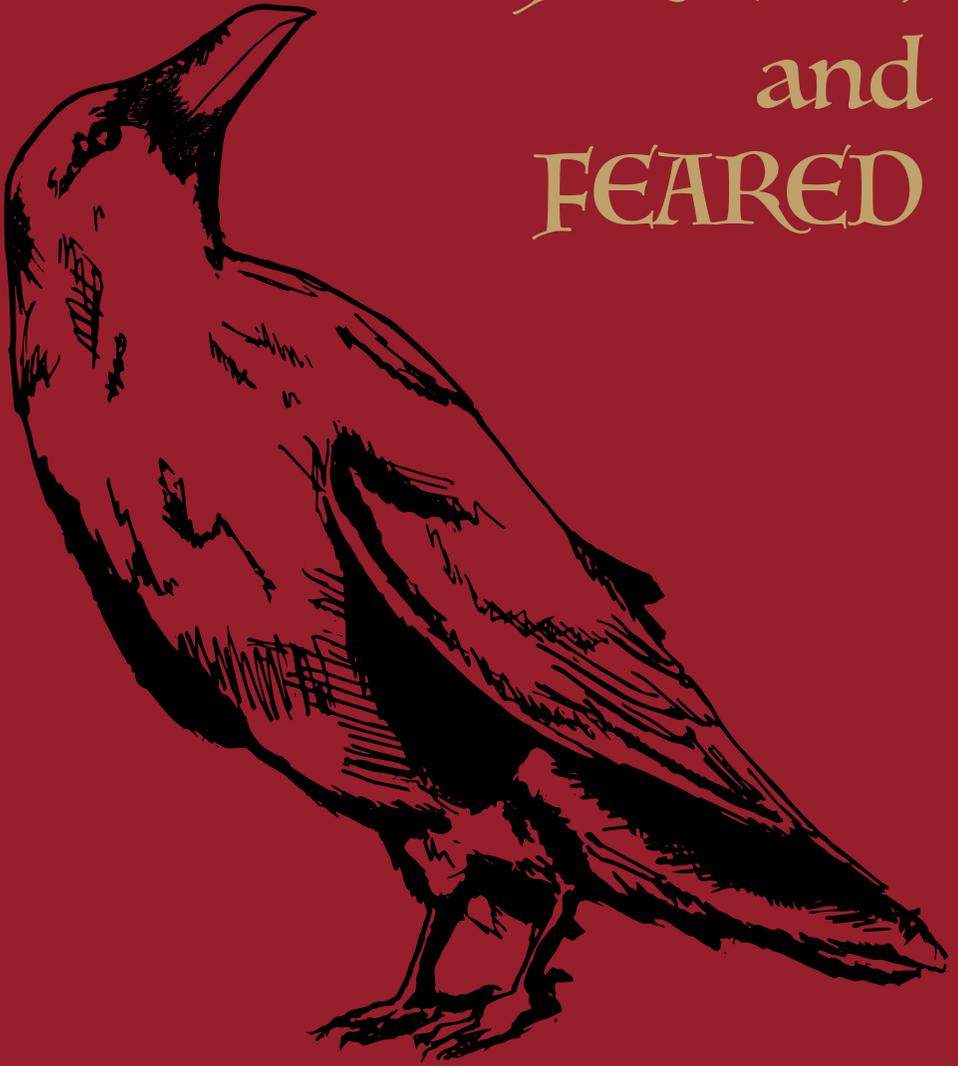


RARE,
PRIZED,
and
FEARED



Tales from
The Traveller's Path

L.A. SMITH

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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ISBN: 978-1-9990140-5-6

www.lasmithwriter.com

Published by CarpetPage Press

For all the readers who always want more...

Author Note

This is a collection of short stories and extra chapters from the world of *The Traveller's Path*, a historical fantasy series set in seventh-century England. In these pages you will find two short stories featuring some of the characters from the series: *Rare, Prized, and Feared* and *A Woman Grown*. This collection also includes some bonus chapters from *Wilding*, the first book in the series.

The two short stories are both prequels to the events in *Wilding*. In *A Woman Grown*, we find out exactly why Nona, the Fey Healer from Gwynedd, was in Bebbanburg awaiting her betrothed from Dál Riata at the beginning of *Wilding*. And in *Rare, Prized, and Feared*, we find out what happened to Godric during a previous Crossing to the seventh century; an event that still haunts him when he encounters Thomas. This event is hinted at obliquely in both *Wilding* and *Bound*, but here you'll get the whole story.

A word about the bonus chapters. They are ones that were deleted from the final, published version of *Wilding*. But I don't want you to have the impression that they were deleted because they didn't "make the cut", or in other words, because they weren't good enough to include. On the contrary. I debated for quite some time about cutting them, and was sad to see them go. Think of them like movie "outtakes".

So why cut them?

The answer is found in the editing process. *Wilding* is my first novel, and so of course I had a lot to learn about the art of novel writing. I knew that I had to hire a professional editor to help me hone the book into its best form for publishing. The person I hired was an accomplished editor, and she gave me some great advice. I definitely learned a lot from her.

But there were two pieces of advice that she gave me that I struggled with. One was to make all three books into one book. The second was to take out all the chapters that were from the point of view of secondary characters and tell the tale using only my main character's point of view.

It is a very good idea for any writer to consider carefully before he or she ignores the advice of an editor. But in the end, the work belongs to the writer, and he or she has the final say. And so in this case, I decided to ignore the first advice and follow the second. I knew my story could not be told in one book, so that piece of advice was fairly easy to dismiss. And although I was also reluctant about following the second piece of advice, once I started taking out those chapters and honing the book down to only Thomas' point of view, I could see that it helped to keep the story focused.

If you have read *Wilding* you will know that I didn't completely follow that advice, however. I kept two chapters from Wulfram's point of view in the book, which frame the story at beginning and end. He is the main antagonist for the series, and so I didn't think it made sense to cut him out completely from *Wilding*, seeing as he has no interactions with Thomas directly in the book. But all the other chapters from other character's points of views were cut. They included chapters from Celyn, Nectan, and Nona.

It was hard! For some of them, I rewrote them from Thomas' point of view, because they contained action essential for the story. For others, I included whatever important information they contained as part of the story elsewhere. But even so, there were still a few left behind. But rather than losing those chapters completely I decided to use them as bonus content for newsletter subscribers. Now I've collected them here, in this book.

I'm glad they aren't lost forever. At the beginning of each bonus chapter I have included a note that lets you know where they fit into the story of *Wilding*, as well as some thoughts about the writing process. I have put them in order of where they would have appeared in *Wilding*.

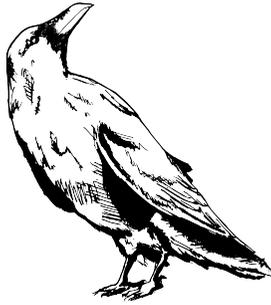
Many thanks to Sarah Smith, who created the beautiful cover illustration, and to Luke Smith, who helped with cover design and book formatting.

I love sharing this world with you! I hope you enjoy this collection as

much as I enjoyed creating it for you.

L.A. Smith, July 2020

PART ONE



SHORT STORIES

RARE, PRIZED, AND FEARED

Chapter 1

Kingdom of Mercia, 622 AD

GODRIC STUMBLED THROUGH the last couple verses of the song, but he didn't think anyone noticed. They were all too drunk to notice. Hell, *he* was almost too drunk to notice.

He finished up the last chord with a flourish. The people who were still listening cheered lustily and begged for another song. But he put the lyre in its bag and slung it over his back and began to make his way to the door, collecting coins from his audience as he went. *Time to blow this popsicle stand.*

A man frowned at him, and for a moment he thought he had spoken out loud. But the guy was aiming the frown at a person behind him, and Godric kept going, sweat popping out on his forehead. One second of forgetfulness could end up in a bad scene. Behaving circumspectly was drilled into every Traveller from the time their Gift was discovered. He knew better. He shouldn't drink so much next time.

The *thegn's* hall was crowded, for the people of Lichfield were celebrating the

goddess Hretha, who seemed to be some fierce warrior-type chick, for all Godric could tell. All he cared about was that the festival brought people together who wanted nothing more but to drink and be entertained, and to shower coins upon the entertainer. Worked for him.

But he needed to get some fresh air. The miasma of smells in the hall, from sweat to food to smoke to dirty dogs, made his already queasy stomach worse. He shook off an older woman who grabbed his arm, gazing up at him with bleary fascination, and veered towards the large double doors.

But a glimpse of a family that sat close to the door stopped him in his tracks. A woman, and man, and a baby. The unmistakable tingle that rushed over him like a mild electric shock told Godric that the baby, like him, was Fey. And the lack of that tingle as his gaze swept over the adults told him equally that they were not.

The mother turned, instinct warning her of his interest in her child, and he ducked his head and hurried through the door, closing it behind him and leaning against it, trying to collect his thoughts.

He was drunk, after all. Maybe he'd imagined it? He blew out a breath, and pushed himself away from the door, staggering a little before getting himself upright. *Whoopsie. Sleep it off. Check it out in the morning.*

Godric woke with a splitting headache and a vague memory of something he was supposed to do, but the pain made it hard to think. He rolled over, the straw rustling under him, a horse in the stalls below the loft where he slept whickering softly to its companion. He sat up with a groan, his head pounding, and peered at the shadows around him. Dawn was approaching. He shut his eyes again, sighing as the sweet rush of Fey power filled him as the sun rose.

He opened his eyes as it faded, feeling a little better. He had definitely overdone it last night. He got up with another muted groan and busied himself getting ready to leave. The festival was over and he would have to seek coin elsewhere.

Which suited him fine. He had been in this time for almost two months, long enough to get his feet under him, and he wanted to explore. See the sights before he Crossed back home at the fall solstice. The circuit of back-water towns he had been travelling through had fallen stale. Time for greener pastures. Maybe head back to Tamworth, the centre of the Unseelie Court, much like it was the seat of power of the Mercian King. Have some fun, pick up some more of the coin surely available from the rich people there.

The old-fashioned strictures of the Court of this time had jarred him at first, but the awed manner in which they treated him, a Traveller, was much the same as the Court back home. *Travellers are rare, prized, and feared.* His Teacher's voice drifted through his mind. That old Fey was a drag, but he was right about that. Ever since his Gift had been revealed at the Knowing ten years before he had been set on a pedestal by the other Fey.

You could be King, think of it! Godric stuffed down the memory of his mother's eager voice and brilliant blue eyes. That was a pedestal he had no desire to reach, no matter his parents' obsession. One of the best parts about being in the seventh century was the escape from their constant harping on it.

He pulled up his cloak. He had been lying on it last night, and as he brushed off the straw a quick flash of memory of long brown hair and muted sighs brought a grin to his face. The lovely Lefled was the only thing he'd miss about this place.

He climbed down the ladder and stepped outside, wincing as the morning light stabbed into his eyes. He had a sudden desire to crawl back into the dark of the loft, but gritted his teeth and forced himself to move. He needed to get going in case Lefled's father came looking for him.

But he had only taken a few steps when a baby's cry froze him in spot and the vague memory that had been chasing around his brain coalesced into clarity.

The human couple with the Fey baby. Right. He followed the sound, curious to see if his memory was not merely a drunken fantasy. Of course there was no saying that this baby's cries belonged to that baby. But he had a hunch. As he rounded the corner of the barn and saw the young woman, her baby bundled at her back as she carried a bucket of water down the path, he stopped short. His Fey-sense tingled at the sight of the baby. *Bingo.*

But not for the mother. He hadn't been wrong.

Foreboding filled him. He hesitated a moment as she walked further away, and then with a mental sigh forced himself into motion, staying in the shadows and stepping lightly as only a Fey could. Perhaps the human man with her last night was not the child's father. He should at least try to find out for sure.

He followed her to a small dwelling where a man sat under the overhanging eaves, whittling at a piece of wood. A human man, Godric confirmed, the same one from last night. But maybe her brother, or uncle?

The man looked up at the woman with a smile as she drew near, putting down his knife and the wood. He stood, taking her hand and kissing her, lifting the baby from her after she unwound the cloth keeping it bound to her back.

The baby chortled and squealed as the man nuzzled at it, and the woman laughed at them both.

Godric's heart sank. Both human. And with no Fey to guide it, the child would grow up to be a wilding. Dread filled him, and for a moment he hesitated. But then he squared his shoulders and slipped away from the dwelling, heading out of town.

Not my problem.

Godric had gone about a mile when he stopped, heaving a sigh. As much as he tried, he couldn't shake the thought of the baby growing up with a human family. A Fey baby, who would become a wilding, if he...she?...wasn't rescued.

He blew out a breath, thinking it through. Technically, he *should* go to the Unseelie Court and let the king know. They would deal with it. But how long would it be before they finally got around to finding the child?

Screw it. He turned on his heel and started walking back. He would find out if the family actually lived in Lichfield or had been visiting for the festival. If they didn't live there, he would find out where they lived. Then the king would at least know where to look.

He couldn't help but grin, the sudden leap of excitement chasing away his queasy stomach. It squelched out the voice that told him he should leave it alone. That voice sounded like his fussy teacher.

He'd seen the golden arm bands and bracelets the warriors and *thegns* wore, gifts from their king. What would his king give him, as a reward for rescuing a Fey child from a fate worse than death?

Pretty cool souvenir.

It didn't take long for Godric to determine that the family did, in fact, live in the village. The baby was a boy, whom they called Aldred. He watched for a couple of days, hiding from the humans, working out a plan. He felt wild, and free, *Fey* in a way he hadn't felt since he Crossed. He was on a mission for his people, and the thought of the accolades he would get drowned the niggling fears that surfaced at the thought of the plan he had put together.

A little scouting of the area brought him to exactly what he needed in a holding a couple hours away. Almost like it was meant to be.

Two nights later he put the plan into motion.

Chapter 2

Godric positioned himself under the window of a rude shelter, hidden in shadows that clung to the holding he had scouted out. It was past midnight. Inside the house a family slept: a mother, father, and two children. One child was a toddler, but the other a baby boy. He thought the babe was the same age as the Fey child, although what he knew about babies wouldn't fill up a thimble. It didn't really matter, anyway. As long as it was close enough in age he was sure the humans wouldn't notice. They were stupid that way.

The night was warm, a gusty wind rattling the thatch on the roof. An owl hooted. He saw it, sitting on the roof of another house, great yellow eyes searching the ground for any sign of mice. Suddenly it lifted off, swooping down on silent wings and snatching a struggling body into the air. The great wings flapped twice and then it settled back on the roof. It bent its large head down, the wicked beak tearing at the prey in its claws.

He settled his lyre close to him, taking a deep breath. A momentary qualm seized him. He would take this child tonight, to exchange for the Fey baby. He let out a breath, dismissing the pang of sympathy for the mother who would wake

to find the baby gone. They had another child, and would likely have more, knowing how easily fertile humans were.

Not so among the Fey. There were many who could not have children. Many who would welcome a babe into their arms. A baby who would otherwise grow up unaware of who he was, *what* he was. Disaster for the baby, his human family, and the Fey of this time.

And so he would do what the Fey had always done. Take the Fey baby and exchange it with a human child. This child. He would take the place of the Fey baby in the other couple's bed, with none the wiser.

Except this family, who would lose a child and have no replacement for it.

No matter. What I do, I do for the Blood.

The thought eased his fears and he closed his eyes, opening himself to the sweet rush of Fey power. He dropped his fingers to the strings, plucking them softly. The song drifted out from under the window, winding its way into the hushed and quiet room where the family slept.

Dreams visited them; of beautiful things, gold and silver and rubies, sparkling jewels that made them gasp with delight. They saw themselves sitting on thrones, wearing fine linen, embroidered with silk that shimmered when they moved.

The husband looked on his wife, seeing her young and beautiful as he first had seen her, her brown eyes shining with admiration for him.

The wife saw her husband: strong, with an air of grace surrounding him, looking at her with desire and love. Music flowed around them, caressing them, the words merely a soft drone amongst the notes.

Sleep and dream, and sleep again

This the night you find your love

This the night you lose it

Sleep and dream, and sleep again

This the night is yours

They slept, a smile on their faces, lost in the lovely dreams. They never stirred as Godric entered their house, singing softly under his breath. He gathered the baby from his mother's arms and slipped out again, the song trailing behind him like a shimmering ribbon in the dark velvet night.

Godric moved as quickly as he could. The child slept against his chest comfortably, snuggled up in a sling under his cloak. So far, so good. Having it bleat and betray his presence could make things more complicated than it needed to be.

Despite his worries, he was filled with a tingling excitement. In his time he would never be tasked with this most delicate and important of missions. Even though the other Fey gave him respect, in their eyes he would not be mature enough for this job.

At least not in his father's eyes, and he had the ear of the Court.

But here, now? Who would question him? He was a Traveller, after all. He grinned at the thought of the Unseelie King, of his surprise and gratitude when Godric brought him the Fey child, rescued from a horrible fate.

He remembered the gold band that circled the king's arm, and wondered if perhaps he could ask for it as a reward. He tamped down his eagerness. *Better let him offer it instead.*

Dreams of gold and jewels filled his head, just like the ones he had used to Charm the humans, making the miles pass quickly as he hurried back to Lichfield where the Fey child slumbered along with his parents. He had to get there before dawn, before the village stirred.

Soon he saw the outline of the village's wall and quickly found the place that he had scoped out earlier, where he could slip over the wall easily. Before he knew it he was once again standing under a window, getting his lyre out from the bag on his back.

The movements roused the babe he held and it squirmed against him, but he patted it hurriedly and it soon subsided, sleepy and warm in its cocoon.

Godric settled the lyre against him, holding it awkwardly against the bulk of the baby. He hesitated for a moment. The instrument would be loud, right beside the child. Would it wake up?

He clenched his jaw and bent his head to the strings. The wind would bring what it would. He let out a breath, concentrating, and for the second time that night, a Charming song crept through the night and wove tightly into the dreams of sleeping humans.

Once again it was a relatively simple matter to enter the house, leave the sleeping baby he carried and take the other one. He had a start though, when he picked up the Fey baby and it opened its eyes, regarding him solemnly.

"Shh...shhh..." He sang quickly under his breath. The Charm he had already woven shimmered heavier on the parents and the human baby he'd left snuggled close to the mother, but the Fey child merely fixed him with his wide-eyed gaze, as solemn and unblinking as the owl he had seen earlier.

With a muttered curse he cradled the baby to his chest and fled the house, straining to hear any noises from behind him, any sound of the parents waking or the wailing of the human baby he had left behind.

But there was nothing, other than a couple of dogs who barked once as he passed, and those he shushed with a look.

Soon he was safely out of the village. He stopped on the crude road, a cart track, that led away from it. All was quiet. He peered at the baby and saw he was awake, but content, it seemed, cooing at him softly. He took a moment to wrap the babe in the sling and settle it close to his chest, hoping he would fall asleep as the human baby had done.

Once the child was arranged properly, he set off, walking quickly. The Fey King lived near Tamworth, the seat of the Mercian king, a couple of hours down the road. He planned to get there by dawn.

L.A. Smith

Chapter 3

“He is gone, I told you, Traveller. To visit his brother, on the coast. ’Twill be a fortnight or more, before he returns.” The other Fey cocked his head. “Stay here until he comes. We would welcome your tales, and your songs.”

The baby squirmed against Godric’s chest, and he pulled his harper’s cloak closer to him, striving to look unconcerned. “I can’t. I have some news for the King—for his ears only,” he added, seeing the sudden rapacious interest in the older Fey’s light green eyes. The baby squirmed again, and he stood up. “I’ll go meet with him there.”

He left quickly, *fled* would be the better word. The baby had been quiet all night, but once dawn broke he had become increasingly less happy with his confined quarters. And Godric was pretty sure the sour smell he detected wasn’t just from him alone.

Once out of the village, he ducked off the main road and bolted into a thick stand of trees nearby. The baby murmured and squawked. As he flung back the cloak he was greeted by two bright blue eyes squinting against the sudden light. The baby’s face screwed up tight, and it began to howl.

“Shh, shh, come on, kid, be quiet...” Godric bounced the baby against him, gritting his teeth. The cloths wrapped between the baby’s legs were distinctly damp.

Now what? The child was wet, and likely hungry. This was not part of the plan. He had hoped to be rid of the babe and on his way by now, admiring the treasure the king would surely have given him.

The baby’s cries subsided into angry whimpers as he shoved his fist into his mouth and sucked on it, his face screwing up in concentration, erupting in a frustrated cry when his efforts were unrewarded.

Godric wrapped the baby tightly to him again, singing softly, and the child subsided, squawking occasionally as Godric began to walk. After a few moments blissful silence reigned.

Godric let out a shaky breath as he got back to the path. It was only a temporary reprieve. He had to do something, and soon.

Godric strode through the woods, his way lit by moonlight, his emotions careening between despair and excitement. He stopped and closed his eyes, breathing deeply, trying to calm himself. He would give just about anything for a beer, but even that small comfort was denied him out here in the middle of nowhere in this godforsaken time.

He had screwed up royally, he could admit it to himself. He should have told the king about the child and left well enough alone. He opened his eyes, clenching his jaw. But he could still fix it, if he was careful.

The solution had presented itself to him that afternoon. Despite dribbling water into the baby’s mouth, the infant had got increasingly fractious. He had passed a village along the way, and desperate, had managed to steal some milk. He had enough of the Gift of Glamour to make the humans think he was one of their own and not raise alarm at a stranger.

The child’s cries had finally subsided, but he only had enough milk for a couple of feedings. He would need more. On the way out of the village he had seen a young woman drawing water from a well and the solution had presented itself as soon as he saw the baby strapped to her back.

As he greeted her recognition had flared in her eyes, quickly masked. *A Sensitive. Couldn’t be better.* His harper’s cloak eased the way between them, and a subtle Speaking into her mind had sealed the deal.

It wasn’t perfect. But it was better than the alternative. He could still pull off a win, if he was careful.

As he skirted the sleeping village, he passed by a small brook, the moonlight sparkling off its tumbling waters. He stopped, a sudden instinct ringing a bell, studying it. With his heart in his mouth he followed the urge and crossed the water. A few paces beyond a curve in the brook he saw a stand of coppiced ash

Recognition washed over him. *A Crossing.* Goosebumps lifted on his arms. The mysterious luck of the Fey had given him a sign, it seemed. His plan didn’t

seem so far-fetched now. It had to be a sign that his plan was going to work.

But as he studied the trees, a wayward thought thrust itself forward. *Just go. Cross home. No one would ever know.* He rejected it almost as soon as it formed. Abandoning the Fey baby was not an option. But it was good to know there was a Crossing close by. Always good to have an escape route, just in case.

He let out a breath, his confidence returning as he turned his back on the Crossing. The clearing he had selected was close by, and it took a mere fifteen minutes to reach it. He glanced at the moon. *Almost time.*

The Fey child slept, sated by the last of the milk. He bundled him securely to keep him warm and put him down carefully on the soft moss under a tree. He pulled out the pipe that he carried in the pocket sewn into his cloak and took a deep breath, closing his eyes and settling his mind. He knew what to do. Sort of. A Charming was one thing, but this would be different. He had to Bind the woman to him, a deeper Charm that was not so easily broken.

That she was a Sensitive would make it easier. *This has to work.* If he believed in God he would have prayed, but he didn't, so he repeated the Fourfold Vow under his breath instead, the shimmering intensifying of Fey power as he spoke the words giving him courage.

There. Relief filled him at the first faint rustle of movement in the trees, and he grinned. Why had he even doubted? He lifted the flute.

The first few low notes filled the glade; a small invitation. As if on cue the woman stepped from the trees, a dreamy smile on her face.

Come. He Spoke to her in the music as much as he did into her mind, the invitation throbbing through the moonlit glade. But the fierce grin that stretched Godric's mouth fled as he saw she carried her child.

Christ. He gaped at her, shocked into silence for a moment, cursing himself for an idiot. *Should have thought of that.*

He straightened up, his mouth setting in a firm line, trying to ignore the spiralling feeling of doom that blossomed. *Deal with it. The kid will have to come, too. Whatever.*

The woman stopped, the smile slipping from her face. The Charm that had brought her to this place was fading. If he didn't act soon, she would wake up completely.

Godric stepped away from the trees, drawing on his power to ease the pounding of his heart. He hummed softly, and she turned to him, delight filling her face.

She was young, and not particularly pretty. But that didn't matter. She would do.

"Ah, Lady, you come." He stepped towards her, knowing the moonlight and his Fey power made him shimmer in her eyes. "This is a night of wonder, and I your guide."

Her breath caught as he stopped in front of her, lifting a hand to her cheek, and her eyes closed as he cupped her face lightly. Her child slept, bundled to her

in a sling much like the one he had fashioned for the Fey babe. It looked to be older than the Fey baby, closer to a year perhaps.

“Give me the babe,” he murmured, softly. “Never fear, all is well.”

Her eyes sprang open, but the alarm in them faded quickly and she deftly unbound the sling, handing him the surprisingly heavy bundle of the sleeping child. He lay the baby down carefully beside the other one, thankful that neither stirred.

He hummed again, his power infusing the melody, and the woman sighed, her eyes fluttering. He caught her as her knees gave out, and laid her down on the grass beside the baby. His gut clenched as he regarded her. Now would be the tricky part.

He had never done a Binding before. Technically, they were frowned upon. The Seelies forbid them in their Court. But the Unseelies saw them as necessary, at times, for the good of the Fey. Only the Speakers could do it, for it meant linking another to you mentally, so that they would obey you implicitly. His Teacher had shown him the way, but he had only been half-listening that day. He grimaced. *Get on with it.*

He knelt beside her, closing his eyes and opening himself fully to his Fey power. He began the Binding, creating a golden thread that trailed behind him as he went deeper and deeper into her mind. He had expected some resistance, but her mind was as quiet and docile beneath his entrance as the child that slept next to her.

It was almost easy, except for the last, when he felt a brief struggle from her, a sudden alarm, but it was not enough against his power.

He fumbled for a second, even so, suddenly unsure, but then he saw her, huddled in the dark, her hands over her head. He strode to her and her head snapped up, her eyes widening as he lifted her arms in supplication.

He grabbed her wrist. *Now.* Bright power enveloped them both and the thread wreathed her in a twisting rope, one end meeting the other in an almost audible click that he felt as well as heard. Then all went black.

Chapter 4

“Christ!” he groaned, opening his eyes, the last few moments crashing into him. *The babe, the exchange, the woman—*

She lay beside him, silent as a stone, but her baby cried, red-faced and frantic. He peered at the woman. *Agyfen*. That was her name. His head spun and blackness filled him. He scabbled away from her as she awoke, gasping.

Sharp fear filled him as he saw himself, glimmering faintly. *Nay! Good Christ what is this?* It was her thoughts, her mind that filled his, and he shook his head desperately, trying to clear it. But it wasn't only her thoughts that filled him. It was like he was in her body, feeling the cold grass, the strange immobility of her limbs.

She/he struggled upright, clutching the babe to her/him, pulling the knife at her waist out. “Get away, foul demon, for you will not have my child,” she gasped, but the words came out of his mouth, too.

Nausea swirled in his gut, and as if on cue, they both turned and heaved into the grass, choking and spitting.

Good Christ deliver me. Her thought. His thought.

Panicked, Godric drew on his power, but it was flickering, hardly there. He had used a lot in the Binding. It would take some time to replenish. He shut his eyes, and immediately felt better. Not seeing the woman helped him to focus. He concentrated, ignoring the fear and confusion of the woman's mind. The sensations slowly receded.

The bright thread of the Binding stretched out into the darkness, disappearing into black. He realized he was holding it, and with a start, dropped it. Immediately the sensation of Agyfen's mind within his own was muted further, and the sense of being in her body disappeared.

He opened his eyes. The woman sat with the knife in her hand held loosely as she stared at him with vacant eyes. The baby wailed beside her, seemingly forgotten, the sound piercing enough to wake the dead.

Enough to wake the Fey baby, at any rate. His cries added to the noise.

He rubbed his head as a booming headache began to assert itself. He gestured to Agyfen's baby. "Shut him up."

He felt her eager obedience as she turned to her baby, cooing and shushing him.

The feeling brought dizziness again, and Godric battled it back, cursing under his breath as he picked up the Fey child, whose little face was screwed up and furious as he screamed, the noise piercing his skull.

The other baby's cries suddenly stopped. He turned to see that Agyfen had opened her tunic and was nursing her baby, who made soft gulping sounds as he drank.

"Don't give him all. He'll be sharing from now on."

Agyfen looked up, the absent look in her eyes replaced by eager obedience. "Yes, my lord."

Godric turned away from her, suddenly ashamed, juggling the Fey baby to quiet it. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, tentatively testing the bond that tied him to the woman. He could feel her there, if he concentrated, but only if he paid attention to her.

He let out a breath and opened his eyes. It was manageable. He could do this. He sat down and leaned against the tree. He felt sick and weak, his Fey power drained from him by the exertion of the Binding.

But they had to get moving. Once the woman was finished feeding the two children they would be on their way. The less time he spent tied to this woman, the better. For his sake, and hers.

He squelched the guilt that pierced him. *I had to do it. It won't be for long.*

"Keep them quiet," he said to Agyfen. "I'll be back soon. You have food enough, and ale. Do not leave here."

The woman nodded, her face slack and empty. They had been travelling for five days, keeping to the woods, only moving at night. He felt her exhaustion. Hell, he shared it himself. For the millionth time he cursed his recklessness. He

should have just left the damned baby alone.

His lips thinned. He couldn't let negative thoughts defeat him. The Unseelie King, Sidrac, a Mercian warrior in his own right, respected strength and confidence. In order for Godric to pull this off and come out with a win he couldn't doubt himself.

And he very much planned for a win. He hadn't gone through all this to fail now.

The woman settled down with her back against a tree, wrapping her cloak around herself and the children. Her own child whined for a moment, and she released him, watching him as he crawled around, examining leaves and twigs.

Godric watched for a moment, and then turned his back on them and walked away. He hadn't gone far when he felt momentary panic from the woman. *I will be back. Stay there.* He Spoke into her mind, and he felt her fear subside.

An urge seized him to go back. It was the first time since he had Bound her that he hadn't been in sight of her. He forced himself to continue and the feeling faded.

The small sensation of her mind nestled in his also faded. He stopped, closing his eyes and breathing deep. *There.* He saw the rope, a faint line stretching back into darkness. He opened his eyes and let out a shaky breath. She was still there. The holding was not far. He would be back soon.

He began humming a tune as he walked, matching it to the rhythm of his pace. Anything to distract him from the feeling of doom, the fear that this would all end badly.

Chapter 5

“What are you saying, Traveller? A Fey child, here?” Sidrac, the Unseelie king, looked only mildly interested in Godric’s news. He concentrated instead on the stew he ate, tearing off bread to scoop it up.

Godric had found him at his brother’s dwelling, in a small holding near the coast. The King had been somewhat surprised to see him, but not concerned. After all, Godric was a Traveller. The other Fey expected that he would not behave like the rest. Travellers were known to be odd. *Rare, feared, and prized*. This time his Teacher’s voice brought comfort. Even the king would treat him carefully.

Hopefully.

The King’s brother, Eadmaer, answered him before Godric could. “Nay, brother. He says he has brought you a Fey child.”

Sidrac looked up at that, surprised. “What? From where?”

Godric forced himself to look unconcerned. He ignored his rumbling stomach. They had not invited him to sit and eat with them. “From Lichfield. I was playing for coin there and saw a human couple. With a Fey child. I have

brought him to you, to be given to the Fey.”

Eadmaer’s wife’s eyes flared open in shock, and she gaped at him for a moment, then looked to her husband.

The king’s eyes widened and he put down the spoon, his attention fully engaged at last. “You have brought him--” His hand fisted on the table. “Sit down, Traveller. I would hear this tale.”

Godric sat, ignoring the cold sweat pooling under his arms. He quickly summarized the details, hoping the king wouldn’t press him too hard. But the faint hope that his news would be greeted with gratitude quickly dissipated under Sidrac’s steely gaze.

“I would understand this,” the king said. “You found a Fey babe, and you took him from his human parents, exchanging him for a human babe from a nearby holding. You thought to bring him to me, but as you had not asked me of the wisdom of this plan, you had no way to know that I was not home, but instead a week’s travel away. So you did not go to the local Unseelies for help, no. You *Bound* a human woman to yourself to act as wet-nurse and dragged her here with you.” His jaw muscle clenched. “By all the gods, Traveller, are you mad?”

“My lord king—”

“Nay, do not speak!” Sidrac pushed himself away from the table and paced the small dwelling. Eadmaer, who had been listening in open-mouth fascination, regarded him with narrowed eyes for a moment, and then took a long drink of ale, placing the mug back down with a thump. “Leave us,” he muttered to his wife, who nodded and hurriedly exited the house, the door closing with a thump behind her.

The king stopped pacing and glared down at Godric, his hands fisted on his hips. “Is this how it is done in your time? Tell me.”

Godric swallowed. “My lord king, I realize I was hasty. I know I should have come to you first. I walked away from Lichfield thinking to do just that. But I could not. You don’t understand. In my time, the Fey are few. We have been hunted by the humans until we are almost gone. The thought of that babe being left in their clutches was too much for me. I didn’t know if they were just visiting there, or if they lived there. I couldn’t risk that they might leave while I was going to report to you, and then lose track of them. The babe would grow up a *wilding* —” To his surprise, his voice choked off as despair seized him. He had been playing the role of the devoted Fey, but suddenly he realized it was more than just play-acting. “I’m sorry, my lord king. But I couldn’t let that happen.”

But Sidrac didn’t seem moved by his speech. He leaned down on his hands on the table, looking Godric in the eye, fury barely contained in his gaze. “Noble words. But do you have any idea of the damage you may have wrought?”

Godric remained silent. Best to let him rant and get it over with.

But Sidrac pressed him. “Tell me, *Traveller*, what do you think might happen now?”

Godric cleared his throat. “I hope, my lord, that the child could be given to a

Fey couple.”

“And so he shall be,” Sidrac retorted. “Of course. Indeed, there are a few whom I could name who would welcome him. But that is not the point.” He breathed deeply once, and pushed himself back from the table and turned to his brother. “We will go see this child.”

He turned his back on Godric and walked outside, leaving Godric no choice but to follow, Eadmaer in his wake.

As they walked back the way he had come, the wind whipped his tunic against his legs. The sun shone brightly, sparkling off the waves that crashed on the shore on their left. Although Sidrac didn’t seem to mind, Godric was glad he had not taken his cloak off. Even at the height of summer, the ocean breeze felt cold.

Sunlight also flashed off of Sidrac’s armband, making the gold shimmer. Godric averted his eyes from it. There was little hope he was going to be rewarded for his deed now. *But maybe the parents who will receive a babe will be more grateful...*

He cheered himself with that thought. Better that than dwelling on what had gone wrong.

Godric held up his hand, stopping the king and his brother. “Let me go alone, first. She might be scared of you.”

Sidrac nodded. “Very well.”

Godric quickly pushed out of the trees, back into the glade where he had left Agyfen.

He felt the relief that bloomed through her as she spotted him, and she began to cry. “Oh my lord, my lord, you have come, thank all the gods...” The babe was still wrapped snugly around her. The toddler slept, one thumb firmly planted in his mouth.

He strode towards her and hauled her to her feet, for she had collapsed face down at his feet, weeping. “That’s enough. Pull yourself together.” He stuffed down the panic that leaked into him from her. “I’ve brought someone who will help us. He is a great and wise king. He wishes to see you, and the babe.”

“A king?” She wiped her face, trembling.

“Yes.” He turned and waved at the trees where he had left Sidrac and his brother. They emerged, crossing the meadow to where he stood with the woman.

Agyfen bowed her head, smoothing her skirt and plucking ineffectually at some burrs that were lodged in the fabric. “My lord king,” she said, her voice small and shaky.

“He wishes to see the babe,” Godric said.

She hurriedly reached inside the sling and brought the baby out, who blinked in the bright sunlight and began to squirm and fuss.

The king frowned and peered at the babe. “Ah,” he said. He glanced at Godric. “It is as you say.”

Godric squelched his irritation. Did the king really think he could have been mistaken? He might be an idiot, but not that big a one.

The king touched the child on his downy head. “A fine child,” he murmured, then looked back at Godric. He shook his head, anger filling his face. “There is ill to come of this.” He looked as if he would say more, but heaved a breath instead.

“Sidrac, we must—” Eadmaer’s words were cut off by his brother holding an arm up.

“Not now, brother.” The king looked hard at his brother and then turned to Godric. “We will meet for a Gathering a week hence. Bring them.”

He turned and strode off. Eadmaer gave Godric a sour look before they melted into the trees again.

Godric let out the breath he had been holding. *Could have been worse.*

Chapter 6

A week later Godric and Agyfen stepped into a glade where the Southern Unseelie Fey Gathered. He was surprised to see at least fifty of them there. He had hoped for a smaller Gathering, but apparently the combination of a beautiful summer's night and an unexpected Gathering had been too much for the inquisitive Unseelies to resist. He nodded at those he recognized, his stomach roiling. The woman beside him shrank against him, and he pushed her aside. "Stop it," he muttered to her. "I can't walk with you clinging to me like that."

He felt her panic as she blanched and bowed her head. Guilt touched him, swept away by anger fuelled by his own fear. But he had to swallow it down as Eadmaer spotted him, gesturing for him to come forward and be presented to the king.

Sidrac got up on a large boulder that thrust out of the ground in the middle of the clearing, the music fading away as the musicians saw that their king was ready to speak.

Godric came to a halt in front of the king, his heart pounding. He strove to look confident. If he played the frightened child he would be treated as one, and

that could not end well.

A half-moon shone in the unclouded night sky above. The moonlight and firelight gave enough light to see the king's expression, which was decidedly unfriendly as his gaze swept over Godric, and then back at the Gathered Fey. "The Traveller Godric has brought us one of our own, lost to the humans. A Fey child will be restored to us this night, one of the Blood redeemed from the fate of being a wilding. And so we thank him."

Godric blinked, surprised at the praise, relief washing through him. *It's gonna be alright*, he thought, jubilation filling him as he turned and grinned at the crowd.

But his grin faded as he saw less than appreciative expressions on some faces. Others stood with their arms folded across their chests, their expressions downright hostile.

The king spoke again. "Cerdic and Ailred, receive your child." He motioned to a young Fey couple who stood at the front. They clasped hands and approached Godric, matching giddy grins on their faces.

The king nodded at him, and Godric took the sleeping babe from Agyfen's grasp and handed him to the Fey woman who gasped and dissolved in tears, her husband clutching her to his side as he bent his head over the babe, examining him closely.

He looked up at the king, his eyes sparkling with tears as well. "Thank you, my lord king, for this great boon. We are indebted to you."

The king nodded at the man and they turned and joined the crowd, others crowding around them and embracing them, joy evident on all their faces.

Godric noted that not a word of thanks had been directed his way by the couple, and another alarm twinged through him. Something was wrong.

The impression solidified as the king's gaze turned back to him. "Now then, Traveller, we will speak."

He seemed to be waiting for some kind of reply, so Godric swallowed and nodded. "Of course, my lord king."

Silence fell again as the king regarded him, his arms crossed on his chest. Finally he spoke. "I would have you tell the tale of how you came to us this night with a human Bound and a Fey babe. It will be most instructive for my Court." He smiled a wintry smile. "Leave nothing out of what you told me. I would have my Court hear it all." He stepped down from the rock and gestured at it. "Take your place, *scop*."

It was the last thing that Godric wanted to do, but he had no choice. He stepped up on the rock and faced the Gathered Fey. He ignored his roiling stomach and took a deep breath to steady his nerves.

Leave nothing out. The king's command could hardly be disobeyed, seeing as he had already told the king everything before, but he would be damned if he would make himself look like the fool the king obviously thought he was. He looked at the young couple, the babe clutched to the woman's chest possessively, and his resolve strengthened. *The kid would have been a wilding without me.*

So he spun the tale, leaning heavy on the discovery of the babe and the effectiveness of his Charms upon the humans, only lightly touching on the Binding as a clever necessity to save the life of the babe. He resisted the urge to end on a flourish. Best to play it safe.

So he merely nodded at the couple and ended with, “And so the winds have saved one of the Blood, bringing him safely to our Court.”

Silence fell, broken by Sidrac’s snort. But there was no humour in his eyes. “A fine tale you tell, indeed, Traveller. But there are parts missing. Now you will hear the rest.” He gestured to a couple who stood nearby, a young woman and an older man. “Beadohild, tell us all what you told me yesterday.”

The woman nodded at the king and the two of them went forward. Godric relinquished the rock to them, his stomach churning. A sense of impending doom seized him.

“There were an upset in Lichfield two weeks past, so there were,” she began. “My father’s cousin’s wife, screaming’ that her babe would not awaken. That he were different, and all. That he were a changeling.” She darted a fierce look at Godric, and continued. “I saw the child. ’Twas true. He could not be awakened, no matter how they poked and pulled at it. And I saw the cause. ’Twere a Charm the child lay sleeping under. But we couldna get close to him to undo it. Aedwen went to the priest, who said his prayers, but still the babe wouldn’t awake. He counselled patience, but Aedwen were newly a Christian, and in her fear fell back on the old ways. She left the babe out in the woods, to be claimed back by the fairies, hoping’ they would bring her own back. In the mornin’ the child were dead.” She wiped at the tears that had spilled over onto her cheeks. “The humans are right riled. They look to give blame.”

Shock washed over Godric, the events of that night returning to him in a rush. He had sang the Charm with the babe asleep in his arms, and again in the house, trying to sing the Fey child to sleep. It hadn’t worked on the Fey child. But it must have been too much for the human baby, sending him even deeper asleep than he realized.

But he had hardly had time to digest the tale when the older man began to speak. His eyes blazed with anger as he glanced at Godric and then addressed the crowd. “I had told you all in the last Gathering of my cousin, the Sensitive, and their babe. We had agreed that to take the child was an unneeded risk as I was close enough to keep watch and guide him as he grew. But now—” He clenched his fists. “My daughter has told you. Fear haunts the holding. Evil spirits, demons, are blamed by some. Adwen still blames the fairies.” He fairly spat the word out, his fists clenching as he turned towards Godric, his eyes blazing. “Tell me, Traveller, how am I to comfort my cousin? How am I to undo this harm you have done? How will I stop them when they come for us in the night?”

Godric gaped at him, cold sweat running down his back. He swung to the king. “My lord,” he stammered. “I did not know—”

“SILENCE.” The king held up a hand as he barked the word, his eyes

glittering like diamonds. “This tale is not ended. You will hear it all.”

Another couple stepped up. They looked middle-aged, the man’s face worn and tired, the woman’s fearful. She spoke up. “I know the woman whose babe the Traveller took as a replacement for the Fey child. She be a good woman. She is fair crazed with grief. Tales have come to us of the changeling babe. She fears the fairies took her child, too. We were friends, but the night before the king’s Call she came to our home, her and her husband. The eyes of the humans turn to the Fey when sorrow comes. We all know that. Their eyes turn toward us.”

They stepped down, the woman’s eyes glittering with tears. The king nodded at another, a young man who took their place.

He, too, shot a fierce look at Godric before speaking. “The wife of the *thegn* and his child have gone missing from a holding nearby my own. Vanished in the night. Rumours had reached us from about a babe disappearing, and now this. The *thegn* is searching high and low, struck by grief and rage. His suspicions have fallen upon the Seelie Fey Cutha, the miller. Even now Cutha is being questioned about it. I fear for his life if the woman is not returned.”

Silence fell as the man stepped down. The king took his place, looking down at Godric. “Now you have heard the true tale of your folly, Traveller. Tell me then, since you know so well how to fix problems you stumble across, without any advice from anyone, what shall we do with all this?”

Godric fell to his knees, shock and fear causing him to tremble. “My lord king,” he managed. “I did not mean for any of this—I only thought—”

“You thought of nothing but your own gain.” The king’s power swelled, snapping against Godric in a fierce storm as he stepped down from the rock and hauled Godric to his feet.

Fear from Agyfen flashed through him as she screeched, huddling at his feet and sobbing. But he had no time to spare for her distress as the king pulled him close so that his face was mere inches from away. “Fool! I cannot suspect that the Fey from your time are so reckless to behave as you have, so I only imagine that they have sent you away from there to rid themselves of you!” He thrust Godric away from him, his chest heaving as he struggled to control himself.

Godric staggered and tripped over the woman and landed in a heap, fear sapping all his strength as he cowered beside the woman in front of the king. “I’m sorry, my lord king. I only wanted to help.”

The vicious kick in his side shocked him, coming as it had from nowhere it seemed, but as he curled in on himself and the pain that blazed from a rib that surely was broken he saw Eadmaer standing over him, his face distorted in a snarl. “Help? You idiot—”

Sidrac pulled at his brother’s arm. “Nay, brother. Step aside.”

Eadmaer’s eyes blazed in anger, but he stepped away, his jaw clenched.

The king hauled Godric to his feet, flicking an impatient look at Agyfen, who continued to wail at his feet. “Shut her up,” he hissed.

The pain from his side and the flaring panic that seized him made it hard to

concentrate but Godric gathered himself and Spoke to the woman. *Husb. That's enough.*

The woman flinched and subsided into low sobs.

The king thrust him aside and stepped up on the rock. "My people, we must consider together how to deal with these threats we face. We will speak later. First, this Traveller will be dealt with."

Godric's mouth went dry, but before he could speak the king continued, his eyes spearing into Godric's.

"This is what you will do, Traveller. You cannot undo all the harm you have wrought, but one. You will take this woman back her holding and unBind her. And then you will Cross back from whence you came. Eadmaer and Brunstan will accompany you to ensure your obedience." He paused, the fire snapping loudly in the sudden silence, the sparks drifting up to the black sky above. "You are banished from this Court. If you return, I swear my blade will drink your blood. Rule or no, Traveller or no. Do you understand?"

Godric clutched at his aching side and nodded, hardly able to believe his luck.

"Speak it, Traveller. Vow your obedience."

"I swear it, my lord king, under the Earth, the Sky, the Sun and the Moon. I will not return to your Court, on pain of death." He felt the curious effect of the Vow, the sudden hush, the almost audible click inside of him. It didn't matter. He was going to live. He would swear to anything for that.

The king's face was hard as granite. "Go now, before I change my mind."

Godric stumbled out of the Gathering on shaky legs, the sobbing woman trailing behind.

Chapter 7

They approached Agyfen's village after midnight. They did not want to risk meeting any of the *thegn's* men who might be looking for his wife. They skirted the village and reached the same glade where Godric had Bound the woman. He figured it would be best to keep all the circumstances the same as they were when he Bound her.

But as they entered the glade, Godric's stomach clenched. Truth be told, a burgeoning reluctance had seized him as he got close to the spot. Only the grim presence of Eadmaer and the other Fey kept him moving.

You can do it. It'll be fine. Get rid of her and go home.

Versions of this litany had been running through his mind over the days they had travelled, but he had been finding it increasingly hard to believe it as the miles passed. Now it seemed laughable.

It didn't help that Agyfen had picked up on his fear and was dragging her feet, as reluctant to approach the glade as he was. Eadmaer was practically hauling her along as she whimpered and moaned.

Finally they broke through the trees and stepped into the clearing. Eadmaer

dumped Agyfen at his feet. “Do it now, Traveller, and quickly. I weary of this.”

A shudder rippled through Godric. “My lord, give me a minute, I must—”

“Now.” Eadmaer’s voice was cold.

Brunstan lifted his bow and notched an arrow, training it on Godric.

“Wait, wait...give us some space. I need to concentrate....” Godric held up his hands in supplication.

Eadmaer eyed him, his face hard, but finally he gestured to the other Fey and they stepped back to the edge of the trees, a couple yards away. Brunstan kept his arrow notched and ready, though, Godric noted, squelching the wild impulse that had swept through him to grab Agyfen and run.

He swallowed the thought and squatted beside the woman, who lifted her face to him, her face wet with tears in the thin light from the half-moon. “Nay, my lord, nay, do not send me away, please, I’ll be good, I swear—”

“Shut up!” He spoke more viciously than he meant to, the stress making his voice harsh.

She whimpered and collapsed at his feet, moaning. Her baby, strapped to her back, began to wail.

“Shh, shh...” Godric patted the baby, fear and nausea swooping through him. If anyone heard...

“Now, Traveller!” Eadmaer’s voice rang through the clearing, throbbing with Fey power.

With a moan, without thought, Godric shut his eyes, releasing his own power, seeking the bright thread that connected him to Agyfen. *There*. It stretched into the darkness, shimmering with golden fire.

He knew the arrow would be loosed if he did not obey. He was a goner if he didn’t do it. But still he hesitated. The vague instructions from his Teacher years ago weren’t helpful. *Be careful with an unBinding*. He regretted, now, his impatience with learning the details of Fey lore.

He had to break this Bond. But how? He envisioned himself taking the thread in his hands and wrenching it apart, but panic flared through him at the thought. He remembered how it felt when he first Bound her, the vision of him holding the thread, the deepened connection that faded when he let it go. Pulling it apart when he held it would be like wrenching off one of his own legs.

Another thought struck. He envisioned himself standing by the thread, holding a sword. His instincts screamed at him in alarm. This was not the right way to do it, either. But he had no more time nor courage left. If he didn’t act now he never would. With a harsh yell he swung the sword down on the thread with all his might.

The *snap* of its severing threw him onto his back. For a moment he heard Agyfen’s fading wail, disappearing as the thread receded into darkness, whipping like a snake. He caught a glimpse of her, far off, her hands raised towards him, and then her presence was snuffed out.

Godric opened his eyes and managed to get onto his elbows as he retched and

heaved, his head spinning as the woman and baby wailed in unison, their cries splitting the night. They cleaved his skull, falling into a black hole that had opened in his mind. *There. She's there.*

But she wasn't, and he had to bite back the howl that rose to his throat. The black hole, the searing loss was all, a force so huge there was no room for anything else. *I have to get her back.*

"It's done. Release your power." Eadmaer's voice broke through his thoughts, harsh in his ear as the other Fey hauled him to his feet.

Get her back... the need was all-consuming. Godric fought against Eadmaer's restraining hands, and the king's brother cursed as he struggled to hold him.

"Get her out of here, now!" Eadmaer's voice rang in his ear as he yelled at Brunstan.

Panic surged through Godric. "NO!" The word burst out of him and he scored a blow, triumph surging through him as he leapt away.

But Eadmaer tackled against him from behind, bringing him down with a crash. The other Fey flipped him over, straddling him and pinning him down, and struck him in the face hard, twice.

The blows shocked Godric back into himself, and suddenly he realized what he was doing, what had happened. Realized, too, that his power still surged through him and he let it go with a gasp. His vision cleared. Eadmaer's face above him was distorted in a snarl, his fist cocked and ready to hit him again. "Ok, enough, let me go, let me go..."

Eadmaer lowered his fist, but he did not move. "I think not, Traveller. Not until Brunstan is further away."

Suddenly Godric heard Agyfen, a loud screech that filtered through the trees. He couldn't help himself, he bucked and heaved against Eadmaer again. But it was futile, and soon he subsided, panting from the effort.

It was a full fifteen minutes more before Eadmaer finally got off, and even then he kept a firm grip on his arm as he hauled him to his feet. "By all the gods, Traveller, have you not done that before?"

Godric trembled violently, the delayed shock making him woozy, the thrumming need to go get Agyfen back almost unbearable. He could only shake his head in reply.

"If I had but realized..." Eadmaer ground his teeth together. "Worse and worse." He shut his eyes briefly, and Godric felt a warm glow of Fey power throb through the other Fey. He opened his eyes. "I have told Brunstan to Charm her to sleep for now. She will be damaged by this, I fear. But we will see what we can do to restore her."

Godric tried to suppress a sob, but it was no good, and he dissolved in tears, his gut heaving. He collapsed on the ground, unable to stop the wrenching cries that tore through him.

Eadmaer cursed and squatted beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. Godric felt a slight tingle of power ripple through him. The sorrow that tore at

him receded slightly. He heaved a breath and swiped at his face as he struggled to control himself.

Eadmaer's face held some reluctant sympathy. "My cousin once Bound a human. It was difficult for him, too, when he broke the Bond. He recovered in a few days. Of course he broke the Bond properly. I cannot say what this foolishness will cost you."

Godric heaved another breath. "I didn't want—I mean, it wasn't supposed to be like this. I was just trying to help."

Eadmaer's lips thinned, and he grunted as he got to his feet, hauling Godric upright along with him. "Take us to the Crossing you spoke of. It is best you go now." He released him. "Lead the way."

The last thing he wanted to do was to step into a Crossing and face that wrenching void. Maybe he could persuade Eadmaer to let him wait until dawn, so he could use the rising power to aid him.

He would be stronger then, too. He could probably take Eadmaer by surprise, use his power and tie him up, or something. Then he could at least check on Agyfen, make sure she was okay before he went home.

The sudden spurt of excitement at the thought appalled him, told him what a very bad idea that was. The king's brother was right. He had to leave, now or he would not be able to resist the urge to find Agyfen. Bind her again to fill the hole in his mind.

Despair seized him. If he was torn apart by the Crossing, it was only what he deserved.

NEW YORK STATE, 1970

The swirling, wrenching sensation receded, and Godric slowly came back to himself. He was lying face down. He was alive. Those were the only two clear thoughts in his mind.

The rest was a jumble. Strange pictures spun like confetti in the wind through his aching skull. *Faces, looking up at him, laughing. His fingers plucking the strings of a...guitar? A sound floated through his mind—his voice, singing in words that sounded odd. German?* Another picture drifted by. *Himself, kneeling, as he pledged to—*

*Sidrac. Eadmaer. The baby. Agyfen—*suddenly it was all back, the pictures fitting together into a cohesive memory. Nausea swamped him and he hastily pushed himself to all fours as he retched.

He collapsed, panting, and opened his eyes. Stars pierced the black sky above, silence lay like a blanket over him. He should back at the Crossing spot where he had begun this whole nightmare.

Of course since nothing else had gone right, he wouldn't be surprised to find himself in Japan.

He groaned and closed his eyes. He knew that was impossible. A Traveller always came back to the spot where he or she Crossed, even if they didn't leave

from the same one that they arrived at after they Crossed. This was his second Crossing. Both from this same spot in Harriman State Park, upstate from New York City. Surely he had come back there, just like last time. Best not to panic unless he needed to.

He slowly took stock. Whenever he Crossed he felt drained and ill from its effects. What was new this time was the black aching hole in his head where Agyfen had once been. Along with the crushing sense of failure and regret that swamped him.

Grief rose within him in a dark tide and he hastily turned his mind away from the woman and all that had gone wrong. Hopefully the effects of the Binding would fade in a few days. But the spiking panic that perhaps it wouldn't drove him to his feet, wincing at the tender spot in his ribs where Eadmaer had kicked him. Lying there only caused dark thoughts to gather in his mind like shadows.

He looked around. Dark trees stood sentinel, swaying slightly in a stiff breeze that gusted against him. Relief filled him as recognition came. It was indeed the same spot from which he had Crossed.

Now all that remained was the hike back to the road. He could probably hitch a ride back to the City and his apartment. But he rejected that thought. Better to go to Betty, his on-and-off girlfriend. His mother would have set spies around his apartment who would run to her the moment he appeared. He needed a couple days before she swooped down on him, wanting to know how it went.

Familiar irritation seized him as he started to walk. He was twenty-nine. Old enough that his mother shouldn't be checking on him every time he moved. Especially since he had no intention of explaining to her how badly he had screwed up to her, or worse, to his father. Neither of them were Travellers. They had no idea of the difficulties he had faced.

I gotta get outta here. Not for the first time the thought of leaving New York and the stifling obligations of his family crossed his mind. He even had planned where he would go. *California. Sun. Women. Freedom.*

A far-off thin wail pierced the night, dousing his excitement like water on a fire. Godric froze. *A baby? Had Agyfen and her child somehow Crossed with him?* Fear spun him around and he listened intently, but the sound quickly faded into the whisper of the trees in the wind. He stood for a moment, his heart pounding, a massive headache forming behind his eyes with every beat.

Don't be ridiculous. Not possible. He took a deep breath and started off again, ignoring the exhaustion that seized him. He should really rest a couple of days to shake off the effects of the Crossing, allow his Fey power to replenish. But the thought of being alone with his thoughts and regrets spurred him on. He needed the company of others, the busy buzz of New York City. Betty would be a tonic for what ailed him. But even the thought of the wild redhead Unseelie couldn't quite dampen the fear that stalked his steps.

Give it a couple days, he kept telling himself as he walked. *A couple days and I'll feel better.*

But he couldn't shake the feeling that something more than mere time would be needed to fix the hole that Agyfen left behind. That more would be needed to deal with the burgeoning sense of failure that dogged his steps.

California. The idea seized him again. *Sun, surf. Fun.*

But his excitement over the thought didn't silence the intermittent ghostly wail that lingered in the wind, nor did it mask the vision that kept intruding into his mind.

A picture of Agyfen kneeling, arms stretched towards him.

A WOMAN GROWN

Chapter 1

The rain fell in a weak drizzle, making the horses slip on the slick trail. It helped to keep Nona alert, jarring her out of the fatigue that threatened to lull her into a dull doze.

It had been a long night and an even longer morning, what with the difficult birth she had attended and the nervous mother to cope with in the aftermath. She looked forward to her bed and a good night's sleep. It didn't help that she felt slightly nauseous. Either from staying up most of the night, or the lingering effects of her Quickening, she couldn't say. Likely both.

But her fatigue and queasiness couldn't dampen her satisfaction at the successful completion of her task. Nor the satisfaction of being entrusted with it. She was seventeen, and a woman grown. Betrothed and Quickened; an adult at last.

But not entirely free, as a man would be. Arthen, one of her father's fighting men, accompanied on this journey. As a Fey she had more freedoms than human women, but that didn't extend to a journey by herself, such as a young man of her age would be allowed. Neither a Fey nor a human woman would have that

much freedom. And if she were a young man she would be given training in war, unlike the needlework her aunties saddled her with. She scowled at the thought. She couldn't help longing to be able to do what she wanted, and when. And even these small freedoms she had would be restricted once she was married...

She stifled a sigh, wishing she could be more excited about her betrothal. In one thing, at least, men and women were equals. Both were required to marry as benefited their *tud*. The fact that she and Cynric did not much like each other mattered little. The match was a good one for her kindred, and his. A way to strengthen the ties between their families and with Penda, the Mercian king, who was Cynric's overlord. And between two important Seelie families.

She sighed, setting those thoughts aside. She would do her duty when the time came. But for today she would dwell on the successful Healing and enjoy this journey away from her home, however damp and gloomy it may be.

She wanted to stay another day at the new mother's *tref* but Arthen insisted on leaving. The weather mattered not to him. As a Ward, he could lessen the rain if it became too difficult to travel. He was as eager to get home as she was to extend her stay away.

Bronwyn also accompanied her, huddled under her cloak as she rode her mare. The damp air made her hair lie limply against her face. She kept swiping at it, and at her nose, which had begun to run.

She looks feverish, Nona thought, her gaze sharpening on her maidservant, who suddenly sneezed twice. "Are you ill, Bronwyn?"

Bronwyn pulled her cloak closer as she glanced at Nona. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes red-rimmed. "Naught but a cold," she said.

"We will be home by dusk," Nona said. "I will make a draught—"

"Hold, Lady." Arthen interrupted her, hauling his horse to a stop and wheeling it around.

Nona's gelding shied at the sudden movement, but as she pulled on the reins she heard hooves pounding the ground behind them and she turned her horse as well, squinting through the drizzle to see what was amiss.

A man rode pell-mell towards them, bent over his horse's neck and urging it on. He came from the west, from the direction of the holding they had left just after midday.

Nona frowned, a spike of worry piercing her. Had something happened to the babe, or the mother, and they needed her back?

But as the man drew closer it became evident that this was no one she recognized from Cradoc's *tref*. And that he was Fey. His long dark hair was tied back with a leather strip, exposing a thin, narrow face and long nose. His face was all sharp, hard angles, his light hazel eyes filled with worry as he hauled his horse to a halt.

"Good day, Master," Arthen said. "Is something amiss?"

The man's jaw bunched. "Yes, I am in need of aid, my lord." He glanced at Bronwyn, clearly reluctant to say more in front of a human.

“Have no fear,” Nona said. “My maidservant is a Sensitive, and knows the way of the Fey?”

Bronwyn looked at Nona. “I will go on ahead so that you may speak freely.”

Nona threw her a grateful glance. Bronwyn was used to the strangeness of their life. Her mother Ceri, another Sensitive, had been a maidservant to Nona’s mother. When Nona’s mother died of the wasting sickness when Nona was small, Ceri looked after Nona as a mother would. The two girls had grown up as sisters, with Bronwyn a few years younger. When Ceri herself died two years past, Bronwyn had taken her mother’s position as maidservant to Nona.

“We are long parted,” the newcomer said once Bronwyn was out of earshot. After their murmured reply he looked at Nona. “I have been to the *tref* of Cradoc, looking for a Healer, and he said one left this morning, heading east on this road. Are you she, who saw to his daughter?”

“Yes,” she answered. *Perhaps I will not go home this day after all.* Her fatigue washed away at the thought. “What is your need?”

Before he could answer, Arthen spoke. “I would have your name and from whence you hail, Fey?”

The man clenched his jaw. “I am Cynfran ap Nefydd, of Powys.”

Nona sucked in a breath. The name was familiar to her. “You are Unseelie, brother to Tegyn?”

“Yes.” A humourless smile flashed over his face. “Cradoc said you are Seelie. Strange that your Court knows our names.”

“Your brother seeks the Unseelie throne. It would be stranger if we had not heard of you.” Arthen’s gaze raked over the newcomer. “You look well enough. Why do you seek a Healer?”

The Unseelie’s face tightened. “I have given you my name. I will ask for yours before I speak.”

Nona eyed him, uneasy. The Unseelie Court was in upheaval as they prepared for the Summer Gathering, when they would name their new king. An upheaval caused in no small part by Tegyn ap Nefydd’s challenge of their king’s son for the throne.

Nona gathered herself, ignoring the flutter of nerves that assailed her. She had never had much contact with the Unseelie Court. But this man sought a Healer, and she needed to find out why. And he was right, common courtesy required that they name themselves in response to his trust in giving them his name. “I am Nona *ferch* Albanwyr of Arfon. A Healer, as Cradoc has said. I travel with Arthen, one of my father’s trusted warriors, and Bronwyn, my maidservant.”

“Albanwyr of Arfon?” Surprise flashed over the Unseelie’s face, quickly masked. His gaze fixed on her. “A Healer holds no Court when a Fey is in need. You must come with me.”

“The daughter of Albanwyr of Arfon will not be commanded by you, Unseelie.” Arthen’s eyes were as cold as his voice.

Cynfran’s jaw tightened. “I do not command. I ask the Healer for her service.”

“She will—”

“Hold!” Nona took a breath, seeking calm. “Give me leave to speak.”

Arthen clamped his lips together, clearly irritated, but nodded.

She bit back a sigh. She might think herself an adult, but her father and his men did not. *Then I must prove myself one.* She faced the Unseelie. “You have not told us why you seek a Healer?”

Cynfran’s jaw clenched. “My brother lies gravely wounded nearby. I would not deter you from your journey except that I fear for his life if he is not helped soon.”

Fear pierced her. The claimant to the Unseelie throne. And he wanted her, a Seelie, to help him? She forced herself to think. “I do not have much experience. It would be better for someone else to see to him if indeed his injury is grave. What has happened to him?”

Cynfran’s nostrils flared. “He has been shot by an arrow.” He held up a hand before Arthen could speak. “You need not fear. There is no danger. We sought an outlaw, and when we caught up with him, he fired upon us. He is long gone.”

Nona gathered her thoughts. “Annes the Healer lives close to our *tref*. We can send her to you once we arrive home. She would be better suited to Heal him.”

Cynfran’s mouth twisted. “You won’t get back to Arfon until dusk. Too dark to travel back. You could not leave again until the morn so it would be midday tomorrow before you arrived. ’Tis too long. My brother cannot wait.” He eyed her. “Experience or no, you are what the winds have brought. You must come. My brother will die without help.”

Fear fluttered in her stomach at the word “die”. Up until now she had only been Annes’ assistant as she learned the Healer ways. She had never had to use her skills with one so badly wounded. Her mouth went dry thinking of all that might happen if she failed.

Before she could speak Arthen nudged his horse forward, interposing it between herself and the Unseelie. “My Lady is not beholden to you, Unseelie. She returns from a full night of attendance on a birth. She is but newly Quickened, and needs rest. We will send aid tomorrow, but I will take her back home.”

The stranger’s jaw clenched. “I will not allow that.” His Fey power began to rise, snapping against her, and Arthen began to gather his power as well.

God have mercy. A confrontation between Arthen and this high-ranking Unseelie was the last thing they needed.

There was only one solution. They could not risk conflict between the Courts over this. She looked at Arthen. “Enough. I will go. I cannot leave an injured man, ’tis true.”

Arthen looked at her, anger sparking in his eyes. “Think you, my lady. He could be telling a tale, or playing an Unseelie trick.”

Cynfran’s eyes flashed. “God’s blood, ’tis no trick! I swear to you that I ask only for her Gift.”

Arthen scowled. “And if your brother dies, what then? What will you ask of our Court in return?”

The Unseelie blew out a breath, exasperated. “I am not playing a game with my brother’s life. He is gravely wounded, as I said. ’Tis true, she may not be able to Heal him. There will be no blame given, nor payment expected if she fails.”

Arthen’s lips thinned. “Then we all go. Myself and the maidservant as well.”

“I’ll not have a Sensitive involved,” Cynfran said, with a cutting glance at Bronwyn. “This is Fey business.”

Nona held up her hand to forestall Arthen’s objection. “Bronwyn is ill. She must go home. And besides, Father expects us back tonight. You must take Bronwyn home and tell him what has happened.”

“Ill?” Arthen swung his horse around and peered through the drizzle at Bronwyn, who sneezed again at that moment, as if on cue. His lips thinned, and he turned back to Nona. “I don’t like this, my lady.”

Nona squared her shoulders, stuffing back her unease. She didn’t like it either. But she was a Healer, and there was one who needed her. “I will be fine. The good Christ will guard me. I will do what I can for his brother. And tomorrow you can bring Annes.”

His jaw clenched, but before he could speak his refusal, she spoke again. “This Unseelie will not harm the daughter of Albanwyr, I am sure. He will see to my safety.” She glanced at Cynfran, seeking his affirmation.

He nodded and looked over at Arthen. ““The Healer will come to no harm. I Vow it, before the Earth, the Sky, the Sun and the Moon.”

She blinked, surprised at the Vow. She hadn’t expected that, especially not from an Unseelie.

Arthen eyed the stranger for a moment and then sighed. “I will hold you to it, Unseelie.” He spoke the words with little grace. “Tell me, then, where I may find you tomorrow.”

While he got directions from the Unseelie, Nona urged her mount to join Bronwyn. “I must go with this man. His brother is injured, and needs help. Arthen will take you home. You must go to bed at once, and send word to Annes that you are ill. She can make a draught for you. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Bronwyn’s eyes flared wide. “My lady, ’tis not safe! You know not this man. You cannot—” She clamped her mouth shut on her words. She had learnt early that she should not question too deeply the ways of the Fey. “Will you be safe, truly?” Her gaze searched Nona’s.

Nona’s heart warmed at the worry in Bronwyn’s eyes. She was not just her maidservant; she was her closest friend. She squelched the niggles of fear she felt. “As to that, I’m not worried. I will be fine. Don’t worry.”

Before Bronwyn could reply, Arthen joined them. “You do not have to do this one’s bidding, Vow or no.”

Nona smiled faintly. “Ah, but I do. I am a Healer. There is one in need. I cannot turn away. Neither my Gift nor the good Christ would have me do

otherwise.”

Arthen’s jaw clenched, but he nodded. “Then go with God. I will come back tomorrow, never fear.”

“Tell Father not to worry?”

His mouth twisted. “’Twill do no good. He will likely string me up for letting you go.”

“As to that, he will not,” she said firmly. “Tell him I insisted, and you had no choice.”

Arthen nodded, but he didn’t look convinced.

Nona didn’t blame him. Her father was likely to be very angry. But surely he wouldn’t take it out on Arthen, one of his best men.

She stuffed aside the thought that maybe he *would*, and urged Maun into motion with her heels to join the other Fey. She was a Healer, and she was needed. ’Twas as simple as that.

As soon as she joined him, he gathered his reins and kicked his mount into motion. “Follow,” he threw over his shoulder.

Nona had no choice but to obey. God had granted her desire for more adventure. But any excitement at the thought was overcome by the worry that assailed her at the task ahead.

That a Seelie Healer would be asked to Heal a claimant for the Unseelie throne was more than ludicrous. Dangerous.

But she would do her duty, and let God take care of the rest.

Chapter 2

About a quarter hour later the Unselie turned down a path that disappeared into a small copse of trees. They had not gone far when Maun suddenly balked, throwing his head up and squealing.

She hauled on the reins to settle the gelding, but he danced in place, unwilling to advance. “Shh, now,” she muttered, patting his neck distractedly as she scanned the area for the cause of his alarm, but she saw nothing out of order.

She straightened on the saddle and froze as the hairs on the back of her neck lifted. A subtle sense of something wrong touched her like the faint taint of carrion on the wind, marring the settled peace of the woodland.

The other Fey wheeled his horse around and trotted it back to join her. “Settle your beast, quickly. ’Tis not far now.” His own mount danced beneath him, its eyes showing white.

“What is it?” Nona asked, looking around for the source of the odd feeling.

“There is nothing to fear. You sense the outlaw. But he is long gone, now.”

“The outlaw?”

“There is no time for this. Tegyn needs help, now.” Impatience coloured

Cynfran's words. "Use your power and the beast will obey. We must go."

She had seen her father use his power to settle a horse a time or two, but she had never attempted it herself. But she would not let this Unseelie know that. She closed her eyes, concentrating, allowing her power to rise. The sweet rush and tingle of it distracted her for a moment. She was new to this easy access to power, and it still thrilled her.

But the Unseelie was waiting. She laid a hand on her horse's neck, opening herself to its agitation, sending her power through him much as she did in a Healing, but less of it.

Much less. It only took a small touch and the gelding's fear diminished.

The Unseelie gave her no time to savour her accomplishment. "Quickly!" He turned his horse's head and put his heels to its side.

Nona gathered the reins and followed.

Cynfran pulled his horse to a halt when the path narrowed, dropping off the saddle and gathering the reins in his hands.

Nona followed him as the path opened into a small clearing, leading her horse behind her. As she stepped into the clearing, she froze, the same uncanny sensation she had sensed before returning, but it fled as she spotted the injured man lying at the base of a tree.

She dropped the reins and hurried to him but skidded to a halt as a large dog rose to its feet beside the man, its lips pulled back as a rumbling growl issued from its huge chest.

"She is a friend." Cynfran spoke to the dog, who at once settled onto its haunches, the growl quieted, looking at Nona with curiosity.

Cynfran looked at Nona. "Go on. Geneth will not harm you."

Wolfclan. She swallowed and took the last few steps to the man, dropping to her knees beside him. "God in Heaven," she breathed. An arrow protruded from the man's midriff, just under his ribs. Dark blood soaked his tunic. His face was pale, and he had swooned.

Nona let out a breath, fighting back panic. Cynfran had not been lying. Even with her power, his brother would likely die. *And then what?* She forced aside the question. *First, seek information. Don't rely only on what you see. Don't rush to Heal else you miss something important.* Her aunt Annes had taught her the ways of the Healers, and the memory of her calming voice and manner made her steadier.

She drew in a breath, trying to remember everything her auntie did when faced with a wound. She leaned forward and sniffed, concentrating. The smell of blood filled her nostrils, but not the tell-tale stink of pierced guts. Her fear eased a bit. There might be a chance to save him, after all.

The Unseelie squatted beside her. "Why do you wait? Take the arrow out, and be done with it."

"It's not that easy," she said. Her mind raced through all the possible outcomes; all the ways this could go wrong.

“You are a Healer, no? Then Heal him.” He reached for the arrow. “I will take this out, if you are squeamish.”

She knocked his hand away, anger flaring. “Stop. Do you want to ensure his death? Give me a moment, let me think.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded.

She took another deep breath. *Seek information.* “Think you, when did this happen?”

“A few hours past. He was wounded on the path. I dragged him here, away from any who might find him, and went to the *tref* to find help.”

“Not long then. That is good.” She met his gaze. “We need a fire, quickly, and some bandages. Water, too. Bring my bag from my horse. There are some bandages in there, but we will need more. Longer ones, to wind around him. I’ll make a poultice. All must be ready before the arrow comes out.”

He nodded and sprang up to do her bidding.

She looked the wounded man over again, taking in all the details. His Fey power was strong. That would help. And he was young. She forced herself to ignore the ugly arrow sticking out of him and examine him for any other wounds, but she saw nothing. Thankfully. The arrow was bad enough.

She examined it closer, trying to determine its angle so she could more easily pull it out. It protruded slightly downward, she noted. *Good. Away from the heart.* And no bloody froth marred the Unseelie’s mouth, meaning the lung was intact. But if the arrow was stuck in a rib bone, it would be difficult to get it out. She clenched her jaw. One step at a time.

Cynfran brought her the bag and as he searched for dry wood to light a fire, she rummaged through it, seeking what she needed. *Comfrey, plantain, yarrow.* She also pulled out the small jar of honey she always carried.

She had no iron to cauterize the wound, so the silk thread and bone needle she carried would have to do.

She worked quickly, mixing and testing the poultice by taste until she was satisfied. She also put together a draught to help the injured man with the pain so it would be ready when he awoke.

Once Cynfran had a fire ready she heated the poultice just enough so that she could spread it easily and then set it aside, along with the bandages and long strips of linen he had made out of his under tunic.

“Now then,” she said, kneeling beside the injured man once more. She glanced up at the Unseelie. “I will need your help.”

Cynfran nodded and knelt on the other side of his brother.

Nona cut away the injured man’s tunic so that his midriff was exposed, and then took a deep breath. Annes’ voice filled her mind. *Your fear will taint the Healing. Seek peace, first.* She grasped the arrow in one hand, gently trying to twirl it. It shifted slightly, and she let out a sigh of relief. Not stuck in bone. She swallowed back her fear and pulled her knife out of its holder at her waist, wiping it off on her dress.

She looked at Cynfran. "I will enlarge the wound just a bit, to ease the arrow's exit. Hold him tightly. If he awakes he must be kept still."

He nodded and gripped his brothers shoulders.

She gathered herself, murmuring the Healer's Prayer that Annes had taught her. "O Saviour of the human race; O true Healer of every disease, O heart-pitier and assister of all misery, O fount of true purity and of true knowledge. Your hands be mine, your power aid mine."

She made a quick, deep cut beside the arrow shaft. Blood welled and poured down the man's side but she ignored it, quickly dropping the knife and grasping the arrow shaft with one hand and laying the other beside the wound. She closed her eyes and called on her power, gathering it into a bright stream that flowed through her to the man, her fingers tingling as it coursed through her. She directed it down the shaft to the arrowhead, concentrating as she pulled gently on the shaft. *There.* She felt the sudden loosening of the arrow and pulled it out in one smooth motion, the power aiding its exit through the body. She quickly released her power. She would need more later, and she already felt light-headed.

She threw the arrow away with a grimace and grabbed a cloth, mopping away the blood that flowed. Once she had stitched the wound closed she dipped her hands in the warm water Cynfran had heated, sluicing off the blood. She smeared some of the poultice on a bandage and, with the Unseelie's help, began to wind the longer strips of linen around his brother to keep the bandage in place.

When all was done and the ends tied off with a knot, she laid her hands on her patient once more. "Your hands be mine, your power aid mine," she murmured, and once again directed her power into the wound to bathe the torn areas of the body marred by the arrow. As if from far away the faint sense of completion touched her, the knowledge *deeper than deep*, as Annes put it, that all had gone well.

She released her power with a gasp, seeing stars in front of her eyes. The nausea she felt earlier came back in force. She managed to get up and stagger a few steps away before bending over and retching.

Suddenly Cynfran was there, supporting her. "Rest now, girl. You have done well." He guided her over to a tree and helped her sit. She leaned against it, grateful for its hard bulk supporting her, and closed her eyes to shut out the sight of her surroundings swooping around her like she was on the deck of a ship.

Her gorge rose and she leaned over and retched again, wiping her mouth with a trembling hand. Now that her task was done she felt faint, exhausted to the bone.

Cynfran squatted before her, thrusting a wooden mug at her. "Here. Drink."

She shook her head weakly but he took her hand and wrapped her fingers around the mug.

"Drink." He put his fingers around hers and brought the mug up to her mouth. She took a sip, too weary to protest. It was ale, the taste bracing on her

tongue. With another sip the dizziness receded, and she opened her eyes.

The Unseelie's gaze met hers. "Better?"

She swallowed another sip. "Yes. Thank you."

He leaned back on his heels with a small smile lighting his face. "My mother is a Healer. She swears that ale restores her better than anything else." His mouth twisted. "But she has a fondness for ale, 'tis true."

One corner of Nona's mouth lifted up in wry amusement. "As to that, my teacher is a bride of Christ, and only has ale on feast days. 'Tis a trick I would not have learned from her." Her eyes fluttered shut. "But I must rest."

She didn't hear the Unseelie's reply, for she was asleep.

Chapter 3

She woke to the smell of roasting meat and she opened her eyes, her memories flooding back. *The injured man, the Unseelie...*

She sat up quickly but then had to stop for a moment to allow the swooping feeling to settle. She closed her eyes, willing it to go away, and when she opened them again she saw Cynfran sitting across the fire from her, roasting some meat on a stick.

He looked over as he noticed her movement. “You have slept for some time. Are you well?”

She nodded carefully. Even that small movement gave her a bit of vertigo, but she swallowed. “Better,” she said cautiously.

He held out the stick to her. “Eat. Geneth caught us a hare.” The dog, who lay beside Cynfran, lifted her head and thumped her tail on the ground at the mention of her name.

She got up slowly and joined him, sitting across from him on a large rock. He handed her some bread and ale along with the meat. She ate for a moment, feeling strength return with every bite. She took a drink of ale, looking over at

Tegyn, who lay prone where they had left him, covered by a cloak. “Has he woken?”

Cynfran shook his head. “Nay.”

She got up carefully, moving slowly as to not get dizzy, and knelt beside the injured man. After a brief examination she straightened, looking over at the Unseelie. “He has a slight fever, but that’s to be expected.” Satisfaction filled her. “He’s doing well.”

He nodded. “Aye, it seems so.”

There was nothing else to do for her patient for now, so she rejoined Cynfran by the fire, wrapping her cloak around her for warmth. It was close to dusk, and although the drizzle had ceased the air felt damp and cool. “How did this happen? You said you were following someone...” she broke off, remembering the odd sense that had struck her before.

He grimaced. “Yes.” He eyed her, and spoke again. “Nona *ferch* Albanwyr. Your cousin is Celyn ap Wynn, he who has abandoned his king and fights now with Oswald of Bernicia?”

Nona bristled. “He had his reasons, Unseelie.” She bit back the other words she wanted to say. She must be careful. Who knew what use he or his Court would make of whatever she told him?

He held up a hand. “Aye. I mean no offence. I was merely making sure that you were who I thought you were.” He let out a breath. “The wind truly has brought you to me. This man whom we sought, the one who almost killed my brother, is the same one who slew your cousin’s family in cold blood. The rogue Saxon who has plagued our lands since.”

Shock pierced her. “God have mercy!”

“It was him you sensed. He leaves a taint on the wind.”

Icy fear touched Nona. “He was here? He could still be nearby?”

Cynfran shrugged slightly. “I think not. We were close behind the whoreson. Too close, it seems, for Tegyn was felled by his arrow. But the sense of him faded, leaving only this faint stink you sense.”

Christ, have mercy. “And if you’re wrong?”

“Never fear, girl.” Cynfran smiled grimly. “Geneth will warn us long before he gets too close to harm us.” The dog’s tail thumped once and Cynfran ruffled her ears affectionately. He looked up at Nona. “Think you, I left her guarding Tegyn when I came to get help. You saw her effectiveness.”

Nona eyed the dog, slightly mollified. She was huge, a silver-furred beast that looked part wolf. A good alarm and defender, indeed. “But why do you hunt him? Has he killed someone dear to you?” She strained to recall any news of the murderous Saxon. Since the death of Celyn’s family others had died across the lands of the Cymry. All slaughtered in an apparent orgy of blood and destruction. But although many had tried none could find him. He appeared as suddenly as lightning and disappeared just as quickly, leaving death and destruction in his wake.

“My reasons are my own.” The Unseelie fell silent, staring at the fire.

Despite his obvious reluctance to speak of it, Nona persevered. “I have heard he is Fey. Unseelie.”

Cynfran’s mouth twisted in a grimace. His eyes met hers, anger hardening his face. “What if I told you the tales at our Gatherings told us he is Seelie?” His words were as cold as his eyes.

“That’s hardly likely,” she said, her own anger roused. “The Unseelie are—” Belatedly she remembered to whom she spoke, and she snapped her mouth shut. “’Tis what I heard.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear at a Gathering, girl,” he said. He shook his head, letting out a breath. “’Tis more likely that the Saxon is a wilding, free of any Court.”

“I have heard that, too.” It was what her father had believed from the beginning, when the sad tale of the murder of Celyn’s family had reached them.

Cynfran’s mouth twisted in a grimace. “Whatever he is, he has been corrupted by some dark power.”

Nona suppressed a shiver. “Aye.”

Cynfran rose to his feet, the dog doing the same beside him. “I will collect some more wood for the fire, so that we can keep it burning tonight. And perhaps Geneth will get us another hare.” He looked up at the sun, judging the time. “T’will be dusk, soon. I will be back before it gets dark. I will not go far.” He nodded at her and quickly walked to the trees, disappearing into their shadows with the dog at his heels.

She swallowed. She had no desire to be alone, knowing that the crazed Saxon could be near, but what choice did she have? It’s not like he asked her permission. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, fighting back the fear that seized her. A sudden noise made her eyes fly open, but she realized at once that it was the injured man, stirring on the leaves under the tree. She got up and hurried over to kneel beside him.

His eyes opened, his face creasing in pain.

“Don’t speak,” she said. “All is well. I am Nona, a Healer. Your brother found me on the road and brought me here to Heal you.” She felt his forehead. Still warm, but no worse than before.

“Where...?” His voice was rough. His eyes closed as if the effort had been too much.

“Your brother has gone to fetch some wood for the fire,” she said, answering the question he was most likely asking. “He will be back shortly, never fear.”

He nodded. He lay still, and Nona thought he had swooned again, but suddenly his eyes opened. They were clearer this time, and they sharpened on her. “The Saxon,” he managed. “Is he dead?”

“Nay. Cynfran said that after he shot you with the arrow he disappeared. He did not think it likely he would return.” She projected more confidence than she felt. No use to burden the injured man with worry. “I have a draught for the

pain. Do you think you could manage it?"

The Unseelie nodded again.

Nona fetched the mug with the potion she had prepared and knelt beside him once again, assisting him to lift his head and shoulders so she could hold the cup to his lips. He slurped at it, making a face at the taste, but drinking a few swallows. "Good." She eased him back down. "That will help."

He nodded wearily, his eyes closing again.

Nona settled back down as well, letting out a breath. *Thank the Lord for His mercy.* She began to think this Unseelie would survive, after all.

Chapter 4

Nona snapped awake, suddenly alert. She must have nodded off, but she couldn't have been asleep for too long. But *something* had woken her...

She suddenly froze, her blood turning to ice as her neck hairs lifted. *The Saxon*. She scanned the clearing but the cloudy sky and the deepening twilight made it difficult to see clearly. Nor did she see any sign of Cynfran.

She rose to her feet slowly, her heart pounding as the uncanny sense of the Saxon's approach intensified. A stink that she could sense but not smell. He must be close. They were in the shadows under the tree, and perhaps would not be seen if they were careful.

"It's him!!!" Tegyn hissed, struggling to raise himself on one elbow, his face distorted in pain. "Lady, you must—"

"Hush!" She looked down at him, urgent. "Lie still."

Movement on the far end of the clearing snagged her attention. A man stepped out from the shadowed trees. Large, muscled, hair unkempt. Her breath caught in her throat. Perhaps he would not see them...

But her heart seized in fear as he walked straight towards them. She willed

herself not to move, not to make a sound, but still he advanced towards them relentlessly. As he got closer she saw he carried a sword.

"Mam dum," she whispered. *We will die here.* Her heart hammered so hard she thought she might faint, but she forced herself calm her racing thoughts. She needed a weapon. She frantically scanned the area but saw nothing she could use, not even a felled limb.

Tegyn managed to pull himself to a sitting position against the tree. "Lady, you must flee. He will kill you."

Nona ignored him. The sun was sinking below the horizon, bringing an upwelling of Fey power. She had no fear that the Saxon would be affected, for now that she saw him she knew their speculations were wrong. He was no Fey.

But I am. The power could help her. If only there was something she could use...her gaze snagged on the fire, and an idea seized into place. It wouldn't stop him, but maybe slow him down. Another idea struck her, and she looked down at Tegyn. "Your sword—is it with your horse?"

He grimaced, his gaze darting to the steadily approaching man "Yes, but you'll not get it before he reaches us."

The horses were tethered to the right of them, about ten metres away. If she could distract him, sprint for the horses...

It was a chaotic plan, certain to fail, especially since the horses were lunging at their tie-lines, whinnying in terror as the unnatural sense of the Saxon affected them.

The man began to curse and yell as he advanced, foul words that rent the air.

"Flee, Lady, now!"

She ignored his desperate plea, focusing instead on the swelling power as the sun approached the horizon. Luckily her rest had restored some of her power. *May it be enough.*

The sun dipped behind the horizon and she opened herself to the flood of power, adding the little she had, and sprang into motion. One flying step brought her to the fire and she grabbed the stick that she had noticed sticking out of the flames, holding it aloft in a whoosh of sparks and light.

The Saxon turned at her motion, stalking towards her with his sword lifted and his face contorted by a snarl. For a second she saw him clearly in the firelight. He looked massive to her eyes, tall with dark wild hair, his eyes wild and blazing.

"Bitch!" He spat out the word as he advanced, both hands on the sword's hilt as he lifted it, the edge gleaming red from the reflected flames. "I'll drink your blood, whore, cut you to pieces and—"

She heaved the stick with all her might at him, aided by Fey power, and turned and sprinted to the horses.

A rage-filled scream rent the air behind her and then, the savage snarl of a beast. The sound stopped her in her tracks and she spun around to see the silver form of Geneth leaping towards the Saxon, then twisting in mid-leap as the

sword arched towards her.

But not fast enough. The dog gave a heart-rending squeal as the sword bit home and Geneth fell to the ground, unmoving.

An unearthly yell split the air and the Saxon spun around with unnatural speed as Cynfran ran towards him, aflame with Fey power, holding his sword in his hand. But the man didn't stand and fight. He kicked at the fire, spreading flames and embers in Cynfran's path, causing him to come to a skidding halt.

Nona grabbed at Tegyn's horse's bridle, her touch calming it enough for her to fumble at the sword's hilt, panting as she pulled it from the scabbard and whirled around with it in both hands, fully expecting to see the Saxon advancing on her.

But instead she saw that the Saxon had turned and fled, his form a dark shadow as he disappeared into the darkness under the trees from whence he had appeared.

Nona panted, her blood roaring in her ears as she tried to gather herself together. *God have mercy. Christ have mercy.*

Cynfran dropped to his knees beside the dog, keening in an almost wolf-like manner, his face wet with tears.

The sight spurred her into action and she dropped the sword, running to him, her hands frantic on the dog as she fell to her knees. "Let me help," she said, seeking the extent of the injury. "I might be able to—" She stopped abruptly, realizing it was futile.

The dog was dead. Fear turned to rage in a heartbeat at the destruction the Saxon left behind once again. Not only the dog. Celyn's family and so many others had suffered at his hands.

Her power rushed through her in a mighty flood as she grabbed Cynfran's discarded sword and sprang to her feet. *He must pay.* But a hand clamped around her ankle, stopping her before she take a step. She twisted around with a snarl. "Release me!"

"Stop, girl," Cynfran said, his voice firm. His power snapped against her. "It's done. Quickly, now, let it go."

For a moment she didn't understand, and then, suddenly she did. It wasn't his power that she felt, it was hers, coursing through her, causing the hair on her arms to lift, the sweet rush of it teetering on pain as her fingers and toes prickled.

Appalling realization struck as she let it go, gasping as she staggered and then fell to her knees beside the Unseele. Her dizziness returned tenfold and she closed her eyes, willing it to go away. She moaned as nausea roiled through her and she sunk down on her elbows, her face to the cool earth.

Every Fey knew they had to be careful when they used their power. Every Fey child had it drilled into them. Especially the newly Quickened, who were sometimes reckless with the use of it. Nona had thought those warnings didn't apply to her, though. She was level-headed, not scatter-brained and flighty.

Yet she had forgotten all of that in the panic of her first real test. *Foolish girl,*

her auntie had often said, affectionately, but Nona heard those words now in condemnation.

She barely noticed the Unselie get up, but suddenly he was there again, thrusting a mug of ale under her nose. "Drink."

She took it with a trembling hand, wiping her mouth and handing it back when she had drained it. Very carefully she pushed herself up so that she was leaning back on her heels. Her gaze fell on the dog again and grief rose, sharp as a knife. "I'm sorry," she choked out, her throat aching. She let out a sob and pressed a trembling hand to her mouth to stifle more, feeling foolish. What was this animal to her?

But it was not just the dog. It was delayed shock, and the thought of Celyn's family and the fear his lovely wife Eleri must have felt that assailed her now.

Grief flashed across Cynfran's face. "She gave her life gladly and saved us both," he said, looking down and laying a hand gently on the dog's head for a moment. He looked back at her. "Do not be sorry." He got up and brought back her cloak, which he draped over her shoulders, crouching in front of her. "You did well. Think you, my brother would surely be dead if you had not acted. You saved him not once, but twice this day."

Her eyes flared wide. *Tegyn*. "How is he?" She tried to rise, but he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Sit. He is fine. See for yourself." He motioned for her to turn.

She swivelled carefully so she could look behind her. *Tegyn* sat propped up against the tree, his face pale and his eyes closed. "I must see to him."

But he didn't release her. He eyed her critically. "You have not the strength. Rest for a moment. You will recover soon." He took a breath. "But we must leave this place as soon as you are able."

She straightened up. "Leave?"

"'Tis not safe here. The Saxon might come back. We dare not risk it. Without *Tegyn*'s sword arm, and with *Geneth* gone—" He swallowed, his eyes bleak. "I cannot fight him off alone, that is certain. You saw him. The darkness that powers him is too much for one Fey alone. If he comes back we are all as good as dead."

"But to travel at night..." She swallowed, her already sensitive stomach roiling at the thought of encountering the crazed Saxon again.

"We need not travel all night. Only far enough that he could not catch us before dawn. We are on horseback, he is not."

"You know that for certain?"

"I have seen no sign of a horse."

"'Twill be dangerous for your brother. He should keep still for a few days at the very least."

Cynfran ignored her protest. "We have to go."

"But Arthen will be coming here tomorrow. If he sees us gone..." Cold pierced her at the thought.

Cynfran grimaced and opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly froze as a low snarling voice drifted to them across the clearing.

“...drink your blood, *mealas*, tear you to pieces and string you up, bite—” The words drifted off and silence fell again.

Nona met Cynfran’s gaze, the horror she felt reflected in his eyes.

“We must go, and quickly,” the Unseelie said. “I will send a message to your father’s man. To stay here means death for us all. Rest. I will get the horses ready.”

Nona closed her eyes as he sprang up and hurried to their mounts, trying to ignore the fear that seized her. *Good Christ, protect us. O rock-like warrior of a hundred hosts, O fair crowned One, victorious, skilled in battle. Fight for us.* Murmuring the prayer a few times before the Unseelie joined her again helped to calm her rioting heart.

Cynfran was a dark shadow now that night had truly fallen, but his form glimmered slightly with Fey power. “All is ready. Let us go.”

She nodded and took his proffered hand as an aid for rising. She felt weak as a kitten, and the dizziness plagued her still, but she gritted her teeth and ignored it. If she hoped to survive this night, she had to get moving.

Chapter 5

The night shrouded them as they rode. Nona held on grimly to the reins, fighting back nausea and the terrible swooping vertigo that assailed her. Heaven only knew how Tegyn fared. He had swooned again as he tried to mount his horse, so Cynfran had hauled him in front of him on his horse and held on to him as he rode. They tied his mount with a lead rope to Nona's saddle.

They weren't able to move quickly, but even despite the difficulties Nona felt better to be away from the clearing. She only prayed that Tegyn would survive the journey. She certainly would be of no use to him. Her own power was drained.

They had only gone about a quarter hour down the road when Cynfran suddenly drew his horse to a stop, peering intently at the side of the road. As Nona directed her mount beside his she gasped as she saw what had halted the Unselie.

A shadowed form hung from a sturdy branch of an oak, terribly still. "God, have mercy!" She crossed herself quickly. "He has killed himself?" She peered at the form, but it was hard to see details. "Is it the Saxon?"

Cynfran glanced at her. "I cannot tell." He grimaced. "'Tis doubtful. He could not get here this quickly..." His words trailed off, and he shook his head. "But he seems to move on the wind, for all that he is not Fey. Can you have a look? I cannot dismount. And you got a clearer look at him than I did."

Nona swallowed, her flesh creeping at the thought of approaching the dead body. She nodded and dismounted carefully, willing herself to calm. She peered at the body as she approached. But she froze as a slight breeze came up and the corpse slowly began to rotate as if touched by an unseen hand. She halted, her stomach revolting as the breeze brought her the coppery iron scent of blood. It was too much for her unsteady stomach, and she had to lean over, retching.

"What is it?" Cynfran cursed as he fought against his horse which had suddenly reared, spooked by the same smell of blood that had stopped Nona.

Nona stumbled back to Maun and grabbed his reins before he could take off, twining her fingers in his mane to keep herself upright, the slight dripping noise of blood falling onto the fallen leaves under the dangling feet echoing through her mind.

She leaned over and heaved again. *Christ, have mercy. Mother of God, pray for us.*

"Healer!" Cynfran's voice was urgent.

"I'm fine," she managed, although she decidedly was not. She sucked in a breath, trying to calm her heart. "Not the Saxon," she said, closing her eyes and leaning against the bulk of her horse. "His work, I think. It wasn't the hanging that killed him."

"God, have mercy," Cynfran muttered, under his breath.

"Christ preserve us," she added, faintly. If only she wasn't so dizzy she would feel a lot better.

"We must leave this place. Can you ride?"

"In a moment," she said, fighting back the nausea. "There's something else." She looked up at the Unseelie's shadowed form and drew in another breath. "This man carries a bow."

She couldn't see his features, but he drew back as if she had slapped him, and he peered back at the hanging man. "A bow? But that..." he trailed off, his horse shifting uncomfortably underneath him. He turned back to her. "It wasn't the Saxon who tried to kill my brother." He spoke the statement in a flat voice.

"Nay." A memory flashed through her mind of the crazed man advancing towards her, lit by firelight as her torch spun towards him. "He had no bow, I'm sure of it."

Cynfran let out a breath, peering again at the dead man. His horse huffed and tossed his head again, hooves dancing beneath him. "God's blood," he muttered, trying to manage the horse and hold on to his brother at the same time. "I can't get any closer to see if I recognize him. We'll go but a little further and stop for the night. I'll come back in the morning and check."

"No!" Nona held up a hand. "It will do you no good." She swallowed back the bile that rose in her throat and forced the words out. "I did not get a good look,

but his face...” It was no use. Her stomach rebelled at the memory and she heaved again, sparkles flashing around her eyes as the blood roared in her ears.

She stayed bent over with her hands on her knees for a moment, head hanging down. The rush of blood to her head made the sparkles disappear.

“Settle yourself, girl.” Cynfran’s words were firm, but not unsympathetic. “We must leave this cursed place. Only a little further.”

Nona nodded, too spent to speak, and wearily hauled herself up on the horse.

If this was adulthood, she wanted no more of it.

She woke to bright sunshine and a pounding headache. But as she pushed herself upright from she realized the dizziness was gone. A small mercy. She looked around. Tegyn still slept nearby, and Cynfran heated something over a fire in a small iron container, using a crude tripod he had fashioned from some bigger sticks.

He saw her sit up and poured a small amount of liquid from the pot into a mug and brought it to her.

She frowned as she caught a whiff of it and looked up at him, her eyebrows raised.

He shrugged. “I told you, my mother was a Healer. She taught me a few remedies. I used some of the herbs from your bag, and added some feverfew I found nearby. She always used it for headaches.”

“Your power tells you what I suffer from, does it?” She couldn’t help the sour note to her voice.

“Nay. Experience. I’ve overused my power a time or two. Worse than too much ale.” He shrugged. “Drink or not, I do not care.”

She swallowed her pride and took the mug, draining the contents quickly. “How is he?” She motioned to Tegyn.

Cynfran shrugged again, worry shadowing his face as he looked over at him.

Nona forced herself upright, ignoring her pounding head, and went over to the injured man. After a quick examination she leaned back on her heels, glancing up at Cynfran, who had joined her. “He is doing better than I expected.”

Relief filled his face. “Good. Can he travel?”

“Travel? Don’t be foolish. ’Tis only God’s good grace that he survived last night’s journey. He needs rest.”

“I don’t ask what is needed, I ask what is possible.” He scowled at her expression. “We must keep moving. The Saxon still roams. He may yet catch up with us. And last night we discovered it was another who sought my brother’s death. We are not safe here.”

“The one responsible for this is dead,” Nona protested, waving at the injured man.

“Yes. But think you, was he alone?”

A wren began to sing sweetly in the tree above them, the trilling song an odd counterpoint to the thoughts of danger and death that they discussed.

She saw his point, but it didn't mean she had to like it. "Your brother is not out of danger. He could yet die."

"And if the Saxon hunts us down, or another assassin, we will all die."

"There seem many who wish you dead," she retorted. "To which you can add my father, when Arthen discovers me gone. Or had you forgotten he was coming to join us today?"

His eyes flashed. "I am Vowed to keep you safe. He will understand my actions." He let out a breath. "We cannot stay here. Surely you see that?"

She bit back the words that rose to her mouth and forced herself to think. "I would see more clearly if you would tell me why you are being hunted."

He looked at her, his hazel eyes wary, and then got up to go sit at the fire. He motioned at her to join him. "'Tis simple," he said with a sigh. "You know of Tegyn's ambition for the throne. Our king's son sees him as a threat."

Shock pierced her as she understood his meaning. "But the Rule—"

"The Rule." Cynfran snorted. "Of course. You Seelies and your precious Rule."

"'Tis for all the Fey," she protested. "*To kill a Fey is to kill yourself.*"

"Of course. Which is why the one hanging under the tree is likely a human."

A chill washed over her. "He would compel a human to kill another Fey?"

"That is my guess. But I doubt a Charm was involved. Gold will do just as well." He scowled at her expression. "Don't be childish. There is a high price of entry into the game of kings, one often paid in blood. That is true for Unseelie or Seelie, human or Fey." He snorted. "Surely you know that there are Seelie kings who have gained a throne by wading through another's blood."

Nona wanted badly to deny the accusation, but she could not. Not when it was rumoured that her own uncle, who sought the Seelie throne five years past, had died in battle from the blow of rival, not at the hands of the Saxons he was fighting. "Then I will go back, wait for Arthen myself."

He shook his head. "And risk running into the Saxon again? Alone?" He pressed home his point before she could answer. "Besides, as you said, my brother still needs your skills."

She couldn't find an argument against him, which made her ire rise. "And where will this journey end?"

His jaw tightened. "Home. 'Tis two days travel, only."

"Two days?" She sprang up, and immediately regretted it, as her head pounded harder. "And what of Arthen? He travels with Annes, the Healer. They will be at the mercy of the Saxon, too, or do you not care?"

"I have already sent a message to them. While you slept I Called a dog from a nearby holding and directed him to find your father's man. He carries a message on a rope on his neck. They will be in no danger."

"You have already—!" She spun on her heel, crossing her arms in front of her, trying to control herself. *God, give me strength.* She turned back to him. "So you give me no choice."

“No.”

Anger flared at his agreement. “You cannot—”

“Enough.” Cynfran crossed his arms, his eyes glowing as his power rose, the strength of it sparking against her. “We will leave in an hour.”

Her arguments withered in the face of his obstinacy. There was nothing she could do.

Chapter 6

Two days later they stopped at the crest of a hill, looking down at a small settlement nestled at its base alongside a swiftly flowing stream. The sun shone brightly, the sky blue behind the bulk of the steeply rising mountains all around.

Normally Nona would have thought it beautiful, but not under the circumstances. She wanted to be anywhere but there. Her only consolation was that soon her father would be coming to bring her home.

Although that was a small consolation. The terse message they had received back, carried by the dog, was little comfort: *We are coming*. The *we* could only mean Arthen had consulted with her father and that they would arrive together.

And what exactly would the confrontation look like when her high-ranking Seelie father arrived here at the home of these Unseelies, accusing them of stealing her away? Her mouth went dry at the thought.

Above her a peregrine falcon rode the breeze effortlessly, its high chirping call coming to her from far away. Her father's eyes, for he was Eagleclan, and this bird, Gwir, his bonded companion. Her presence meant he was at most a half days ride away.

Cynfran looked up at the falcon circling overhead. He had spotted the bird earlier and Nona had told him of its significance. There was no point in hiding it, being that he was Animal Clan. Those Fey with that Gift could often sense when an animal was bonded to another Fey. And besides, she didn't mind that he knew her father was watching.

Considering all the times she had chafed at Albanwyr's surveillance of her through his birds, he would be well satisfied to know it. *Mayhap the only thing he will be satisfied with*, she thought with a grimace.

Tegyn looked at her. He was still pale, and their travel had been slowed because of his need for frequent stops to rest. But he was alive, and despite all that had happened Nona could not help but be happy for that. "We will soon be at the *tref*. You need not fear."

"No?" She swallowed. It was now or never to speak of what had occupied her mind as they travelled. "Your king sent an assassin on your trail. You have not told me the reasons for why you pursued the Saxon, but I can only assume your quest cannot have been secret, else how did the assassin know where to find you? Which means there is at least one among your kindred here who is not happy with your attempt to wrest the throne away from your king's heir. One who betrayed you to your rival. They will not be happy with your return."

Cynfran scowled. "I have Vowed your safety, do not forget."

"You have Vowed it, but your Court has not. What is your Vow worth if they greet you with a blow, not a kiss?"

Tegyn grimaced. "There are far more here who support my claim than who do not." He sighed. "Our pursuit of the Saxon was to prove wrong the rumour of his place among the Unseelies and to end the scourge of his foul deeds. More will be disappointed that we failed in our quest than will be sorry to see me return." His gaze sharpened on hers. "That Selwyn ap Coed gained the Seelie throne was a great boon to the Cymry Unseelie. How much better for the Cymry that both of the Southern Courts are led by one of our own? That we wrest control from the Mercian Fey? Many support me in my bid for the throne. Leofgod's attempt on my life speaks to his worry that I will succeed." He spoke with intensity. His personality had been hidden by pain and fatigue on their journey, but now Nona saw the combination of charm and power that marked him. He would make a formidable rival. No wonder Leofgod had taken the chance he did.

She also understood what Tegyn had not said. Capturing the Saxon would have been a perfect opportunity to prove Tegyn's worthiness to take the throne, a brave deed to win over those who might not be convinced.

Cynfran glanced at his brother, and then back at her. "Tegyn will make a far better king than Leofgod, son of Wulfgar. Most here understand that." He paused, his eyes intent on hers. "But think you, we must be careful all the same. You must keep our discovery of the assassin to yourself. It could be dangerous to reveal we know of this plot. We will only say it was the Saxon himself who

drew the bow, as we first assumed before we found the dead man.”

Nona nodded. “Aye, I understand.”

Tegyn spoke again. “I will not forget that you have saved my life. I owe you a great deal.”

Nona could not help her flush of pleasure at his words, but she remembered her auntie’s admonition of the danger of pride and waved her hand. “All for the glory of God,” she murmured.

He nodded. “Even so, Healer, I thank you.”

“Come, brother, we have dallied long enough,” Cynfran said. He swung his horse around and urged it into motion.

Nona sucked in her breath to settle her nerves. She was not unused to the schemes and plots of both the Fey and human Courts. Her choice to help this Unseelie who sought to usurp Wulfgar’s bid for the throne had been risky. There would have been difficult consequences from success or failure both. It was too early to say which of those her actions would prove to be. Likely they would not know until the Unseelie Gathering and the new king was crowned.

She could not dwell on it. For now, she had only to endure until nightfall, when her father would come. She clenched her jaw. *Please God, may he not come in anger.*

They had not gone far down the path when Cynfran suddenly pulled his horse to a halt as he squinted at the settlement below. “God’s blood!”

Tegyn frowned as he looked at the jumble of buildings, then suddenly stiffened. He exchanged a dark look with his brother.

“What is it?” Nona asked, alarmed.

Cynfran glanced at her. “You see the standard, there, by the hall?”

A black flag with a red and white boar embroidered upon it fixed to a pole stood stuck in the ground by the hall, where some horses were tied to a wooden rail.

She glanced at him. “The boar. What of it?”

“’Tis Leofgod. He’s here.”

Nona felt the blood drain from her face. “Here?” She gathered herself. “We must leave, then, before he discovers us.”

Tegyn scowled. “We’ll not hide like outlaws. This is our home.” He kicked his horse’s flanks and trotted it down the road.

“Is he mad?” Nona looked at Cynfran.

But she got no answer. He merely shook his head and rode after his brother.

God, have mercy. She was stepping into the midst of a bloody struggle for the throne. She knew how easily the innocent could suffer when the those in power played their games of conquest, whether it be war or succession.

She looked up at the falcon, wheeling above. *Hurry, father.*

Chapter 7

Like all *trefi*, the settlement where Cynfran lived was made up of a large extended family along with their tenant farmers and slaves, ruled over by a high-ranking *breyr*. Unusually, in this case the high-ranking nobleman here was a Fey. Nefydd of Powys was not only held in high esteem in the Unseelie Court, but was also part of the trusted war band of Eiludd, king of Powys. Usually the Fey preferred not to be so prominent in human affairs.

Also unusual were the number of Fey she noticed as they rode into the settlement, more than were typical. In fact most of the people she saw working in the early summer fields were Fey, as were most who greeted them in the settlement as they rode towards the main hall.

In secret we are born, in secret we must stay. Thus we survive, by the Rule of the Fey. It was the first and most important Rule. Yet these Unseelies seemed to take no notice of it.

But she had little time to ponder it, for as she entered the hall behind Cynfran and Tegyn her attention was captured by the two men who stood conversing at the front of the hall. One was an older man, obviously Cymry in his looks and

dress, who she presumed must be the *breyr* Nefydd. The other, a tall thin blonde man, must be Leofgod. A couple of other Saxons, presumably Leofgod's men, stood nearby.

Nefydd glanced over at them as they entered and broke off his discussion with the Saxon, hurrying towards them, limping slightly as he did so. He was of average height, with the same lean build as his sons, but there the resemblance ended. A large chin dominated his face, his eyes the same light green as her own. He was bald, his scalp shiny in the sunlight that shone through the open windows of the hall.

"God be praised!" he exclaimed, embracing Cynfran in a back-slapping hug. "You have returned!" He glanced at the Saxon, a smile wreathing his face and added in the Saxon tongue, "My sons have returned from their quest!"

Tegyn held out a hand as his father moved to embrace him, too. "Have a care, Father. I have been injured, and your greeting might be too much for me." He, too, spoke in the Saxon tongue.

Nona dared a glance at Leofgod, and saw the tightening of his face, quickly masked. Her blood went cold. What they speculated must be true. *Mam Dum. Mother of God.*

"Injured?" Nefydd drew back, and suddenly he noticed her. "And who is this?"

Tegyn remained silent, allowing her the Fey courtesy of giving her own name. She could choose how much or how little to reveal.

"I am Nona *ferch* Albanwyr, a Healer of Arfon. Cynfran found me along the road soon after his brother was wounded, and I came to his aid. The rest is his tale to tell." She, too, spoke in the Saxon tongue, grateful that her father had insisted she learn the harsh language. She very much wanted both of them to understand her answer. Quick understanding flashed over both men's faces. Her father was high-placed among the Seelies, his name well-known among all the Fey.

It was a gamble to reveal this. She would have great value as a hostage. But that was a remote possibility. She didn't think Nefydd would dare. Especially since his son had vowed her safety.

"How fortunate for your son, that the winds brought this Healer to him in his time of need," Leofgod said, before Nefydd could speak. His voice was pleasant, but she saw the hardness in his eyes.

"Yes, indeed, praise God and all the saints." Nefydd turned to his sons. "Come then. A feast is being prepared to welcome Lord Leofgod. Come wash the dust of the road from your throats and tell us all that has happened."

Nefydd sat back with a frown on his face as Cynfran finished the tale. "A pity the Saxon escaped." He looked at Nona. "I am most grateful to you, Lady, for your assistance. It seems I have you to thank you for my son's life."

Before she could answer, Leofgod spoke up. "Indeed. My people will be

astonished to hear that a Seelie would stoop so low.”

Nona sucked in a breath at the insult, but her retort died in her mouth at the bitter anger she saw in the Saxon’s eyes as he glanced at her over the rim of the silver goblet he held.

“Come, Lord Leofgod. She saved my life, and is an honoured guest here.” Tegyn said. His voice was mild, but there was no mistaking the steely edge in it.

“Of course,” Nefydd interjected. “We are all grateful for this Healer’s actions, is that not so, my lord?”

Nona didn’t miss the tiny inflection on the word *all*, nor that Leofgod’s smile in no way reached his eyes.

“Of course, Lord Nefydd,” the Mercian murmured. “I merely meant that ’tis rare for a member of one Court to help one of another where there is no hope of gain. ’Tis admirable indeed that the Lady Nona did so.”

It was not much of an apology, but it would do. Nona inclined her head in acknowledgement, trying to look unruffled despite the cold sweat pooling under her armpits.

Nefydd took a long drink and lowered his goblet, his eyes sparkling as he turned to Nona. “Tell us, then, about your king. We Unseelies here in Powys have a great affection for him, no matter that he leads your Court. He has shown us what is possible.”

Nona nodded, careful to keep her glance away from Leofgod. “Indeed, my lord. He is an inspiration to us all. He leads with great wisdom and courage.” Her father would choke on his ale to hear her describe Selwyn such, but she would never reveal her true feelings about the vain and capricious Seelie King to these Unseelies.

To her relief, Nefydd turned to conversation to other things. He must have felt he had taken enough jabs at the Mercian. Nona was happy to put her head down and eat the food. The less she said, the better.

When they had finished eating, Leofgod turned to her. “I have travelled far to speak to Nefydd and his sons about some matters relating to the Unseelie Court. I’m sure you can understand that I cannot speak freely with you here. Would you give us leave to speak in private?”

Nona felt a flush staining her cheeks. “Of course, my lord.” She got up. “My father will soon be here. I will go outside and await his arrival.”

Truth be told she was glad of the excuse to exit the hall and leave the tense atmosphere. She could only imagine what Leofgod had to say, and pray that the conversation would not erupt into violence.

That disquieting thought led her to the pasture, where she found Maun eating clover contentedly. She was debating whether or not she should re-saddle him, so as to be ready for a quick escape, when she heard someone approach her from behind.

She turned to see one of the men who had been with Leofgod in the hall approaching her. The coldness in his eyes as he stopped dried the words of

greeting out of her mouth.

“Leofgod bids me to tell you that your interference has been noted,” he said, his gaze intent. “Tell your king that we do not look lightly on this attempt to sway the Unseelie Court.” His gaze swept over her. “Step carefully, girl. Your part in this has been noted.” Without waiting for her reply he turned on his heel and stalked back to the hall.

Nona swallowed, sucking in a trembling breath to try to calm her rioting heart. Her act of mercy had been misinterpreted as somehow being directed by Selwyn. Which was ridiculous, of course. The Courts did not interfere with each other’s affairs, certainly not with the choosing of a king.

But suddenly a thought struck her, and she leaned against the pasture fence as her knees went weak.

God have mercy.

Chapter 8

Nona's agitated thoughts compelled her to take a walk around the settlement, trailed occasionally by children who tugged at her skirts, giggling when she turned. She had nearly completed a circuit and was wondering if she should dare enter the hall when the dogs began to bark, signalling new arrivals.

She turned to look down the path that entered the *tref* and relief washed over her as she saw her father and Arthen approaching, along with two other of her father's men. The guard standing by the hall went inside to alert Nefydd. As the men of Gwynedd pulled their horses to a halt Nefydd and his sons came out of the hall, followed by Leofgod and his men.

Albanwyr glanced at her, but she had no time to speak before Nefydd spoke.

"Greetings, Albanwyr of Arfon." The *breyr* raised his hand in welcome. "You are welcome here indeed. We are long parted."

Her father nodded, his sharp gaze darting among the gathered Fey. "But never far apart."

"God has indeed blessed us! First Lord Leofgod of Mercia comes to us, and now a representative from the Seelie Court."

Albanwyr looked at Leofgod, his face carefully neutral. "Greetings, my lord."

Leofgod inclined his head in acknowledgement, but stayed silent.

Albanwyr looked back at Nefydd. "I come only to take my daughter home, my lord, not under the banner of Selwyn ap Coed."

"Of course. But surely you will tarry here tonight and rest from your journey? Join us in our feasting?"

Albanwyr's smile was wintry. "Let's be honest, my lord. Your desire to entertain me is likely as strong as mine is to be entertained. I will take my daughter and leave, for both our sakes."

Nefydd looked startled, and then he burst out in a laugh. "Aye, then. So be it. Go on your way, and may God bless you." He turned to Nona. "Again I thank you, Lady, for my son's life. You have done us a great boon."

She nodded her head briefly.

Albanwyr turned to Cynfran. "Arthen tells me you Vowed to keep my daughter safe, and so you have done. I thank you, Unseelie."

Cynfran flushed, and nodded with little grace.

Leofgod spoke up. "Give my regards to Selwyn when you next see him, Seelie. If I am made king we will have words, I am sure." He paused, his lips lifting in a cold smile. "Best you keep your daughter close to home, Lord Albanwyr, lest no other misfortune befall her."

Her father's jaw bunched, the falcon above suddenly screeching in an alarm call. "You can be sure of it, my lord."

Nefydd gave an order that Nona's horse be made ready, and while a slave rushed to do his bidding, Tegyn turned to her. "Once again I thank you, my lady. I will not forget your kindness towards me."

In the light of Leofgod's dark scowl, Nona felt the safest answer was a nod.

Soon they had said their farewells and headed up out of the path that led out of the *trefi*. They had not gone far when Albanwyr turned to her. "We will not speak of this where there are so many ears to hear. Hold your tongue until I give you leave, do you understand?"

"Of course," Nona said, relief filling her. She was more than happy to put off their conversation off as long as possible.

But her reprieve only lasted but an hour, when night had fallen and they were forced to stop. After building a fire her father set Arthen and the other guards to stand watch. Looking for the Saxon and the Unseelies both, Nona supposed.

Albanwyr sat down across the fire from her. "I am not sure whether I should applaud you or whip you, and that's God's own truth," he said, through his teeth. "God's blood, girl, what were you thinking to go off like that, and with an Unseelie, no less! Are you mad?"

Nona lifted her chin. She had rehearsed her arguments over the past days so they rolled off her tongue easily, even though they held little strength in the light of all she had surmised. "I am a Healer. A man was in need. I could not turn away."

“You could not?” Albanwyr scoffed. “An Unseelie? A claimant to their throne? Alone? I would have whipped the hide off of Arthen for allowing it except that I needed him to show me the way.”

She swallowed. “’Twas my decision. I told him to go. If you will punish someone, punish me.”

“Aye, and I will, never fear, daughter!” He sprang to his feet and turned from her, his arms crossing across his chest. He heaved in a breath or two and then turned around. The anger had drained from his face, she was glad to see, but the grief she saw there hit her like a blow. “You are so much like your mother. I cannot bear to lose you too, do you not understand, *fy ngeneth*?”

Her heart tore at his distress. “I’m sorry, Da, truly. But you have taught me my duty. I cannot ride to war as a son might do. But I will do what I am called to do, even so. A man was injured. And by God’s grace he lives because I was there.” She swallowed. “But perhaps it was an ill-formed decision, even so.”

Her father’s eyes sharpened on hers. “What do you mean? Speak plainly.”

Her stomach churned, but she took in a breath and recounted all that had happened. “I could not fathom why Leofgod could possibly think that I was Selwyn’s pawn in a plot to interfere with the Unseelie succession.” She met his gaze. “Until I realized the most probable explanation was that it was true. Selwyn is in league with Tegyn to help him gain the Unseelie Throne.” Albanwyr’s eyes flickered, and shock propelled her to her feet. “This is no surprise to you?”

He sighed. “Nay.” He waved at her. “Sit down, *fy ngeneth*.” His mouth twisted. “We Fey walk a fine line in this world. Up until now you have been sheltered from the true cost of it. Loyalties collide between our Blood and the humans, and between Courts. Those loyalties can be hard to navigate. You know full well that the Saxons have forced the Cymry into our mountains, leaving us with our backs against the sea. The Mercian Fey have come to dominate both Courts. Tegyn said it to you himself: that Selwyn ap Coed gained the Seelie throne was a great boon to the Cymry Fey. ’Twas only natural that there might be some aid given to another Cymry who sought to lead the Southern Unseelie Court. Carefully. Some counsel, perhaps. Some influence on those who share families between the Courts.” He shrugged slightly. “These things happen every time a throne changes hands. But this time there is more at stake, more layers of loyalty to consider.”

“And I stepped in the midst of it.” She hesitated, and then told the last part of the tale that she had left out. “Leofgod told me to tell our King that his interference had been noted. I fear Selwyn will be none too pleased with me.”

A wry grin twisted her father’s mouth. “As to that, it won’t be the first time one of our family has been out of favour with our King.” He shook his head. “You are a Healer. You did not truly understand the consequences, but you were right to save his life. Never fear, *fy ngeneth*. I will protect you from Selwyn’s wrath.”

Fy ngeneth. My girl. The loving endearment pierced her. “I am a girl no longer,

Da. In but a month I will be married and Cynric will have the care of me.”

A shadow crossed his face and he looked away from her, into the fire.

Nona frowned. “What is it?”

He met her gaze again. “There will be no marriage. Cynric will not come back from fighting with Cadafael. Word came just before we left that he is dead.”

“Dead?” Shock pierced her and then, to her shame, relief. She shook her head, guilt filling her. “May God have mercy on his soul,” she murmured, crossing herself.

Her father grunted and followed her lead. “Aye. Although ’twas not the Christ who welcomed him after he breathed his last, more’s the pity.” He shook his head. “We need not pretend to mourn, *fy ngeneth*. Neither of us were pleased with the match. But Cadafael forced my hand, as you well know.” He leaned forward, intent. “Think you, this is an opportunity God has given us, and just in time.”

She frowned, trying to digest the news. *Cynric, dead*. True, she had not liked him much, but she had resigned herself to do her duty. To be suddenly free of it was hard to fathom.

“We have another chance to make a match for you. A name came to mind as we journeyed here, but I dismissed it. But now I see God’s purpose.”

“What do you mean? Who do you speak of?”

“Conaire Mac Alpin, of Dál Riata.”

“Dál Riata,” she said faintly. *So far north, amongst the Scotti*. She hardly knew what to think. The name meant nothing to her.

Albanwyr’s jaw bunched. “Leofgod will not forget your interference. No matter if he gains the throne or not, he will gain his revenge on those who set themselves against him. He will not move against you openly. But I fear he will strike even so.”

Nona swallowed, meeting her father’s eyes. “He said as much,” she admitted, and quickly recounted what Leofgod’s man had told her.

Anger darkened Albanwyr’s face and his jaw clenched. “As I said. You are not safe in Gwynedd.” He blew out a breath. “When we are back home I will send word to Dál Riata. Cadafael seeks to make alliances with the northern kingdoms to bolster his strength against both Northumbria and Mercia. I can sell the match to him. By God’s grace, at this time next year you will be safely north, out of Leofgod’s reach. And far from Selwyn’s anger at your exposure of his connections to Tegyn ap Nefydd, even if you did so all unwitting.” He frowned. “You must leave as soon as possible. Once the details are arranged, think you, perhaps you should go to Bebbanburg to see Celyn. Wait there over the winter, and in the spring he can escort you to Dál Riata, or your betrothed can come to you there.”

Nona only half-listened. She still had not adjusted to Cynric’s death. To think of another betrothal was beyond her. But when Albanwyr mentioned Celyn she snapped to attention. She had not seen her favourite cousin since he left Gwynedd in the wake of his family’s death. “But he is painted as a betrayer.

Surely Cadafael would not want...” her words trailed off. She wasn’t actually sure what the king of Gwynedd would or would not want.

Her father waved a hand. “It will be no matter.” His eyes gleamed suddenly in the firelight as he grinned. “We Fey are good at getting our way when the winds blow in our favour. And right now, I sense they are.”

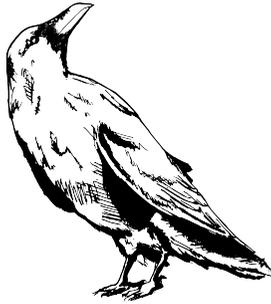
Nona couldn’t help but smile back, his excitement spurring her own, replacing the fears that had assailed her ever since her meeting with the Unseelies.

Her decision to help Cynfran came with many consequences. Time would tell whether they would be good or bad.

But no matter. She was a woman grown, and her decision had been her own. As would the consequences.

Human or Fey, ’twas the way of the world, after all.

PART TWO



BONUS CHAPTERS

A SINGULAR OBSESSION

In Wilding, after Thomas meets Godric at Wulfstam and the two part company, the harper drops out from the rest of the book. This is because the other chapters featuring Godric were all from his point of view, showing what he was doing apart from Thomas. Since I could only include chapters from Thomas' point of view I could not include the other Godric ones. The bulk of those chapters I rewrote into this short story, which I included as bonus content for newsletter subscribers after Wilding was released.

Some readers have told me they have a soft spot in their hearts for Godric. If you are one of those, never fear. His story comes back in Bound, the second book of the trilogy.

Near Eoforwic, Deira

November 11, AD 642

“WAKE UP, MASTER! Wake up!”

The voice in his ear, coupled with the small hand shaking his shoulder, brought Godric out of a deep sleep. He opened his eyes blearily to see a small boy staring at him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m awake.” He closed his eyes against the bright morning sunlight, taking stock. The wagon rumbled along underneath him, jostling him with every bump in the road. He opened his eyes again. The round blue eyes of the boy were still fixed on him with fascination. He sighed, and winced as he pushed himself painfully to a sitting position. Too much ale last night. He should have known better. The family’s enjoyment of his show, the fine brew the father insisted on sharing, and the worshipful blue eyes of the oldest daughter had pushed him into indulging more than was his custom.

He vaguely remembered staggering over to the family’s wagon last night and climbing in the back to settle down amongst the straw and the belongings that were stacked in the wagon’s bed. He had met this family two days before, as he journeyed towards Eoforwic, and they had gladly accepted his offer of

entertainment in trade for a ride. The father, a merchant, had been returning with his goods to his holding nearby the town. His wife and children were with him, as they had been visiting relatives as he did his trading.

He squinted at the boy, trying to remember his name. *Aethbred... Aelfwold... Aelf-something*. His head hurt too much to puzzle it out.

“Ma says we are almost at Eoforwic and that you should get up.” Message delivered, the boy nimbly hopped off the end of the wagon, straw stuck to his coarse woollen tunic.

With a sudden lurch and a “Ho!” from the front, the wagon came to a halt. Godric had only a moment to appreciate the blessed silence before the boy’s sister approached, her slim form lithe under her long skirts. She was pretty, with even features and glossy auburn hair that was tucked under her head covering. Probably around sixteen, he thought. Old enough, in this time, to be married.

Those eyes. Even better in the daylight. Sapphire blue, with thick, upswept lashes. Bewitching eyes a man could get lost in.

The girl smiled shyly as she noticed Godric’s regard. “So, you are awake, good Master Godric. ‘Tis about time. You have slept half the day away.”

“Only because I was dreaming of you,” Godric murmured, careful to pitch his voice low enough that the mother would not hear. He managed a lazy smile, one that he knew females were hard pressed to resist, especially when accompanied by the slightest *push*, as it was in this case. The girl’s magnificent eyes widened slightly, a blush appearing on her cheeks as she dropped her gaze.

Godric’s smile widened, enjoying the girl’s discomfiture. She was his for the taking, if he wanted. As it had been a very long time since he had a woman, the thought was tempting, to say the least. *Too young*, he scolded himself. But still...

The boy’s head appeared at the end of the wagon again as he strained to peek over the edge of the board nailed to the wagon’s end.

“Father says come here!” he announced. Godric squinted at him, uncertain who had been addressed, himself or the girl. But the boy spun around and scampered off, leaving him none the wiser.

“We are almost at the gates of Eoforwic,” the girl said. “Where will you stay? There is an inn near our house,” she added.

“Ahh, ‘tis tempting, to be sure.” Godric hesitated. “But I have a friend I must see, and work to attend to as well.”

The girl’s smile broadened. “Work? Is it hard, constructing poems and learning songs?”

Godric grinned back. “Oh, you would be surprised, fair mistress. The life of a *scop* is full of many trials and tribulations. It is not all ease and glory. Try singing for your supper one night, and see how you do.”

Gytha giggled, a pretty sound that warmed Godric’s blood further. She gave him another sly look from under her lashes, and he revised her age upwards. There was too much worldly knowledge in that look. *Eighteen? Nineteen?* Perhaps a visit to this inn she spoke of would not be out of the question. He could find

out more about her.

“Gytha!”

Godric winced as the mother’s exclamation brought a spike of pain to his abused head.

“Enough of your foolishness,” the woman said sharply, addressing her daughter. “Don’t you stand and chatter at Master Godric. Your father needs help!”

Gytha ducked her head. “Yes, Mother.” She risked another glance under her lashes at Godric before she hurried off.

“Now then, Mister Godric, we have come to Eoforwic. Aeric will water the animals here and then we’ll be off to our holding.” Godric heard the unspoken addition. *So bugger off and quit flirting with my daughter.* “I thank you for your entertainment. It was most...unusual.”

Godric smiled easily, hiding the trickle of disquiet that clenched his gut. *Unusual* was definitely not what he wanted to be. *Unusual* attracted attention, the last thing a Fey needed. Which was the reason he normally kept his alcoholic consumption to a minimum. He racked his brain to recall what he had done last night to provoke the woman’s comment.

He had started with the usual folksongs and poems. Things had gone well, and Aeric had brought out the ale, which had encouraged some of the bawdy drinking songs he knew. Gytha had begun clapping and swaying to the music, smiling prettily. He had never seen a female with eyes of that unique glittering blue before.

Shock rippled through him. Had he really started singing a Beatles tune? Straining through the alcohol-induced haze in his memory, he realized with a sinking stomach that he had.

He cursed himself twice over as a stupid fool as his gaze met the other woman’s. She shared the same piercing blue gaze as her daughter, but it was not so attractive on her.

Time to layer on the charm. “You are too kind, Mistress Godgyth,” he said, clambering out of the wagon to stand on the dusty road beside her. He brushed down his tunic and breeches carefully, noticing some new stains that were not there yesterday. His head pounded sickly with each movement, but he managed to bow his head politely. “And I thank you indeed for your charity. It would have been a long walk without your assistance.”

Godgyth nodded, and opened her mouth to reply, when a sudden shout distracted her.

“Wife! Come here and give aid! This beast... “Her husband’s voice was cut off by a loud bellow from the ox, who had planted his hooves and was refusing to move. Godgyth shot an apologetic look at Godric and hurried away to help her husband.

Godric blew out a breath. Time to get out of here before he brought any more of the wrong kind of attention to himself. He dug among the straw and

parcels in the back of the wagon and retrieved his cloak, along with his bag containing his lyre. He slung the bag's strap across his chest, enabling him to carry the instrument on his back. His other bag, which held his personal effects, he tied onto the end of his stout walking stick. This enabled him to rest it against his shoulder as he walked, the bag dangling from the end behind his back. The stick also doubled as a handy weapon. That, and his proficiency with the throwing daggers he kept in his boot and at his waist, had kept him safe against the occasional threat a lone traveller could meet as he travelled.

Of course, those were a last resort. The occasional Charm was enough to deal with most humans.

"You comin' with us, Mister?"

The boy had reappeared again at his side. Godric studied him through narrowed eyes. The boy could almost be Fey, with his cat-footed quickness. But there was no tingle of recognition that would identify one of his kind. It was just the usual quick grace of childhood, he supposed.

"Nay, Aelfwig," he said, relief at the easy retrieval of the name causing him to smile benevolently at the boy. Finally all his neurons seemed to be firing properly, even with the hindrance of the thundering headache. "I must be on my way." He reached out and plucked a coin from behind the boy's ear, to Aelfwig's delighted surprise.

He spotted Gytha leading the ox to the stream, and after a quick glance to confirm that her mother wasn't watching, sketched a courtly bow to her, winking as their eyes met. The pretty blush that stained her cheeks was worth the renewed pounding in his skull as he straightened up.

"Gytha!" Godric's sharp voice rang out. "Quit gawping and move along!"

The girl threw him a guilty glance and tugged at the rope holding the ox as she started moving again.

Godric sighed and with a nod to the boy, turned and started down the road, toward the gates of Eoforwic, known in his time as York, although this rude settlement was a far cry from the elegant city he had visited then. After a couple of steps, he turned back on a sudden impulse.

"Aelfwig! Catch!" He flicked the coin at the boy with his thumb. The coin winked brightly as it looped towards the boy, who caught it deftly in his outstretched hands. He looked at the treasure in his palms, and then looked up again at Godric, awe blossoming in his blue eyes.

Godric tugged his forelock in exaggerated respect to the boy, and turned and spun on his heel, whistling jauntily as he walked.

No matter that the sun was piercing in his eyes, his stomach was roiling and his head pounded in time with his steps. He grinned. Life was good, and he was heading for something big. He could feel it.

Godric ignored the curious looks cast his way as he walked through the muddy streets of Eoforwic. He had turned his multi-coloured harper's cloak around, so

the brown side was visible, but people could still glimpse the colours on the other side as it swirled around his legs, and there was no hiding the bag holding his lyre, which bumped along his back with every step. But he ignored the inquiries that came his way as he walked. He had business to attend to, first, and then he could think about earning some coin.

The York of his time, with its glorious cathedral and charming Middle Ages architecture, was much more interesting than this huddled collection of Dark Ages dwellings pressed up against the crumbling wall which encased the old Roman city. As was the case in other places in seventh century England, people here had an aversion for living amongst the ruins. They preferred to build their own dwellings, scavenging stone and bricks as they needed.

The afternoon sun was starting to wane as he entered the gap in the old Roman wall where a wooden gate once stood. He paused for a moment, looking around. He soon found what he was looking for: the wooden cathedral built some fifteen years ago for the baptism of the newly converted King Edwin.

He started towards it, turning his mind to the puzzle that had preoccupied him over the last few days. The unexpected meeting with the wilding, Thomas, had disturbed him a great deal. A third Traveller. One who was bright with Fey power he had no idea how to use. It gave him a cold shiver down his spine. He shifted his shoulders under his cloak, trying to set the feeling aside. Hopefully Wulfram would know what to do with him.

The boy's tell-tale Fey power had been evident to him as soon as he entered Seward's hall with the dour Welsh warrior. But Godric had been in the middle of a performance and couldn't spare time to talk.

Good thing, too, for as he found out later, the young man was a wilding Fey, one who had grown up among humans, ignorant of his true nature. Luckily the Welshman who'd found him right after he Crossed hadn't killed him on the spot, but instead was determined to take him to Lindisfarne, to the monks.

Godric had managed to persuade the boy to sneak away from Celyn and come back to meet Godric, but the kid hadn't shown up. So Godric had headed north to Wulfram, the other Traveller, to share the news and figure out what to do. They couldn't leave a wilding Fey roaming around, that's for sure.

God knows what the monks will make of him. Godric snorted at the thought. He stopped walking as another thought struck him. He could have gone after Thomas, tried to catch up with him. Why hadn't he? Faint alarm stirred in his gut, but just as quickly as it surfaced it was gone, fading like the waning daylight, and he continued walking. He was hungry. Hopefully Wulfram would give him something to eat.

He drew closer to the church, and to the newer buildings that had sprung up beside it. Edwin had built a larger dwelling in which to stay when he visited this part of the kingdom. A new king used it now, for Edwin was long dead, his kingdom divided. Oswine, the cousin of the newly crowned Oswy of Bernicia, now held the Deiran throne, at Oswy's bidding. Or maybe the other way around.

Whatever. Godric shook his head, dismissing the thought. The lives of the humans and their affairs were more or less window-dressing to him. Travellers kept to themselves, hidden amongst the humans like the other Fey, although it was a little harder to stay unnoticed as a Traveller. His mouth twisted as he remembered his mistake from the night before. He had better be more careful. Especially in these unenlightened times to be different was to stand out, and that could get you killed more times than not.

Of course, getting too entangled with the Fey of the time carried its own dangers, and could be just as deadly. He had discovered that the hard way last time.

He clenched his jaw, pushing the memory aside. No use thinking of it now. It had happened some two years ago, and he knew better now. Thankfully many more years than two years had passed in this time since he was here last. No one here likely remembered it, especially not here, in the north. But he had stayed away from the Unseelie Court just in case.

He slowed his steps as he got closer to his destination, trying to remember which house he was looking for. There were quite a few newer dwellings in this part of the previously abandoned town. Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, also had a smaller house near the church, a place to stay when he was in the area. And as it was true in any time, the presence of power attracted those who wished to either curry favour or bask in its reflected light. So, others had erected houses near the king and Bishop's dwellings.

Wulfram had got one of these houses for himself. The details were hazy in Godric's mind. Probably he had drunk more than he should have the last time he was here, when he had run across Wulfram in Eoforwic, shortly after Godric's Crossing.

He rounded a corner. *There.* He pulled into the shadows of a nearby building to study Wulfram's house.

It was a typical house of the time with a thatched roof, timber-planked sides whose chinks were filled in with daub, and only one window and door.

But Godric frowned as he studied it, a chill rippling through him. There was something off about it. The shadows that fell from the late afternoon sun seemed darker, somehow, than the shadows around the other buildings, and clung to the house in an oddly determined fashion. In fact, the shadows seemed longer than the hour would warrant, almost as if the house itself was slightly off in time.

Which was impossible. The presence of a Traveller did not have that effect on the physical world. There must be some other explanation for the way the dark lingered around the corners of the building and pooled thickly under the slanting edges of the thatched roof. The trouble was, the only possible explanation that Godric could come up with was one he didn't care for very much.

Godric watched a group of humans as they walked towards the house. They were engaged in deep discussion, and seemed unaware of their surroundings. But

Godric noticed their path swung wide around the house without so much as a glance at it. He swore under his breath. He had learned not to discount the humans' instincts. At times they could be as finely attuned as a Fey's, especially when the Undying were involved.

The icy chill within him deepened. The other Traveller's fool plan had not gone unnoticed, he would bet his bottom dollar. The best thing for him to do would be to get out of here—

—he approached the door, lifting his hand to knock. Sudden dizziness swept over him, and he leaned against the door for a moment. *What...* He felt odd, dislocated, like something had happened, but what? *Thomas. Gytha. The boy. Going to Eoformic.* As he reviewed the last couple days, he straightened up, feeling foolish. He must be more tired and hungry than he thought.

A throaty rumbling croak startled him out of his reverie. A dark shape detached from the roof, calling out again as it flapped away in an ungainly fashion. He watched, trying to judge the direction it was going. *West.* A wry smile lifted his lips. A raven calling to the west meant a shift in your life, according to the old Celtic woman he had met when he had first Crossed. *A shift for the better, no doubt, once Wulfram hears my news.* He saluted the bird as it disappeared into the twilight sky, and turned and knocked at the door.

He heard a low murmur of voices and the sound of shuffling steps and then the door opened, to reveal an untidy-looking child who gazed at Godric with dull eyes.

“Master bids you come,” he said.

Godric frowned at the boy, taking in the unwashed hair, stained green tunic, and the lack of expression on the young man, who could hardly have been more than twelve. *Odda. Wulfram's slave. Right.*

“Do you remember me, Odda?” Godric asked.

The boy kept his eyes downcast and did not answer. He stepped to the side of the door, holding it open. “Master bids you come,” he insisted, a hint of panic creeping into his voice.

“Yeah, alright,” he said, his jaw clenching. “I’m coming.” He knew that dull look well. He had seen it himself the last time he had Crossed to this time. Had been the *cause* of it. It was the look of a human who had been Bound to a Fey. A Fey who had used their Speaking Gift to overpower the human's will, to make them their slave.

Deja vu washed over him as Odda stood waiting for Godric to enter, the feeling that they had played this scene before. He had seen that look on the boy's face before, the last time he was here, and his reaction had been the same. Shock and remembered shame, alarm over what Wulfram was doing.

The memory dropped full formed into his mind. How could he not have remembered that? His alarm grew, along with the urge to flee, but he took a step inside and the feeling snuffed out, gone as if it had never been.

Odda reached to close the door behind him, but Godric put his hand out to

stop the door's progress. He couldn't stand the thought of having that door shut behind him.

Wulfram was mixed up with the Undying, he was sure of it. He would have to be very careful. Tell him his news and then get out of there. Even as the thought crossed his mind, another followed on its heels. *Best to get out now.*

But that voice of warning quickly faded as he peered into the dark interior, looking for the other Fey.

The candles that dimly lit the inside of the house sputtered and wavered in the breeze from the open door, causing the shadows in the interior to jump around crazily. It gave Godric's heart a bit of a start, but he calmed himself, taking a deep breath as the boy scurried over to Wulfram, crouching down at his feet with a look of fearful adoration as the other Fey rose to greet Godric.

He was tall, lean, and elegant, much the same as when Godric had seen him last. The candlelight glinted off the subtle gold trim at the edges of his dark green tunic and the heavy silver ring on his finger. His black hair was short, neatly trimmed; his eyes amber, flecked with gold. He was a powerful Fey—something else Godric had forgotten.

He showed no surprise at Godric's arrival. Likely his birds had given him warning. He regarded Godric with the same expression the harper remembered from the last time. Arrogant, sardonic, self-assured. It grated on Godric's nerves, just like it had before.

"Man, you need some fresh air in her," he commented. He should have given the Greeting, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to extend that common courtesy. The window was shuttered against the evening breeze, trapping most of the smoke from the smouldering fire inside. The little that filtered out though the small hole in the thatched roof made no difference as far as Godric could tell.

If Wulfram noticed his discourtesy, he didn't show it. "Perhaps," he said with a shrug. "But I desire the warmth more. Shut the door, before we freeze."

"Whatever," Godric muttered, and pulled the door shut behind him. He had a queer feeling in his stomach as he did so, and he had to squelch the quick desire to open it again, to walk away.

Get a grip, man, he thought. *He's a Fey, another Traveller. And he's going to love your news.* Thomas' face rose up in his mind, and with it, a frisson of excitement. Wulfram might be generous in his appreciation, after all. And besides, it was his duty to tell the other Traveller about the wilding. His birds could track him down easier than Godric could. The kid probably needed some help.

He just barely managed to suppress the sudden snicker the thought inspired. *Something's wrong,* he thought, faintly. But he stepped into the room on wooden legs like any other choice had been denied him.

Sardonic amusement lurked in Wulfram's amber eyes as he swept a hand towards a chair at the table. "Sit, please. I'm surprised you have come back so soon. Has something happened?"

He sat down on the other chair, looking at Godric expectantly. Godric sat, oddly tongue-tied. Normally he had no lack of things to say. But his normal self-confidence was diminished in this Fey's presence.

Candlelight glinted off the silver goblet on the table. That was new, as was the tapestry that hung against the wall to shield the interior of the house from the cold air leaking from the wattle-and-daub wall. Wulfram had gained some money, or influence, since Godric had been there last. *Probably both. His plan must be going well.*

He wasn't surprised. The humans didn't have much chance against a Fey with his power, his Speaking gift.

Wulfram interrupted his thoughts. "Odda, take Master Godric's cloak, and bring us some ale." The boy jumped up, jerked into motion like a marionette dangling at the ends of its string.

"Water will do for me," Godric said, mindful of the excesses the night before. The last thing he wanted was to be dulled-witted around the other Traveller. He handed his cloak to Odda, who folded it carefully over his arm and hurried off, towards the back room where Wulfram slept.

"You've Bound him," he blurted out, switching to English from the Saxon language they both had been speaking. It was safer that way, as long as no one heard their strange speech.

The other Fey's eyebrows raised. "We discussed this last time. I was... experimenting. His mind was weaker than I thought." He too spoke in English.

"Not a great idea." A memory flashed through his mind. *A woman, wailing, hands outstretched towards him...* He shoved it away. *Focus.* He didn't need that distraction. "Hasn't anyone noticed?"

"I keep to myself," Wulfram said, absently, studying him carefully. He cocked his head. "Interesting. You really don't remember this, do you? You told me to be careful, that I would bring unwarranted attention. I told you the same thing I will tell you now." He leaned forward, his eyes hardening. "The Binding is a tool, a part of my Gift. The same Gift you share, the same Gift *you* used once, to accomplish a greater good."

Shock froze Godric in his chair. He *never* spoke of his first Crossing to *anyone*. That debacle he kept very carefully to himself. How had Wulfram found out?

Wulfram kept talking. "I do what I must, for the good of the Fey." He sat back, curiosity in his eyes. "Do you remember nothing of what occurred the last time you were here?"

Godric swallowed, feeling distinctly odd. There was a note of fear in Wulfram's voice, despite the casual manner of the other Fey. *Something's wrong.* He knew it in his bones, but he couldn't chase it down, couldn't figure it out. He wanted to get up, to leave. But he remained sitting, just the same.

"Of course I do." Even as he said the words, he knew they weren't true. A fog had settled in his mind over the events of the last time, preventing him from seeing the details, only giving him the big picture. He strained at the memory.

He had bumped into Wulfram in Eoforwic when he came here to earn some coin. After the performance he came to Wulfram's house, and the other Fey had given him the big song and dance about what he was trying to do. Godric had warned him against it and left.

Or something like that. The details were slippery. He couldn't seem to hold the memory of that night in his mind in a complete whole, just bits and pieces.

Odda returned, another silver goblet in hand and handed it to him. The water was cool and fresh, and Godric drank it eagerly, hoping it would revive him.

Wulfram sipped at his cup. "Very good Odda," he said, in Saxon. "Leave us now. See to supper. I'm sure Master Godric is hungry. You may prepare a chicken for our meal."

The boy nodded. "Yes, Master." He left quickly, shutting the door behind him.

"Never mind our last visit," Wulfram said, waving a hand. "Tell me why you have returned. You were meant to go to Bebbanburg, to see how Oswy fares as King. You could not have made it there and back again so soon. What has happened?"

Godric frowned. *I was meant to go Bebbanburg?* They had talked about it, certainly, but hadn't he *offered* to go take a look, as a lark? He pushed himself to remember, but it was hazy, as seeing it through gauze. He hadn't drunk that much, had he?

A furious squawking erupted from outside, breaking his train of thought. The frantic clucks stopped abruptly, followed a moment later by the dull *thunking* sound of an axe against wood. Godric grimaced. Sometimes living here made him strongly tempted to be a vegetarian, like some of his hippie friends back home.

"Well?"

Wulfram's impatience snapped him back to the present. *Thomas. Right.* He gathered himself. *Sooner you tell him, the sooner you can leave.* "I met another Fey. A Traveller."

Wulfram stiffened slightly, a sudden spark of interest lighting his eyes. "Go on."

Godric swigged back some more water, then wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "He's a wilding Fey. Said he was from 2019."

"A wilding!" The words erupted from the other Fey. Shock filled his face. "Are you sure? Where did you find him?"

"At Wulfstam. Near the coast, south east of here. And yes, I'm sure. The kid's a wilding. No doubt about it. I had to tell him he was Fey."

Wulfram's eyes narrowed, and he sat back, exhaling. He sat in silence for a moment, absently twirling the ring on his finger, lost in thought. Finally, his gaze sharpened on Godric again. "Tell me everything"

Godric obliged, briefly describing his encounter with Thomas from the time he had met the young Fey to his last night at Siward's lair, waiting in the darkness for the boy to appear. He ended with a shrug. "He never showed up. I figured

you would want to hear the news, so I came back here, to fill you in.”

As he said those words, however, unease trickled down his spine. To come running back here like an eager puppy to its master was odd, now that he thought about it. Now that he was here, he remembered how much he didn't like the other Fey, with his grandiose plans and arrogant ways. And he had *Bound* the slave—

Wulfram interrupted his thoughts. “Why do you think he didn't come back to meet you?”

Godric blinked, feeling like he was two steps behind in this conversation, trying to remember what he had just been thinking, but it was gone. He shifted in the chair, uncomfortable. “I dunno. They could have run into some trouble on the road. Outlaws. Or an ambush, or something. Or maybe the Welshman stopped him.” Privately he thought this last option most likely. Celyn was the type of man that would be hard to fool, of that Godric was certain.

Wulfram sat bolt upright. “This human, he was Welsh? You didn't say that before. Are you certain?”

Godric nodded. “Yeah. So what?”

The other man looked bemused for a moment, and then threw back his head with a short barking laugh. “Godric! You have indeed done well! Hah!” He pushed himself away from the table and stood up, pacing back and forth, his hands behind his back.

“What's the big deal?”

Wulfram stopped, his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “You should pay more attention. The native Britons of this time, the Welsh, Irish, and Scots—the Celts, in other words—are enemies of the Saxons, except that the Irish have made some accommodations with them in order to convert them all to Christianity. But the Welsh, especially, are implacable enemies. Think, man. Why would a Welshman be heading north, to Lindisfarne, and Bebbanburg? To an important seat of Anglo-Saxon power?”

Godric shrugged. Politics never interested him much. It was why Wulfram could be so tiresome. That's all he wanted to talk about.

Thankfully Wulfram answered his own question. “Because he must be an ally of Oswy's. Which makes him a traitor to his people, who are allied with Penda, the Mercian king, *against* Oswy. Which makes him someone of interest to us. A piece of information we can use.”

“I suppose.” Godric conceded Wulfram's point. To survive in the unfamiliar places that Travellers found themselves in, they had to become adept at inconspicuously gathering as much information as they could, and then sifting through that information to understand what would be relevant to them. Godric understood this, of course. This was hardly his first Crossing. But he had allowed his discovery of the wilding to overshadow the importance of his companion. That and the fact that Celyn rubbed him the wrong way. It was a mistake that he shouldn't have made.

He frowned. A mistake he *wouldn't* have made, normally, but—

The door opened, allowing a burst of cool air that made the candles flicker in their holders. Odda came in, the beheaded and plucked chicken dangling from one hand. He held up the bird. “Chicken, Master!”

Wulfram smiled a thin smile. “Yes, very good, Odda. Make sure you roast it properly now, like I showed you.” He looked back at Godric. “We will speak again later,” he said, in English, with a slight nod towards Odda.

“Sure.” His stomach rumbled. He would eat and get a good sleep, rest up for the road. In the morning he would leave.

He had a fine enough sense of self-preservation to know that lingering long with Wulfram was asking for trouble. Trouble was the last thing he wanted. He'd rather pay a visit to the merchant's daughter, instead.

“So, this wilding. Where did you say he was from?”

Godric stretched out his feet towards the fire, warming them. After a change of clothes, a short nap, and a satisfying meal, he felt more like himself. Odda had been dismissed to his pallet at the foot of Wulfram's bed, leaving Godric and the other Traveller alone. With the setting of the sun, the temperature outside had dropped considerably, reminding him that winter was not far off. The failing light had also deepened the shadows inside the house.

Despite the coziness of the setting, Godric still felt uneasy. The lengthening shadows reminded him of his earlier impression of the house. He couldn't shake the sense that something out of the ordinary lurked, waiting for a moment to pounce. Now that his hunger had been satisfied, he had been toying with the idea of changing his plan. He could leave now, find a room in the inn Gytha had mentioned.

He blew out a breath, biting back his impatience. The other Fey would not be satisfied until every bit of information Godric possessed would be brought to light and examined for its possible implications. Like a crow looking for every last shiny piece in a pile of garbage. “He said he was from Canada. That's all.”

Wulfram's eyes narrowed. “Hm. Interesting.” He sat in silence for a moment, then continued. “And the Welshman. He must be a Sensitive, no?”

Godric shrugged. “Probably. Thomas said he saw him when he first Crossed, and that he saw—” “He broke off abruptly, realizing too late that he had neglected to mention Thomas' tale of the Undying in his first recounting of the story. The gloomy atmosphere of the house had spooked him, and he hadn't wanted to invoke even the thought of the Others as he told the story. The same reluctance stopped his words now. “That he saw him. When he first jumped.”

“Yes, that is unusual.” A log fell, causing a shower of sparks to flutter up. “Did this wilding show signs of any other Gifting?”

“Not that I noticed, but we weren't together long. I mean, he's likely a Speaker, right?” Travellers often had that Gift, but not always.

Wulfram nodded absently, deep in thought. Finally, he let out a breath, and

stood up and began to pace. “This could work out very well for us, very well, indeed.”

Godric shook his head. “Look man, forget *us*. Keep me out of it. I came to tell you about the kid, but that’s as far as it goes for me. Whatever you have planned here, it doesn’t involve me.”

Wulfram stopped pacing and looked at Godric, his eyes narrowing. “Do you not remember what I told you? About what happened in 2001?”

Godric frowned, straining at the memory. Details emerged from the fog. “The planes, the World Trade Center....?” He wasn’t sure if it was true, or something Wulfram made up to suit his plan. The Towers were still being built in his own time. Even in California he had heard the news about the construction of the tallest buildings in the world. It was hard to believe they could be destroyed in such a fashion.

But he had Crossed over to this time with the events of the 1972 Olympics fresh in his mind. The humans’ capacity to destroy one another was not exactly a surprise.

“Exactly. The Towers, the planes, the rain of destruction— “Wulfram stopped abruptly, and his head dropped, as if the weight of the memories were too much to bear.

Godric took a drink of mead, trying to figure out what to say. One detail he did remember from his last visit was that this conversation hadn’t ended well. He cleared his throat. “Look, I’m sorry about your brother. Really. But you can’t change it. It’s crazy. Doesn’t matter what you do, it’ll be what it’ll be. Period. *To change the future by the past is forbidden*. You know the Rule as well as I.”

Wulfram’s head snapped up. The candles on the tables flickered as a gust of wind rattled the shutter on the window. The other’s Fey’s eyes were hard. “The Rule,” he said, scorn dripping from his words. “What is the Rule, anyway? It was made after the Destruction, when the Fey were hiding in their caves and trembling at every sound. Afraid of the damned humans. They had us beat, and we skulked back to our hidey-holes to lick our wounds. We forged our peace. Laid low, hid in plain sight. Pretended we were *human*—weak, and soft, and pliant.” His fists clenched. “We pretended so well we forgot what *we* were. We, an ancient and noble race, heirs of the planet just as much as *them*, with the faery blood singing in our veins and power coursing through our fingertips, we decided to let the *humans* enjoy the spoils of victory while we sang our songs and mourned over what we had lost.”

Godric shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. These were not new ideas. The history of the Fey was littered with small revolts, those who could not accept the truth of their place in the world. Those who could not accept the Rule that had been crafted in those dark days of despair, when the Fey began the painful process of forging a new way of living in the world; not as masters, but as the vanquished.

All Fey felt the sting of it. But Seelies and Unseelies alike agreed that the long-

ago Fey who created the Rule were right. The humans held sway in the world, either by victory, divine right or sheer biology, seeing that many Fey were barren and the humans bred like rabbits. There were simply not enough of the Fey to mount any credible resistance. And so, like any conquered people, they had had to learn how to survive, or be wiped out entirely.

Godric preferred survival, even though it irked him when he saw the messes the humans made. But they had learned that to step in led to destruction, not only for the one who tried to meddle, but for other Fey as well.

The humans had not forgotten their ancient hatred of the Fey. It resided still, buried deep in their unconscious minds. It only took a small spark to light the fire again, a fire that burned hot, destroying any Fey in its wake.

But the fervour burning in Wulfram's eyes was just as hot and just as hard to quench. Godric had tried before. *Time to split*. He blew out a breath and stood up. "Listen, man, it ain't gonna work. You know it. You try, and you'll attract all sorts of attention. Attention you don't want. You know what I mean. You really want that?"

"What I *want* is for my brother to live. And for the Fey to survive. It is what you should want, too."

Godric shook his head. "I told you before. Count me out, man. You're crazy. I came to give you the news, but I'm not staying. You're on your own in this one."

The other Traveller's eyes narrowed, his fists clenching and unclenching, and he gave a small nod.

Godric felt a ripple of power, a whisper of electricity that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He acted without thought, quickly pulling his knife from his boot, whipping around and throwing it blind in one seamless blur of motion, allowing his instinct to guide him.

It was an accurate shot, but it didn't matter. He hit the shape that stood behind him full in the chest, but the knife merely passed through the shadow with a slight wobble and buried itself with a dull *thunk* in the wooden door behind it.

The terrible desire that radiated out from the creature beat against him, freezing him to the spot. Behind him, he heard Wulfram panting harshly.

MOVE. He leapt to the side, crashing around the table, careful not to touch the shadow creature. He flung himself at the door, his fingers reaching the latch.

Unballed night, grim and greedy—the line from *Beowulf* flashed through his mind, and he had a moment's wild triumph, the impossibility of success coursing through him.

"He must be stopped." Wulfram spoke quietly, his voice strained as if he forced the words out.

Godric had a moment to appreciate the subtleties of that statement. Not a command. No Fey would dare to tell one of the Undying what to do. A suggestion wrapped up in a declaration, the outcome left entirely to the other creature's will.

Apparently the Undying so willed, for a sudden surge of power against his back crashed Godric into the door, and he fell heavily to the floor. He would have gladly changed into a mouse or a spider in order to crawl under the door if he had the shape-changing abilities some humans attributed to the Fey. But as those abilities were a myth that option was not open to him.

The breath was knocked out of him, but he staggered to his feet, fighting the dizziness that was making it hard to think. He tried to lift his hand to the latch again but it was like trying to fight against a strong current. His limbs were uncooperative, heavy and unyielding. *Come on, come on...* he panted with the effort, desperate to get away from the shadow-creature at his back.

Godric shuddered as he felt the creature's touch against his mind. He struggled to pull his wits together to resist it, but his thoughts fell away like raindrops running down a window. The aching desire to grovel before the thing and do its will drowned out the small flames of resistance that he tried to fan into being.

He opened his eyes. Panic surged as he realized he had stopped struggling, a fly exhausted in the spider's web. The rush of adrenaline allowed him to push away from the door, only to be slammed back into it again, his face pressed up against the wood.

Behind the turmoil of his thoughts and the screaming need to give in he heard Wulfram muttering under his breath. The words flowed around the room, slipping and sliding between his heartbeats, through the rush of blood in his veins. He dared not concentrate on the words, but he recognized a few from the tales of the Old Time. Wulfram spoke ancient words of power, belonging to the time when the Fey were many, when they welcomed the help of the Undying in their war against humankind.

Godric had a moment to wonder at the other Fey's audacity, that he could imagine he could control the creature, when another surge of power flipped him around, facing him towards his captor.

The Dark One stood where it had been before, one arm outstretched towards him, but it was too far away for it to touch him. Godric tried to press himself back into the door, *through* the door, to avoid that touch, but at the same time an eager desire for it flooded through him. He trembled.

Thankfully, at that moment, the creature lowered its arm. The pressure ceased and Godric gasped as he staggered forward. He stopped himself at the last moment from throwing himself at the creature's feet and pressed himself back up against the door again, feeling behind him for the latch.

The desire to abandon himself to the Undying One was so compelling it was hard to remember why he shouldn't do it. *Unballed night—*

Suddenly the outline of the Undying One wavered, shrinking and condensing into a more solid form, accompanied by a faint hissing that brushed against him. The form coalesced into that of a man, thin and supple, dressed all in black. The face was pale, possessing a terrible beauty. The eyes burned red.

“We meet again.” It spoke in a deep voice, even and rich, but with a faint wrongness to the sound that scraped against his ears.

As the words sunk in memory returned. He had been standing here, in this very house, facing this same creature, caught in its thrall just as thoroughly as he was now. He didn’t remember exactly what had happened, but suddenly the compulsion to report back to Wulfram began to make more sense.

Fury seized him. He tore his eyes away from the Undying, looking past it to Wulfram, who stood behind the creature. The other Fey’s eyes met his briefly, and then skittered away, to rest again on the demon. Godric would bet Wulfram was as firmly caught in this spider’s web as he himself was, no matter what the other Fey thought about who was running this show.

“You bastard,” he panted through clenched lips. It felt good to focus on Wulfram, as it kept his attention away from the creature in front of him.

Wulfram glanced at him, his eyes amused as he folded his arms against his chest. He would have looked the picture of nonchalance, except for the sweat beading his forehead, and the strain around his eyes. “Yes, you said the same thing last time, if I recall. Is it coming back to you now?”

Godric wished with all his heart that he could grab his other knife and plunge it into Wulfram’s heart. But he was frozen in spot, unable to move. Wulfram stepped up beside the Undying, but he was careful to keep his distance from it.

Thomas’ story came unbidden to Godric’s mind. One or more of these beings had actually touched the kid, *grabbed* him, as Thomas had put it. Horror flashed through him at the thought, as well as a sudden deep longing to feel that smooth hand against his skin, to be surrounded and enveloped in the pure power of the creature...

If his knees hadn’t been locked in place he might have swooned. *Stop it stop it stop it.* He squeezed his eyes shut as Wulfram begin to chuckle, thinly.

“Yes. The youngling Nephilim,” the demon spoke, a slight hiss accompanying the word *yes*. “We will hear more about him.” The deep voice, although hypnotic, skittered along his nerves painfully.

Godric knew he should feel alarm, and even shame, that the creature could read his mind so easily. All the defenses he put up before it melted away, but he could hardly bring himself to care. All he felt was a dark pleasure, that at last he could once more be of use to the Undying.

And so, with a gasp that escaped as his final resistance melted away, he told the whole story once again, this time leaving nothing out.

Godric was a day’s journey from York before he began to regain some semblance of himself. The first day had passed in a nightmare—stumbling on nerveless feet, half blind with terror and sickened to his core. Running with no thought but to get away from that cursed house.

He had bolted through Eoforwic, all thoughts of stopping to visit the merchant’s daughter forgotten. He ignored the haunting fear that that no matter

how far he ran, he could not escape the Undying's reaching hand.

Mixed with the desire to flee was the pounding insistence that beat through him to go north, to get to Lindisfarne, to bring the wilding back. It was a scalding fire in his blood that drove him on with every heartbeat, even as he cursed it.

But after blindly running through the dark and then collapsing for a few hours rest, curled up under his cloak under the protection of a spreading oak tree, he woke with a clearer mind.

He took stock as he walked through the early morning mist down the road. *I'll figure this out*, he promised himself. But truth be told, he wasn't sure what *this* was. What exactly had happened to him?

Wulfram. Odda. Memories flickered through his mind, jumping here and there. They had eaten dinner, and then—

—he heaved a breath, his hands on his knees, sucking in air. *What the hell?* Why was he running? He strained at the memory, feeling odd. *Wulfram.* He shut his eyes, concentrating, panic beating around the edges of his mind, but he forced it away. *Christ. Pull yourself together.* He took a couple more shuddering breaths, and straightened up, looking around at the dull landscape with little interest, trying to figure out what was going on

Suddenly the memory came back. *Wulfram. Odda. Wulfram's ridiculous plan. And the Undying...*

Panic flared and he gritted his teeth against it, willing the memory away. *North. Lindisfarne. Thomas.* Purpose seized him, replacing the fear. *I'll figure this out. Just get the wilding back to Wulfram.*

Eager desire filled him, and he set off on the road again, those three words beating a rhythm in his brain. *North. Lindisfarne. Thomas.*

A day later he came across a small holding. He paused at the edge of a cleared field, eyeing the jumbled buildings, the fat sows squealing in their enclosure. Sudden resolve filled him, lightening the weight he had been labouring under the last couple of days.

This is what he did, *this* is who he was. A *scop*, a teller of tales, a travelling minstrel who wandered from place to place, playing his music and getting some coins in return, or a warm bed and food, or, if he was lucky, or good enough, all of the above. He would go to this place, and play for his supper, eat his fill.

But his feet refused to move. He should be striding across the field with his lyre bumping against his back. He could see himself doing it. Could picture his flourishing bow, the suspicious scowls turning to gleeful welcome, the family welcoming him in.

As quickly as it came, the resolve faded away. As much as he longed for his old life, there was no going back to it, not just yet, anyways. Not with that black hole in his mind, the one that the nightmares came from.

Bring him to me.

The words whispered through his mind. He shook his head, as if to clear it. The problem was, he couldn't.

The realization had come slowly over the last couple of days, a realization that had crept up on him, one that he could hardly look at squarely, for fear of collapsing under the weight of it.

He was carrying the Undying with him. Or perhaps, the Undying was carrying *him*. He had a sudden vision of that dark, elegant form striding down the road with him piggy-back upon it. A small giggle escaped him, and the sound of it snapped him back to himself, appalled, cold despair falling upon him.

He couldn't risk going to that holding. He was under the sway of that creature, and no telling what it might make him do. Besides, he must hurry, go to Lindisfarne, bring back the wilding Traveller. A delicious shiver ran through him at the thought. *Yes.*

So he turned his back on the welcome he would get at the holding, and the coin, and the warm bed. He faded back through the woods in the deepening twilight, heedless of the hunger in his belly, the cold that seeped through his cloak.

Bring him.

Slipping through the shadows under the trees, a mere shadow himself, Godric's longing for his old life dissolved, transformed into the singular obsession of the Undying.

The obsession drove him through the night, ignoring the cold and the ever-growing ache in his belly, until he collapsed from exhaustion in a heap, crumpled next to a rowan tree after stripping some of the shrivelled berries and cramming them into his mouth.

He didn't think of building a fire, and as the sky cleared and the temperature plummeted, he easily could have frozen to death had not it been for the sustaining power of those berries and the family that discovered him in the early hour after dawn.

He awoke from his shoulder being roughly shaken by a man, a hard-eyed *coerl* of few words, his wife hovering in the background anxiously. He blearily came back to life as they bundled him into their cart. They fed him some bread and cheese, and slowly he started to feel more like himself.

It was fortunate they had bothered to investigate his still form under the tree. Many people of the times wouldn't have bothered. People were too occupied with their own survival to worry overmuch about a stranger. Never mind the superstitious fear that would keep people from approaching one they thought was dead. But his bright harper's cloak drew them, and when they saw he was alive, the affection most felt for a gleeman prompted them to do what they could to help.

As he bumped along in the cart Godric found another reason to bless his good fortune. His head was clear for the first time since he had left Wulfram, the

twisting presence of the Undying quieted into mere murmurs once and again, an uneasy feeling of dislocation that occasionally flashed through him. Perhaps nearly dying in its service had caused it to realize the limitation of his mortal body. Godric didn't know the reason for its withdrawal, and he didn't care. He was just glad to be free from its suffocating shadow.

He thought about leaving the couple, about finding a Crossing spot and jumping back home, but the thought only lingered for a moment before a sudden panic seized him, and with a spurt of alarm he felt the Undying awakening within him. He hurriedly turned his thoughts away from escape, and to his relief the presence of the Undying faded. After that he avoided any idea of Crossing. It was a small tradeoff for being able to be free in his own mind, at least for now.

So he simply sat in the cart with a blanket wrapped over his cloak, brooding.

They arrived at the family's holding just after dusk. Godric peered at it in the gathering twilight as the cart came to a halt. The collection of haphazard, rickety buildings didn't seem too promising.

The woman sighed in relief, all the same. "'Tis good to be home, husband. Seems much longer than a week since we left, so it does."

There was no reply from her husband, just a noncommittal grunt.

The door to the house flew open and three small children of indeterminate sex erupted, roiling out of the doorway like puppies. The children were followed by another couple, an older man and woman. The children's welcoming howls were just about enough to make Godric regret his rescue.

The woman clambered down from the cart and met the children half way. She bent down to gather them all in her arms, her exclamation of joy rivaling the piercing cries of the children.

Godric began to help the father unload the supplies that the family had obtained in Eoforwic. He was a potter, and had traded several of his pots for a new axe and some spices and cloth.

"Ye'll sleep in the barn," the man commented as Godric handled a bundle to him. "It's warm enough, and the hay be fresh."

Godric nodded, relieved to not have to share the close interior of the home with the family. He would find little peace amongst the rioting children. He would get far more rest with the cows, to be sure.

But a worse fear haunted him. The conclusion that had been jostled free in his mind during his bumpy journey in the cart was a sickening certainty that filled him with dread and bitter anger.

Wulfram had Bound him to the Undying. Those muttered words of power that wove through the scattered memories of the night in Eoforwic, his eager surrender, the dark cancerous spot in his mind that ate away his will; all confirmed it.

He knew what a Binding was. He had done it himself, and the undoing of it had left a hole within him that he had never been able to fill, the same hole that

now carried the Undying. The thought of it, the *feel* of it, was something he could only approach sideways, carefully, not head-on, lest he be overwhelmed by horror. But even so, the weight of it was tinged with a slight touch of relief. Finally, finally the hole was filled, the need satisfied. And that disgusted him more than anything else.

He wasn't sure what the creature might make him do. He was afraid of what he was going to become. He couldn't linger long with the humans, or surely they would notice. And being noticed, for any Fey, was bad news. The distraction of their company would stop him from brooding on his dilemma, but he was going to have to be careful.

The chatter of the children as they ate supper helped. And as he expected, after they ate, one of them tugged on his sleeve, looking up at him with wide eyes.

"Play us a song, Master?"

Godric managed a thin smile, looking around at the eager anticipation of the children, the expectation on the faces of the parents. He could hardly refuse. "Just one or two. To thank your parents for their help, and the hospitality. But then I will need to sleep, and so will you."

The little one scampered back to his mother, climbing up in her lap. The rest of the kids grinned and clapped their hands, eager to have the distraction.

Godric pulled his lyre out of his bag, running his fingers over the strings experimentally, tuning them. Music was a balm to the Fey, a means of expressing their deepest emotions. It could be so for humans as well, but the effect was magnified for the Fey. As he started to play, his fingers moving without thought on the strings, his eyes fell shut. The music spoke notes of anguish and fear, shadowed by rage, the pace quickening as his fingers moved faster—

He snapped his eyes open, stopping his fingers. *Careful*. A Fey could Charm a human easily through music, and that was the last thing he wanted to happen. He quickly launched into one of his most rowdy songs, a nonsensical ballad about a drunken warrior who cuts off his own head during a battle and gets it reattached by a doddering old witch, who botches the job and puts it on backwards.

He strummed the first chord, tentative at first, and then more boldly as he sang the second line. He felt comfortable, at home, the strings coming to life under his fingers. He looked around, saw the children grinning, the wife's toes tapping, and a smile split his face. He felt more himself than he had in days. He bent his head over the lyre and abandoned himself to the song.

Later that night, as he burrowed under the blankets on top of the sweet-smelling hay, he smiled again. The dark presence in his mind was quiet, for now. The music hadn't driven it off, by no means, but there was something pure and honest about it that was anathema to the cruel twisting darkness that was the essence of the Undying.

He was under no illusions that he was free for good. Wulfram and the Undying would not discard him that easily. But maybe he had found a way to

thwart them, just a little. He would have to be careful. But he would not roll over without a fight, however small and feeble that fight might be.

He would go to Lindisfarne, collect Thomas. He couldn't help the shiver of pleasure at the thought. But along the way, he would play his music, and bide his time. Slow his pace, delay.

There had to be a way for him to be free completely. For now he would try out what small rebellions he could, dally as long as he dared, learn the limits of his tether.

These optimistic thoughts lulled him to sleep, a small bulwark against the despair that shrouded his heart. He ignored the icy ball in his stomach that would not go away, not even in the warmth of that flickering hope.

A SIGN

Those of you who have followed my writing adventures for a long time will likely recognize this outtake. When I first wrote it, it was never intended to be part of the book. I wrote it in response to a writing challenge posted on a blog I followed, in which the blogger asked writers to write a story in response to a picture. The picture was of a wooden fence at night, lit by moonlight, stars shining above. At the time I was in the beginning stages of writing my novel and Nectan had come into the story. I decided to use the writing prompt to write a little scene with him so I could start to figure out who he was. This was the result. The blogger loved the scene, which gave me some encouragement that I was on the right track. The early drafts for Wilding included this as a chapter, and for a long time it was featured on my old website as a teaser chapter from the book. But of course, as it turned out it ended up getting cut. I'm glad to bring it back here!

This chapter was positioned near the beginning of the book, just before Thomas and Celyn arrive at Wulfstam in Chapter 7 of Wilding.

NECTAN STOOD BY the fence, the night settling around him in small whispers of sounds: the low breath of the horses in the paddock in front of him, a roosting chicken muttering in the trees.

The settlement was shut tight against the night, against the wolves and the bears and the spirits that wandered, unmoored by darkness.

Against the Sidhe. A smile touched his face at the thought. His own kind, unseen and hidden among the humans. The Fey were among them, part of their families. It was too late to shut them out.

He took a deep breath, wanting the peace of the night to fill him, trying to shake off the unease that the dream had given him. But it was no use. His jaw clenched, remembering the figure he had seen: a Fey, shining with power, with the shadow of destruction clinging to him like a shroud. And over all, the sense of his own helplessness, the feeling that he would not be good enough to prevail.

Beside him, Eru shook her wings out and squawked softly. Nectan soothed

her with a quick stroke, her feathers silky under his hand. She hopped closer to him, settling her wings in place once more. Her eyes reflected the starlight, black orbs like the bowl of the sky above.

The falcon sensed his discomfort, sensitive as always to his moods. With an effort he shook off his foreboding, willing himself to consider what this dream might mean. It was the second time he had dreamed it in as many weeks. A sign, to be sure.

A soft footfall from behind, accompanied by the tingling sense of one of his own, disturbed his meditation. He turned and saw the glimmering form of his Speaker, and cousin, approaching. "Domech," he said, in greeting.

"My lord King," his cousin replied, his head dipping in a brief nod. He stopped beside him, his eyes searching Nectan's. "All is well?"

Nectan could not help the wry smile that tipped one side of his mouth up. His cousin and he were closer than brothers, and their Speaking Gift made them more so. "Ye know it's not."

"Aye," Domech acknowledged, a smile ghosting over his face. "I know it."

Nectan looked up at the stars above, wheeling in their courses. "Does God give us our dreams, d'ye think?"

Domech snorted. "The dreams of a Fey are our own."

Nectan looked back at him. "Indeed. But have you no thought, a time or two, that God directs the ways of the Fey as He does the humans?"

Domech half shrugged, discomfort flashing over his face.

Nectan understood his unease. It was a dangerous topic, and one he would not broach except that this night held them in its cocoon, their secrets safe within it.

"God directs all, or so the monks say," his cousin replied.

"Ah. The monks."

Silence fell between them; pregnant with words they dare not say.

Finally Domech sighed. "Tell me your dream then, if confession is what ye seek, for there's no priest to hear it, and none that would understand if he did."

Nectan understood the faint disdain that coloured the other Fey's words. It was the disdain all the Fey felt for the humans, their ancient enemies with whom they shared an uneasy peace.

Who, truth be told, would kill them if they had half the chance, and with God's blessing, besides.

He took a breath, dismissing all thoughts of God and the humans. It was a reflection for another time, another night. "A Fey, strong in power, and it filling him up like water fills a bowl. Such a Fey as I havna seen but a few times in my life. But for all his power, he was uncertain—afraid, I think." Nectan paused, steeling himself to tell the rest. "It wasna just the power, or the fear that marked him. I looked at him and saw destruction, the fate of us all hanging in the balance. A foreboding as strong as I have ever had."

He kept to himself the feeling of inadequacy that had coloured the dream.

That burden only he would bear. A King must be strong in the eyes of his people.

Domech sucked in a breath. "Who was it?"

Nectan shook his head. "I couldna see. His face was darkened, shadowed. I just saw him walking, the mist clinging to him, purpose in every step. He was alone."

"But do ye know him, d'ye think?"

Nectan considered the question. He hadn't thought of that. Did he know him? He closed his eyes, forcing himself to recall the dream, pushing through the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach that the memory brought.

His eyes snapped open. "Aye. I did. I saw him, and I knew him. In the dream he was familiar."

"In the dream," Domech echoed. "But not now?"

Nectan shook his head. "Nay."

Domech straightened his shoulders, his eyes resolute. "Then he is coming," he said. "We have time, yet, to prepare."

Nectan saw his cousin's resolve, and clapped him on the shoulder, suddenly light at heart. Eru flapped her wings, squawking again. "Aye, indeed. A warning, to be heeded." He thought for a moment. "We must watch, Domech. Put out the word. Any unknown Fey that the Seelies are aware of I must know, right away."

Domech nodded. "And if he comes to the Unseelies, first?"

Nectan frowned, considering. "Well, then, we will do what we must. Perhaps Raegenold has been given the same dream."

The mention of their half-cousin, the Unseelie King of the North, caused Domech's mouth to thin. "Perhaps, my lord King. I will use what ears I have in that Court."

Nectan nodded, and they turned and walked back to the settlement, the small houses huddling close together under the indifferent stars.

YET ANOTHER STRANGER

This chapter was one from Celyn's point of view. It occurs after he and Thomas had first met, while they are on the way to Bebbanburg and stop at the thegn Siward's holding in Wulfstam. It gives us a bit more information about Celyn and his place in this world, and it also gives some historical information about the time. On reflection, it probably gives a bit too much historical information. An author writing historical fiction has to be careful to not be too enthusiastic about imparting all the wonderful details he/she has gathered about the times they are writing about. Does this chapter contain too much of that? I'll let you decide...

CELYN AND SIWARD had gone a few paces when Sigulf joined them, falling into step beside his father with a hooded glance at Celyn. Siward's youngest son was the match of his father in wits, with a youthful arrogance and temper that Siward encouraged. Very much like the *thegn* in his youth, before war and the delicate art of negotiating the shifting tides of Bernician power struggles had smoothed his edges. *Smoothed them like the whetstone polishes the edge of the blade*, Celyn mused, *making him all the more dangerous*.

"I left the gleeman by the pasture," Sigulf said. "Aculf is ready."

Siward grunted. "Good. Now we shall see."

Celyn looked at Siward. "See?"

"See if we can trust this stranger you brought us," said Sigulf, a challenge in his eyes.

Celyn stopped dead, the naked insult flushing his cheeks. To suspect Thomas was to suspect himself, as he was the one who brought him to the holding. His hand dropped to his sword, but he had left it in the hall, as a mark of respect to the *thegn*. That same respect was normally shown to the guests of the *thegn*, but he saw none in Sigulf's eyes.

"Hold, my lord, I pray," Siward said to Celyn, then turned to his son. "Bide your manners, boy. You forget yourself." His voice was hard, with an edge of steel.

Sigulf's cheeks flushed and opened his mouth, but seeing the look on his father's face, closed it.

Siward turned back to Celyn, anger and apology warring in his eyes. "Forgive me, my lord. The boy is young, and his blood runs hot. We have much to speak of, you and I, but not here." He glanced around at the holding, where the people were going about their business, but always with a nod or greeting to their lord. "I wish to be undisturbed."

Celyn swallowed back his anger and nodded. Oswy needed Siward's support to keep his newly acquired throne. It would not be wise for Celyn to antagonize the man. To find out what the *thegn* knew about the Mercians interlopers must be his first priority.

Siward led them along the pasture, which stretched out behind the stable, until they reached the far end. Beyond it there was nothing but the road leading into the settlement. Here, they could converse without other ears to hear.

Celyn steeled himself as Siward stopped and turned to him, Sigulf standing beside him with barely concealed hostility on his face.

The boy was arrogant, like his father. He had never liked Celyn much, but Celyn wondered at Sigulf's anger. After all, Celyn and Siward had fought side by side with Oswald more than once. But Oswald was gone, Celyn reminded himself, and along with his death came the loosening of the vows the *thegns* had pledged to him and the Bernician throne. Many had given the same pledge to Oswy, including Siward, but Celyn knew the *thegns* were waiting to judge Oswy's strength, to see if he could become *Bretwalda*, High King, of a united Northumbria, like his half-brother. But Acha, queen of Deira, was Oswald's mother and Oswy's. So Oswy had been forced to give his cousin Oswine the Deirian throne for now. Celyn suspected, however, that Oswy was merely biding his time. No matter that Oswine would give tribute to Oswy as his overlord, the concession to the Deiran *thegns* was a bitter draught to swallow.

And Penda, King of the Mercians, prowled around the edges of Northumbria's kingdoms, biding his time while he grew in strength. Were the men who attacked him coming back from meeting with Siward? Had they promised him land in exchange for his cooperation? Was Penda planning a strike at Bebbanburg in the spring?

Celyn forced his thoughts back to the moment at hand. He would find out the truth soon enough.

The *thegn* smiled with his back to the fence, seemingly at ease, but Celyn could see the coiled tension in him. "You arrived with extra mounts," Siward began, jerking his chin towards the horses grazing in the pasture behind him. "Where did you get them?" Straight to the matter. Siward was nothing but direct.

Celyn unclenched his fists at his side, willing himself to calm. "We found them."

The *thegn* smiled humourlessly. "And did you also find the men that rode past here on these very beasts, if my men are not mistaken?"

Celyn hid his alarm that Siward had discovered his evasion. "It's hard not to miss a man who attacks you in the middle of the night."

The other man's eyes widened slightly, then his eyebrows drew down in a slight frown. Beside him, Sigulf stiffened, surprise flashing across his face. Not the answer they were expecting, then. Which could only mean that as much as Celyn had been suspecting betrayal of Siward, the *thegn* had likewise been expecting it of him. They thought that he was in league with the Mercians, it seemed.

The knowledge lodged as a bitter stone in his heart. *Celyn Back-biter*, the voice in his head mocked, the one that always spoke in his brother's voice. *Traitor*. He willed the voice away with an effort.

Father and son exchanged a swift glance, and then Siward looked back at Celyn. His eyebrow rose in question. "Dead?"

The clash of swords, Fristhan's lips drawn back in a snarl as he hissed curses upon Celyn, the blood black and shining in the moonlight. The scene came back in perfect clarity. "Aye. One of them was Fristhan Black-Heart."

"Penda's man?" Siward drew back, startled.

Celyn nodded.

Sigulf put his hands on his hips, a sneer curling his lips as he looked at his father. "We have only his word for it," he said, scorn evident on his face.

Icy anger flooded through Celyn, his hands curling into fists at his side as he took an involuntary step towards the boy.

Sigulf's eyes widened at the look on Celyn's face, and he stepped back, quickly.

Siward whirled on his son, his face flushed in anger. "Do you forget Maes Cogwy? You would be mouldering in your grave had the lord Celyn not stepped between Penda's man and you. Think, boy! Hold your tongue, else I cut it out!"

Sigulf's face went white, and his jaw bulged as he clenched it, obviously struggling to control himself.

At that moment small boy of perhaps nine years pelted around the corner of the pasture, and scrambled to a halt as he saw the men, sensing the tension between them.

Siward ignored him, holding onto Sigulf's gaze until his son looked away. Then Siward glanced down at the boy. "You have news, Aculf?"

"Yes, my lord. The stranger meets with the gleeman. I do not understand their talk, so I cannot tell you what they say."

Unease spiked through Celyn. The harper. Thomas met with him again?

"You have done well, lad," Siward said, squeezing the boy's shoulder. Aculf blushed at his lord's praise and ducked his head, scampering off like a young puppy.

Siward turned to his son. "Leave us now. I will speak with you later."

Sigulf shot a narrow-eyed look at Celyn, then nodded at his father and stalked away.

The threatened rain began to fall lightly, dewing the *thegn's* hair with small

beads of moisture as he turned back to Celyn.

“He speaks without thinking,” Siward said.

It was not much of an apology, but likely the only one he was going to get. “A common affliction.”

Siward grunted. “The *scop* came the day after you left here for Tidwick. He said he came from Eoforwic. He provided a welcome diversion from the labours of harvest, and brought news of afar. We were glad to have him for the feast of Samhain.” Siward paused, considering. “I mistrusted him, yet I cannot tell you why.”

Celyn said nothing. Godric had set his teeth on edge as well. He could hardly share that with the *thegn*, however, because that would mean he would have to tell him about Thomas’ encounter with the gleeman last night.

Siward continued. “He was here for two days and then left. But he returned two days later and has been here ever since. The day after he came back my men spotted the strangers on horseback. They gave chase, but lost them in the forest.” He paused, his pale blue eyes hardening on Celyn. “And now here you are, with yet another stranger and a tale of being attacked in the night by the very men we chased from here.”

“The truth.” Celyn said, pointedly.

Siward’s eyes narrowed. “Of course. And now this Thomas meets with the *scop*, alone.” He paused. “You believe the story he tells you?”

“As to that, I have no reason to doubt it. I saw him, myself, attacked by the outlaws. They scattered when I came to the boy’s aid.”

“More strangers. Too many at once. Perhaps they are all together, part of some plot of Penda’s. The *scop*, the men who attacked you, and this boy you found along the way. And men that attacked him, as well,” he added, thoughtfully. “Mayhap some disagreement amongst themselves that you stumbled upon. Or could these outlaws have been the same men who surprised you later?”

Celyn shook his head, suppressing a shudder at the memory of the dark creatures. “No. They were not the same. I am sure of that.”

“You said you are taking the boy to Lindisfarne?”

“Yes.”

Siward grunted. “Well, Bishop Aidan will soon get the truth out of him. In the meantime, I advise you to keep a close watch on him.”

Celyn nodded. As to that, he and Siward were agreed. Thomas needed watching. And Celyn would do so, both for the boy’s sake and for his own.

A PRECARIOUS SEAT

This chapter shows some of what Nectan was up to between the time he heard of Thomas' arrival and when he first met Thomas at the Gathering at the winter solstice in December.

I really hated to lose this one. It contained my only Anglo-Saxon battle scene, and showed some of the forces that were motivating Nectan in the story. It also gave more background on what was happening in the greater story world of seventh century Northumbria. The battle that Nectan takes part in here actually occurred. Being that it was a battle that happened in the wintertime, there is some scholarly speculation as to the motivations behind it, as summer was the preferred season for waging war, for obvious reasons. I sorted out some of the speculations and picked one interpretation, and wrote the chapter around it. Strap on your helmet and grab your sword for this one!

THE KNOCK ON the door came late, barely heard above the noise of the pelting rain. Nectan was awake, musing by the fire. The odd dream had woken him, and he found he could not shake off its foreboding shadows. The knock was a welcome distraction, especially when he knew there was only one who would come calling this late in the night.

Nectan rose and opened the door, ushering Domech in out of the rain.

"My lord?" Eara's voice, heavy with sleep, came from their bed. She had lifted up on one elbow, her long hair tousled around her shoulders. A faint glimmer outlined her form, the mark of a Fey, to another Fey's eyes.

"'Tis only Domech, *mo chridhe*, dinna fret." He spoke in a low murmur, and she yawned and sank down on the bed, used to the comings and goings of Nectan's nephew and Speaker.

Domech divested himself of his cloak and sat by the fire, warming himself. Nectan sat across from him, curious as to the reason for this late night visit. In the corner, Eru shifted on her perch, a small chirrup escaping her.

"A foul night for a walk," he commented.

Domech grimaced. "Aye indeed, uncle. But I couldna wait. I received a

message for ye.”

Nectan straightened. “A message? From who?”

Domech lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “From my mother, on one of her falcons. It came from Bebbanburg, from the Lady Nona, the Healer from Gwynedd.”

Bebbanburg. Domech had all his attention now. “Go on.”

“She says there is a wilding Fey, a Traveller, living with the monks on Lindisfarne.”

Nectan’s heart skipped a beat, and continued faster than before. “Another Traveller? A wilding?”

Domech nodded, his face solemn.

“God’s Blood,” Nectan breathed, a cold hand of fear touching him. He took a breath, trying to corral his racing thoughts. “Could this be the harper we’ve heard tales about?”

Domech shook his head. “’Tis not said the harper is a wilding, my lord.”

Nectan stood up, his anxiety propelling him to motion. “The Unseelies canna get their hands on this wilding. Heaven knows what tool Raegenold will make of him.” The thought of the Unseelie King having a wilding in his Court was more than unsettling. He clenched his fists and sat down. “Yet we are called to war. I canna leave, not now.”

“Nay,” Domech’s face was troubled. “And Raegenold has no such obligation. But if we know about this wilding ’tis likely he does, too. Nothing to stop him from getting there first.”

Nectan blew out a breath. “Send word to the Lady Nona. She must keep the wilding there until we get back.”

Domech dipped his head. “Aye, my king. I’ll send the bird back on the morrow.” He hesitated. “The task may prove too much for her, if the Unseelies come to call.”

“Then we must hope they do not.”

“Hope, and pray.”

Nectan merely nodded in reply.

After Domech stepped back out into the rain, Nectan stared into the fire, the cold ball of unease in his gut untouched by its warmth.

Another Traveller. A wilding. There were forces moving here, patterns he could sense but not decipher. Eru shook her feathers and squawked, sensing his distress as he watched the flames, brooding.

Nectan gripped his spear, shifting his weight as the British warrior charged at him, screaming out his defiance. There was no time to think, only to react as the man brought down his sword in an overhand blow that would have split his skull open had Nectan not managed to get his shield up. The blow was a fierce one, the impact making his arm go momentarily numb, but he ignored it and thrust his spear into his assailant. The man screamed and fell.

In one fluid movement Nectan twisted and withdrew his spear, spinning around to face the next threat to emerge from the chaos around him. He swept an assessing gaze over the field of battle, a small finger of fear touching him.

It was evident things were going badly for the Dál Riatans and their allies, Nectan's Picts among them. The Alt Clut were too numerous, the weather too foul. *Or so would run the excuses*, Nectan thought. The fact was that to try to use Owen's raid across the mountains as a distraction, sending his allies to fight while Oswy launched an attack in the north in order to expand Bernicia's power was an ill-formed idea. *Oswald would have known better*. Nectan grimaced, setting that thought aside. Oswy sat on the Bernician throne now.

But for how long? That was another thought best kept to himself.

The noise and tumult of battle raged around him—the screams and grunts, the crash of weapons, the cries of the wounded, the struggling figures locked together in combat. Above the sounds of battle came a sudden surge of yells and excited cheers. Nectan looked around, wiping the rain out of his eyes, searching for the source.

Quick movement distracted him: another warrior rushing at him from out of the melee. The man had blood streaming down his face, his mouth twisted in a terrible snarl as he swung his shield at Nectan, who had to duck and jump back to avoid the thrust of the other's spear.

But the ground beneath his feet betrayed him. Normally he was light on his feet, and graceful in movement as was common to the Fey. But it had been raining all night, and at dawn, when the battle was joined, the field had soon turned into a morass of blood and mud that sucked at their feet and caused them to slip.

He felt himself falling and twisted to try to land on his shoulder and roll back to his feet quickly. But the warrior was upon him, and Nectan barely had time to get his shield up to deflect the spear's thrust.

The spear slid along the wet, curved wood of his shield and grazed his upper arm. A bright flash of pain caused Nectan to grunt in reaction.

The other man raised his shield again to smash it into Nectan's face. Fear speared through Nectan as he tried to raise his own shield to deflect the blow. But his arm wasn't working quite right; he couldn't lift it properly.

Nectan grappled at the man ineffectively as the warrior lifted his spear, certain triumph in his face. Nectan bucked against him to try to escape, all the while knowing it was hopeless.

But then Domech was there, a sword in his hands. With an inchoate scream he thrust it into the other man, who fell in a gurgling heap upon Nectan.

Nectan scrambled out from under the warrior and back to his feet, aided by Domech, who grinned fiercely at him. Nectan clapped him on the shoulder, unable to stop his own grin in reply. But they could not savour the momentary victory for long. Domech's eyes widened, and he hissed in surprise. "My king!"

Out of the corner of his eye Nectan saw a sword cutting towards him, the

same time as he felt the distinctive presence of another Fey. Instinctively he leapt to the side and spun around, low, to avoid another two-handed blow. The shock of the attack lent strength to his weary limbs. The attacker advanced on him, his sword raised for another attempt. But Domech, who swung at the attacker with the plundered sword, stopped him in his tracks.

Domech was no swordsman; his weapons were the spear, the shield, and the axe. It was easy work for the warrior to dodge the blow. Out of the corner of his eye Nectan saw another Fey attacking his cousin, who was forced to turn to defend himself, leaving Nectan's attacker free to continue his advance.

The attacker wore a helmet with a nose guard and cheek plates, but Nectan knew him with cold certainty: Strang ap Durst, taking the opportunity to rid himself of Nectan and so make the way clear for him to gain the throne of the Northern Seelie Fey.

Although the Rule stated that a Fey must not spill the blood of another Fey, it would not be the first time one had killed another in the confusion and tumult of battle. Clever of Strang to take this opportunity. He could kill Nectan and none need ever know it was he.

These thoughts went through Nectan's mind in a flash, and he gripped his spear in his good hand, steadying his feet as well as he could. His wounded arm blazed with pain, he felt his shield slipping out of his blood-slick fingers, and tossed it aside. It could not help him, and would only slow him down.

Grim confidence radiated from Strang's eyes as he advanced, his sword held ready, preparing to strike.

Nectan knew he could not prevail over his more heavily armoured and better equipped opponent. His only advantage was to get Strang off guard, and so he gathered himself to attack, to surprise the other Fey into making a mistake.

Just then Domech's opponent leapt out of the way of one of Domech's wild swings, and he crashed into Strang, causing him to stagger to the side and collide with another of the Alt Clut. That warrior turned with a roar, swinging a *seax*, forcing Strang to defend himself.

Domech dispatched his opponent and turned to aid Nectan, just as another Alt Clut warrior joined the battle against Strang. They disappeared into the driving rain and melee of battle, Strang's opportunity to kill Nectan vanishing with them.

Domech turned to him. He was covered with mud, with a red streak of blood running down his hand from a cut on his forearm. "May he be damned to hell, and all his children with him," he said, his voice harsh with anger. He spat, and wiped his face. "How long had he been watching ye, do ye think?"

Nectan thought back through the haze of fighting, bits and pieces flickering through his memories, but he could not recall any sense of one of their own nearby. He shrugged. "Some time, I imagine."

"Oh aye," Domech agreed. "And he waited until ye were injured, the coward."

Nectan's lips thinned, but there was no time to reply, for suddenly two more

Alt Clut were upon them, screaming in their tongue.

His opponent was young, barely out of his teens, fuelled by blood lust and the glory of battle but lacking in skills. Even with his injury it was no difficulty for Nectan to kill him, feeling some regret as the boy slid to the ground, death darkening his eyes as his blood poured from him.

Too young, he thought. Or mayhap I am too old.

Sudden yells erupted and they both whirled around, searching for the cause. A struggling knot of men clustered around the banner of the Dál Riata king. Fear speared through Nectan at the sight, and he spun around, looking for the standard of Brudei, King of the Picts. Nectan recognized the sudden change that marked the battlefield; he had experienced it many times before, that point when all was won or lost, one way or another.

They all felt it, both the Alt Clut warriors who were fighting with renewed vigour against the Dál Riatans and their allies, as well as the Picts, who were reacting as any cornered animal would, with fury and desperation, trying to turn the tide in their favour.

But like a tide, the momentum was relentless, sweeping them all aside. The rain fell harder, and Nectan swiped at his face, squinting at the shrouded figure of Owen, King of the Alt Clut, who whirled around on his horse, his distinctive boar's hair helmet marking him. The Alt Clut warriors howled in triumph as Owen lifted up a spear which held the impaled head of Domnall Brecc, king of the Dál Riatans.

The sight spurred Nectan into motion with a snarl, Domech at his side as they charged towards their King. They hacked through the Alt Clut warriors who surrounded him, their Fey power giving them added strength. He and Domech spun and slashed in concert, the two of them a deadly force cutting a bloody swath.

Soon they were fighting back to back with the King, the rest of the Picts grappling with the Alt Clut warriors who were pressing home their advantage.

Suddenly Brudei slipped on the wet ground and fell, his shield up to deflect the attack of the warrior facing him. Nectan could not help him, nor could any of his war band, as they were being hard-pressed by the Alt Clut, whose numbers seemed endless.

"ENOUGH!" The command tore through the clash of weapons and the moans and screams of the dying. "HOLD!" Owen's horse jumped over a fallen man and came to a halt as Brudei scrambled to his feet, weapon at the ready.

The rest of the Brits fell back at the arrival of their King. Nectan stood in the knot of Pict warriors who gathered in a knot around Brudei, Domech breathing heavily beside him.

"Domnall is dead," Owen declared above the keening cries and sobs of the wounded. "Go back to Bebbanburg and tell Oswy that the Alt Clut have won the victory this day." His gaze swept over them, scorn on his face. "Tell him to come himself the next time he wishes a fight, instead of sending some mewling

women to do his bidding”

The insult goaded Brudei into action, and he leapt towards Owen, but two of the Alt Clut stopped him, holding the struggling Pict in their grasp.

All around them the remaining Dál Riatans were either being cut down as they chose to die beside their lord, or were being chased from the field of battle by screaming Alt Clut warriors. Nectan’s heart pounded hard in his chest as he caught his breath, eyeing the warriors who ringed them, his fingers tightening on his spear.

“I wilna give you a honourable death,” Owen said with a sneer. “Go back to the Angles with your tail between your legs like the whipped cur ye be, but I will have your tribute before ye do.”

Nectan glanced at his king, awaiting his decision. If Brudei decided to fight, his men would fight with him, to the death. Part of Nectan longed for it, for glorious death beside his lord was far preferable to the insult of defeat. But the larger part of Nectan, the Fey part, was unwilling to give his life in service to this human. Obligated he may be, but his greater obligation was to the Fey, and his death would leave them with Strang as King, for he had no doubt the other Fey would find a way to survive this day.

Brudei was a practical man, however. He had done his duty to Oswy, answering his call to fight with the Dál Riatans against the Alt Clut, while Oswy took advantage of Owen’s charge across the mountains to attack Manau Gododdin in the northeast. Brudei’s face twisted, and he threw down his sword at the stallion’s feet, followed by his shield. “You will rue this day,” he snarled. “I will cut ye down the next time we meet, and your sons with you.”

Owen merely smiled as the rest of the Picts followed their king’s lead and left their weapons and rings, arm-bracelets and torcs in a pile at his feet. Once they were done Owen wheeled his horse around, and screamed in triumph, brandishing his sword in the air.

The Alt Clut roared in response, clattering their weapons against their shields in tribute to their king. Domnall’s head bobbing above them as one of Owen’s sons handed the spear holding it back to his father.

Nectan suppressed a shiver at the sight. *Another king dead in this ill-fated year*, he thought. There would be repercussions, negotiations, jostling for power amongst the kings and nobles once again. And for the victorious, a share in the booty and feasts in the mead-halls.

For the rest, they could return home for the balance of the winter. In the summer Oswy would likely call on the Picts for aid once more as he sought to consolidate his hold on the throne, assuming he survived his excursion into Manau Gododdin. And despite this humiliating defeat, Brudei would likely not refuse the Bernician overlord’s request. Oswy’s nephew, Talorcan, was fostered with Brudei, and the ties between them were long and deep.

Nectan took a deep breath. Bone-deep weariness crept over him as the blood lust of battle released him from its grip. He and Domech began to trudge away

from the field of death, mud sucking at their feet at every step.

Troubled thought began to plague him, thoughts of Domnall's head on the pike, and Strang's face as he advanced, sword at the ready. And of Oswy, the new king, whose gamble to check Owen's ambition had cost him the life of one of his closest allies. Even if he won the day at Manau Gododdin, his *thegns* and *ealdormen* would not think highly of this winter's work.

A king's throne, be it human or Fey, is a precarious seat, he mused. A sobering reminder, one he dare not forget.

PREY

Another Nectan chapter. This one came just before Thomas hears the Call from Nectan that leads him to the Wild Hunt. You may notice that although this chapter references Matthew, there is no reference to Matthew being Thomas' father. That was deliberate. I wanted readers to have the shock of seeing Thomas' father appear at the same time as Thomas did.

I did struggle with letting these Nectan chapters go, but one of my beta readers remarked that she liked having Nectan be a bit mysterious, and not knowing much about his motives.

Taking out these chapters certainly added to the air of mystery about what Nectan was up to. That's not a bad thing, and in the end I'm happy with Wilding as it is.

But it's fun to be able to draw back the curtain now and give you a little glimpse behind the scenes...

“HE IS COMING,” Eara said, her face pale as she faced Nectan over the table in his workshop. “A message has come. He left a week ago.”

Nectan had been cutting a new quill for drawing a brooch design, and he lowered it slowly, his gut clenching. He knew whom his wife referred to.

He rapidly calculated the distance, thinking it through again, even though he had done so many times since the Gathering. “A week,” he said. “If he faces no obstacles, it will take another week to get here. Yet the snows are heavy around Hii, or so I hear.” He shook his head slightly. “Three weeks at the most. He will be eager to arrive.”

“And the wilding?”

He grimaced, his hand fisting, and shook his head. “I canna say,” he admitted. “The Lady Nona said her cousin and the wilding had left with one of the monks, and that they would be gone for some time. I know nothing more. The Ward is watching the monastery. He will send word when the wilding gets back.”

Eara regarded him, anger sparking in her eyes. “If only ye could have spoken to him, helped him understand.”

His lips thinned. “Aye. If only.” He took a breath. “I am his King. I have his

pledge. T'will be enough.”

Despite her words, Nectan saw the uncertainty in her eyes, an uncertainty he shared. Thomas was a wilding, and unpredictable. And Eara had not had the Knowing of Thomas, had not seen the full strength of the boy, nor his fear and loneliness. Loneliness that had marked him since the death of his father.

Eara's eyes narrowed. “His pledge may not be enough,” she said. “He could break from us. And with Matthew on the way—” She grimaced, and continued. “Ye could lose both of them.”

He looked at her sharply, disconcerted at hearing his fears put into words. “Nay, wife. I had the Knowing of the boy; I saw his heart. He will not easily break his pledge.”

“Not easily, no. But if Matthew gets here first, and the wilding comes back and finds him? What then, husband?” Eara's eyes blazed. “’Twas foolishness to bring him into our Court! Ye shouldna done it, not with Strang ready to pounce on ye, searching for any weakness—”

Nectan's fear goaded sharp anger to life. “I've told ye the dream. This wilding must be tamed, ere he brings disaster upon us, Seelie and Unseelie alike! I couldna leave him to Raegenold, can ye no see that?”

“Better he be the downfall of Raegenold than of you, husband,” she snapped. “Let your cousin try to tame him, and fail. Let your cousin lose his throne at the Beltane Gathering. The Unseelies thrive on chaos, t'will be no hardship for them. And have you forgotten our son? Durst will be King, if ye can hold the throne.” She heaved a breath. “Ye must hold it, ere your disgrace falls upon him. Let the wilding go. If not to the Unseelies, then to Matthew. The Traveller will be happy to take him away, I am sure. This wilding is his responsibility, after all, not yours!”

He shook his head sharply. “Enough, woman! Ye speak foolishness, and I wilna hear no more!” He waved his hand angrily.

Eara's scowled, and she opened her mouth to say more, but then whirled and stalked away.

He heaved a breath, willing himself to calm down, a knot of fear clenching his gut as he watched his wife's retreating back.

A sudden longing seized him to do as Eara desired, to wash his hands of the wilding. But he turned his mind from it. To do that would be to ignore the threat the boy posed. His hands fisted at his side, and he shook his head, wishing again that he understood exactly what doom the wilding brought with him, but the winds had not given him the answer yet, no matter how hard he listened.

He was King, but there were those among his people who would prefer to see the Eagle Clan back on the throne, who would support Strang's bid for it at the Beltane Gathering. Yet all that would change if he could draw Matthew into his Court. To gain that powerful Traveller's pledge, a pledge he had so far resisted giving to Seelie or Unseelie alike, would be a telling sign of Nectan's prowess to the rest of the Seelies.

The wilding was a risk he had to take, the bait to draw in the bigger prize: the

Traveller that even now made his way towards him, drawn like a moth to a flame.

Nectan carefully *cut* a cuttlefish bone, and handed half of it to his son, Durst. “We must polish it now,” he said, taking the rough cloth, showing how to make the surface of the bone smooth.

Durst began carefully rubbing away at the bone, and Nectan did the same with his half. “Can I make something today, Father?” he asked, his eyes eager.

He hid a smile. “Not today, my son. But ye can pour the silver, once we make the mould.”

Durst nodded, and bent his head back to the cuttlebone, the sunlight striking gold sparks off his red hair.

Nectan regarded him with satisfaction for a moment, his heart swelling with love and pride, seeing the Fey power in the boy, but only dimly, as Durst was not old enough, yet, for the Quickening.

NECTAN! COME! He dropped the cuttlebone and knife with a clatter as the voice speared through his head. Fear and urgency accompanied it, overwhelming him for a moment, and he had to hold his head with his hands, his eyes squeezing shut as he grappled to get control.

It had been a week since Earra had told him the Traveller was on the way. He had come quicker than Nectan thought.

“Father?” Fear coloured Durst’s voice, but Nectan could not reassure him, for words flashed through his mind again.

He’s chasing—Words and pictures all tumbled together in his mind, an urgent appeal. His blood ran cold, and he gasped. *Gather your Seelies, you must COME*—

It was all a jumble; the fear, the words, the sense of what was happening, the desperate Call for help. But the brief snatches Nectan received were enough.

He opened his eyes as the Call faded from his mind and saw Durst’s wide-eyed fear. “Dinna be afraid,” he managed to say. “Go find Domech, bring him here, quickly now.”

Durst nodded, and scrambled to his feet, leaving his father’s workshop without a backward glance.

Nectan took a couple of breaths, trying to calm his rioting heart, but it was no use. His hands fisted at his side. His debt to the Traveller, the one that had enabled him to gain the Seelie Throne, was coming due. He had envisioned many ways in which Matthew might call upon him, but he had never thought of this, nor that it would come now, at this inopportune time.

He would have to Call his Seelies, and those who were close enough would come. And the wilding would hear it, for according to the message he received just this morning, Thomas had returned to the monastery two days past.

He shut his eyes, visions of disaster flitting through his mind. *He might not come.* He shook his head, finding no comfort in the desperate thought. He had seen the wilding’s heart; the boy would honour the pledge he made to the Seelie Court.

The both of them, together, and no way to prepare them—

Nectan heaved a breath, and then another, his emotions churning. He snarled, and with a violent motion swept the table clean with his arm, the tools and cuttlefish bone falling to the ground in a clatter. Eru lifted from her perch with a sudden squawk, her wings fluttering madly for a moment. He gripped the edge of the table, trying to think, but his thoughts kept spiralling into chaos.

The gods were laughing at him, he could feel it, with every ragged breath he took, seeing again and again the vision that had accompanied the cry for help that had speared through his mind: the Alder King was on the Hunt, and Matthew, the exiled Traveller, his prey.

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