

~ Evermore ~

by Mavis Applewater

Part Three of the Everlasting Series

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Thanks to my beta reader, Mary.

As always this is for Heather.

Alithea's head fell back her body trembling from the feel of her long red hair caressing her naked back. She had ended her day feeling exhausted after dealing with the pending matters of state. She had planned on climbing into bed and falling fast asleep. When she entered her bedchambers and discovered Raven waiting for her sprawled across their bed wearing nothing but a smile she quickly altered her plans. Now her fingers clawed at the bedding. Reclining naked on the bed with a plump pillow nestled beneath her bare bottom, her emerald orbs smoldering with desire as she glanced down her naked flesh to find her lover's body nestled between her thighs. Once again her head fell back her body giving into the delightful sensation of Raven's tongue slowly stroking her.

The Queen's heart was pounding against her chest while she bit down on her lip to silence her murmurs of pleasure. The children were in bed and she hoped fast asleep. Still now that they were older she and her lover had discovered that it was best to at least try to keep their passion as quiet as possible. It was a difficult task the castle walls echoed horribly. She jerked her hips forward; pressing her passion hard against her lover. "By the heavens." she gasped rolling her hips encouraging Raven to pleasure her more deeply.

Alithea released a strangled cry when Raven eagerly granted her request. Her skin prickled from the feel of one of Raven's hands gliding up along her body. The Queen began to thrust her hips urgently upon feeling Raven's teeth teasing her throbbing pearl while nimble fingers captured one of her nipples. She was unable to quell her passionate cries when Raven suckled her harder while teasing her erect nipple.

The Queen became adrift her world was spinning and her lover seemed determined to never cease giving Alithea pleasure. Alithea's eyes had snapped shut; her body flailing eagerly enjoying her lover's determination. She fell down upon the bed pleased when Raven continued bestowing pleasure on her. She felt as if she was falling before the world slipped away. Eventually the mist cleared and her body calmed. She rolled onto her side smiling when she

discovered her lover nestled beside her. "Now had I known you wish to ravish me I would have concluded the council meeting much sooner," she cooed to her lover. Alithea's eyes widened surprised by the pensive look in Raven's eyes. "What is the matter my love?" she questioned brushing an errant lock from Raven's brow.

"Not a thing my love." Raven reassured her with tender kiss.

'Well she is lying.' Alithea silently concluded nestling closer to Raven. She had seen the same troubled look in her lover's eyes before. It was the same look she possessed each time she awoke from a fitful dream. Of all the things Alithea could bestow upon her lover vanquishing the dark dreams was the one thing she was incapable of doing. She reached up and began caressing her lover's shoulder. She sighed wearily when Raven captured her hand halting her touch.

"It is late." Raven softly offered.

"Sleep?" Alithea tenderly encouraged while saying a silent prayer that tonight Raven would find peace as she slept. For several moons the King failed to sleep through the night. Even Peregrine's powders and charms failed. Alithea cradled her King in her arms caressing Raven's body praying that tonight would be different.

How many years had passed? The dark one wondered lurking in the back of a pub. At first he thought the pub only seemed familiar because so many watering holes looked much like any other. Now it came back to him. He had passed through these doors before and the port had failed to improve over the passing years. Who had been the one that night? A bar wench perhaps? No, the grizzly portly man pouring the sloth he had the nerve to call a drink was the same one who had been standing behind the bar the first time he had the misfortune of traveling through this land. There was a girl that much he could recall. There was always a girl. "Where am I?" He demanded shoving the slovenly drunken sod seated next to him.

"Far too early to have lost yer way," the weary looking man spat out.

"Not lost, how can I be lost when I have no destination?" he hissed revealing his yellow teeth.

"Nor have I," the man who looked much older than his twenty some odd summers.

"That would explain the smell," the dark one groaned.

"You'd fair better not speaking with the likes of this one," the barkeep cautioned him. "A traitor to the crown is not the way to make friends in this land."

"Traitor?" this peeked his interest.

"Fresh out of the King's dungeon," the barkeep prattled on sneering at the former soldier. "Betrayed the King and he dare sits at my bar." he added spitting at the young man.

"I paid my debt," the former prisoner weakly tried to argue.

"Your debt will never be paid," another patron chimed in.

"Well spoken," the dark one encouraged already forming a plan. "Tell me Sir what is the name of this land?"

"Lyennarian," the barkeep proudly proclaimed.

"Ah I knew I had traveled this road before," he smiled the wheels turning. "So many roads."

"Trades man?" The bartender curiously inquired studying the odd creature's strange appearance.

"Of sorts," he smiled once again. "King Hardwin rules this land does he not?"

"He did God rest his soul," the bartender explained his words bringing about praise for the fallen monarchy.

"And now?"

"King Rowan," the server proudly proclaimed. "Long live the King."

"Rowan!" Was cheered throughout the dingy barroom.

"Long live King Rowan," he politely joined in. What was her name? She was a servant girl the one he had chosen that rainy night. Greta she worked in the palace. He had chosen her for his seed feeling certain that she would be the one to finally bring his heir into the world. All of his traveling he spilled his seed everywhere each time certain that his son would be waiting for him. Now all of the back tracking leading him in circles and no child had been born. Perhaps this would be the one.

He slinked into the background. It was something he was quite skilled at. So many times he could enter or exit a room and no one would notice him. He could linger for hours without being noticed. The darkness was his friend. He waited watching the prisoner enduring the jeers and cursing until he finally fled. Quietly he followed the fallen man out of the tavern, slipping along the muddy roads his quarry never taking notice. No they only saw him when he desired it and then he would only lure them in before he would reveal his true self. Then and only then would they know not just what but who they had crossed paths with.

It was the eyes that gave him away, the glowing red which he could conceal when he desired to do so. The thought of a new King leading this plush land was promising. He was tired of dwelling in grottos, mines and in the trunk of mossy trees. The palace would suit him just fine. The girl was the key. He needed to learn more and he needed to find her. The girl who he spared from despair. Misery and death were after all his calling. Still she was ripe and he needed to breed. For now he yearned to know more of this place. It might prove to be the new feeding ground he had been seeking. This fallen soldier would not get him closer to the new ruler, still he

might know things. Having endured time in a dungeon or two the dark one had learned that many times those in chains are the only souls who truly know what is happening.

He stalked his quarry running his tongue along his growing fangs. He sneered flashing them to the moonlight. He needed his son if there was one. He needed to feed on the one who came from his blood and his heart. This one would do him no good he could smell it. He pitied the clumsy man sloshing along the road. "The fool is going to fall and drown in a mud puddle," he snarled moving quickly.

Jeron stumbled backward when the dark man suddenly appeared before him. "Leave me be," the fallen soldier barked teetering slightly.

"I have no quarrel with you," the dark one smirked. "He is not my King."

"Nor mine," Jeron spat out feeling his blood curdle when the odd looking man smiled. "I should have run him through. The sword was there. All I had to do was-

"Was what?" He gloated as the answer came to him. The stranger reeked of it. The smell was that of a coward.

"Hammond would be on the throne now if I hadn't failed," Jeron whimpered. "I could have slain that dragon. He isn't natural. Sir Hammond said so."

"Not natural?" His questioned now his curiosity was peeked. "How so?"

"An orphan, rising from a blacksmith's shop," Jeron grumbled on finally finding his footing again. He stumbled along not really noticing the odd man nipping at his heels. "Marries the Princess and now he is our King."

"Oh," he hissed feeling cheated. "By unnatural you mean he came from humble beginnings. I'm wasting my time."

"Wasting your time?" Jeron laughed. "I'm lucky I haven't been hanged. I need to leave this place."

"A wise choice," the dark one agreed. "First can you help a stranger? I passed along this road a long time ago. There was a servant girl. She worked in the palace. Her name was Greta. Have you heard of her?"

"The whore cook?" Jeron spat out. "She serves him. Wiping his bastard children's asses now."

"Whore?" He pried his eyes burning with a hint of redness.

"Had a child, no husband still Hardwin kept her on," Jeron grumbled slipping once again. "Probably his bastard."

"A son?" He anxiously pried.

"Daughter, I think," Jeron slurred turning to his companion. There was something wrong with this man. He shook his head thinking the stranger with dark eyes, scraggly hair and long nose smelled like a wet dog. The pungent odor was unmistakable. "Didn't catch yer name?" he questioned thinking he must have drunk more than he thought. It couldn't be possible that this man's eyes were glowing a bright shade of red.

"Me?" He snickered cruelly revealing his large teeth. "I am called Barghest."

Jeron stood frozen with fear praying that he had heard wrong. Barghest's claws ran down along his throat the dark man no longer looking human; his fiery red eyes holding Jeron captive.

"Not to worry," Barghest howled. "I shan't bring you misfortune. You've already been blessed with that." He explained while his claws scraped along Jeron's throat. "You shall be granted my other gift." His long claws pierced Jeron's throat slashing it open. He watched with pleasure the blood pouring from the coward's body. He gazed down at his prey crumpled on the muddy road while Barghest licked his blood from his claws. "Now the girl." He gloated falling on his haunches before devouring his prey. His glowing red eyes gleaming in the darkness while savoring his victory.

Peregrine bolted up a horrible vision disrupting his slumber. "He's here!" He bellowed in horror.

The dawn had arrived just as Penelope strolled down the still muddy road fighting off the chill that came with the morning dew. She was not looking forward to another day of working at the tavern. Fending off the advances of drunken braggarts did not suit her. She sighed heavily spying the man sprawled out in the road. "Speaking of which," she grunted under her breath. She didn't slow her pace assuming that the man had been patronizing the tavern last evening. "Got drunk and passed out in the road did ya you stupid sod," she hissed as she neared the figure. "Soiled yourself to boot," she grunted with disgust when the pungent odor assaulted her. The closer she stepped the faster her heart began to beat. When the fallen man's body came into full view she released a horrified scream.

Cormac shrank back from the sight. He hadn't wanted to show weakness in front of Ives. Still the wretched smell and ravished body made it difficult for him to keep his insides from churning.

"Jeron," Ives sighed kneeling beside the ravished form. "Who would exact revenge in such a heinous manner? He was so happy to finally be freed. Now I bet he wished he had stayed locked in the dungeon."

"No man did this," the young man grimly asserted.

"Men are capable of some very dark things, my Prince," Ives wearily surmised.

"Of that I am certain," the young man conceded. "The violence although sickening could have been by a mortal hand except,"

"Except?" Ives questioned truly curious. He cast a glance over his shoulder and felt a twinge of concern when he spied the Princes' unnaturally pale pallor.

"The markings," Cormac managed to utter despite the feeling of bile rising in his throat. "The piercing in the throat; the way it was ripped open. This was not a man."

"A bear?" Ives pondered examining the corpse more closely. "That would explain the way his chest was torn open."

"No," Cormac softly offered studying the strange pattern of the wounds. "The throat looks more like a wolf. The chest I can't understand. He looks as if a pair of talons tore him open. Pulling in opposite directions before the beast devoured its prey."

"A wolf," Ives mulled over the possibility. "Could be. The savageness is consistent still the claw markings are not. This beast has long fangs and a taste for blood. We need to tell your father. Looks as if we'll be on a hunt soon."

"Could it have been a dragon?" The young Prince asked with sudden enthusiasm.

"No my Prince," Ives smiled for the first time that morn. He hated to disappoint the boy. "If Jeron had met a dragon there wouldn't be a body. "Frederick, Crispin come here," he beckoned the young foot soldiers who had accompanied them. "Sorry lads," he began with a half hearted smile. "You are in charge of cleaning this mess up. Do it quickly no need for anymore villagers to find this awaiting their morning travels."

"Where shall we bury him?" Crispin questioned choking from the stench and horrific sight.

"Crossroads burial ground," Ives coldly instructed silently pleased that a coward like Jeron's final resting place was a dark patch of land reserved for the remains of criminals and deviants. "Better than he deserves." He added with disgust still recalling the day Jeron stood in formation cowering before the King he had been plotting against. *'You not only betrayed the King, you betrayed my friend.'* He silently hissed pleased by the horrible way Jeron's life had come to an end.

Rowan waved her hands frantically in an effort to brush away the dust Peregrine had just blown in her face. "By the heavens," she shouted. "What is wrong with you? Trust me Wizard I can get dirty all by myself. Just ask my bride." Rowan was in a foul mood. He had a fitful night. When sleep would come it brought troubling dreams of the dark man. The one he had feared since childhood. When the morning finally came she found no relief only distressing news. Jeron had

been murdered. Rowan could not find it in her heart to mourn the traitor still she was troubled that someone might have chosen to expel their own form of justice. Jeron had paid for his crime wallowing for over a decade in a dank dark cell in the dungeon. In Rowan's mind the man had paid his debt and was free to live his life preferably far from Lyennarian.

"Stand still," Peregrine demanded waving foul smelling incense around the King.

"Will you stop that?" Rowan pleaded while trying to escape from the pesky Wizard. "I have things to attend to."

"It is merely a protection spell," Peregrine persisted.

"What I need protection from is you," she complained pushing past the elderly Wizard. "What is this?" she snarled while brushing the dust from her clothing.

"Ashes," Peregrine offered simply.

"Of?" Rowan wearily questioned eager to find Ives.

"Dragon's Heart," Peregrine shrugged. "And-"

"And?" Rowan demanded.

"Cow dung," Peregrine answered.

"Dead animal organs and poop thank you very much," Rowan growled before finally pushing past the Wizard and making her way out to the grand hall.

"It is also mixed with," Peregrine prattled on.

"Stop!" Rowan howled now completely agitated. "Are you quite done? If so I have a kingdom to rule over."

"For the moment I am satisfied," Peregrine grumbled before vanishing.

She smiled upon discovering her Queen reclining comfortably on her throne. Alithea seemed occupied studying scrolls. Rowan knew her bride was tending to royal matters. Rowan wore the laurels of the King but it was Alithea who ruled the kingdom.

"Do I want to know why you are stomping about and shouting like a lunatic?" She questioned Rowan peering up at her lover.

"Peregrine decided to give me a dusting and it wasn't fairy dust," Rowan grouched before taking a seat by her lover.

"I am certain he has his reasons," Alitheia quickly deduced. She had long ago accepted the sorcerer's meddling. She didn't like it still she endured it. She could only hope that it was another sleeping potion. As she had predicted Raven slept very little before waking in the most frightful state.

"Anything I should know about?" Rowan questioned glancing at the scrolls her bride had been toiling with.

"No," Alitheia politely informed her. "What of this murder?"

"I am waiting for Ives return," Rowan answered.

"Do you think it was wise sending Cormac?" The Queen questioned in a troubled tone.

"Yes," Rowan flatly retorted.

"He is so young," Alitheia tried to argue.

"No he isn't," Rowan sighed wearily. It was a familiar argument. "He needs to learn. Someday he will be King no man will follow him if he doesn't learn. I was much younger than he is when I first went to battle."

"Don't remind me." Alitheia scowled.

"I am sorry my love," Rowan tenderly began clasping her lover's trembling hand. "I know that as a mother you are worried. Our son is the heir to the throne. Even in peaceful times he may be called upon to raise his sword. I will sleep better if I am certain he will be able to use it."

"Speaking of sleep," the Queen tentatively began. "When was the last time you slept through the night?"

"It is of no matter," Rowan dismissed her query.

"It is getting worse," Alitheia astutely noted. "The nightmares come more often. Is he coming? The one you fear is he coming?"

"Someday," Rowan evasively answered blowing out a terse breath when Ives and her son entered the room. "What news?"

"Rest easy my Lord," Ives proclaimed. "There is no vigilante in our midst. More like a rabid wolf. I thought it was a murder until the Prince noticed the clear markings of an animal."

"Good work," she complimented her oldest son.

"At first I had hoped it was dragon," Cormac explained with a mischievous grin. "Alas, just a wolf. A rather large one from the tracks we found. Shall we form a hunting party?"

"Yes," she readily agreed. "It is a fine day for a hunt and I fear that I am pestering your mother."

"Who shall we take?" Ives quickly questioned eager to be out doing something. The peace that loomed over the land was blissful still Ives often felt an itch to do something.

"Cormac you decide," Rowan instructed pleased by the bold smile that formed on her son's lips. "Form two parties. I want you with me and the second team can have the dogs."

"Why is it that you never use hunting dogs?" The Prince questioned always curious by the way his father often shied away from the animals.

"Dogs don't like me," Rowan absently responded. It had always troubled her the way some animals fled from her. "Off you go. You have work to do. I want this beast slain before the next dawn."

Left alone with her bride Rowan was concerned with the pensive look clouding her lover's eyes. "A hunting trip," the Queen absently muttered.

"You never minded when I've taken him out before," Rowan questioned.

"Yes when your quarry was limited to deer, ducks or the occasional rabbit," she grumbled. "A wolf! It could be dangerous."

"I'll be right by his side," Rowan tried to reassure her lover. She could tell by the stormy look in Alithea's emerald orbs her words offered no comfort.

She shifted nervously in her throne noticing the way Alithea's brow had crinkled. Then suddenly the Queen sniffed the air and glared at her. "Just what did Peregrine throw on you?"

"Dung," Rowan groaned.

"Because?" Alithea persisted her curiosity truly peeked and she failed to hide her amusement and Rowan decided to make her exit. "Dung?" she questioned under her breath. "There must be a reason." she added absently before returning her attention to the matter of presiding over the kingdom.

Rowan had viewed the body before Jeron was buried. This was no ordinary beast they would be tracking. For a brief moment she considered leaving Cormac behind. She knew in her heart she couldn't. He had to learn; if he would indeed take the throne he needed to know danger and face it. This knowledge did little to ease the ache in her heart. She fought reminding herself to think as the King and not a parent. She made a silent pledge that no matter what danger they faced she would perish before she allowed any harm to come to her child.

"If it is a wolf it will hunt at night," Rowan announced. "Only one set of tracks?" She questioned her child.

"Yes father," he nodded. "I found that to be quite strange."

"It is," she answered solemnly. "Still the alpha male could have cast him out. Now he is lost searching for a new pack and forced to fend for himself. Bitterness can run deep even in such a creature."

Barghest nestled his shaggy body in the moss. He hid deep in the woods plotting his next move. His quest was always the same he wished to attach himself to a home. Not just any home, he felt he deserved the best. Years of traveling and the only time he felt close to achieving the comfort he craved was the last time he had traveled through this land. She was young and by all appearances innocent. He thought the plump lass foolish for traveling alone at night. And he was thankful for her foolishness. He saw the castle looming in the darkness when he took her. He did not possess the desire to take her life only to make her wish that he had. Leaving her bleeding and helpless near the castle gate he lurked in the shadows. He was filled with delight that this might be his chance at gaining entrance. His plan was foiled when she was discovered by the guards. There were too many for him to chance attacking or sneaking past them. His bright red eyes glowed in the darkness reflecting his growing anger. He fled from Lyennarian greeting as many villagers as he could knowing that by simply crossing paths with them they would soon die or fall pray to misfortune. He thought of this as his gift; a gift that brought him pleasure. He also felt immense pleasure from feeding off of their fear and anger. It made him stronger as did their blood.

Curious hazel eyes studied the Wizard who was thrashing about his humble home. He had never seen Peregrine in such a state before. "I know you are there," Peregrine grumbled waving his hand encouraging the boy to come out of hiding. The youngster sighed heavily slipping from behind the cabinet. "Raleigh," Peregrine greeted the boy trying to sound calm. "I know you are curious and enjoy our time together today is not a good day."

The lad shifted nervously on the balls of his feet. Peregrine couldn't help smiling thinking how much the lad looked like Rowan when he did that. He saw something else in the Prince something the Wizard felt the day the boy was born. It was the spark of light in his eyes and the bright light that surrounded him. A small part of the Wizard wished that he was mistaken because as the boy grew his thirst for knowledge and natural curiosity in matters that a Prince should not hold interest in made it clear. Raleigh had a gift, a calling the same one that Peregrine had been blessed with.

He had begun the lad's tutelage early fearing each day his parents would discover what he was doing. For the life of him the ancient wizard was at a loss as to how he was going to explain the boy's calling to them. Alitheia would be most displeased when she learned her youngest child was

destined to follow not in his father's footsteps but in the Wizard's. The Prince was a natural when it came to alchemy. Peregrine had read the runes over and over again each time the stones were clear; Raleigh would be his successor. The old man was still leery of informing his parents of the boy's destiny. He went so far as to confer with the council. It was fated Raleigh would indeed succeed guiding his ancestors while protecting Lyennarian for well over a hundred years. It would be his passing that would bring the end of glory during the times when the world would begin to change abandoning the old ways and casting aside the lore which would only be remembered as myths and legends.

'Perhaps I won't be the one to tell the King and Queen since my departure from this earthly plane is nearing,' he pondered while watching the boy who seemed to waiting for him to say something. Peregrine felt it in his heart the time was nearing. He had already prepared for another to step in to complete the boy's education after his passing. Lindell will be a good teacher for the lad he knew that in his heart. Still he wished that he could be the one to be there for Raleigh. It was a selfish wish. The dark one was here and time was running out.

"Peregrine?" The Prince pleaded still standing there waiting for the Wizard to either invite him in or to dismiss him.

Peregrine waved his gnarled hand inviting the lad to come closer. He could never refuse that pleading look in the boy's soulful eyes. This time he was uncertain what he should tell him. The battle would soon begin and Raleigh would learn things that might shatter his world. Still he wondered how much the youngster truly understood. He could hear the hesitation in all of the children's voices each time they addressed their father. They knew something was not as it should be.

He pulled an old wooden stool to the table motioning for the boy to take a seat. "There is a storm brewing," he carefully began. "I must prepare."

"You don't mean it is going to rain do you?" Raleigh questioned his voice filled with dread. "Are you leaving me?"

"Wise beyond your years," Peregrine shook his head. "I will do all that I can to ensure that I won't be leaving you. Still my Prince if I should fall there is another coming who will help you. He is old like me. Listen to him."

"Does this have anything to do with the prisoner who was murdered?" Raleigh grimly questioned studying the mixture of roots and potions set out on the table.

"Yes," Peregrine wearily confessed. "How did you know?"

"I saw it in a dream," Raleigh shrugged.

"What did you see?" the Wizard prompted.

"A big black dog with long shaggy hair and red eyes," Raleigh shivered. "Then it wasn't a dog but a strange looking man, with gnarly limbs, a long nose and his ears were pointed just a little. There is a dark cloud around him. Cormac thinks it was a wolf. He and Father are going to hunt it down."

Peregrine took a seat next to the boy feeling the weight of the world bearing down on him. "I see," Peregrine began in a thoughtful tone. "Well then we need to do what we can to ensure that they are successful. Have you ever heard of a Barghest?" Raleigh shook his head emphatically. "A Barghest is a monstrous dog with huge teeth, long shaggy hair, baneful breath and red eyes."

"My dream," Raleigh gasped. "That is what I saw."

"There is more," Peregrine continued his tone filled with dread. "It is not just a dog it is a goblin as well. It appears only at night. It is said that anyone who sees it will beset by misfortune or death."

Raleigh's eyes widened with fear. "What can I do?" He questioned earnestly. "I know about goblins they can be mischievous or evil. If this thing is both a dog and a goblin it can be slain. But how can they kill it if by seeing it will kill them? Is there a spell or a charm?"

"That is what we are going to find out," Peregrine tried to reassure the lad. What he wasn't telling the boy was that this dark beast was more than likely his grandfather. The Wizard was confused as to how such a beast could sire Raven and yet she remained pure.

Rowan studied the road carefully scratching her chin in confusion. "The tracks," she explained to her son pointing to the muddied prints left in the road. She wondered if the rain the night before had washed away the prints she was seeking.

"I see as well." Cormac respectfully answered kneeling beside his father.

"Tell me what you see?" Rowan encouraged the young man.

"I see Jeron's trail," he slowly began pointing to marks in the mud. "Based on the way they wander I'd say he was drunk. I also see another man's footsteps following him, a small man with an odd gait. Then just past where Jeron fell I see only the tracks of the wolf. The other man's footsteps have vanished. We haven't found another body or drag marks to indicate the wolf enjoyed a second meal. What is troubling is that the wolf's paw marks begin where the second man's footsteps end. The rain perhaps?"

"Perhaps." Smiling by the way her eldest child echoed her thoughts. "We follow the wolf."

Peregrine leaned on his walking stick his body weary. "Those over there," he instructed Raleigh who was helping him gather the herbs he hoped would help with his quest. It was easier to simply allow the boy to help than to continue arguing with him. Plus the youngster could gather what he needed much more quickly than he could. The sound of a bird echoing from across the lake caught his attention. He glanced to the sky thinking that it was much too early in the day for a raven to be about. He cleared his throat his eyes narrowing as he listened to the sound of the fairies flitting about in the sacred oak. The fluttering of wings drew his attention away from the fairies.

The elderly wizard clenched his jaw when she appeared behind the boy's shoulder. The fairies giggled when they spied her watching the scene. "He sees them," she began in a lilting tone. "He knows not to seek them out or to call them by name. They welcome him. Why shouldn't they? The magic is strong in this family." Peregrine nodded his head not wanting to explain to his young charge who he was speaking with.

"He sees me as well," she explained looking down at the boy. "He thinks I'm a fairy."

"You're not?" Raleigh gleefully inquired.

"No." She smiled brightly. "But I know them."

"Who are you?"

"I am called by many names," she tenderly began. "In this realm I am known as Badb. Sit and watch the fairies at play they won't mind. I need to have a chat with your friend." Her smile grew when the boy nestled himself beneath the tree happy to watch the fluttering winged creatures. "Wizard we must speak." she commanded.

Peregrine nodded grimly and followed after her. "Goddess." He greeted her with respect. "Why have you come?" "Direct," she laughed ushering them away from Raleigh's curious ears. "I've always liked that about you. Do you not wonder why the boy sees the fairies?"

"As you said the magic is strong."

"They blessed his grandmother," she slowly began. "Sparing the child from being what her father was and setting her on her path the one which you so carefully guided her on. You know if you try to defeat this dark beast you will die."

"Yes." he answered his voice cold devoid of emotion. "Raven must not fall or any of her children," she cautioned. "If she falls prey to this beast the road will be altered. My sisters and I will be most displeased."

"I can defeat this beast," Peregrine tried to argue.

"You will fail," she warned him. "This beast; this dark goblin has a taste for blood. His favorite is familiar blood. It gives him power. He sired her so the darkness inside of him could flourish.

More so if she had been born a male child. This Barghest must die. It will be by Raven's hand. If she can listen and not allow her emotion to cloud her thoughts."

"She will heed me." He fussed knowing that the King's distrust at times clouded her judgment still he always managed to convince her to follow his lead.

"No she won't." the Goddess wearily cut him off. "She distrusts magic. Despite understanding things were done and hidden from her so could follow her fate she still hesitates. When the dawn comes they will find the cook's body savagely torn apart by the Barghest. It will taint her good sense. She won't heed your warnings or mine. There is only one she will listen to. The fiery one who owns her heart."

"The Queen?" he questioned thinking that Alitheia mistrusted magic far more than her lover.

Alitheia's head was pounding it had been a long day. It wasn't the matters of the state that troubled her it was the talk her sweet daughter had tried to begin. Arielle was at the age that she should be sat down and these matters discussed. "She'll begin courting soon," the Queen whimpered not pleased by the thought. "She came to me just as she should and asked about these matters." The Princess was curious as to what men and women did during intimacy. "I have no idea what to tell her." She never stopped to think that someday she would need to tell her daughter what to expect on her wedding night. Alitheia had no first hand knowledge of what men and women did together and it wouldn't be appropriate to ask another to explain such matters to her child.

"Important for a girl to know, still Arielle has time." A voice beckoned her.

Alitheia's head jerked up then she tilted it studying the woman. She had long flowing dark tresses and her eyes seemed to be reflecting the colors of the rainbow. She quirked, examining the stranger in the long green gown and cape, the amethyst dangling from her neck. "You've brought a friend Peregrine," she quipped rising from her chair. There was something alluring about this woman, something familiar that made her skin prickle. Her attention turned to window the ominous feeling striking her again. She had felt it since that last turn of the moon. There was a darkness looming over her land. She ran her fingers along her lips as she often did when she was consumed with troubling thoughts. Turning again she carefully approached her strange guest. Her fiery gaze never wavered from this powerful woman. "We've met before?" she questioned unable to recall where she had seen this woman before.

"Yes." the woman nodded respectfully holding out a large scroll.

"And what is this?" Alitheia almost laughed accepting the odd gift. "Words of wisdom?"

"Yes," the stranger nodded. "About the birds and the bees and many other things a girl should know. If your kingdom survives the next fortnight Arielle won't need to read that for at least another summer."

"She is most definitely a friend of yours," Alitheia scoffed twirling the scroll.

"Don't ask him for the answers this time," the woman cautioned. "You hate it when he reveals things after everything is said and done. This is why it happened. Annoying isn't it?"

"Yes."

"He too experiences the same frustrations," the woman almost laughed. "We keep secrets even from your guides. Threads in a tapestry are fragile. Miss a stitch, weave the thread incorrectly, and a thing of beauty becomes a common wash rag."

"My heavens," Alitheia gasped the memory of those words returning to her. "My mother's bedside. You said that to me when I was just a girl. Mother was sick again. I rushed to her chamber because they had taken-"

"Raven was taken away." the Goddess concluded. "And I explained to you and your mother why. Raven's thread must be weaved differently and that meant she had to go away."

"And now you've returned with a scrap of paper?" Alitheia fussed waving it at the strange woman. "Your advice to my daughter in matters of the heart."

"Not my words," Badb calmly explained. "Your mother's. She wrote them for her granddaughter."

Alitheia quickly unraveled the scroll her heart pounding as she looked down at the words recognizing the hand that had written them. It was indeed written by her mother's hand. "To my darling granddaughter Arielle," she read aloud. Her hands were trembling as she brushed an errant tear from her face.

"She knew?" Peregrine bristled.

"You always assumed that the magic in this family came from the one blessed by fairies," Badb calmly offered. "A small drop is from her. The magic comes from the Queen's blood. Not her father's side of the family it was her mother who passed on the gift. Queen Benedicta was truly blessed; a gifted woman who was devoted to my sister Morrigan. One of my sisters many gifts is fertility. Your mother tried so many times before she was blessed with you."

"I know." Alitheia stiffly responded.

"It broke Morrigan's heart to watch as one child after another died in your mother's womb," Badb tried to comfort the Queen. "The only solace Morrigan could offer was that someday she would be blessed with a beautiful daughter. That you would guide this land into a glorious age of peace and harmony. Your children will follow in your footsteps."

"My mother," she smiled pressing the scroll to her breast. "Why not write to me? I could have used her wisdom on my wedding night."

"Unlike your father she knew the truth, the real reason Raven was sent away," Badb softly continued. "She took the secret to the grave. I have a letter for you as well. She never wrote of your wedding night because she was confused as to what to tell you. Long before you were born she knew that your King would not be a man. Her dilemma was similar to the one you experienced just a short while ago. What could she tell you? She had no knowledge of what you would experience. Alitheia there are so many things you need to know. If we fail the darkness will consume this land and all will be lost. You need to trust me. This is from your mother." she offered handing the Queen another scroll. "This she wrote for you before she died. My sister Morrigan was by her side and she passed it along to me. Now is the time for you to read it. I have matters to attend to. I will return. While I am away I need the both of you to keep the King from giving into her anger."

"Anger?" Alitheia stammered.

"This is a dangerous battle," Badb cautioned. "One whose outcome I can not ensure. I know you are hesitant in trusting me. I was instrumental in taking Raven from you. If we hadn't she would have stayed here, grown up as the cook's daughter and no matter how much love the two of you shared she never would have been your lover. Even if she had been born a man, the bastard child of the castle cook could have never ascended to the throne. She would have grown bitter and the darkness inside of her would have poisoned her blood. The woman you know would never have been. She would have grown into an evil stranger determined to destroy all that you love. I knew this the day she was born. I held your King in my hands when she took her first breath. I watched her grow. Laughing when others fell under Peregrine's spell seeing a man. In your heart that is never what you truly saw. Ask yourself why you always thought that Sir Rowan was beautiful? Not handsome or dashing always beautiful. Now I must leave. You read the letter and you-" she pointed at Peregrine. "Heed my warnings. You can not kill the Barghest."

"Goddess Badb where are you going?" Peregrine scowled.

"I need to find a troll."

"A troll?" he sputtered. "But they dwell in the North lands."

"Not to worry I've dealt with this one before," she laughed. "I know where to find him. So does the Barghest."

Alitheia stood there in a stunned silence when the woman suddenly vanished. Her hands still shaking as she looked down upon the scrolls. "A troll?" she sputtered in confusion a wave of discomfort assaulting her when she took notice that Peregrine who always seemed to have the answers shared her confusion.

'The troll will know if she had a child,' he gleefully surmised skulking through the woods his gnarly legs slowing him down. He cursed knowing he would have to wait for nightfall before he could prance on four legs and move swiftly. "Under the bridge," he cackled. "That is where he

was when I found the girl. I could smell him still lingering there a year later when I returned to find my child." Only he didn't find the troll that night. No what he found was a large raven that attacked him. "Oh she was angry when she revealed herself to me." He trembled recalling how the Goddess tried to kill him. He fled the kingdom without a meal or finding out if he had a child. "Bitch." he hissed. "The troll is still living under the bridge I smelled his stench when I made my way to the castle. He will know."

A raven flew down to the edge of the water landing beside two crows. The Triad emerged. "Sisters," Badb greeted her siblings.

"You've read the stones," Morrigan scolded.

"And the crystals," Macha joined in.

"Just as you cautioned the Wizard it will not be your hand that brings this beast to its knees," Morrigan fumed. "Don't make the same mistake Peregrine is about to make."

"Unlike Peregrine it will not cost me my life," Badb argued.

"The stakes are high," Macha cautioned.

"One taste of Raven's blood and the beast will be unstoppable," Morrigan cautioned. "It will feed on the entire line and then its evil will be too great. Other dark forces will join in before moving on leaving behind nothing but a barren wasteland. There will be no history, no future this land will be no more. Do you believe that terrorizing a troll will help?"

"It will please me," she smirked. "I have to try. None of us have seen the answer. How can Raven strike this beast down? This beast isn't simply a messenger of death, he is a deliverer. I may not be able to succeed in killing him, but perhaps I can stop him from killing Greta. If I can spare her mother's life Raven will act more rationally."

"Tread lightly," Morrigan cautioned her sister once again. "The answer is near I feel it. We won't be far away."

Once her sisters had vanished Badb made her way up the hill to the bridge just outside of the castle walls. She was filled with anger. Reaching under the bridge she cackled grasping the chubby body and dragging him out. "There you are, you little coward!" she screamed at him pleased when he fell to his knees whimpering. "I knew I'd find you still lurking under here. Just as I found you that night one year after you just hid under here while he raped that girl."

"Goddess," the troll stammered quivering like a leaf. "He is Barghest. What was I to do? I've met his kind before this one is truly evil. He's deranged."

"I've noticed," she spat out raising her hand. "Since I know you'll be of no use to me it will be as the last time."

"Not a fish again!" He helplessly pleaded.

"I could just leave you here. A fat little troll would make a nice snack for him. No? Then we will do this my way. Time for a swim and if you're good I may bring you back," she threatened before casting a lightning bolt down upon him. She smiled watching the tiny fish flopping helplessly on the bridge. She kneeled and picked it up. "Remember don't swim too far. I need him to catch your scent," she cautioned before tossing him in the water. She glanced up at the sky. "Almost nightfall. Come on you furry bastard. I'm waiting."

Alitheia retired to her room eager to read her mother's words. She was careful when she unwrapped the scroll. She ran her fingers along the stained pages. She could feel her mother near. She caressed it many times before her eyes could focus on the words.

My darling daughter this is perhaps the strangest letter I will ever write. My time on this earth is nearing its end. There is so much to say. I wish that I would be there to watch you grow into the beautiful woman I know in my heart you will become. The day you were born was the happiest in my life. I thought that no love could compare to the love I feel for your father. I was mistaken. The first time I held you in my arms I felt a love that expanded beyond the stars. I was only saddened by the knowledge that I would be unable to be there for you later in life.

I have always been frail and I've always known that my life would be short. My health was so fragile that your father was advised against courting me. Even though our marriage would unite two powerful kingdoms it was feared that I would never be able to give him an heir. Thankfully our love was strong. We ignored politics and followed our hearts. It broke my heart each time I lost our child. He never wavered in his devotion. I prayed to the Goddess Morrigan and one night she came to me. She promised that someday I would be blessed with a daughter.

Now I have the most unusual tale to share with you. The summer before I was blessed with your arrival something terrible happened. Greta, the young woman who toiled in our kitchen, was violated by a hideous animal. How she suffered not only being ravished but by something not human. The poor girl prayed for death. She even tried after she discovered that this creature had planted its seed inside of her.

I went to her tiny room to console her. I was at loss as to what I could say. She was terrified that she was going to give birth to a monster. Many people shunned her thinking that she had made up the story and given away her virtue. I knew in my heart she was telling the truth. She was on the brink of hysteria when I sat beside her bed. I saw the fairies. I've seen them before. Magic runs deep in our family. Greta was unaware of their presence. They blessed the child in her womb. One whispered to me that the child would be a healthy baby girl bearing no resemblance to her father.

A part of me was jealous since I was unable to bring a child into the world. My jealousy vanished when Greta began to wail. I comforted her telling her that all would be right. She refused to believe my words. I spent many hours by her bedside trying to comfort her. At times she trusted my words believing that she would have a beautiful child. Other times she just couldn't accept it.

Late one evening Morrigan came to me again. I woke to find her standing beside my bed. She took me by the hand and led me to Greta's room. It was time; the baby was coming. I wanted to fetch the midwife but the Goddess dismissed my plans. "We have all the help that we need," she explained guiding me to the girl.

I was shocked when I entered the room. Greta was wailing hysterically and by her side was the Goddess' sisters. The three Goddesses had come to bring this child into the world. 'The fairies blessed her.' Morrigan explained to me as I knelt beside Greta. 'When they blessed her they wove a stitch a much needed thread in the tapestry.'

I must confess I hate when the mystical deities speak in riddles. Whenever Peregrine does it I have a desire to slap him. Greta's hysterics became uncontrollable. The Goddess Macha give her a strange looking mushroom that not only calmed her nerves and eased her pain it sent the poor girl into a trance. I held Greta's hand and watched as the Goddess Badb ushered the beautiful girl into this world. I was not surprised by the name bestowed upon the child. It is said that of all the forms Badb can assume the raven is her favorite.

'The future King.' Badb announced.

I was stunned. 'You said the child is a girl?' The three of them just smiled at me. 'Goddess you said I was to be blessed with a daughter. I fail to understand.'

'It is destined,' Morrigan insisted. 'This child was sired by a Barghest only if you heed everything we tell you will she be spared from the darkness.'

'Everything.' Macha insisted.

'No matter how painful.' Badb stressed handing me the child.

'Hold her,' Morrigan smiled down upon me. 'You will be holding your own daughter soon.'

She was a beautiful girl and my heart swooned as I held her. Raven's eyes were so bright and the way her tiny finger clasped onto mine and knowing that soon I would be cradling my own daughter I began to weep. Still I was mystified by the notion that this sweet girl would someday be your King. It simply failed to make sense.

'You must trust us,' Badb sternly advised me.

'Heed our instructions,' Morrigan echoed. 'Peregrine will know what we wish.'

Then they were gone vanishing in a mist. I was left alone holding Raven in my arms while her mother slept. Looking at her I could see how my child could fall in love with her. Still if you are both women how would such a thing be possible? I had to trust that the powers that be knew what they were doing. Peregrine already held your father's trust. I heeded his advice. Although at times I questioned them. Still I understood that his hand was being guided by the Triad. I followed blindly until the day he informed your father that Raven was to be sent away.

I could already see the love that the two of you shared. I no longer worried that the both of you had been born female. It was a true and pure love. Anyone could see it. How could I take her from you? How could I take her from her mother? I had taken ill when these events transpired. I was trapped in bed. Still I argued this time I refused to blindly trust the Wizard. Peregrine was stern and your father, despite his misgivings, followed the Wizard's advice. I was horrified. How can stealing a child from her mother's arms be the right thing to do?

It was, in my mind, a dastardly act. They did it anyway. Tore the crying girl from Greta's arms and sped her away under the cover of darkness. Greta locked herself in her room. I was far too ill to go to her. The following morning I awoke to discover the Goddess Badb standing at my bedside. Not caring who I was speaking to I demanded to know why this heinous act was the right thing to do. I fully expected to be on the receiving end of her wrath which from what I've been told is very harsh. Instead I received a smile.

'The world will see her as man,' she tried to explain.

'Will she become a man?'

'No,' she laughed at my query. 'But this is how the world will see her. Even your husband. You will see the truth. Alitheia will know it but not for many years. They will marry and Rowan will bless you with three beautiful grandchildren.'

'And that won't happen if she remains here?' I fumed angered by her actions.

'No,' she firmly responded. 'Staying here growing up with Alitheia will break her heart. The darkness from her father will poison her blood. Instead of seeking honor and peace she will crave revenge. She will kill your child.'

My blood ran cold and you entered the room. I tried to calm you. Tried to explain why Raven had to go away. I couldn't tell you the truth. My words were of no comfort to you. Badb told you a story about how a tapestry is woven and that Raven's thread led away from our world. The story was more for my ears than yours. I understood that we were saving your life and Raven's soul.

Once I was well enough to leave my bed I went to Greta. Badb told me it was time for her to know the truth. I explained everything to her. After I told her the story she grew quiet. When she finally spoke it was with tears. I wept along with her as we agreed to keep the secret so our children would be spared. Not telling you was the hardest thing I have ever done, harder than dying and leaving you behind. I hope you can forgive me. I still find it hard to believe that the

beautiful Raven I knew could take your life. Yet I've seen the visions in my dreams. The woman she would have become was not the brave beautiful girl we know.

There is so much more I wish to tell you. I am growing weaker and unable to finish this letter. I love you and I pray that I will always be in your heart. If my dreams are true then I know that you and Raven will share a long and happy life together. This is what gives me peace.

With all my love, Mother.

"Why are you crying?" Raven gasped when she entered the room. "Alithea my love what is wrong? Why are you sitting in the darkness with no fire? What is the matter?"

Alithea tried to speak as she brushed the tears away. She fought to stop them from falling. She watched while Raven lit a fire before climbing on the bed and cradling the Queen in her arms. "What is it? Please my love, tell what has happened?" Raven pleaded her hands caressing Alithea's body.

Alithea sniffed pulling slightly away from her lover's embrace. "This wolf you are hunting," she choked out.

"We haven't found it," Raven absently interrupted her. "It is near the castle. I lost the tracks. I don't understand how but I did. We've given up the search for tonight."

"It isn't a wolf," Alithea asserted with a hard swallow. "It is your father."

"I know," Raven confessed. "The dark one, the one that has haunted my dreams. He's come back."

"He is a Barghest."

"No," Raven sputtered. "That isn't possible. If that were true . . . Alithea a Barghest isn't simply a malicious dog it is a goblin. How could I . . . I'm human. Different to say the least still I'm quite certain that I am flesh and blood."

"You need to read this."

Raven felt spent when she finished. Her insides churning with disgust at what might have been. She gently handed the scroll back to her bride. She leaned back the words haunting her. She looked into Alithea's trusting eyes her thoughts jumbled. "We have fairies lurking about the garden?" It was the only thing she could think of to say.

"Apparently," Alithea nodded resting her head in Raven's lap. She released a soft murmur when Raven's fingers began massaging her scalp.

"That day," Raven slowly began gently kneading her lover's head. "When we were children playing."

"The day you fell," Alitheia sighed nestling closer to her lover. "We were chasing fairies because I thought I had seen them."

"The reason I jumped out to save you is because I saw something very tiny push you," Raven explained. "That is why I saved you."

"From what I understand they don't like it when you seek them out."

"Obviously," Raven sputtered feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. "Have our lives never been our own? How can I be part dog and goblin? It would explain why every canine whose path I've crossed runs yelping in fear whenever I approach."

"What shall we do?" Alitheia whimpered.

"I am going to hunt it down and kill it." Raven vowed.

"How?"

'Crow's feathers and raven's feather's,' he thought barring his fangs while he sniffed along the shore. *'I still smell the troll he is near. Is she? Don't want a repeat of the last time.'* Thinking it was worth the risk he stealthy made his way under the bridge. There was no fierce raven awaiting but there was no troll either. He growled snarling at the barren sight. *'I'll find the girl myself.'* He vowed with a wag of his bushy tail. He just needed to get past the castle gate. He howled barking furiously when he stepped out into the road. His red eyes burning brightly in the night when the large black steed blocked his path. His growl deepened as he tried to scare off the large animal. *'Damn horse get out of my way!'* He howled before the steed reared standing on its hind legs. He yelped darting away from the attacking animal. He felt shame as he cowered whimpering like a pup.

"Will you never learn?" She bellowed appearing before him.

He failed to understand what he had done to offend her. He knew that he was no match for a Goddess. "You don't even have a name," she ranted on her eyes glowing with fire.

"What have I done?" he questioned wondering why such a powerful entity would bother with the likes of him.

"Maybe I simply dislike rapists and murderers." she snarled barring down upon him.

"I am what I am," he frantically pleaded scurrying quickly she was once again hell bent on trampling him to death. It must have been the sheer panic that guided him. Slipping beneath her she didn't have the agility to turn. Hoofs slammed against the road.

She cursed her stupidity emerging in her true form. He was gone. She followed his trail fearing what she would discover at the end of the trail.

"You have certainly made a great many enemies in such a short period of time," the Wizard taunted the hairy beast.

"Which tells me what I need to know," the dark one hissed snarling at the elderly man. "There is a child. By morning I shall be stronger than you."

"By morning you shall be dead." Peregrine spat out raising his fist. Claspng the orb tightly his reflexes slowed by the passing centuries was his undoing. The beast sprang up tearing open the Wizard's throat before he could unleash his power. The orb slipped from his fingers while his life seeped from his body.

The Wizard's blood made him stronger this pleased him. He would have stayed to lap up each drop but he had business to attend to. The girl was near only she was no longer a helpless lass. She was sitting by the fire unaware that danger was lurking just beyond her door. She quirked her head when she heard the strange noise in the corridor. It sounded like panting. "Strange," she muttered climbing to her feet. She listened at the door not knowing that he could feel her. Hearing nothing further she cautiously opened the large wooden door. She had only managed to open it just a crack when the wooly beast burst through pinning her to the floor.

The memories came flooding back to her. She was paralyzed with fear knowing that she was about to relive a nightmare. It bared its fangs the beast's foul breath assaulting her. She had to fight. Her mind was screaming for her to fight back this time. The weight of the beast kept her pinned to the floor. Bright red eyes glared at her and she was unable to calm the erratic beating of her heart. The pain shot through her arm but still she struggled. "The child?" it hissed.

"Never." she spat back her heart seizing.

"Not yet," he snarled furious that he was being robbed. His howling grew louder when he felt her body turn cold. She died without giving him what he deserved. Furious he ripped open her throat. Feeling only a small glimmer of pleasure when her blood sprayed over his body.

They sprang from the bed when they heard the horrified howling echoing throughout the castle. "The children." Raven choked out as they rushed from the room. They frantically searched gathering all three of the children and dragging them off to the tower. "Peregrine?" Alithea called out feeling a sense of dread that the Wizard was absent.

"Ives!" Raven bellowed clenching his sword tightly.

The knight rushed to the room followed by a group of his most trusted men. "My King," his body tense as he looked about.

"This is the safest room in the house," Rowan explained. "No one enters."

"Where are you going?" Alithea pleaded.

"Mother." He explained with a hard swallow. "He'll go to her. I need to get her."

The children huddled by the fire while their mother paced nervously about the room. She knew in her heart that the guards would give their lives to protect them. It was a small comfort with her husband missing and knowing that this beast was a harbinger of death. *'Can these brave men stop this creature?'* Her mind screamed.

"Mother?" Cormac disrupted her thoughts. "What is happening?"

"We are in danger." She bluntly informed her oldest child. There was no need to sugar coat what was happening she needed all of them to be prepared for whatever happened.

"Where is," he paused it was a trait all three children had begun doing. It was as if they knew the truth. "Where is Father?"

"He went to fetch Greta," Alithea explained. "He feels she may be in danger as well."

"I should be with him."

"No," she fumed. "Your father wants all of us to stay together."

"Mother what is this about?" Arielle demanded.

"The Barghest." Raleigh innocently supplied from his place by the fire.

"How did you know that?" She slowly and carefully questioned while she approached him.

"The lady."

"What lady?" Alithea was afraid to ask.

"The one who came to visit Peregrine today," Raleigh innocently answered playing with something on the floor. "She came to warn him."

"Barghest, are you certain little brother?" Cormac pressed kneeling by his younger brother.

"Yes." He answered innocently looking up at him.

"The wolf. By all that is sacred how can Father defeat such a creature?" Cormac pleaded with his mother. "If he sees it he will die."

"I know." Alithea grimly answered fighting against the urge to break down and cry.

"What was this lady's name Raleigh, perhaps you are mistaken?" Cormac demanded.

"Badb." He shrugged returning his attention to his project.

"The Goddess Badb?" Cormac stammered.

"Raleigh that isn't possible," Arielle protested.

"She said she had many names but that was the name she is called in this realm," Raleigh earnestly supplied. "Then she let me watch the fairies."

"He has to be making this up." Arielle insisted.

"He isn't," Alithea solemnly confirmed. Her eyes blinked with confusion. "Raleigh what is that you are playing with?"

"Not playing," he huffed. "Peregrine said we need to find a way that Father can kill the beast."

"Runes? Are those Runes?" Alithea demanded taking a closer look at the stones. "Who taught you to use those?"

"Peregrine," Raleigh respectfully answered shrinking slightly back.

"I swear I'm going to wring that old man's neck," Alithea was furious she shielded her eyes when a bright light illuminated the room.

"I am afraid that you are too late," the Goddess sadly informed her.

"Badb?" Arielle questioned with a hint of fear.

"Morrigan." The Goddess corrected her. "Peregrine failed. I am sorry."

"If Peregrine failed how can Father hope to succeed?" Cormac was in a panic.

"Rowan shall not fail," Morrigan promised.

"Is that promise?" Alithea spat out.

"Sadly I can not make that promise," Morrigan wearily responded. "Perhaps the boy will find the answer. He is gifted."

"As?" Alitheia demanded.

"Your young man will be a fine Wizard some day."

"A wizard?" Alitheia bemoaned rubbing her throbbing temple. "Where is Rowan?"

Her answer came in the form of a piercing scream. "Stay." Morrigan demanded. Alitheia bristled. Goddess or not she was going to plow through this woman and find her lover. "For the sake of your children." Morrigan pinned her with a fiery gaze. Alitheia looked to her children and back at the door her world divided. "Badb will watch over the King." Morrigan vowed.

Ivan discovered the King kneeling over the bloodied remains of Greta. The King was tearing at his chest wailing like a child. "Go." Rowan demanded turning to the knight with a wild gleam in his eyes. "I told you to watch my family," Rowan growled like an animal. Her eyes darkening; Ivan shrank back seeing not his friend but a mad man kneeling before him. "I said to go and protect what is mine."

"Yes my king," Ivan swallowed hard. "No harm will come to your family." He vowed bowing his head before cutting off his troops. "The Queen and her children are our only charge tonight. Not a hair on their head shall be harmed. This is the King's word."

"And what of the King?" Maxwell questioned.

"The King has his own battle to fight this night." Ivan's voice was grim.

Raven stood slowly drawing her sword glaring down at the bloodied tattered remains that had been her mother. He swung the sword at nothing. "Tonight you take your last breath." She vowed allowing the vile to course through her blood.

"And if you follow this path it will be your last night on this plane." Badb cautioned from behind not even batting an eye when Raven swung her sword at her. "You feel it. The sickness growing inside of you. This is his legacy. Fight it or he will be the victor this night."

Raven sneered turning a deaf ear to the Goddess. She wanted blood; his blood and she would not be denied. "Fight it; be the brave soul that you were blessed to be." Badb stressed never wavering despite Raven's growing ire. "Cast it from you or you will be lost."

"You enjoy us mortals. We make such good sport do we not?" Raven taunted her blood boiling unaware that he could smell her. "Have you enjoyed your game? You pit us against one another drag us into battle. We live and die by your will."

"You live and die by your will," she calmly corrected the lost soul. "Remember your bride's smile, the look in her eyes each time you enter a room."

"Be quiet!" She hissed her body trembling the anger filling her. "I'll have none of this. Your trickery has taken my mother from me."

"Think of her touch," Badb pressed on. "Think of your children's smiles. If you do not fight this poison they will die tonight."

Raven stumbled slightly the words slowly creeping into her thoughts. "It will be your blood that will give him the power to strike down the brave men who have vowed their allegiance to you," Badb threatened. "They will perish because you failed. There will be nothing barring him from reaching your children. Your bride helplessly watching as he grows stronger from their blood and then he will have her."

"I feel sick," Raven stammered absently while Badb continued to plead with her.

"That's it!" Raleigh screamed with delight.

"What is it son?" Alitheia wearily questioned.

"Those that see him shall die," Raleigh exclaimed. "If Father never looks at the beast then he will not die."

"Then how can Father brandish his sword?" Cormac questioned baffled by his brother's reasoning. "He'll be struck down if he tries."

"With an arrow." Raleigh innocently supplied.

"A blind fold and a crossbow?" Cormac chimed.

"Yes." Arielle agreed.

"You wish to send your father out to hunt this devil with a blind fold and a crossbow?" Alitheia stammered wondering if madness was contagious?

"He's done it before." Cormac insisted.

"We've seen it," Arielle shouted. "It was a game. We were children and Father placed these apples on a tree stump. Donned a blindfold and shot at them with a crossbow."

"He didn't miss a single one," Cormac tried to comfort his mother.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Morrigan shook her head. "I shall return. Do not leave this room until I tell you to do so." Then she vanished.

"Raven?" Badb pleaded.

"I'm here," she groaned wiping the sweat from her brow.

"Yes you are," Badb sighed with relief finally seeing the light returning to Raven's steely gray orbs.

"How do I kill him?" Raven pleaded turning away from her mother's body fearful that the rage would return.

"With these," Morrigan announce appearing before them.

"My this is a busy castle," Raven groaned accepting the Goddess' gifts. "A blindfold and a crossbow. Not my first choice."

"Of course," Badb groaned at how simple the answer was.

"The child saw it." Morrigan explained. "The game you played with your children. The apples on the tree stump. You must not look at him yet still strike him down."

"So simple," Badb shook her head. "Hurry he is coming for you."

"And I for him." Raven vowed wrapping the cloth tightly around her eyes. Sniffing the air she found her quarry. "He is a foul smelling beast."

"We will stay with your family and protect them as best we can if you should fall." Morrigan promised before vanishing along with her sister.

The troops were stunned when the King emerged from the room blindfolded waving a bow about. "Do not look at him," Ives commanded. "Keep this door barricaded. God speed my King."

"I shall see you soon my friend," Raven promised smelling the night air following the stench through the twist and turns of the castle. It was an advantage she knew these corridors better than almost anyone. The beast was the interloper stumbling about in the darkness.

He could smell his own kind as he fumbled through the strange castle. "They said you were a girl," it hissed almost laughing at the fellow stumbling closer. The bow drawn while his eyes were shielded.

"I am," Raven smiled cocking the bow.

"No matter," the beast hissed rising on its hind legs thinking how easy a kill this one would be. He growled fierily revealing his fangs still dripping with blood. He sprung at the fool eager to taste his child's blood. The arrow pierced his heart before he heard the bow string snap. He yelped with pain crumpling to the floor his breathing shallow as he lay dying. He tried to rise so he could flee. Instead his last breath gurgled from his withered body.

"You can look now," an alluring voice beckoned.

Raven was gasping for air as she tore the cloth from her eyes. She blinked clearing her vision discovering Badb kneeling beside the large hairy animal frozen in death. "Your destiny is complete," Badb explained. "There will be no further twists in the road, no more challenges to conquer. Not for you nor your children. The last page in your book is to live a very long and happy life, slipping peacefully away in the arms of your bride."

"Stand down," Raven commanded her troops.

"My King," Ives cautiously greeted his old friend.

"It is done," Raven asserted. "The beast's body lies in the north passage way. Burn the body and bury the ashes far from this land. Then go home to your Diana and hug your children."

"Yes my Lord," Ives sighed with relief.

"Saxon before you and the rest of the troops go on your way I need another favor." Raven fought against the image.

"For you my King anything." Saxon vowed.

"Greta the children's nanny she's fallen prey to the beast." Raven choked out.

"Greta?" Saxon snapped. "That vile animal. What can I do Sire?"

"Greta was a member of my family," Raven confessed without revealing the truth. "Please tend to her body before anyone sees the horrid display? The Queen will handle the services for now please take care of her."

"It would be my honor," Saxon gulped. "She was a good lady I will take care of her."

"Saxon," Raven weaved slightly. "I know the old woman was kind to you as well. I need to forewarn you, Jeron got off lightly."

"Such villainy." Saxon hissed. "I wish I was by your side when you slew the beast."

"As do I." Ives growled.

"You had a far more important task. My family." Raven tried to comfort them. "Now unlock that door I wish to see my wife."

"Raven!" Alitheia screamed rushing into her husband's arms. "I mean Rowan. Well you've gone and gotten filthy again."

"Couldn't be helped," Raven wearily explained drawing Alitheia closer. "Greta is dead," she whispered in her bride's ear.

"I'm sorry my love. We will tell the children in the morning," she whispered in return before taking a step back. "Now my King."

"Yes my Queen," Raven squeaked knowing that the tone in her lover's voice could only mean she had done something foolish.

"Am I to understand that you went off blindfolded to go shooting with our children?" Alitheia demanded.

"Just once," Raven squeaked. "Alitheia it was a game."

"With sharp objects," she snapped.

"It was Raleigh who solved the problem," Cormac interrupted.

"Yes he figured it out." Arielle concurred.

"Raleigh? You did that son?" Raven sputtered.

"Yes Father," the boy smiled.

"Raleigh?" Raven questioned her Queen.

"It seems that our son is a budding wizard," she curled her lips.

"A wizard?" Raven almost whined. "Of course he is. Raleigh?"

"Yes Father?"

"Are you happy?"

"Yes Father."

"Then I can not ask for more than that," Raven conceded. "Children it is late. The beast is dead and according to your mother I need a bath. Off to bed, now."

Raven lay comfortably in her bath the waves of sadness and exhaustion rolling off her body. "My King," Alithea greeted her upon entering the bathing chamber. "The children are in bed. There are no fairies lurking about and the Goddess' have gone on their way."

"No other news?" Raven quipped.

"A new wizard is arriving soon to continue Raleigh's tutelage." She grumbled.

"Raleigh is destined to be a wizard," Raven said slowly watching her bride remove her clothing. "With all the twists and magic in our lives why are we surprised?"

"Still a wizard," Alithea laughed slipping into the warm water and nestling beside her love. "A royal wizard who is a royal. It is a bit odd."

"We are quite an unusual family," Raven laughed.

"It does seem to make him happy," Alithea sighed gliding her hands along Raven's sleek body. "And wizards live a very, very long time."

"He will guide Cormac's hand as our kingdom enters a century of peace," Raven thoughtfully noted. "He will help select Arielle's husband. The magic that will select the man who will take our daughter's hand will come from her brother. It pleases me. He will watch over our grandchildren. If the Goddess' words are true the only strife awaiting us is the pains and frustration of old age."

"Speaking of Arielle she posed a question this morning that sent me into a tizzy," Alithea shook her head while she continued to wash Raven's body. "Before the siege it was the only concern that loomed over me."

"Do I wish to know what our overly inquisitive child asked?" Raven fearfully gulped.

"She wished to understand matters concerning intimacy." Alithea stammered.

"She is too young." Raven snapped.

"No she isn't." Alithea meekly corrected.

"Pray tell what did you say?"

"Very little," Alithea confided straddling her lover's lap. "I know little of what men and women do together. Do you have any words of wisdom."

"Only the crass tales from the soldiers," Raven shivered wrapping her hands around Alithea's slender waist. "Perhaps Diana could be of assistance in this matter?"

"Our ever friendly Goddess' passed along a scroll from my mother which will prove helpful," Alithea explained wrapping her fingers against the nape of Raven's neck. "I was instructed that Arielle will not require reading it until next summer."

"So soon?"

"Our children are quickly becoming adults," Alithea smiled nuzzling the King's neck. "Do you wish to talk about your mother?"

"I can not," Raven stammered shifting uncomfortably. "Seeing her like that brought out something dark. Something I never knew dwelled inside of me. We will talk in the morning. Tonight I need to forget. I need you to love me."

"I do love you." Alithea vowed gliding her tongue along the weary warrior's neck. "And I will show you how much. Step out of the bath and let me take you to bed."

Raven stepped from the warm water meekly allowing her Queen to dry her body before guiding her into their bedchambers. She offered no resistance when Alithea guided her down on to the bed. Raven whimpered when her bride climbed in beside her teasing her exposed flesh with her fingertips. Alithea's tantalizing touch slowly vanquished her demons. The horrors slipping away the troubles they had faced ebbing her only thoughts turning towards the beautiful creature lying beside her.

Alithea dipped her head blowing her warm breath against Raven's naked flesh. Pleased when her brave warrior's skin prickled from her teasing. She kissed Raven's shoulder gliding her tongue along the firmness. She understood that Raven needed to love and to be loved more than she needed rest. She had seen her lover in this state before after a horrid battle. Making love was a necessary step in expelling the horrors she had witnessed.

The Queen's warm breath teased the King's pert nipple coaxing it to stand at attention. Watching the bud puckering excited Alithea and soon her lips captured the erect bud. She teased it with her tongue before suckling it urgently. She moaned against Raven's skin feeling the warrior's nails digging into her flesh. She shifted her body covering Raven's completely pressing more of her breast inside the warmth of her mouth. Alithea's hands eagerly explored Raven's body her soft caresses quickly turning urgent. She slipped her thigh between Raven's, moaning from the feel of Raven's passion caressing her body.

Raven's hands seemed to be everywhere guiding Alithea to take whatever she wished. The Queen was helpless to refuse. Her hand glided down her lover's taut body brushing against the damp curls. She slipped inside of Raven's passion slowly gliding along her slick folds. Raven's body ground against her own the King choking out pleas for more. Alithea's kisses turned fiery her fingers stroking her lover's throbbing desire.

The sounds of Raven chanting her name echoed throughout the room. Alithea teased her lover's nipple with her teeth while her nimble fingers slipped inside of her lover's wetness. Her kisses drifted lower turning savage not caring that she was leaving a trail of blemishes in her wake. Her

fingers plunging deeper stroking her brave warrior to the brink of ecstasy. Raven wrapped her long legs around the Queen's shoulders. Alithea was nestled in her favorite place on earth quickly burying her face inside of Raven's passion.

Alithea feasted upon Raven savoring her taste while trying to steady the warrior's body. She smiled when Raven groaned with disappointment when Alithea's fingers slipped from her body. Alithea's emerald orbs glimmered with delight as she gazed down upon Raven's quivering body. She expelled a heavy breath curling her tongue and plunging it deep inside of her lover. Raven's passionate cries turned to frantic pleas. Alithea's body trembled her own desire quickly mounting. Her tongue slipping deeper before plunging in and out of Raven's body.

Raven's passion washed over her and still the Queen pleased her lover. Slipping from her cocoon she straddled Raven's trembling form. Rocking her body against the warrior's firm body while leaning back and returning her fingers to the delightful task of teasing Raven's pulsating nub. Alithea gleefully guided Raven over the threshold time and time again until the King's voice raw from screaming demanded that the Queen give herself to her.

Alithea groaned pleased by the request. Crawling over Raven's still quivering body she loomed above her brushing her passion against Raven's lips. She trembled when Raven clasped her naked backside and drew Alithea's nectar to her mouth. Raven wasted no time feasting upon Alithea like a starving animal. The Queen was enthralled. The waves of passion consumed her until she almost tore the tapestry that hung above their bed from the wall. Raven persisted long past the time Alithea's body had been sated.

The world had vanished and the Queen had no consciousness if it was night or day only that she was nestled in her lover's embrace. The world be damned at that moment later they would rise and face the day. They would plan Greta's burial which many would question why a mere castle servant would be afford such grandeur. Then they would go on living out their lives no longer fearing dark dreams. Relishing the peace watching their children grow followed by their grandchildren. Alithea's only darkness coming when Raven slipped quietly from the world one night. Passing peacefully in the Queen's embrace. She held her head high waiting for the day she would be reunited with her only love. In her heart knowing that it would not be long before she would see her love again.

The End.

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