

Chapter 1



Eire, the region of Chiarrai
1128

There was a storm in him, as black and vicious as that which bullied its way across the sea. It whipped inside his blood, outside in the air, battling within and without as he stood on the rain-slickened rock.

The name of his storm was grief.

It was grief that flashed in his eyes, as bold and as blue as those lightning strikes. And the rage from it spit from his fingertips, jagged red that split the air with thunderclaps that echoed like a thousand cannon shots.

He thrust his staff high, shouted out the words of magic. The red bolts of his rage and the bitter blue of the storm clashed overhead in a war that sent those who could see scurrying into cottage and cave, latching door and window, gathering their children close to quake and quail as they prayed to the gods of their choosing.

And in their raths, even the faeries trembled.

Rock rang, and the water of the sea went black as the mouth of hell, and still he raged, and still he grieved. The rain that poured out of the wounded sky fell red as blood—and sizzled, burning on land, on sea, so that the air smelled of its boiling.

It would be called, ever after, *The Night of Sorrows*, and those who dared speak of it spoke of the sorcerer who stood tall on the high cliff, with the bloody rain soaking his cloak, running down his lean face like death's tears as he dared both heaven and hell.

His name was Hoyt, and his family the *Mac Cionaoith*, who were said to be descended from Morrigan, faerie queen and goddess. His power was great, but still young as he was young. He wielded it now with a passion that gave no room to caution, to duty, to light. It was his sword and his lance.

What he called in that terrible storm was death.

While the wind shrieked, he turned, putting his back to the tumultuous sea. What he had called stood on the high ground. She—for she had been a woman once—smiled. Her beauty was impossible, and cold as winter. Her eyes were tenderly blue, her lips pink as rose petals, her skin milk white. When she spoke, her voice was music, a siren's who had already called countless men to their doom.

"You're rash to seek me out. Are you impatient, Mac Cionaoith, for my kiss?"

"You are what killed my brother?"

"Death is . . ." Heedless of the rain, she pushed back her hood. "Complex. You are too young to understand its glories. What I gave him is a gift. Precious and powerful."

"You damned him."

"Oh." She flicked a hand in the air. "Such a small price for eternity. The world is his now, and he takes whatever he wants. He knows more than you can dream of. He's mine now, more than he was ever yours."

"Demon, his blood is on your hands, and by the goddess, I will destroy you."

She laughed, gaily, like a child promised a particular treat. "On my hands, in my throat. As mine is in his. He is like me now, a child of night and shadow. Will you also seek to destroy your own brother? Your twin?"

The ground fog boiled black, folded away like silk as she waded through it. "I smell your power, and your grief, and your wonder. Now, on this place, I offer this gift to you. I will make you once more his twin, Hoyt of the Mac

Cionaoiths. I will give you the death that is unending life.”

He lowered his staff, stared at her through the curtain of rain. “Give me your name.”

She glided over the fog now, her red cloak billowing back. He could see the white swell of her breasts rounding ripely over the tightly laced bodice of her gown. He felt a terrible arousal even as he scented the stench of her power.

“I have so many,” she countered, and touched his arm—how had she come so close?—with just the tip of her finger. “Do you want to say my name as we join? To taste it on your lips, as I taste you?”

His throat was dry, burning. Her eyes, blue and tender, were drawing him in, drawing him in to drown. “Aye. I want to know what my brother knows.”

She laughed again, but this time there was a throatiness to it. A hunger that was an animal’s hunger. And those soft blue eyes began to rim with red. “Jealous?”

She brushed her lips to his, and they were cold, bitter cold. And still, so tempting. His heart began to beat hard and fast in his chest. “I want to see what my brother sees.”

He laid his hand on that lovely white breast, and felt nothing stir beneath it. “Give me your name.”

She smiled, and now the white of her fangs gleamed against the awful night. “It is Lilith who takes you. It is Lilith who makes you. The power of your blood will mix with mine, and we will rule this world, and all the others.”

She threw back her head, poised to strike. With all of his grief, with all of his rage, Hoyt struck at her heart with his staff.

The sound that ripped from her pierced the night, screamed up through the storm and joined it. It wasn’t human, not even the howl of a beast. Here was the demon who had taken his brother, who hid her evil behind cold beauty. Who bled, he saw as a stream of blood spilled from the wound, without a heartbeat.

She flew back into the air, twisting, shrieking as lightning tore at the sky. The words he needed to say were lost in his horror as she writhed in the air, and the blood that fell steamed into filthy fog.

“You would dare!” Her voice gurgled with outrage, with pain. “You would use your puny, your pitiful magic on me? I have walked this world a *thousand* years.” She slicked her hand over the wound, threw out her bloody hand.

And when the drops struck Hoyt’s arm, they sliced like a knife.

“Lilith! You are cast out! Lilith, you are vanquished from this place. By my blood.” He pulled a dagger from beneath his cloak, scored his palm. “By the blood of the gods that runs through it, by the power of my birth, I cast you back—”

What came at him seemed to fly across the ground, and struck with the feral force of fury. Tangled, they crashed over the cliff to the jagged ledge below. Through waves of pain and fear he saw the face of the thing that so closely mirrored his own. The face that had once been his brother’s.

Hoyt could smell the death on him, and the blood, and could see in those red eyes the animal his brother had become. Still, a small flame of hope flickered in Hoyt’s heart.

“Cian. Help me stop her. We still have a chance.”

“Do you feel how strong I am?” Cian closed his hand around Hoyt’s throat and squeezed. “It’s only the beginning. I have forever now.” He leaned down, licked blood from Hoyt’s face, almost playfully. “She wants you for herself, but I’m hungry. So hungry. And the blood in you is mine, after all.”

As he bared his fangs, pressed them to his brother’s throat, Hoyt thrust the dagger into him.

With a howl, Cian reared back. Shock and pain rushed over his face. Even as he clutched at the wound, he fell. For an instant, Hoyt thought he saw his brother, his true brother. Then there was nothing but the screams of the storm and the slashing rain.

He crawled and clawed his way up the cliff. His hands, slippery with blood and sweat and rain, groped for any hold. Lightning illuminated his face, tight with pain, as he inched his way up rock, tore his fingers in the clawing. His neck, where the fangs had scraped, burned like a brand. Breath whistling, he clutched at the edge.

If she waited, he was dead. His power had waned with

exhaustion, drained with the ravages of his shock and grief. He had nothing but the dagger, still red with his brother's blood.

But when he pulled himself up, when he rolled to his back with the bitter rain washing over his face, he was alone.

Perhaps it had been enough, perhaps he'd sent the demon back to hell. As he had surely sent his own flesh and blood to damnation.

Rolling over, he gained his hands and knees, and was viciously ill. Magic was ashes in his mouth.

He crawled to his staff, used it to help him stand. Breath keening, he staggered away from the cliffs, along a path he'd have known had he been blinded. The power had gone out of the storm as it had gone out of him, and now was merely a soaking rain.

He smelled home—horse and hay, the herbs he'd used for protection, the smoke from the fire he'd left smoldering in the hearth. But there was no joy in it, no triumph.

As he limped toward his cottage, his breath whistled out, hisses of pain that were lost in the rise of the wind. He knew if the thing that had taken his brother came for him now, he was lost. Every shadow, every shape cast by the storm-tossed trees could be his death. Worse than his death. Fear of that slicked along his skin like dirty ice, so that he used what strength he had to murmur incantations that were more like prayers for whoever, or whatever, would listen.

His horse stirred in its shelter, let out a huff as it scented him. But Hoyt continued shakily to the small cottage, dragging himself to the door and through.

Inside was warmth, and the ripple from the spells he'd cast before he'd gone to the cliffs. He barred the door, leaving smears of his and Cian's blood on the wood. Would it keep her out? he wondered. If the lore he'd read was fact, she couldn't enter without an invitation. All he could do was have faith in that, and in the protection spell that surrounded his home.

He let his soaked cloak fall, let it lay in a sodden heap on the floor, and had to fight not to join it there. He would mix potions for healing, for strength. And would sit through the night, tending the fire. Waiting for dawn.

He'd done all he could for his parents, his sisters and their families. He had to believe it was enough.

Cian was dead, and what had come back with his face and form had been destroyed. He would not, could not, harm them now. But the thing that had made him could.

He would find something stronger to protect them. And he would hunt the demon again. His life, he swore it now, would be dedicated to her destruction.

His hands, long of finger, wide of palm, were tremulous as he chose his bottles and pots. His eyes, stormy blue, were glazed with pain—the aches of his body, of his heart. Guilt weighed on him like a shroud of lead. And those demons played inside him.

He hadn't saved his brother. Instead, he had damned and destroyed him, cast him out and away. How had he won that terrible victory? Cian had always been physically superior to him. And what his brother had become was viciously powerful.

So his magic had vanquished what he'd once loved. The half of him that was bright and impulsive where he himself was often dull and staid. More interested in his studies and his skills than society.

Cian had been the one for gaming and taverns, for wenches and sport.

"His love of life," Hoyt murmured as he worked. "His love of life killed him. I only destroyed that which trapped him in a beast."

He had to believe it.

Pain rippled up his ribs as he shucked off his tunic. Bruises were already spreading, creeping black over his skin the way grief and guilt crept black over his heart. It was time for practical matters, he told himself as he applied the balm. He fumbled considerably, cursed violently, in wrapping the bandage over his ribs. Two were broken, he knew, just as he knew the ride back home in the morning would be a study in sheer misery.

He took a potion, then limped to the fire. He added turf so the flames glowed red. Over them he brewed tea. Then wrapped himself in a blanket to sit, to drink, to brood.

He had been born with a gift, and from an early age had soberly, meticulously sought to honor it. He'd studied, often in solitude, practicing his art, learning its scope.

Cian's powers had been less, but, Hoyt remembered, Cian had never practiced so religiously nor studied so earnestly. And Cian had played with magic, after all. Amusing himself and others.

And Cian had sometimes drawn him in, lowered Hoyt's resistance until they'd done something foolish together. Once they'd turned the boy who'd pushed their younger sister in the mud into a braying, long-eared ass.

How Cian had laughed! It had taken Hoyt three days of work, sweat and panic to reverse the spell, but Cian had never worried a whit.

He was born an ass, after all. We've just given him his true form.

From the time they'd been twelve, Cian had been more interested in swords than spells. Just as well, Hoyt thought as he drank the bitter tea. He'd been irresponsible with magic, and a magician with a sword.

But, steel hadn't saved him, nor had magic, in the end.

He sat back, chilled to his bones despite the simmering turf. He could hear what was left of the storm blowing still, splattering on his roof, wailing through the forest that surrounded his cottage.

But he heard nothing else, not beast, not threat. So was left alone with his memories and regrets.

He should've gone with Cian into the village that evening. But he'd been working, and hadn't wanted ale, or the smells and sounds of a tavern, of people.

He hadn't wanted a woman, and Cian had never *not* wanted one.

But if he'd gone, if he'd put aside his work for one bloody night, Cian would be alive. Surely the demon couldn't have overpowered both of them. Surely his gift would have allowed him to sense what the creature was, despite her beauty, her allure.

Cian would never have gone with her had his brother been by his side. And their mother would not be grieving.

The grave would never have been dug, and by the gods, the thing they buried would never have risen.

If his powers could turn back time, he would give them up, abjure them, to have that one night to relive that single moment when he'd chosen work over his brother's company.

"What good do they do me? What good are they now? To have been given magic and not be able to use it to save what matters most? Damn to them all then." He flung his cup across the little room. "Damn to them all, gods and faeries. He was the light of us, and you've cast him into the dark."

All of his life Hoyt had done what he was meant to do, what was expected of him. He had turned away from a hundred small pleasures to devote himself to his art. Now those who had given him this gift, this power, had stood back while his own brother was taken?

Not in battle, not even with the clean blade of magic, but through evil beyond imagination. This was his payment, this was his reward for all he had done?

He waved a hand toward the fire, and in the hearth flames leaped and roared. He threw up his arms, and overhead the storm doubled in power so that the wind screamed like a tortured woman. The cottage trembled under its might, and the skins pulled tight over the windows split. Cold gusts spilled into the room, toppling bottles, flapping the pages of his books. And in it he heard the throaty chuckle of the black.

Not once in all of his life had he turned from his purpose. Not once had he used his gift for ill, or touched upon the black arts.

Perhaps now, he thought, he would find the answers in them. Find his brother again. Fight the beast, evil against evil.

He shoved to his feet, ignoring the scream in his side. He whirled toward his cot and flung out both hands toward the trunk he'd locked by magic. When it flew open, he strode to it, reached in for the book he'd shut away years before.

In it were spells, dark and dangerous magicks. Spells that used human blood, human pain. Spells of vengeance and greed that spoke to a power that ignored all oaths, all vows.

It was hot and heavy in his hands, and he felt the seduction of it, those curling fingers that brushed the soul. Have all, have any. Are we not more than the rest? Living gods who take whatever is desired?

We have the right! We are beyond rules and reasons.

His breath came short for he knew what could be his if he accepted it, if he took in both hands what he'd sworn never to touch. Unnamed wealth, women, unspeakable powers, life eternal. Revenge.

He had only to say the words, to rebuke the white and embrace the black. Clammy snakes of sweat slithered down his back as he heard the whispers of voices from a thousand ages: *Take. Take. Take.*

His vision shimmered, and through it he saw his brother as he'd found him in the muck on the side of the road. Blood pooled from the wounds in his throat, and more smeared his lips. Pale, Hoyt thought dimly. So very pale was his face against that wet, red blood.

Now Cian's eyes—vivid and blue—opened. There was such pain in them, such horror. They pleaded as they met Hoyt's.

"Save me. Only you can save me. It's not death I'm damned to. 'Tis beyond hell, beyond torment. Bring me back. For once don't count the cost. Would you have me burn for all eternity? For the sake of your own blood, Hoyt, help me."

He shook. It wasn't from the cold that blew through the split skins, or the damp that whirled in the air, but from the icy edge on which he stood.

"I would give my life for yours. I swear it on all I am, on all we were. I would take your fate, Cian, if that were the choice before me. But I can't do this. Not even for you."

The vision on the bed erupted in flames, and its screams were past human. On a howl of grief, Hoyt heaved the book back in the trunk. He used the strength left to him to charm the lock before he collapsed on the floor. There he curled up like a child beyond all comfort.

Perhaps he slept. Perhaps he dreamed. But when he came to, the storm had passed. Light seeped into the room and grew, bold and bright and white, to sear his eyes. He blinked against it, hissing as his ribs protested when he tried to sit up.

There were streams of pink and gold shimmering in the white, warmth radiating from it. He smelled earth, he realized, rich and loamy, and the smoke from the turf fire that was still shimmering in the hearth.

He could see the shape of her, female, and sensed a staggering beauty.

This was no demon come for blood.

Gritting his teeth, he got to his knees. Though there was still grief and anger in his voice, he bowed his head.

"My lady."

"Child."

The light seemed to part for her. Her hair was the fiery red of a warrior, and flowed over her shoulders in silky waves. Her eyes were green as the moss in the forest, and soft now with what might have been pity. She wore white robes trimmed in gold as was her right by rank. Though she was the goddess of battle, she wore no armor, and carried no sword.

She was called Morrigan.

"You have fought well."

"I have lost. I have lost my brother."

"Have you?" She stepped forward, offered him a hand so he would rise. "You stayed true to your oath, though the temptation was great."

"I might have saved him otherwise."

"No." She touched Hoyt's face, and he felt the heat of her. "You would have lost him, and yourself. I promise you. You would give your life for his, but you could not give your soul, or the souls of others. You have a great gift, Hoyt."

"What good is it if I cannot protect my own blood? Do the gods demand such sacrifice, to damn an innocent to such torment?"

"It was not the gods who damned him. Nor was it for you to save him. But there is sacrifice to be made, battles to be

fought. Blood, innocent and otherwise, to be spilled. You have been chosen for a great task.”

“You could ask anything of me now, Lady?”

“Aye. A great deal will be asked of you, and of others. There is a battle to be fought, the greatest ever waged. Good against evil. You must gather the forces.”

“I am not able. I am not willing. I am . . . God, I am tired.”

He dropped to the edge of his cot, dropped his head in his hands. “I must go see my mother. I must tell her I failed to save her son.”

“You have not failed. Because you resisted the dark, you are charged to bear this standard, to use the gift you’ve been given to face and to vanquish that which would destroy worlds. Shake off this self-pity!”

His head rose at the sharp tone. “Even the gods must grieve, Lady. I have killed my brother tonight.”

“Your brother was killed by the beast, a week ago. What fell from the cliff was not your Cian. You know this. But he . . . continues.”

Hoyt got shakily to his feet. “He lives.”

“It is not life. It is without breath, without soul, without heart. It has a name that is not spoken yet in this world. It is vampyre. It feeds on blood,” she said, moving toward him. “It hunts the human, takes life, or worse, much worse, turns that which it hunts and kills into itself. It breeds, Hoyt, like a pestilence. It has no face, and must hide from the sun. It is this you must fight, this and other demons that are gathering. You must meet this force in battle on the feast of Samhain. And you must be victorious or the world you know, the worlds you have yet to know, will be overcome.”

“And how will I find them? How will I fight them? It was Cian who was the warrior.”

“You must leave this place and go to another, and another still. Some will come to you, and some you will seek. The witch, the warrior, the scholar, the one of many forms, and the one you’ve lost.”

“Only five more? Six against an army of demons? My lady—”

“A circle of six, as strong and true as the arm of a god. When that circle is formed, others may be formed. But the six will be my army, the six will make the ring. You will teach and you will learn, and you will be greater than the sum of you. A month to gather, and one to learn, and one to know. The battle comes on Samhain.

“You, child, are my first.”

“You would ask me to leave the family I have left, when that thing that took my brother may come for them?”

“The thing that took your brother leads this force.”

“I wounded her—it. I gave her pain.” And the memory of that bubbled up in him like vengeance.

“You did, aye, you did. And this is only another step toward this time and this battle. She bears your mark now, and will, in time, seek you out.”

“If I hunt her now, destroy her now.”

“You cannot. She is beyond you at this time, and you, my child, are not ready to face her. Between these times and worlds, her thirst will grow insatiable until only the destruction of all humankind will satisfy it. You will have your revenge, Hoyt,” she said as he got to his feet. “If you defeat her. You will travel far, and you will suffer. And I will suffer knowing your pain, for you are mine. Do you think your fate, your happiness is nothing to me? You are my child even as you are your mother’s.”

“And what of my mother, Lady? Of my father, my sisters, their families? Without me to protect them, they may be the first to die if this battle you speak of comes to pass.”

“It will come to pass. But they will be beyond it.” She spread her hands. “Your love for your blood is part of your power, and I will not ask you to turn from it. You will not think clearly until you have assurance they will be safe.”

She tipped back her head, held her arms up, palms cupped. The ground shook lightly under his feet, and when Hoyt looked up, he saw stars shooting through the night sky. Those points of light streamed toward her hands, and there burst into flame.

His heart thumped against his bruised ribs as she spoke, as her fiery hair flew around her illuminated face.

“Forged by the gods, by the light and by the night. Symbol and shield, simple and true. For faith, for loyalty, these gifts for you. Their magic lives through blood shed, yours and mine.”

Pain sliced over his palm. He watched the blood well in his, and in hers as the fire burned.

“And so it shall live for all time. Blessed be those who wear Morrigan’s Cross.”

The fire died, and in the goddess’s hands were crosses of gleaming silver.

“These will protect them. They must wear the cross always—day and night—birth to death. You will know they are safe when you leave them.”

“If I do this thing, will you spare my brother?”

“You would bargain with the gods?”

“Aye.”

She smiled, an amused mother to a child. “You have been chosen, Hoyt, because you would think to do so. You will leave this place and gather those who are needed. You will prepare and you will train. The battle will be fought with sword and lance, with tooth and fang, with wit and treachery. If you are victorious, the worlds will balance and you will have all you wish to have.”

“How do I fight a vampyre? I’ve already failed against her.”

“Study and learn,” she said. “And learn from one of her kind. One she made. One who was yours before she took him. You must first find your brother.”

“Where?”

“Not only where, but when. Look into the fire, and see.”

They were, he noted, in his cottage again, and he was standing in front of the hearth. The flames spiked up, became towers. Became a great city. There were voices and sounds such as he’d never heard. Thousands of people rushed along streets that were made of some kind of stone. And machines sped with them.

“What is this place?” He could barely whisper the words. “What world is it?”

“It is called New York, and its time is nearly a thousand

years from where we are. Evil still walks the world, Hoyt, as well as innocence, as well as good. Your brother has walked the world a long time now. Centuries have passed for him. You would do well to remember that.”

“Is he a god now?”

“He is vampyre. He must teach you, and he must fight beside you. There can be no victory without him.”

Such size, he thought. Buildings of silver and stone taller than any cathedral. “Will the war be in this place, in this New York?”

“You will be told where, you will be told how. And you will know. Now you must go, take what you need. Go to your family and give them their shields. You must leave them quickly, and go to the Dance of the Gods. You will need your skill, and my power, to pass through. Find your brother, Hoyt. It is time for the gathering.”

He woke by the fire, the blanket wrapped around him. But he saw it hadn’t been a dream. Not with the blood drying on the palm of his hand, and the silver crosses lying across his lap.

It was not yet dawn, but he packed books and potions, oatcakes and honey. And the precious crosses. He saddled his horse, and then, as a precaution, cast another protective circle around his cottage.

He would come back, he promised himself. He would find his brother, and this time, he would save him. Whatever it took.

As the sun cast its first light, he began the long ride to An Clar, and his family home.

Chapter 2



He traveled north on roads gone to mud from the storm. The horrors and the wonders of the night played through his mind as he hunched over his horse, favoring his aching ribs.

He swore, should he live long enough, he would practice healing magic more often, and with more attention.

He passed fields where men worked and cattle grazed in the soft morning sunlight. And lakes that picked up their blue from the late summer sky. He wound through forests where the waterfalls thundered and the shadows and mosses were the realm of the faerie folk.

He was known here, and caps were lifted when Hoyt the Sorcerer passed by. But he didn't stop to take hospitality in one of the cabins or cottages. Nor did he seek comfort in one of the great houses, or in the conversations of monks in their abbeys or round towers.

In this journey he was alone, and above battles and orders from gods, he would seek his family first. He would offer them all he could before he left them to do what he'd been charged to do.

As the miles passed, he struggled to straighten on his horse whenever he came to villages or outposts. His dignity cost him considerable discomfort until he was forced to take his ease by the side of a river where the water gurgled over rock.

Once, he thought, he had enjoyed this ride from his cottage to his family home, through the fields and the hills, or along the sea. In solitude, or in the company of his brother, he had ridden these same roads and paths, felt this same sun on his face. Had stopped to eat and rest his horse at this very same spot.

But now the sun seared his eyes, and the smell of the earth and grass couldn't reach his deadened senses.

Fever sweat slicked his skin, and the angles of his face were keener as he bore down against the unrelenting pain.

Though he had no appetite, he ate part of one of the oatcakes along with more of the medicine he'd packed. Despite the brew and the rest, his ribs continued to ache like a rotted tooth.

Just what good would he be in battle? he wondered. If he had to lift his sword now to save his life he would die with his hands empty.

Vampyre, he thought. The word fit. It was erotic, exotic, and somehow horrible. When he had both time and energy, he would write down more of what he knew. Though he was far from convinced he was about to save this world or any other from some demonic invasion, it was always best to gather knowledge.

He closed his eyes a moment, resting them against the headache that drummed behind them. A witch, he'd been told. He disliked dealing with witches. They were forever stirring odd bits of this and that in pots and rattling their charms.

Then a scholar. At least he might be useful.

Was the warrior Cian? That was his hope. Cian wielding sword and shield again, fighting alongside him. He could nearly believe he could fulfill the task he'd been given if his brother was with him.

The one with many shapes. Odd. A faerie perhaps, and

the gods knew just how reliable such creatures were. And this was somehow to be the front line in the battle for worlds?

He studied the hand he'd bandaged that morning. "Better for all if it had been dreaming. I'm sick and tired is what I am, and no soldier at the best of it."

Go back. The voice was a hissing whisper. Hoyt came to his feet, reaching for his dagger.

Nothing moved in the forest but the black wings of a raven that perched in shadows on a rock by the water.

Go back to your books and herbs, Hoyt the Sorcerer. Do you think you can defeat the Queen of the Demons? Go back, go back and live your pitiful life, and she will spare you. Go forward, and she will feast on your flesh and drink of your blood.

"Does she fear to tell me so herself then? And so she should, for I will hunt her through this life and the next if need be. I will avenge my brother. And in the battle to come, I will cut out her heart and burn it."

You will die screaming, and she will make you her slave for eternity.

"It's an annoyance you are." Hoyt shifted his grip on the dagger. As the raven took wing he flipped it through the air. It missed, but the flash of fire he shot out with his free hand hit the mark. The raven shrieked, and what dropped to the ground was ashes.

In disgust Hoyt looked at the dagger. He'd been close, and would likely have done the job if he hadn't been wounded. At least Cian had taught him that much.

But now he had to go fetch the bloody thing.

Before he did, he took a handful of salt from his saddlebags, poured it over the ashes of the harbinger. Then retrieving his dagger, he went to his horse and mounted with gritted teeth.

"Slave for all eternity," he muttered. "We'll see about that, won't we?"

He rode on, hemmed in by green fields, the rise of hills chased by cloud shadows in light soft as down. Knowing a gallop would have his ribs shrieking, he kept the horse to

a plod. He dozed, and he dreamed that he was back on the cliffs struggling with Cian. But this time it was he who tumbled off, spiraling down into the black to crash against the unforgiving rocks.

He woke with a start, and with the pain. Surely this much pain meant death.

His horse had stopped to crop at the grass by the side of the road. There a man in a peaked cap built a wall from a pile of steely gray rock. His beard was pointed, yellow as the gorse that rambled over the low hill, his wrists thick as tree limbs.

“Good day to you, sir, now that you’ve waked to it.” The man touched his cap in salute, then bent for another stone. “You’ve traveled far this day.”

“I have, yes.” Though he wasn’t entirely sure where he was. There was a fever working in him; he could feel the sticky heat of it. “I’m to An Clar, and the Mac Cionaoith land. What is this place?”

“It’s where you are,” the man said cheerfully. “You’ll not make your journey’s end by nightfall.”

“No.” Hoyt looked down the road that seemed to stretch to forever. “No, not by nightfall.”

“There’d be a cabin with a fire going beyond the field, but you’ve not time to bide here. Not when you’ve so far yet to go. And time shortens even as we speak. You’re weary,” the man said with some sympathy. “But you’ll be wearier yet before it’s done.”

“Who are you?”

“Just a signpost on your way. When you come to the second fork, go west. When you hear the river, follow it. There be a holy well near a rowan tree, Bridget’s Well, that some now call saint. There you’ll rest your aching bones for the night. Cast your circle there, Hoyt the Sorcerer, for they’ll come hunting. They only wait for the sun to die. You must be at the well, in your circle, before it does.”

“If they follow me, if they hunt me, I take them straight to my family.”

“They’re no strangers to yours. You bear Morrigan’s Cross. It’s that you’ll leave behind with your blood. That and

your faith.” The man’s eyes were pale and gray, and for a moment, it seemed worlds lived in them. “If you fail, more than your blood is lost by Samhain. Go now. The sun’s in the west already.”

What choice did he have? It all seemed a dream now, boiling in his fever. His brother’s death, then his destruction. The thing on the cliffs that called herself Lilith. Had he been visited by the goddess, or was he simply trapped in some dream?

Maybe he was dead already, and this was merely a journey to the afterlife.

But he took the west fork, and when he heard the river, turned his horse toward it. Chills shook him now, from the fever and the knowledge that the light was fading.

He fell from his horse more than dismounted, and leaned breathlessly against its neck. The wound on his hand broke open and stained the bandage red. In the west, the sun was a low ball of dying fire.

The holy well was a low square of stone guarded by the rowan tree. Others who’d come to worship or rest had tied tokens, ribbons and charms, to the branches. Hoyt tethered his horse, then knelt to take the small ladle and sip the cool water. He poured drops on the ground for the god, murmured his thanks. He laid a copper penny on the stone, smearing it with blood from his wound.

His legs felt more full of water than bone, but as twilight crept in, he forced himself to focus. And began to cast his circle.

It was simple magic, one of the first that comes. But his power came now in fitful spurts, and made the task a misery. His own sweat chilled his skin as he struggled with the words, with the thoughts and with the power that seemed a slippery eel wriggling in his hands.

He heard something stalking in the woods, moving in the deepest shadows. And those shadows thickened as the last rays of sunlight eked through the cover of trees.

They were coming for him, waiting for that last flicker to die and leave him in the dark. He would die here, alone, leave his family unprotected. And all for the whim of the gods.

“Be damned if I will.” He drew himself up. One chance more, he knew. One. And so he ripped the bandage from his hand, used his own blood to seal the circle.

“Within this ring the light remains. It burns through the night at *my* will. This magic is clean, and none but clean shall bide here. Fire kindle, fire rise, rise and burn with power bright.”

Flames shimmered in the center of his circle, weak, but there. As it rose, the sun died. And what had been in the shadows leaped out. It came as a wolf, black pelt and bloody eyes. When it flung itself into the air, Hoyt pulled his dagger. But the beast struck the force of the circle, and was repelled.

It howled, snapped, snarled. Its fangs gleamed white as it paced back and forth as if looking for a weakness in the shield.

Another joined it, skulking out of the trees, then another, another yet, until Hoyt counted six. They lunged together, fell back together. Paced together like soldiers.

Each time they charged, his horse screamed and reared. He stepped toward his mount, his eyes on the wolves as he laid his hands upon it. This at least, he could do. He soothed, lulling his faithful mare into a trance. Then he drew his sword, plunged it into the ground by the fire.

He took what food he had left, water from the well, mixed more herbs—though the gods knew his self-medicating was having no good effect. He lowered to the ground by the fire, sword on one side, dagger on the other and his staff across his legs.

He huddled in his cloak shivering, and after dousing an oatcake with honey, forced it down. The wolves sat on their haunches, threw back their heads, and as one, howled at the rising moon.

“Hungry, are you?” Hoyt muttered through chattering teeth. “There’s nothing here for you. Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a bed, some decent tea.” He sat, the fire dancing in his eyes until they began to close. As his chin drooped to his chest, he’d never felt so alone. Or so unsure of his path.

He thought it was Morrigan who came to him, for she was beautiful and her hair as bold as the fire. It fell straight as

rain, its tips grazing her shoulders. She wore black, a strange garb, and immodest enough to leave her arms bare and allow the swell of her breasts to rise from the bodice. Around her neck she wore a pentagram with a moonstone in its center.

"This won't do," she said in a voice that was both foreign and impatient. Kneeling beside him, she laid her hand on his brow, her touch as cool and soothing as spring rain. She smelled of the forest, earthy and secret.

For one mad moment, he longed to simply lay his head upon her breast and sleep with that scent filling his senses.

"You're burning up. Well, let's see what you have here, and we'll make do."

She wavered in his vision a moment, then recrystallized. Her eyes were as green as the goddess's, but her touch was human. "Who are you? How did you get within the circle?"

"Elderflower, yarrow. No cayenne? Well, I said we'd make do."

He watched as she busied herself, as women would, dipping water from the well, heating it with his fire. "Wolves," she murmured, shivered once. And in that shudder, he felt her fear. "Sometimes I dream of the black wolves, or ravens. Sometimes it's the woman. She's the worst. But this is the first time I've dreamed of you." She paused, and looked at him for a long time with eyes of deep and secret green. "And still, I know your face."

"This is my dream."

She gave a short laugh, then sprinkled herbs in the heated water. "Have it your way. Let's see if we can help you live through it."

She passed her hand over the cup. "Power of healing, herbs and water, brewed this night by Hecate's daughter. Cool his fever, ease his pain so that strength and sight remain. Stir magic in this simple tea. As I will, so mote it be."

"Gods save me." He managed to prop himself on an elbow. "You're a witch."

She smiled as she stepped to him with the cup. And sitting beside him, braced him with an arm around his back. "Of course. Aren't you?"

"I'm not." He had just enough energy for insult. "I'm

a bloody sorcerer. Get that poison away from me. Even the smell is foul.”

“That may be, but it should cure what ails you.” She simply cradled his head on her shoulder. Even as he tried to push free, she was pinching his nose closed and pouring the brew down his throat. “Men are such babies when they’re sick. And look at your hand! Bloody and filthy. I’ve got something for that.”

“Get away from me,” he said weakly, though the smell of her, the feel of her was both seductive and comforting. “Let me die in peace.”

“You’re not going to die.” But she gave the wolves a wary glance. “How strong is your circle?”

“Strong enough.”

“Hope you’re right.”

Exhaustion—and the valerian she’d mixed in the tea—had his head drooping again. She shifted, so she could lay his head in her lap. And there she stroked his hair, kept her eyes on the fire. “You’re not alone anymore,” she said quietly. “And I guess, neither am I.”

“The sun . . . How long till dawn?”

“I wish I knew. You should sleep now.”

“Who are you?”

But if she answered, he didn’t hear.

She was gone when he woke, and so was the fever. Dawn was a misty shimmer letting thin beams eke through the summer leaves.

Of the wolves there was only one, and it lay gored and bloody outside the circle. Its throat had been ripped open, Hoyt saw, and its belly. Even as he gained his feet to step closer, the sun beamed white through those leaves, struck the carcass.

It erupted into flame that left nothing behind but a scatter of ashes on blackened earth.

“To hell with you, and all like you.”

Turning away, Hoyt busied himself, feeding his horse, brewing more tea. He was nearly done when he noticed his palm was healed. Only the faintest scar remained. He flexed his fingers, held his hand up to the light.

Curious, he lifted his tunic. Bruises still rained over his side, but they were fading. And when he tested, he found he could move without pain.

If what had come to him in the night had been a vision rather than a product of a fever dream, he supposed he should be grateful.

Still, he'd never had a vision so vivid. Nor one who'd left so much of itself behind. He swore he could smell her still, and hear the flow and cadence of her voice.

She'd said she'd known his face. How strange that somewhere in the center of him, he felt he'd known hers.

He washed, and while his appetite had come back strong, he had to make do with berries and a heel of tough bread.

He closed the circle, salted the blackened earth outside it. Once he was in the saddle, he set off at a gallop.

With luck, he could be home by midday.

There were no signs, no harbingers, no beautiful witches on the rest of his journey. There were only the fields, rolling green, back to the shadow of mountains, and the secret depths of forest. He knew his way now, would have known it if a hundred years had passed. So he sent his mount on a leap over a low stone wall and raced across the last field toward home.

He could see the cook fire. He imagined his mother sitting in the parlor, tatting lace perhaps, or working on one of her tapestries. Waiting, hoping for news of her sons. He wished he brought her better.

His father might be with his man of business or out riding the land, and his married sisters in their own cottages, with young Nola in the stables playing with the pups from the new litter.

The house was tucked in the forest, because his grandmother—she who had passed power to him, and to a lesser extent, Cian—had wanted it so. It stood near a stream, a rise of stone with windows of real glass. And its gardens were his mother's great pride.

Her roses bloomed riotously.

One of the servants hurried out to take his horse. Hoyt merely shook his head at the question in the man's eyes. He

walked to the door where the black banner of mourning still hung.

Inside, another servant was waiting to take his cloak. Here in the hall, his mother's, and her mother's tapestries hung, and one of his father's wolfhounds raced to greet him.

He could smell beeswax, and roses cut fresh from the garden. The turf fire simmering in the grate. He left them behind, walked up the stairs to his mother's sitting room.

She was waiting, as he'd known she would be. Sitting in her chair, her hands in her lap, clasped so tightly the knuckles were white. Her face carried all the weight of her grief, and went heavier yet when she saw what was in his eyes.

"Mother—"

"You're alive. You're well." She got to her feet, held out her arms to him. "I've lost my youngest son, but here is my firstborn, home again. You'll want food and drink after your journey."

"I have much to tell you."

"And so you will."

"All of you, if you please, madam. I cannot stay long. I'm sorry." He kissed her brow. "I'm sorry to leave you."

There was food and there was drink, and the whole of his family—save Cian—around the table. But it was not a meal like so many he remembered, with laughter and shouted arguments, with joy or petty disagreements. Hoyt studied their faces, the beauties, the strengths and the sorrows as he told them what had passed.

"If there is to be a battle, I will come with you. Fight with you."

Hoyt looked at his brother-in-law Fearghus. His shoulders were broad, his fists ready.

"Where I go, you can't follow. You're not charged with this fight. It's for you and Eoin to stay here, to protect with my father, the family, the land. I would go with a heavier heart if I didn't know you and Eoin stand in my stead. You must wear these."

He took out the crosses. "Each of you, and all the children who come after. Day and night, night and day. This," he said and lifted one, "is Morrigan's Cross, forged by the gods in magic fire. The vampyre cannot turn any who wear it into its kind. This must be passed on to those who come after you, in song and story. You will swear an oath, each of you, that you will wear this cross until death."

He rose, draping a cross over each neck, waiting for the sworn oath before moving on.

Then he knelt by his father. His father's hands were old, Hoyt noted with a jolt. He was more farmer than warrior, and in a flash, he knew his father's death would come first, and before the Yule. Just as he knew he would never again look in the eyes of the man who'd given him life.

And his heart bled a little.

"I take my leave of you, sir. I ask your blessing."

"Avenge your brother, and come back to us."

"I will." Hoyt rose. "I must gather what I need."

He went up to the room he kept in the topmost tower, and there began to pack herbs and potions without any real sense what would be needed.

"Where is your cross?"

He looked toward the doorway where Nola stood, her dark hair hanging to her waist. She was but eight, he thought, and held the softest spot in his heart.

"She didn't make me one," he said, briskly. "I have another sort of shield, and there's no need for you to be worrying. I know what I'm about."

"I won't cry when you go."

"Why would you? I've gone before, haven't I, and come back handily enough?"

"You'll come back. To the tower. She'll come with you."

He nestled bottles carefully in his case, then paused to study his sister. "Who will?"

"The woman with red hair. Not the goddess, but a mortal woman, one who wears the sign of the witch. I can't see Cian, and I can't see if you'll win. But I can see you, here with the witch. And you're afraid."

“Should a man go into battle without fear? Isn’t fear something that helps keep him alive?”

“I don’t know of battles. I wish I were a man, and a warrior.” Her mouth, so young, so soft, went grim. “You wouldn’t be stopping me from going with you the way you stopped Fearghus.”

“How would I dare?” He closed his case, moved to her. “I am afraid. Don’t tell the others.”

“I won’t.”

Aye, the softest place in his heart, he thought, and lifting her cross, used his magic to scribe her name on the back in ogham script. “It makes it only yours,” he told her.

“Mine, and the ones who’ll have my name after me.” Her eyes glimmered, but the tears didn’t fall. “You’ll see me again.”

“I will, of course.”

“When you do, the circle will be complete. I don’t know how, or why.”

“What else do you see, Nola?”

She only shook her head. “It’s dark. I can’t see. I’ll light a candle for you, every night, until you return.”

“I’ll ride home by its light.” He bent down to embrace her. “I’ll miss you most of all.” He kissed her gently, then set her aside. “Be safe.”

“I will have daughters,” she called after him.

It made him turn, and smile. So slight, he mused, and so fierce. “Will you now?”

“It is my lot,” she told him with a resignation that made his lips twitch. “But they will not be weak. They will *not* sit and spin and knead and bake all the damn day.”

Now he grinned fully, and knew this was a memory he would take with him happily. “Oh won’t they? What then, young mother, will your daughters do?”

“They will be warriors. And the vampyre who fancies herself a queen will tremble before them.”

She folded her hands, much as their mother was wont to do, but with none of that meekness. “Go with the gods, brother.”

“Stay in the light, sister.”

They watched him go—three sisters, the men who loved

them, the children they'd already made. His parents, even the servants and stable boys. He took one last long look at the house his grandfather, and his father before, had built of stone in this glade, by this stream, in this land he loved with the whole of his heart.

Then he raised his hand in farewell, and rode away from them and toward the Dance of the Gods.

It stood on a rise of rough grass that was thick with the sunny yellow of buttercups. Clouds had rolled to layer the sky so that light forced its way through in thin beams. The world was so still, so silent, he felt as though he rode through a painting. The gray of the sky, the green of the grass, the yellow flowers and the ancient circle of stones that had risen in its dance since beyond time.

He felt its power, the hum of it, in the air, along his skin. Hoyt walked his horse around them, paused to read the ogham script carved into the king stone.

"Worlds wait," he translated. "Time flows. Gods watch."

He started to dismount when a shimmer of gold across the field caught his eye. There at the edge of it was a hind. The green of her eyes sparkled like the jeweled collar she wore. She walked toward him regally, and changed to the female form of the goddess.

"You are in good time, Hoyt."

"It was painful to bid my family farewell. Best done quickly then."

He slid off the horse, bowed. "My lady."

"Child. You have been ill."

"A fever, broken now. Did you send the witch to me?"

"There's no need to send what will come on its own. You'll find her again, and the others."

"My brother."

"He is first. The light will go soon. Here is the key to the portal." She opened her hand and offered a small crystal wand. "Keep it with you, keep it safe and whole." When he started to remount, she shook her head, took the reins. "No, you must go on foot. Your horse will get safely back home."

Resigned to the whimsy of gods, he took his case, his bag. He strapped on his sword, hefted his staff.

“How will I find him?”

“Through the portal, into the world yet to come. Into the Dance, lift the key, say the words. Your destiny lies beyond. Humankind is in your hands, from this point forward. Through the portal,” she repeated. “Into the world yet to come. Into the Dance, lift the key, say the words. Through the portal . . .”

Her voice followed him in, between the great stones. He locked his fear inside him. If he'd been born for this, so be it. Life was long, he knew. It simply came in short bursts.

He lifted the stone. A single beam of light speared out of those thick clouds to strike its tip. Power shot down his arm like an arrow.

“Worlds wait. Time flows. Gods watch.”

“Repeat,” Morrigan told him, and joined him so that the words became a chant.

“Worlds wait. Time flows. Gods watch.”

The air shook around him, came alive with wind, with light, with sound. The crystal in his uplifted hand shone like the sun and sang like a siren.

He heard his own voice come out in a roar, shouting the words now as if in challenge.

And so he flew. Through light and wind and sound. Beyond stars and moons and planets. Over water that made his sorcerer's belly roil with nausea. Faster, until the light was blinding, the sounds deafening and the wind so fierce he wondered it didn't flay the skin from his bones.

Then the light went dim, the wind died, and the world was silent.

He leaned on his staff, catching his breath, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the change of light. He smelled something—leather, he thought, and roses.

He was in a room of some sort, he realized, but like nothing he'd ever seen. It was fantastically furnished with long, low chairs in deep colors, and cloth for a floor. Paintings adorned some of the walls, and others were lined with books. Dozens of books bound in leather.

He stepped forward, charmed, when a movement to his left stopped him cold.

His brother sat behind some sort of table, where the lamp that lit the room glowed strangely. His hair was shorter than it had been, shorn to the jawline. His eyes were vivid with what seemed to be amusement.

In his hand was some sort of metal tool, which instinct told Hoyt was a weapon.

Cian pointed it at his brother's heart and tipped back in the chair, dropping his feet on the surface of the table. He smiled, broadly, and said, "Well now, look what the cat dragged in."

With some confusion, Hoyt frowned, scanning the room for the cat. "Do you know me?" Hoyt stepped forward, farther into the light. "It's Hoyt. It's your brother. I've come to . . ."

"Kill me? Too late. Already long dead. Why don't you just stay where you are for the moment. I see quite well in low light. You're looking . . . well, fairly ridiculous really. But I'm impressed nonetheless. How long did it take you to perfect time travel?"

"I . . ." Coming through the portal might have addled his brains, he thought. Or it might be simply seeing his dead brother, looking very much alive. "Cian."

"I'm not using that name these days. It's Cain, right at the moment. One syllable. Take off the cloak, Hoyt, and let's have a look at what's under it."

"You're a vampyre."

"I am, yes, certainly. The cloak, Hoyt."

Hoyt unhooked the brooch that held it in place, let it drop.

"Sword and dagger. A lot of weaponry for a sorcerer."

"There's to be a battle."

"Do you think so?" That amusement rippled again, coldly. "I can promise you'll lose. What I have here is called a gun. It's quite a good one, really. It fires out a projectile faster than you can blink. You'll be dead where you stand before you can draw that sword."

"I haven't come to fight you."

"Really? The last time we met—let me refresh my memory. Ah yes, you pushed me off a cliff."

"You pushed me off the bloody cliff first," Hoyt said with

some heat. "Broke my bloody ribs while you were about it. I thought you were gone. Oh merciful gods, Cian, I thought you were gone."

"I'm not, as you can plainly see. Go back where you came from, Hoyt. I've had a thousand years, give or take, to get over my annoyance with you."

"For me you died only a week ago." He lifted his tunic. "You gave me these bruises."

Cian's gaze drifted over them, then back to Hoyt's face. "They'll heal soon enough."

"I've come with a charge from Morrigan."

"Morrigan, is it?" This time the amusement burst out in laughter. "There are no gods here. No God. No faerie queens. Your magic has no place in this time, and neither do you."

"But you do."

"Adjustment is survival. Money is god here, and power its partner. I have both. I've shed the likes of you a long time ago."

"This world will end, they will all end, by Samhain, unless you help me stop her."

"Stop who?"

"The one who made you. The one called Lilith."