true. I’ve changed, so it seems impossible that everything else hasn’t.”

“It was the same for me the first time I returned to *Clann Abhaile* after joining an outside pack. It’d only been two years, but... somehow, everything had changed. It wasn’t my home anymore.”

Cora sighed and tucked an escaped strand of hair behind her ear. “No, it’s not, is it?”

Cillian reached between them to grab her hand. He kissed her knuckles softly and said, “Your home’s with me now, *Moghrá*. No matter where we go.”

Finally, the sadness faded from her eyes, and she kissed his hand in return.

••••

THEIR HORSES CARRIED them through the gates of her father’s castle a short while later. Lord Kilkenny himself waited in the courtyard to meet them, and Cora all but leapt off her horse to embrace him.

Kilkenny’s men eyed the luchthonn company warily, but Cillian ignored them. This time, when one of the young stable hands approached him, he handed Crow’s reins off easily.

He approached Cora and her father, waiting for them to separate before he spoke. Cillian reached out a hand in greeting. “We came as soon as your letter arrived. What news?”

Lord Kilkenny clasped his arm and patted his shoulder. “Thank you for your haste. Please, see to your men first. We can discuss everything once you’re settled.”

Cillian shook his head and waved Cathall over. “If Edwin’s men are as close as you say, there’s no time. My men know how to pitch a camp. Just tell them where to go, and they’ll settle themselves. Cathall and I will go with you. The sooner

we know what's happened, the sooner we can make a plan to beat the sorry bastards back.”

Lord Kilkenny nodded and gestured toward the main hall. “This way, then. My steward will see to your men.”

Cora fell in step beside him. He considered asking her to stay behind—his mate was more than capable of setting the men to rights. One look at her expression, however, was enough to dissuade him. Cathall glanced at him over her head as if to ask why she was joining them for a war plan.

In his mind, Cillian scoffed. Let Cathall try to tell Cora to stay behind. See how well it worked out for him. After their argument in the tent, Cillian would just as soon keep all his bits and pieces connected. There would be other battles to fight with his wife—he wasn't foolish enough to make this one of them.

Once inside, Lord Kilkenny led them down the winding halls to his study. A map of Ossory and the surrounding lands lay on his desk, with several wooden figures scattered across it. He gestured to the map—and several missives piled next to it.

“The latest reports from the coast are grim. The English have burnt Waterford to the ground. They took no prisoners and left nothing undisturbed. By the time my men reached them, they found nothing but smoldering ashes.”

Cora's hand went to her mouth in surprise. “Nothing? Even those who couldn't—what about the women and children? The elderly?”

Lord Kilkenny shook his head. “They left none alive. It was the same as the village—Baunmore. Edwin means to make an example of us, it seems.”

“Why?” Cora cried. “Why Ossory? What have we—our people—done to deserve this?”

Her father sighed and shook his head. “Edwin wants Ireland. His own lands aren't enough to keep him happy, so he seeks to spread English influence and control here. He sent letters to the lords attempting to buy their surrender, but we

refused. Now, he will try to take it by force. I'd thought we'd have more time to prepare, but it seems he plans to show the lords his power by razing Ossory to the ground."

Cillian laid a hand on Cora's shoulder. "This is war, lass. Don't look for heroes and justice here. War turns men into savage beasts, and the worst of them won't change their skin like me."

She swallowed, struggling against whatever fire raged in her heart. He understood it well. He'd been barely out of boyhood when he'd first gone into battle and seen what men could do in the name of greed, king, and country.

She would learn.

Finally, Cora nodded, her mouth set in a grim line. "What will you do? How do we stop them?"

Her father pointed to the map. "Our best chance is to send your men to join our soldiers here. It's the most likely path Edwin's forces will take to reach us, and it's defensible. The land is open, but there's a forest nearby—here—that would allow for safe travel."

Cillian looked up from the map. "And your men—they've been told to expect us?"

Lord Kilkenny nodded. "Yes. They've been... prepared for the forms their allies may take."

"Good. We'll leave at dawn, then. If the English are moving this quickly, we'll need all the time we can get."

"Agreed. I plan to send most of our company along with you. A few will stay here to guard the castle, but only as many as Éogan deems necessary."

Cillian smirked. "Probably best to travel separately. Horses can be... uneasy around us at certain times."

"Ah, yes, that would make sense, wouldn't it? Very well. Our company will follow the main road south—here." He pointed to one area on the map, then another. "Your men can take this road—through the woods—and meet us at the border beyond the town."

The conversation went on for a while longer, but by the end, they had a solid plan of attack. Cora listened, her face pale and drawn as they discussed casualties and contingencies, but she remained quiet. When their meeting concluded, she kissed her father's cheek and followed them out without a word. Once they reached the main hall, Cillian sent Cathall to share the plans with their men. For the rest of the day, they would rest and prepare; luchthonn and *madraí* both would need to know their role in the coming battle.

When they were finally alone, Cillian pulled Cora into his arms. "What troubles you, *Mo ghrá*?"

Her laugh was sharp and angry as she buried her face in his chest. "Everything. My people are dying for nothing but greed, and I must watch those I love most ride off to war to save them while I stay behind. It all troubles me."

He kissed the top of her hair, then pulled away far enough to meet her eyes. "Be strong, wife. We'll need you after the battle. Don't forget that. Your father has a plan—a good one. We'll be fine."

Cora took his face in her hands and held his gaze. "You come back to me, Cillian Fane. I'd make a terrible widow, and we both know it."

"Aye, love. I promise."

He knew better than to make promises before war, but for her, he'd promise the world.

Chapter 18

Cora

CLANG CLANG! CLANG CLANG!

The sound of the chapel bells woke Cora from a fitful sleep. Cillian jerked up and out of bed before Cora could even wipe the sleep from her eyes. By the time she'd swung her legs out of the bed and lit a candle, he'd already crossed the room to their one window.

"Cillian? What is it?"

He shushed her, peering through the window into the dark. Cora padded behind him, squinting to see anything. There, in the distance, specks of light by the tree line.

"Something's wrong," he murmured.

"How can you tell?"

He pointed down, eyes still glued to the window. "The guards are gathering in the courtyard already. They're armed."

"Oh God. You don't think—it couldn't be the English, could it? They're meant to be days away!"

Cillian finally looked away from the window, his expression grim. "Could have been a mistake. Could have been a forged message from the scout. But aye, it's them."

"What should we do?"

Cillian glared at her as he bent to pull on his boots. "*We* will do nothing. I'll go out and join the others. Edwin's a fool to attack at night. He probably thought he'd have the upper hand if the castle guards were asleep, but the luchthonn kill just as well in darkness as in light."

"But Cillian, I can—"

"NO!" He roared, the sound echoing in the rafters above them.

She opened her mouth to protest but snapped it closed so fast her teeth clicked when he grabbed her shoulder. He snarled, his dark eyes bright even in the darkness. It had been a long time since she'd feared Cillian, but with candlelight throwing shadows across his face, he was truly frightening.

“You'll stay here. You'll hide under the fucking bed if you must. You will not leave this room under any circumstances! If I find out you did, I'll turn your arse so red you won't be able to sit for a month. Do you understand me?”

She said nothing, only answered his glare with one of her own.

Cillian shook her, the pressure on her arm almost painful. “Cora! Do you understand?”

Cora wanted to shout. Wanted to tear her arm away and slap him for being such a beast.

But there was no time. Even she could hear the shouts from the courtyard below.

They would need him.

She nodded slowly. “Yes. I understand.”

He stared at her for a moment more, then yanked her into his arms. His kiss was hard and rough, as animalistic as it was passionate. He'd never kissed her like that before, like he was trying to devour her whole... or memorize her. The thought made her want to howl with rage.

She cupped his cheeks and pulled back enough to look into his eyes. “Remember, you promised to come back.”

He nodded solemnly and kissed her once more.

And then he walked away. Marched out the door and slammed it behind him without a single look back.

Chapter 19

Cillian

Cillian threw open the door from the main hall. Moonlight covered the courtyard in a dim, hazy light, almost as though he'd walked right into a dream.

Or a nightmare.

He gritted his teeth as he made his way outside. Guilt and fear tore into his insides just as surely as any blade could. He never should have allowed her to come. He should have tied her up, thrown her over a horse, and sent her to *Clann Abhaile*—to safety! Now, because of his weakness for her, she was mere inches away from men who'd take her life without a second thought.

The wolf snarled in his mind, as angry as he was at their mate's proximity to the danger. There was no doubt in his mind who waited outside the castle walls. It was a bold move, but not unthinkable. In fact, if they hadn't taken those damned scout reports as truth, he might have anticipated such an attack.

He'd been too distracted. From the moment she'd convinced him to let her come with him, he'd been distracted. Hell, since the moment she'd walked into his tent with her proposal, he'd been distracted.

Distractions lead to death. The luchthonn were stronger than the average man, but they weren't invincible. There were ways to kill them, and he'd just as soon not give Edwin's men the chance to find them out.

The courtyard was alive with men rushing around like bees in a hive. Fergus's captain, Éogan, stood in the center, shouting orders as a tall boy helped him into his armor. Cillian jogged toward him. "The English?" he asked.

Éogan scowled and nodded. "Bloody wraiths, sneaking up in the middle of the night. They must have taken another road—one our scouts weren't watching. Don't know how they

could have known, but—” he paused, then shook his head. “No matter. They’re here, and if the number of torches is anything to judge by, we’ve got quite a scrap ahead. Where are your men? We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Just then, a single, echoing howl split the night. Cillian gave him a thin smile. “They’re ready. The *madraí* will join your guards behind the wall, but we luchthonn will go out ahead to meet our enemy. Let us see how brave they are then.”

Cillian tugged the wolf’s skin over his head, exhaling roughly as the change took over. In the blink of an eye, he surrendered to the wolf, embracing the shift to his other form. When it was over, he shook himself, stretching his limbs and testing the air. Éogan stood several feet from where he’d been, staring in wide-eyed wonder.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” he whispered, crossing himself. “I’ll be thanking all the saints you’re on our side.”

Cillian huffed—the closest thing to a laugh he could manage as a wolf. All around him, the humans had stopped their preparations to stare. Some flinched away, clutching their weapons in front of them, but others inched closer, curiosity and amazement gleaming in their eyes.

Another howl pierced the silence. Cathall. This time, Cillian threw his head back and returned it with one of his own. The humans shouted in surprise, leaping away from him, but he paid them no mind. He took off toward the gate, loping past the men, who scrambled to get out of his way.

Ahead, an open field lit by a bright full moon. Cillian had never been superstitious, but it seemed the goddess of the wolves, the moon herself, was with them. How could it be anything but a good omen?

He raced through the field, his paws thudding against the hard ground. Within moments of leaving the castle walls behind, he felt them at his sides—his brothers. He knew their shapes, their scents, as well as he knew his own. Cathall slipped into place at his left, his golden fur shining in the moonlight.

They were halfway across the field before Cillian noticed the archers. A line of men armed with bows and arrows stretched across the tree line. Suddenly, a small fire pierced the darkness at one end of the line.

The arrows, he thought. They've lit the arrows.

One sharp bark scattered the wolves. Some rose from four legs to two, and even at a distance, Cillian could hear the fearful shouts up ahead. Adrenaline raced through his blood, pushing him faster and faster toward his prey.

The archers released their arrows, sending them up in a wide, fiery arc. Cillian howled, warning his pack of the incoming danger. He watched the arrows fall, leaping to one side and then another to avoid being struck. Behind him, a pained whine and a dull thud suggested that not all the wolves had been so lucky. He pushed aside the instinct to protect his pack with the knowledge that it would take more than an arrow to bring down a luchthonn. The burning arrow would sting like the devil, but unless it went through their head, they'd heal.

As he approached the line of English soldiers, time seemed to slow. It was as though there was nothing around him but the war drum of his pulse in his ears and the beat of his paws on the ground.

He saw his prey, and his wolf would have their blood.

The luchthonn fell on the first line of soldiers like a mighty wave against the shore. The men crumpled beneath them, easily overpowered by bodies twice their size. Shields splintered against sharp claws and powerful blows. Bones snapped between his teeth as he closed his jaws over one man's sword arm. Blood flowed from their enemies' wounds, the crimson liquid bright in the moonlight.

Snarls and screams filled the night. Swords glinted in the pale light before cutting into thick, furred bodies. One Englishman stabbed at Cillian with a spear, grazing his side before he could pivot away. He growled at the man, baring his blood-stained teeth. A sharp odor hit his nose—the man had pissed himself in fear. Cillian rose on two legs, threw back his

head, and howled. His opponent tried to run, but Cillian was on him before he'd taken a single step. The man's neck snapped beneath his teeth like a twig in a child's hands. Cillian didn't even wait for his body to hit the ground before moving on to the next soldier.

The battle was over almost as quickly as it began. The luchthonn stood in the remains of the battlefield, surrounded by the bodies of their adversaries. Cillian called the change, tugging the wolf's skin off of his head to survey the damage. The red haze of battle still thrummed beneath his skin, and he scanned the area with a mounting feeling of dread.

Minutes passed as he walked the field, helping his brothers to their feet and trying to make sense of the niggling doubts in the back of his mind.

“Cillian? What troubles you?”

Cathall stood beside him, muscles tensed as though he too felt something was wrong.

Cillian shook his head. “It was too easy, wasn't it?” He gestured at the bodies on the ground. “This was it? This was Edwin's two hundred strong? Ain't half of that here—where are the rest?”

Cathall glanced around as though the dead might hold the answer.

Cillian tilted his head toward the rest of the luchthonn. “Anyone hurt?”

Cathall paused, then shook his head. “Nothing serious, anyway. I can't find—”

CLANG CLANG! CLANG CLANG!

In the distance, the bells rang again. A large company—much larger than the one they'd faced—surrounded the castle gate.

Cillian's heart plummeted as icy dread slithered down his spine. It'd been a ruse. Somehow, their enemy had known. They'd known the luchthonn would lead the charge, and

they'd sacrificed some of their men to distract from their actual target—the castle.

Cora.

He'd left her there without so much as a weapon to defend herself.

With a savage snarl, Cillian yanked his wolf's skin over his head. He leapt forward, already on four paws by the time he hit the ground at a run. A howl went up behind him as the others followed, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything but getting to his mate in time.

And gods save anyone or anything that stood between them.

Chapter 20

Cora

Cora paced the length of the room, cursing Cillian under her breath. In the five minutes since he'd left, she'd called him every name she could think of and made up a few new ones on the spot.

How dare he leave her behind?

How dare he just... just *leave*?

The irony of her feelings didn't escape her. This was why she'd married him in the first place. His presence here—the risk to his life—was a condition of their marriage. She had brought him and the other luchthonn here, and if they died, it'd be her doing. And she'd have to live with that, knowing that while they fought for her people and her father's lands, she hid in a castle, safely protected by its walls.

It wasn't right.

She glanced at the door for what felt like the thousandth time. It was barred, but only from her side. There was no way to lock it, so she'd pushed a heavy chest in front of it to keep people out—and maybe to keep her from following him right out the door. It mocked her now, reminding her she was in a prison of her own making.

Outside, the guard's shouts continued. She strained to hear their words, but everything muddled together until it sounded like another language. If she squinted, she could make out the little dots of English torches in the distance. They were no closer, from what she could tell, but it was difficult to be sure with such little light.

Cora's heart lurched when she heard the first howl. Another followed, and she watched as a mass of shadowy figures raced away toward their enemy.

The luchthonn.

Her heart clenched in her chest as she strained to make out Cillian in the pack. Of course, they were too far away—there was no way to see one wolf separate from the others. Cora crossed herself and mumbled a prayer for her husband’s safety.

She stared out of the window until she couldn’t make out the luchthonn anymore. Placing her hand on the window, she whispered words she hadn’t yet had the courage to say out loud. If—when—Cillian came back, she swore that she’d tell him.

She had to.

The words had flitted through her mind often enough, but it had never seemed like the right moment. Even as they’d embraced before he left, she’d nearly said them, but the fear of being misunderstood—of him dismissing her words as desperate platitudes—stilled her tongue.

With the luchthonn out of sight, Cora peered down into the courtyard. She thought she could make out some *madraí* among her father’s guards, and she watched as they took up posts along the wall.

Helpless to do anything but watch, Cora turned away from the window. She went back to pacing, counting the stone tiles beneath her feet to give her mind something to do. There was nothing for her to do—no way to help him and no way to end the fighting any faster.

Cora was nearly half-mad with worry when the shouts began again. They’d faded when the luchthonn took to the field, but suddenly they were back—and louder. She rushed to the window, peering down into the courtyard. Éogan stood in the center, hollering and gesturing toward the gates. Her father stood next to him, dressed in full armor.

Dread pooled in Cora’s belly at the sight of him. Though he hid it well, Lord Kilkenny had suffered a wound years ago that had left his sword arm permanently damaged. He could write, pick things up, feed himself, and do other everyday things, but he hadn’t swung a sword in years. He couldn’t—not without extreme pain.

What could he be thinking?

Cora wanted to shout at him; she wanted to bang on the windows and yell until he listened. It was madness for him to be there, and she couldn't understand why Éogan didn't send him away.

Except she could. She knew exactly why her father was there, dressed in armor and holding a weapon he couldn't use. He refused to watch others defend his land while he hid away—even if it cost him his life.

For a moment, she tried to tell herself that he'd be safe behind the walls, just as she would. Cillian and the luchthonn would defeat the English invaders, and her father would never have to fight. All would be well, just as Cillian promised.

Then she looked up and saw the torches.

Her initial fear was that Cillian had been killed and the English had already made it to the castle. When she saw the flickering lights still in the distance, she realized what had happened.

Upon seeing the size of the force heading their way, she made a decision. The English outnumbered them, and with Cillian and the luchthonn busy with the first wave, they'd be on their own. They would need every able hand.

Cora raced to the door, silently begging Cillian's forgiveness. She grunted and groaned against the weight of the heavy chest but managed to push it out of the way. Then she raced down the stairs as quickly as she could.

A weapon, she thought. I need a weapon.

The armory would be the smart place to go, but it was across the castle. Where else?

The study—her father kept a spare set of weapons in his study! She skidded on a rug, rounded a corner, and took off up another set of stairs. The halls seemed longer than usual in her haste, but she reached the door to the study in mere minutes. Thankfully, it had been left unlocked in the chaos and opened easily. Cora scanned the room, eyes peeled for anything she

could use. A small dagger caught her eye, and Cora slipped its sheath onto her belt.

Just as she closed the lid to the last chest in the study, the doors burst open. Cora yelped and pulled the dagger from its sheath just in time to recognize the intruder.

“Eoin! Holy Mother, what are you doing here?”

Eoin leaned against the door, panting as though he’d run for a full day. His dark wolf’s skin hung loosely about his shoulders, haphazardly pinned, as though he’d been in a rush. He wore no shirt, and his trousers and boots were just as helter-skelter as the rest of him.

“Lady Cora—thank the goddess! Quickly, we must go now! Fane is looking for you!”

Before Cora could respond, the bells rang again, their heavy clang echoing through the halls. Cora ran to the window and gasped at the sight of the English horde gathered outside the castle walls. A sickening crash came from outside the gate, and the guard’s shouts grew frantic.

Her father’s men and several of the *madraí* strained against the gate, using their bodies to hold it shut. Outside, there came another crash, and the wood of the gate shuddered and shook.

Cora glanced back at Eoin. “What are you talking about? Where’s Cillian? Is he out there?”

Eoin shook his head, his eyes wide and frantic. “No, Lady—it was a trap! They knew we were coming! I don’t know how—so many wolves are dead! Fane was badly injured. Couldn’t come himself, so he sent me to fetch you to safety. Please, Lady, we must go!”

Images of Cillian broken and bloody flashed through Cora’s mind. “Oh God, no! Where is he? Are the others returning? They’ve got a battering ram—they’ll breach the castle soon!”

Eoin snarled and raked his fingers through his lank hair. “Those that still live will be here soon. Now, come! Fane’ll have my hide if I don’t get you out before the English overrun us!”

Cora nodded and followed Eoin toward the door. He heaved a sigh of relief and led her down the halls. A final, terrible crash echoed through the night, followed by screams and shouts from the courtyard. Eoin cursed under his breath and took her arm, pulling her faster down the corridor, away from the main hall and the battle.

“Where are we going? Is Cillian meeting us there?”

Eoin nodded, stopping at a corner long enough to scan both halls before pulling her down one that would take them to the kitchens. “Aye, he said he’d be there. Plans to ride off with you to safety, I think. Says there are too many English—too few of us. We’re all getting out.”

Cora slowed, her brows furrowed. “He means to abandon the castle? My father? He can’t! They’ll die without the luchthonn’s help!”

Eoin turned back, an impatient scowl on his face. “It’s us or them, isn’t it? No use in our kind dying just to save some warring humans! If I’d had my way, we wouldn’t have come at all! But we did, and now Fane has seen the truth—this isn’t our battle. He sent me to save you. Be grateful for that, and hurry your arse up!”

“How dare you—oh!”

When he saw she meant to argue more, Eoin growled and threw her over his shoulder without another word. Cora screeched and beat on his back with her fists.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. The longer she was with Eoin, the more the uneasy feeling spread through her body. Cillian wouldn’t have sent Eoin to get her—he would have come himself. And he wouldn’t run away from the battle, especially not with her still inside.

Eoin was lying.

He had to be.

“Eoin, what’s going on?” she demanded. “Where are you taking me?”

Eoin made his way down the halls with her hanging off his shoulders like a sack of grain. “This could have gone much easier, you stupid cow. You just had to follow me! But no, couldn’t make anything easy, could you? We’re in this whole bloody mess because of you!”

“What are you talking about? What have I done to you?”

Cora cried out when Eoin slapped her thigh sharply. “You know what you did!” he hissed. “What you’ve done is unnatural, and it’s taken a lot of trouble to fix it. Once the elders see what I’ve done, let’s see who they name the bloody alpha!”

Dread turned her blood to ice. “What do you mean? Eoin, what have you done?”

“What I had to do,” he said, picking up his pace. “What had to be done to put things as they should be.”

Cora struggled, but even as a man, Eoin was much stronger than she’d ever be. She remembered the dagger in her pocket. Thankfully, it had gotten bunched in with the rest of her skirts, so he hadn’t noticed it in all the fabric.

Eoin carried her through the castle, but he didn’t seem to be looking for an exit. Outside, the battle roared on as her father’s men valiantly fought for their home. Somehow, despite her shouts, they hadn’t met a single other person in the castle. It occurred to her that all the staff would have fled or gone into hiding, and everyone able to fight would be outside in the courtyard. There was no one to hear her or save her.

Finally, they came to the main hall where her father met with petitioners, where she and Cillian had met with him to announce their agreement. It seemed so long ago, now, that she’d stood before her father and told him what she’d done to protect their people.

Eoin unceremoniously dropped her to the ground, snarling when she tried to scoot away. “You stay put, *dall* bitch! We’ll wait here, and you’ll stay still and quiet if you know what’s good for you. Said I’d bring you alive—made no promises about how bloody you’d be.”

Cora's thoughts raced, desperately reaching for any way to get away. Eoin paced the floor in front of her, so agitated that his limbs shook. If she could just distract him enough—enough to keep him from noticing the dagger, then...

“What are we waiting for? Eoin, tell me what you’ve done. It’s not too late to make this right!”

His bark of laughter echoed off the stone of the hall. “I am making it right, you daft twig! You’re the ones who made it wrong—you and Fane. So I’m bagging two rabbits with one snare tonight. I’ll undo all this mess you’ve caused, and I’ll have the means to bring our pack back to the right way of things!”

“Cillian will never let you—”

Eoin’s laughter, cold and sharp, startled her. “Well, that won’t be a problem, now will it? Since he’ll be fucking dead!”

Cora scoffed, inching her hand toward the dagger. “If you’re thinking you’ll be the one to kill him, you’re off your head. You could never best Cillian alone!”

“Well, I suppose it’s a good thing he won’t have to, isn’t it?”

Cora’s head snapped toward the unknown voice. A man—a young man in full armor—stepped into the hall, pulling an ornate helm from his head. Cora didn’t recognize him, but his accent was easily recognizable.

“And who are you?” she spat. “One of Edwin’s lackeys come to do more of his dirty work?”

The man chuckled and shook his head. The sound sent a shiver of unease up Cora’s spine.

“No, my lady, I’m afraid not. King Edwin of England, at your service.”

Chapter 21

Cora

Cora stared in disbelief. “You... that’s not possible.”

The man—King Edwin—arched an eyebrow. “Isn’t it? This little island has become quite the problem of late. What better way to solve a problem than to resolve it myself?”

The sounds of battle outside the door rose, nearly drowning out Edwin’s quiet voice. Cora glanced toward the door that led to the courtyard, then glared at Edwin. “My father will never surrender to you. You will not have our lands.”

“I think you’ll find that I will, Lady. Assuming Lord Kilkenny isn’t already dead—not as quick as he used to be, is he—he’ll be joining us shortly. And when he hears my terms, I think he’ll be more than happy with my... generosity.”

He smiled, but it was a cruel, ugly smile that made Cora want to heave. A thousand questions ran through her mind, but she pushed them away. Now was not the time for distraction. Eoin was dangerous in his own way, but the man before her exuded power and control. Like a poisonous snake in the path, he watched her as though waiting for his opportunity to strike.

She wondered how he’d gotten in without detection. A handful of guards flanked him, but they wouldn’t have been enough to allow him to just walk through the chaos outside unscathed. Her stomach roiled as she realized how much they’d underestimated their opponent. They’d all assumed that Edwin would send his raiders as he had before. They attacked villages at random, burning and pillaging as they went with no obvious goal except destruction.

For the King of England to be here—in her father’s home—on this night spoke to a more specific goal.

Outside, the bells rang once more. Cillian would hear them, she told herself. He would come. All was not yet lost.

“What is it you want?” she asked. Perhaps if she asked the right questions, she could delay him long enough for Cillian to arrive.

Edwin scoffed. “I should think that’s quite obvious,” he said. “I intend for this land to fall under English rule. Your Irish lords have had ample time to accept that inevitability. I’ve generously offered them terms of conquest without bloodshed, but they’ve refused. So, I’m going to make my point a bit more... vividly. When the other lords see how easily Ossory fell, even with the help of the fabled wolf-men, they will submit.”

Cora’s eyes widened. “How—how did you...?”

Edwin’s eyes flicked toward the pacing luchthonn behind her. “Oh, I admit I had some small support in that matter. Quite unexpected, to be sure, but valuable nonetheless.”

Eoin snarled, “And that valuable support had a price, English. Don’t forget your part of this agreement.”

Edwin sighed as though the question bored him. “Ah, yes. In exchange for your information and the delivery of Lady Kilkenny, you wish for the rest of your... pack to be allowed to leave under your leadership. After we ensure the death of Cillian Fane, of course.”

Cora was on her feet and charging toward Eoin before Edwin finished his sentence. “You cowardly traitor! How could you?”

Hands wrapped around her arms, yanking her away from Eoin at the last moment. He growled, teeth bared as he advanced on her. “How could I? I’m protecting my kind! Fane is the traitor! He’s the one mixing our line with worthless *dall* blood! I’ll see our pack return to the old ways—the right ways! None of this allying with rodents, who ought to be nothing but prey in our teeth!”

His ranting grew so wild that spittle landed on her cheek. In his rage, Eoin was nearly feral. He clenched his fists as though his claws might pop at any moment. When she’d first come to the luchthonn camp, he would have terrified her.

Now she only wanted to tear his eyes out.

“You spineless gobshite! You don’t deserve to be alpha, you absolute bas—”

A large hand covered her mouth, cutting off her tirade.

Edwin shook his head as he moved between her and Eoin. “Such language, Lady. And here I’d been told you were a meek thing. Dutiful and easily frightened, I heard. It would seem your time amongst these monsters has corrupted you, hasn’t it?”

Cora glared at him, still silenced by his guard. Edwin smiled and wiped the flecks of spittle from her cheek. “As it happens, I agree with you. Well, to a point.”

He snapped his fingers. Suddenly, two of the guards grabbed Eoin by the arms, easily restraining him. Eoin’s eyes went wide, a feral growl reverberating from his chest. “What is this? We had an agreement!”

Edwin faced Eoin, eerily calm in the face of the luchthonn’s rage. “Ah—you see, there’s been a change of plan. That agreement isn’t in the crown’s best interest, so I’ll be changing the terms.”

Eoin strained against the guards, but they held him fast. Edwin approached, a disturbing gleam of interest in his eyes. “You know, when you contacted me, I almost didn’t believe you. Men who could turn into wolves? Who would believe such a thing? But thankfully, as king, I have experts in many areas of knowledge available to me, and there are those who know of your kind. There is one thing they said that I’d like to put to the test, though. You don’t mind, do you?”

He pulled a dagger from his belt. As the guards held an increasingly frantic Eoin, Edwin unpinned the wolf’s skin and slid it off of Eoin’s shoulders. Cora’s eyes widened, fear turning her blood to ice in her veins. A luchthonn never parted from his wolf’s skin. Cillian had explained the bond between luchthonn and wolf, and how the skin connected them. Without the skin, they wouldn’t be able to change.

Edwin held the skin in his hand, testing the fur between his fingers. “Truly fascinating,” he said. “To think such a monstrous creature relies on something so fragile as this.”

He glanced back at Cora and gave her a conspiratorial wink. “Let this be a lesson—every enemy has a weakness. And, if my sources were correct, this particular enemy has just one.”

Without warning, he slashed his dagger through the skin, separating the head from the rest. Cora gasped as Eoin howled, his body thrashing with such force that the guards lost their grip. He fell to the floor, screaming in pain, raking his nails down his skin until they left bloody furrows.

Cora watched, horrified at the sight before her. Edwin nodded to one guard, who bent over Eoin and slashed his throat from ear to ear. Edwin turned to her and smiled—the same cruel, ugly smile he’d given her before. “Always good to find that one’s information is sound.”

He spoke so calmly, as though he were speaking about the weather. He might as well have been at a dinner party rather than next to a dying man. Eoin choked on the blood, his hands at his throat as though it would stop the crimson flood. Finally, after what seemed like an age, he stilled, his blood seeping out onto the stone floor around him.

Cora stared at the body, too shocked to construct any sort of thought. Just as she forced herself to look away, a howl pierced the air. A moment later, another—then another. Soon, a chorus of howls rose that seemed to shake the roof above them.

“Quickly, give me the girl.”

They passed her into Edwin’s arms before she could react, and suddenly, his dagger was at her throat.

“I imagine your husband will join us presently,” he murmured into her ear. “Be a good girl, and I won’t have to use this. Make no mistake, though, I will not hesitate to spill your blood just as easily as the wolf’s should you misbehave.”

Before she could answer, the door to the main hall, which had been barred before the battle, burst open, shattering into splintered pieces. Edwin's guards cursed as enormous, shadowed bodies stepped inside. The moonlight behind them only made them appear larger. With nothing but the sound of deep growls and the sight of glowing eyes in the dark, they were truly terrifying.

Or they would be if Cora couldn't see familiar blue eyes staring straight at her. The wolves approached, some on four legs and some on two. Their snarls promised death, and Cora noticed the way Edwin's guards clutched their weapons. She allowed herself a small smile as her wolf stalked closer. Despite what had happened to Eoin, she wasn't afraid.

Edwin's grip tightened. He pressed the blade close enough to be unnerving without harming her. "Remember," he whispered, his lips against her ear, "you behave, or you die."

Cora had no intention of dying by an Englishman's hand.

Neither did she have any intention of obeying.

When the lurchthonn drew near, Edwin called out, "That's close enough, thank you. Might I have the pleasure of speaking with Cillian Fane?"

Cillian rose on two feet and growled so loud Cora felt it in her bones.

"I thought as much. I have an... opportunity for you, if you will. All I require is a moment of your time."

The wolf's expression was easily interpreted, even without words. Cora could almost hear her husband's voice telling Edwin to shove his 'opportunity' up his arse.

The dagger at her throat twitched, and she couldn't help flinching away. Cillian snarled, stepping closer.

"Ah-ah-ah, stay where you are. But I feel this conversation would be best had man to... well, as close to man as you can be, I suppose."

Cora glanced toward Eoin's body, trying to draw Cillian's eyes to it. He followed her gaze but gave no sign that the sight

of his former pack-mate's body had any effect on him. She hoped he noticed the skin. Hoped he realized what it meant because she couldn't tell him without risking her own life.

Cillian hesitated, his eyes still fixed on Edwin's blade at her throat. Edwin pressed the dagger harder. Something warm and wet slipped down her neck—blood.

Cillian gave another bone-chilling growl and made the change from wolf to man. He kept the skin over his head, and highlighted by moonlight, he resembled one of the battle gods of old.

“Know this, English,” he growled, his voice low and deadly. “Any blood you draw from my mate, I'll take from you a hundred times over.”

Despite the danger she was in, warmth spread through Cora's chest. To think she'd ever been afraid of her wolf—her mate. She glanced around, looking for anything that might help. Cillian would protect her—or avenge her—but it was up to her to look for ways to help. The dagger still hung heavy in her pocket. If Edwin were focused on Cillian, he might not notice her reaching for it. She looked down, her eyes sliding along the length of Edwin's arm. He'd wrapped one arm around her middle and the other around her neck, resting his dagger against the opposite side. An idea struck her as she stared at his arm. She'd have to time it just right, but it could work.

As Cora puzzled out her plan of attack, Edwin grimaced. “That is rather... undignified, isn't it? Haven't you a robe or something?”

Cillian smirked and cupped himself. “No surprise that a cockless coward who hides behind a woman would be frightened of mine.”

Edwin scoffed and said, “What you call hiding, I call insurance. Now, are you ready to hear my proposal? Or shall I add your lovely wife's corpse to the pile in the courtyard?”

Cillian gave her a strange look, then crossed his arms. “I'm listening.”

Chapter 22

Cillian

Cillian faced the English king, not bothering to hide his nakedness. Sure, he could use his wolf's skin as a sort of kilt, but he wouldn't. He'd seen Eoin's body to the side, along with his beheaded wolf's skin. Somehow, this pale, dodgy bastard knew enough about the luchthonn to kill them. Cillian's wolf's skin wouldn't go anywhere but on his head, and if those guards of his moved a toe out of line, he'd have his fangs in their throats before they could blink.

Besides, if he threw the king's delicate sensibilities off by the sight of his balls, all the better. If he'd thought it'd do any good, he'd have danced a jig and bounced them about a bit—anything to keep the attention on him and off of that knife at his mate's neck.

“Ah, see? I knew you could see reason. Some of my advisors warned me that the luchthonn were too feral to deal with, but I had a feeling about you. After all, a man doesn't earn your reputation by accident.”

Cillian sneered. “Did you come all this way to whisper sweet nothings in my ear? Sorry to tell you, lad, but I'm already mated.”

“I suppose the vulgarity is to be expected from an animal like you. Very well, let's waste no time. I'd like to propose an alliance between the luchthonn and the English crown.”

Of all the things he'd expected to come out of Edwin's mouth, an offer of alliance was last on a very long list.

“Oh, have you now? And just why would I ally with the bastard cunt who attacks my home and threatens my mate?”

Edwin scoffed, “Please, let's not exaggerate. The only reason you're here is because of your marriage to Lady Kilkenny—excuse me, Lady Fane. You've no actual obligation to these lands. And as far as threatening your... mate, let's assume that as long as everyone remains calm,

she's in no danger at all. I only needed to make sure I had your attention."

Cillian scrutinized the English king. He'd always thought kings to be fat and stupid—too drunk on their own power to see past their powdered noses. They didn't go into battle for fear of scuffing their fine slippers. Instead, they moved their pawns around their little maps as though men's lives were worth less than the wooden figurines.

This one, though. Edwin had clearly planned this meeting carefully. He'd learned about them and found an ally in one of their own. Eoin's bloody form and tattered wolf's skin screamed of betrayal. To be cut off from one's wolf was agony, and his death would have been torturous.

Good. Traitors deserved no less.

"Let's say I agree with you. What exactly do you want from me in this... *alliance*, and what have you to offer in return?"

Edwin smiled, his eyes lighting at Cillian's apparent interest. "Your part is simple. Your wolf-men are capable warriors. They're twice the size of a soldier and three times as strong. Help me complete my conquest of Ireland, and I'll give you all you sought from Kilkenny and more. You want land for your people? It's yours. In fact, take Ossory and this castle for your own if you'd like."

Cillian pretended to consider the offer, schooling his features into an expression of interest. "A castle, you say? And only slightly damaged from your attack? How kind of you to offer."

"Consider it only the beginning of an investment. Once Ireland is mine, I'll need someone to keep the local rabble in line. I would be inclined to reward such a man handsomely."

As they went back and forth, Cillian surreptitiously watched his wife. The more Edwin talked, the looser his grip on Cora became. He watched her eye Edwin's arm before glancing up to be sure the king's attention was still solely on

him. Her hand twitched on her skirt, then slowly began moving back toward her pocket.

Cillian paced a few steps, his gait casual and relaxed. “I see. Let me see if I’ve heard you right. You’ll give me land, coin, and all the little rabbits a wolf could chase, and all I’ve got to do is off a few fat lords?”

He glanced at Cora again. This time, she caught his eye. First, she glanced down at Edwin’s arm; then, she bared her teeth. Immediately, he understood her plan.

Edwin’s smile grew. “That is the gist of it, yes. And who knows? Serve me well here, and I may have other lands that need your particular brand of war.”

Cillian stopped in front of Edwin. He crossed his arms and nodded as though considering the offer. The king’s grip loosened even more. With the guards’ attention still glued to the other luchthonn, Cora slipped her hand into her pocket and gave a tiny nod.

“Well, you’ve given me much to think on, haven’t you? Quite a lot to... sink my teeth into.”

Cora burst into action, burying her teeth in Edwin’s arm. He shouted in surprise, yanking his arm away from her bite—and her neck. As soon as the blade was away from her throat, Cora pulled a small dagger from her pocket and slashed at the arm around her middle. Edwin bellowed, instinct pulling him away from the source of pain.

Chaos erupted. The luchthonn lept at the guards, knocking their blades aside with a single blow and tackling them to the ground. They’d be dead in moments.

Cillian lunged toward Edwin, who still somehow had a hold on Cora’s arm. “Dirty bitch!” the king cried. He raised his dagger and shook Cora violently.

Time slowed. Cillian felt the change sweep over him as he watched Cora swing her arm up just as the English king swung down. His shout became a howl of outrage as the wolf took over. All he could see was the blade careening toward his mate.

Before it reached her, Edwin jerked, wide-eyed. His blade glanced off of Cora's arm as he flailed, gasping for breath. Cillian slammed into him, knocking Edwin to the ground. As he loomed over the English king, he saw what had caused the man to miss.

There, buried between his ribs, was Cora's dagger.

Cillian growled, his bared teeth inches away from Edwin's face. The formerly confident king cowered as he desperately tried to back away from the giant wolf. Cillian pressed one heavy paw into the man's gut, pinning him in place.

All around him, the sounds of dying men and angry snarls echoed through the large hall. The scent of blood hung heavy in the air, and the wolf salivated at the thought of Edwin's blood filling his mouth as he tore the man to pieces.

A small hand on his back stopped him just before he lunged for Edwin's throat. Cora ran her fingers through his fur, stroking his head as she glared down at the fallen king.

Her voice was as cold and merciless as a winter storm. "These are our lands, Edwin of England. We will never surrender them to you or anyone else. Let your death be a lesson to those who might follow in your footsteps."

Cillian struck, closing his teeth around the king's neck before he could gasp a response. Blood flowed and bones snapped as he crushed Edwin's throat between his jaws. The king gargled desperately, blood dribbling from his mouth. With a single twist, Cillian ripped Edwin's head from his shoulders and sent it rolling across the floor.

Within minutes, every one of the English soldiers was dead, their bodies ripped to shreds by the angry luchthonn. When the last drew his final breath, Cillian turned to his mate. Blood and grime streaked her dress and skin. The cut from Edwin's dagger at her throat still bled, its droplets staining the collar of her dress.

He growled, glaring at her injuries as though he could frighten them away. Once, she'd been frightened of this form. Now she ran to him and locked her arms around his neck.

“I’m all right, my love,” she said, her face buried in his fur. “It’s all right now.”

Distressed by his mate’s blood, the wolf whined and licked at her face. She smiled—that soft smile he treasured above all else. He’d come so close to losing her. Too close. One slip of that bloody dagger and she’d have been lost to him forever.

In a breath, he was a man again. Cillian gathered her in his arms, rocking with her on the ground.

“Ah, lass,” he breathed, “You are a wonder.”

Cora grinned, the blood on her face giving her a decidedly feral appearance. Cillian tried to wipe it away as best he could but only smeared it around. He smiled and kissed her nose.

“I knew you’d come,” she said. “No matter what, I knew you would come for me.”

After the terror he’d felt seeing a dagger at her throat, her kiss was the sweetest thing he’d ever known. “I’ll always come for you, *Mo ghrá*. You have my love and my heart. How could I ever leave you alone?”

Tears gathered in Cora’s eyes, though she tried to hide them by burying her face in his neck. “You have my love as well, husband. But perhaps, next time, if you could show up for your grand rescue a few minutes earlier?”

Cillian chuckled and kissed her once more. “And ruin the chance for all that lovely banter? Perish the thought, woman. Besides, t’was my cock that had him distracted enough for you to sink those little teeth in. I’d say my timing was spot on.”

Cora smiled and rolled her eyes. She looked around the room, her smile falling as she took in the bloody remains of the English. Her eyes narrowed on Eoin’s body. “You know he helped them?” she asked.

Cillian nodded. “Aye, I suspected as much. He went missing during our little scrap and ended up in a bloody heap on the floor here. Doesn’t take a genius to put those pieces together.”

She stared a moment longer, then jolted in his arms. “Cillian! The courtyard! What about the English? They’d breached the gate and—”

“Whoa, lass,” he urged. “Calm yourself. Your father’s men did him proud. They were holding their own well enough when we returned, and I left most of the wolves behind to help even the odds. The battle will be well over by now.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You mean... we won?”

Cillian grinned. “Well, considering the English haven’t shot our arses full of arrows, I’d say the chances are high.”

Cora scrambled to her feet. “Come on! They might need help!”

Chapter 23

C *ora*

Though they had indeed won the battle for Ossory, the price had been steep. Bodies littered the ground, both Kilkenny men and madraí. The only thing that made the sight of so many dead easier to bear was the knowledge that they'd paid the English back thrice over for every man they'd lost.

Cora marched through the battlefield like a woman possessed. She searched the faces of the dead, and every time she came across a face she recognized, she closed her eyes and said a prayer for their soul.

She'd been through half the bodies when she found him—Bran. Until then, she'd kept her tears at bay, but the sight of the stable hand crumpled on the ground with nothing but an old pitchfork made it impossible to hold them back any longer. She dropped to the ground and took his hand in hers. Tears streamed from her eyes as she forced herself to look at him. To see what this battle had cost them.

Cillian crouched beside her. "Who was he?"

Cora let out a shuddering breath. "His name was Bran. He worked in the stables, and he—he's the one who told me stories about you."

Cillian laid a hand on Bran's shoulder, grasping it like he might one of his luchthonn. "He has my thanks, then. For his sacrifice and for his part in sending you to me."

"Cora!"

Cora's head whipped up, scanning the area until she found the source of the voice. Across the courtyard, her father stumbled toward them.

"Da!" Cora was on her feet in an instant. She flew across the stone yard, dodging the injured and dead until she could throw herself into her father's arms.

"You're alive. Thank all the saints, you're still alive!" Her father murmured prayers against her skin as he kissed her hair

and face.

They held each other close, rivers of tears flowing down their faces. When they finally pulled away, his eyes went wide.

“What happened to you, lass? Who’s done this to you?”

Cora quickly explained the events of the night, detailing Edwin’s plans for Ossory and the luchthonn. When Cillian approached—his wolf’s skin considerately wrapped around his hips—her father clasped his arm.

“You have my thanks, Fane. Without you and your luchthonn, I would have lost everything I hold dear tonight.”

Cillian clapped her father on the shoulder. “Your men fought well, Fergus. They defended their homes with strength and honor. You should be proud.”

Her father straightened, his head held high. “I am. It was a hard-won victory, and we lost many good men. They deserve a warrior’s funeral. I would be honored if you would wish for any of your dead to be buried with them.”

Cillian shook his head. “My thanks, but we’ve our own traditions for such things.”

“I understand. Will you leave soon, then? With Edwin dead—well, I can’t imagine his advisors will be quick to bother with us. They’ll be busy enough crowning a new king.”

Cillian glanced at her, and she understood his question without needing to be asked. It warmed her heart that he’d take her desires into consideration when he had so many others to worry about.

She nodded. “We’ll stay to help with the burials and repairs. But after that, we’ve our own home to see to.”

Her father nodded, pulling her in for another embrace. “You’ve made me so proud, *A stór*. What father could ask for a more valiant daughter?”

Cora laughed and replied, “And here I thought daughters were supposed to speak softly and worry about their needlework.”

“Perhaps so, but I doubt any of them would bite a king!”

Cora released her father and returned to Cillian’s side. As they turned to help the others, her father stopped them. “I wonder... there’s a plot of land close by. It’s rich land—plenty of game and a stream running through the nearby woods. It’s not the land you’d settled on before, but... it’s yours, if you’d like it. You’d be closer to the castle—if that’s what you want.”

Cora looked up at Cillian hopefully, and yet again, they needed no words to understand each other. Cillian nodded and squeezed her hand as he said, “Aye, we’d be honored.”

••••

CORA RACED THROUGH the trees, the path ahead barely visible. Above her, the full moon cast fractured rays of light onto the ground, and Cora used them to weave her way deeper into the woods. This time, she’d not allow herself to be herded out into the open. If she was to be hunted, her predator would have to catch her among the trees. It was better here. She could maneuver through the trees much easier than the wolf, even in the low light.

A howl pierced the night, and a shiver of anticipation ran up her spine. It had been months since they’d been able to get away like this. A pulse of warmth spread between her legs as she imagined the beast on her trail. He’d given her more of a head start this time—promising to make it a proper hunt. If she could evade him for fifteen minutes, he’d promised to let her train with the luchthonn women when they visited *Clann Abhaile* in the spring. If he caught her, though... Cora’s mouth spread in a wicked grin at the thought of what he wanted.

She ran faster, determined to have her prize. She’d taken a winding path through the woods, planning to follow a large circle back toward the pack’s new home. Construction was well underway, and with luck, they’d finish before winter. The luchthonn and *madraí* worked tirelessly each day, bolstered by whatever men her father could spare from the castle. Cillian worked just as hard as the rest. Every time she saw the pride in his eyes at a new roof or sturdy foundation, she thanked God for her foolish idea of wedding the mercenary Wolf King.

A sound to her left caught her attention. A large shape moved through the trees beside her, matching her speed and baring sharp white teeth that were visible even in the dim light.

Cora yelped and tried to veer away, but it was too late. The creature leapt and knocked her to the ground. Sputtering in the dirt, Cora stared up into the bright blue eyes of her wolf. He growled again before dropping his weight onto her body and licking her face.

Cora gasped and protested, “Get off me, you great bloody horse! I can’t breathe!”

A moment later, the wolf was gone, and Cillian loomed over her with a playful expression. “I may be a great bloody horse, but you, wife, are a wee bunny rabbit caught in my trap. Do you surrender?”

Cora huffed. “You could have at least chased me a bit longer. Let me dream of winning?”

His laughter was like sunlight in her heart. “I could have. I do enjoy chasing you, after all. But really, it’d be cruel to give you too much hope.”

Cillian leaned in, pressing his body to hers. They kissed leisurely, neither in a hurry to move things along. They had all night.

They had the rest of their lives.

Cora pulled away far enough to meet his eyes. “Promise you’ll always catch me?”

Cillian pressed her hand to his heart and kissed her again. “Aye, my love. I promise.”

THE END

Acknowledgments

Thank you so much for coming along on Cora and Cillian's journey! This book was a labor of love, sweat, tears, and a mountainous helping of imposter syndrome. There's nothing quite like the first to make you feel like you have no idea what you're doing—first book, first child, first day of school or work—it's all the same. But I'm so happy to have created something that I'm proud to share with you, and I hope you enjoyed spending time in their world as much as I did!

I'd be remiss if I didn't take a minute to thank the people whose efforts got us here.

Leah, without you, I'd still be stuck on the very first story I ever sent you. Thank you for your neverending cheerleading. For your unshakeable belief that I could do this. For reading every word I put in front of you. For the uncountable ways you've made me a better writer! You are my mother, my sister, my auntie, and my dear, dear friend. I could never have come so far without you.

Mary, you are the writer sister I never knew I needed, and I'm forever inspired by you. Your passion, encouragement, and step by step help through this whole process have been invaluable, and I won't ever have the words or the time sufficient enough to express how much I treasure our relationship.

And you, reader, thank you. An author's greatest hope is that people will read their stories and enjoy them. Thank you for reading mine! If you liked the story, I'd appreciate it if you'd be willing to go leave a rating and review! Visibility is the biggest roadblock of a new author, and your ratings and reviews are worth more than gold to me!

About the author

Rachel Abernathy has been writing since Hugh Jackman played Wolverine and she decided that if she couldn't be his mutant soulmate for real, she'd write a story and pretend she could. When she's not writing and researching vague historical details for new books, she's teaching middle schoolers to love reading too. Nothing fills her with as much joy as historical trivia, morally gray anti-heroes, badass women, and the snarky men who love them. Come follow on Facebook for more details about upcoming projects, trivia, and other shenanigans!

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