

She Who Holds the World

- [Content Warnings](#)
- [Chapter 1: A Strange Encounter](#)
- [Chapter 2: Earth's Inconveniences](#)
- [Chapter 3: The Beginning of My Misfortune](#)
- [Chapter 4: Start of the Isekai Journey](#)
- [Chapter 5: My Mortal Enemy](#)
- [Chapter 6: Yay... New People](#)
- [Chapter 7: Increasing Understanding](#)
- [Chapter 8: The Conclave](#)
- [Chapter 9: Life in the Freeze](#)
- [Chapter 10: Second Meeting](#)
- [Chapter 11: Well, That Went Poorly](#)
- [Chapter 12: Great... I'm a Prisoner](#)
- [Chapter 13: The Shaman](#)

Content Warnings

I've done my best to include as many content warnings as I can here, but I can't guarantee that I've caught all of them. As always when reading a novel that covers heavier topics, please keep your mental health in mind!

- near death experiences
- forced to watch torture

Chapter 1: A Strange Encounter

I didn't like walking down Houston's streets at night. To be fair, Houston's streets didn't have my skin crawling or make me swivel my head for danger. That came when I was in any big city after dark. Houston just happened to be my home at the moment.

Today hadn't been great for me. My current work project was quickly approaching its deadline, and not only had I fallen behind on it, but the trip I was taking tomorrow would only further delay my progress. Unless I pulled a miracle from thin air, I'd miss my deadline, and while this would be my first time to do that at this job, the prospect nevertheless made me cranky. Disappointing people had always felt like crushing tiny bits of my soul into dust, even if the person disillusioned this time would only be my boss.

And of course, the trip home tonight had been, as usual, less than pleasant.

"I swear, public transit in this city is the worst," I grumbled, kicking at a loose pebble.

At least I'd made it to my final bus stop before the 'witching hour' had come. There wasn't that much crime in my neighborhood, nothing compared to Third Ward at least, but I liked to have a locked door between me and the rest of the world before the clock struck ten. It wasn't an entirely irrational desire, even if the chances of something bad happening after that hour were still small, but I liked playing it safe. Always had.

With the sun having fallen below the horizon, Houston's oppressive heat had begun to fade, but its ever-present mugginess persisted. I couldn't wait for fall to arrive, a time when you could walk outside without feeling like you were swimming through the ocean. Tonight, however, I pressed through an invisible wall of water, quickening my pace upon seeing the turn for my neighborhood up ahead. I'd eaten dinner on campus, so I only needed to finish packing before-

"Excuse me."

That rasping voice kept my foot hovering for a split second before I let it crash onto the sidewalk. Turning toward the noise, I dug in my purse for the can of pepper spray I'd been carrying since moving here. Since I'd never had to use it before, it lay under my wallet and copious amounts of junk, but after I'd curled my fingers around it, I didn't draw it forth. Not yet.

The tremulous greeting had come from a man leaning on the brick wall that surrounded my neighborhood. He looked like he'd just stepped out of a sci-fi and fantasy convention, none of which currently graced Houston with their presence, so far as I was aware. A cloak hung over his

homespun tunic and trousers, and at his side, a fairly convincing sword replica glinted in the street lamps' light. He wasn't wearing faux armor, though, which was strange. Usually, if someone decided to go all-out with a cosplay like this, they tried to stay historically accurate, and the average knight in the Middle Ages would have worn some form of protection over their clothing, not nothing as this man did.

"You're here," he said to the concrete at his feet. "I thought you'd never come."

He lifted his lolling head, and I frowned, tightening my grip around my pepper spray. This stranger's murky blue eyes kept skipping over me as if refusing to focus with his greasy brown hair, salted with gray, drifting in front of his face. Was he drunk? High?

"I have something for you," he said, taking a faltering step toward me.

I took my own step backward.

"No, thank you," I said. "Stay back, or I'll- I'll call the police."

Like that would do me any good.

A wistful smile flitted across the stranger's face as he stopped.

"Ships, you're as wary of me now as when I knew you," he said. "That's good. Well, not so good for us now but it'll serve you later."

He was definitely on something. I shuffled another step away, but a perceptible shudder, a clench of the man's teeth, and a pained whine stopped me from fleeing toward my neighborhood's safety.

"Are you... ok?" I asked. "Do you need a hospital or something?"

It would be just my luck to run across an overdosed junkie or someone just as troubling on my way home from a day like today.

The stranger laughed, an unnerving cackle that had me bristling. The sound of it intermingled with the big city's noise—the cars zipping down a nearby interstate and the ever-present buzz of electricity—and reduced it to so much chaff.

"Your medicine can do nothing to fix what's wrong with me," he gasped as his laughter died. "Although I appreciate your concern, word wright."

Word wright?

"What do you want?" I asked. "Money? I don't carry cash on me, but we can walk to the gas station on the corner if you like. I can get you food."

"Kind of you to offer," the stranger rasped with his eyes jittering over me, "but unnecessary. As I said, I have a gift for you. Nothing dangerous. Not a weapon hidden as altruism, as is so often done

in this iteration. Merely an item that might be useful to you.”

Reaching under his cloak, he pulled something free, something I couldn't clearly see in the dimmed light, and extended it to me. Ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble, I edged toward him. What was the harm in taking what he was offering? I could always throw it away later, and if I accepted it, this strung-out stranger might leave me alone.

And I had my pepper spray ready if he tried anything funny.

I fixed my eyes on the stranger as I plucked his gift from his hand. It went into my purse alongside every other scrap of junk I'd acquired since last cleaning it out.

“Thank you,” I stiffly said.

As if waiting for this specific moment, the stranger's eyes cleared, capturing my gaze with the intensity of the emotion in them, and smile lines creased their corners.

“No, thank *you*,” he said. “After everything that's happened, all of the sacrifices made and the terrible things I've done, I can truthfully say that it's good to see you this time, my word wright. Good journey to you.”

With a final, hesitant grin, he shuffled away from me, grazing his hand along the brick wall to steady his stumbling steps. Making my mouth work took a few seconds, but when I could, I cleared my throat.

“Are you sure you don't need help?” I called.

Pausing, the stranger slumped while his shoulders rose and fell.

“I'm getting what I deserve,” he said. “So, no. Thank you.”

“What you... who decides what you deserve?”

The stranger's chuckle was much less harsh this time, a weak protest against the city's hub-bub.

“Forget me, word wright.”

And he stumbled around the corner, leaving me frowning.

“That wasn't ominous *at all*,” I said under my breath.

If I didn't know better, I'd think this encounter heralded some grand change in my life, as it always did in the books I loved, but this wasn't a fantasy tale. This was real life, and that had been a bad luck meeting with a man who'd been high as a kite.

Shrugging, I continued toward my neighborhood's entrance. I'd trash the stranger's 'gift' the next time I turned my purse inside out, looking for my keys. Until then, it could rest in what, at times,

seemed like a bottomless pit.

As I strode past my neighborhood's identical townhomes, no one hovered in their driveways or strolled down the sidewalks, sparing me the trouble of making small talk. People in the city usually knew how to mind their own business, but every so often, an obnoxiously friendly person would greet me on my way home.

That wasn't fair, though. I shouldn't call those sorts of people obnoxious because their extroverted personalities clashed with mine. Just because *I* found them annoying didn't mean they were.

But there I went again, censoring my *thoughts* because they might not please someone. As if anyone could hear them! What was wrong with me?

I set my self-criticism aside as I closed my front door, and fifty pounds of tri-colored fur skidded to a stop behind me.

"Hey, buddy," I said, hanging my purse on its hook. "How was your day?"

When I faced him, Beau looked up at me with pleading eyes while his tail stub wiggled his back end. Crossing my arms, I listened to him whine for a moment before patting my stomach.

"Come here."

Beau jumped on me, and I curled over slobbery kisses to hug his squirming body. Rubbing his ears, I murmured nonsense words at him for a bit before pushing him to the floor. He followed me to the couch and when I collapsed on it, rested his head on my lap.

"I know," I said. "I'll take you out in a minute. Let me have a second to unwind."

Even saying that, I could never sit still for long. As soon as my feet had stopped aching, I let Beau out through the back door. Keeping an eye on him through the windows, I hurried to my bedroom. I dragged my suitcase out from under my bed and started shoving clothes into it. I'd filled it with only half of what I'd need when I spotted a black blob making for the townhome's back porch.

"You," I said, pointing at Beau as I let him back inside, "are too fast. Are you hungry?"

With his food serving as a distraction, I continued packing. Toothbrush, travel shampoo and soap, razor, phone charger, and most importantly, my e-reader. What had I forgotten?

I was zipping my suitcase closed when Beau trotted into my bedroom. Immediately, his ears went back, and he gave me the worried look he always wore when we went to the vet.

"Don't do that," I said. "I tried to hide what's happening tomorrow, but you had to inhale your kibble, didn't you? It's not my fault that I couldn't finish packing in the thirty seconds it took you to eat."

He continued staring at me while I set my suitcase on the floor.

“Stop! You’ll be fine,” I groaned. “Mom will pick you up tomorrow morning, and you’ll spend a week getting spoiled rotten by her lax rules about getting on the furniture.”

I rolled my suitcase to the front door while behind me, Beau’s claws clacked against the hardwood floor much less enthusiastically than they normally would.

“Fine!” I said, whirling on him. “You can sleep in the bed with me tonight, *and* we’ll play with the ball. How does that sound?”

At the b-word, Beau perked up with his body going alert and his upper lip getting caught in his teeth.

“That’s what I thought,” I said with a sigh. “Ball time, then maybe you’ll let me finish the quest I’m stuck on in Baldur’s Gate, hmm? And maybe you can help me pick which physical book I should bring with me. You know how much I need that textural part of reading sometimes.”

My musings went unnoticed by Beau. His world had become the spiky, rubber ball I was holding, his ‘crack ball’ as I affectionately called it. He hopped and skipped over himself on our way to the back door.

“What do you think?” I said. “Should I dive into Terry Pratchett’s fabulous irreverence again or return to a classic like *The Princess Bride*?”

Beau gave me no opinion as we strode into the dark and the door closed behind us.

Chapter 2: Earth's Inconveniences

No one likes to travel. I don't mean visiting other places and enjoying what pleasantries could be found there. That's not too bad. I mean the actual act of moving from one place to another. Whether it's by cramming into a car and rolling at impossible speeds across the ground or getting stuffed into a metal tube, set to hurtle across the globe from kilometers in the air, traveling is the worst.

In my opinion, flying is marginally better than other modes of transport, and that's only because it's so much faster. A few hours of my time are worth the indignities I might suffer in the airport or the plane itself. Some things do, however, always prove exceptionally irritating.

It never failed. Be prepared for a flight by arriving hours before it departed and the line through security was near non-existent, leaving you bored at the gate long before you needed to be there. Run late and the line spilled onto the street, leaving you chewing your fingernails while you waited, in the hopes that the bad habit would somehow keep you from missing your flight. When that worst of possibilities nonetheless happened and you *somehow* managed to wrangle a seat on the next possible flight, you always ended up beside the mother with a squalling baby or the man with no concept of personal space.

Usually, I chose the prepared method when traveling by air. Today, I had not. As I walked out the doors of San Jose's airport, I shook off my disgruntled attitude to appreciate my surroundings, breathing in the ever-present, wonderfully crisp air before I shivered. I'd forgotten how much colder this place was when compared to home, but I didn't care. I was here! The city of dreams.

Or of my dreams at least.

As my rideshare took me to my hotel, I watched parched grass and homes from the '70's roll past, one after another. Maybe not the most aesthetically pleasing area but it was leaps and bounds better than Houston's concrete sprawl, and while the cost of living here never ceased to blow my mind, I thought dealing with it would be worth it if only for three things.

One: the weather. San Jose might be colder, but that was colder when compared to my current natural habitat, where the sun literally tried to kill me every day. While it was constantly sunny here, that distant ball of fire was more of an ally than an enemy, giving this city perfect weather almost *all the time*. Every time I'd been here, it had never rained. I'd never seen cloudy skies. Perfect blue had always greeted me, and while I might miss rainy days if I lived here, I thought I could handle their loss.

Two: the people. In Houston, if one presented as anything other than the typical WASP, one got strange looks. Deviate too far from that pattern, and walking down the city's streets could become dangerous.

In San Jose, people were more relaxed. Alternate dress and lifestyles weren't as prevalent as you might think, but when they showed up, vividly dyed hair, tattoos, and piercings never received so much as a second glance.

And the *nerd culture!* I had yet to make a visit here without seeing a Firefly reference on a t-shirt or something equally nerdgasm inducing.

Schedules were much more relaxed here too. Gone was the 'go-go-go' corporate mentality of Houston and the do-it-exactly-as-your-told approach. Here, people only cared if your work was done on time, which would come as a welcome relief for me.

Three: opportunity. San Jose served as the hub for Silicon Valley. Mountain View, Cupertino, and other such suburbs lay around the city, and since I was a software engineer, my mind cried out to dive into these work environments and never emerge. If I managed to attract the attention of a tech giant, I'd pack up my belongings and leave Houston without so much as a farewell. I'd do it in a heartbeat.

After thanking my ride share's driver, I rolled my suitcase onto the sidewalk, taking a moment to prepare. My least favorite part of trips like this, pretending to be friends with people I didn't like, was next.

"Brennan!" someone shouted as I walked into the hotel's lobby.

Finding my co-workers wasn't hard. They were clustered by the elevators, the only people here in button-up shirts and suit pants.

Starting Monday, such a sight wouldn't be out of place since that was when the convention started, but for now, their attire stuck out like a sore thumb.

"Hey, guys!" I called with a wave. "Let me get checked in and stash my stuff."

Doing so didn't take long, although once I was in my room, I made sure to look myself over. Heaven forbid if I appeared as anything besides the perfectly put together business woman.

Once I was ready, I took the elevator down, checking whether my parents had gotten my text about my arrival. I'd received nothing from dad yet, but my mom had responded with an adorable picture of Beau lounging on their couch.

"Enjoy it while you can, little bastard," I said, ignoring the ache already invading my heart.

While I'd gotten settled, my co-worker had moved. One, Allan, was barely visible through the door into the hotel's on-site restaurant.

“Am I the last one here?” I asked as I approached.

“You got here right after Spence. Don’t worry,” Allan said. “We didn’t wait long.”

“Well, that’s good,” I said. “How was your flight?”

“Ehhh,” Allan said, rocking his flattened hand back and forth. “Could have gone worse. If you want a story, you should ask Zubair. He had trouble getting through security again.”

Making a sympathetic noise, I clicked my tongue.

“He should get pre-check, poor thing.”

“I don’t think that would solve the problem.”

Before I could answer, Spence ambled up to us with drinks in his hands.

“You like whiskey sours, right, Bren?” he asked, extending one my way.

“Yes,” I drawled. “We’re drinking already?”

“The boss is,” Spence said, jiggling his offered glass.

“In that case.”

Snatching the drink from him, I half-emptied it in one go.

“Bad flight?” Allan asked, taking his own drink.

“You have no idea,” I said with a groan, “but I’m here now, as are we all. Do we have a table yet or...?”

“We do, actually,” Spence said. “Why do you think I came to get you two?”

“Lead on, then.”

As Allan strode after Spence, I hung back a moment, taking another sip. One exchange and I was almost drained. Thank God Tim hadn’t gone on another of his ‘alcohol is of the devil’ spells. I probably wouldn’t make it through the night without this liquid assistance.

As we joined the others, I half-listened to everyone’s greetings, equally as inattentive as we looked over the menu and placed our orders. When the waitress eventually left us alone, though, nothing stood between us software engineers and the question that had been jangling in at least my head since learning about this trip. Fortunately, I didn’t have to voice it.

“So, Tim, you plan on telling us why we’re here three days before the convention starts?” Spence asked. “I won’t complain about getting to spend a weekend in beautiful California but...”

But why this change in routine? I didn't think the company would fly us halfway across the country for training if our jobs were about to become... not ours, but unexpected circumstances like this had never boded well for us in the past. Why ask for us to fly out on Friday morning rather than Sunday night? It was...really quite strange that they'd done that, ever leaving the choice of travel plans up to us.

"As you all know, we didn't perform as expected last year," Tim said.

Oh, no. I'd been right. He was about to fire us.

"But this year went exceptionally well," he said, which stifled my nervous laughter.

Paranoid. I'd been entertaining my paranoid thinking *yet again*. I really needed to get that under control.

"And a lot of that success has come about because of the team sitting around me," Time continued. "Management wanted to spread the love a little, so to speak. I persuaded them to let us take some time exploring the area on the company's dime. So. How'd you four like to spend a couple of days in wine country?"

"Are you driving?" Zubair immediately asked.

Chuckles rose around me, overriding any excitement or worry from those at the table. Everyone here knew how much Zubair hated cars.

"Stop it, Zub," Allan hissed. "If Tim's forced behind the wheel, he might take the offer back."

"I'll drive," Tim loudly said, rolling his eyes. "I've picked a lovely resort for us to stay at. All drinks, massages, food, you name it is paid for by the company, and we get to try some of the best wines in the country straight from the source. What do you think?"

"That sounds *amazing*," I said.

I'd come here expecting a weekend of small talk and awkward social interactions, followed by five days in a crowd, but with this, I might find some alone time. Time where I could read and write.

"The lady gives her approval," Allan said. "That means the rest of us can go, right?"

"Oh, hush," I said, lightly shoving him. "I haven't kept the rest of you from that many events."

Around the table, the men flicked their eyes to one another, quirked their lips, or let their hands twitch.

"Of course not, Bren."

Our food arrived in the nick of time. For them. While digging into dinner, I forced myself not to glare as my co-workers devolved into chatter about some sporting event, football in nature most likely.

I knew what the rest of this meal would entail. My co-workers would get wrapped up in their subjects of interest, and with them being nothing like mine, I'd fade into the background. They'd make no effort at including me, and I'd let them do that. I shouldn't blame them for it, considering I'd do the same in their place.

But I did. Watching them, a word came to me unbidden: a whisper in my mind.

Bastards.

Chapter 3: The Beginning of My Misfortune

Two days in wine country. Sounds great, right?

It was, for the most part. Our rooms were the pinnacle of luxury with every meal we ate only serving to enforce our belief that chefs here were masters of their craft, and after my massage, the state of relaxation I floated in persisted for hours. Only two things stopped the experience just shy of perfection.

I'd admit one was mostly petty. Personal preference, if you will. I'd forgotten that, for the most part, red grapes were grown here, which meant that, for the most part, red wines were produced.

Now, I wasn't super picky when it came to what I drank. I also didn't have the most cultivated of tongues. To me, alcohol was alcohol. As long as it got me to a beautifully fuzzy, drunken state without gagging me too much, I was happy.

That being said, I did have preferences, as I mentioned. I liked sweet drinks, and I wasn't talking about what most consider sweet. I was talking Moscatos, margaritas, and the occasional whisky sour when social functions required it. Dessert wines were my choice, not what I'd found here.

As I held a glass of cabernet to my nose, our guide on this tasting journey explained this vintage's many qualities and properties while I pretended to care. Beside me, Zubair leaned closer.

"You know they pour such generous portions because they want us drunk," he whispered. "We'll spend more like that."

And here was the second reason I wasn't having the time of my life.

"Thanks, Zub. That's good to know," I said. "It's helped every time you've mentioned it at all the wineries we've visited."

"Oh," Zubair said, frowning. "I'm sorry. I don't remember saying it."

"It's ok, Zub," Spence said, clapping both of our shoulders. "You're only having a good time. We don't mind you repeating yourself. Right, Bren?"

Glaring at him over my glass's lip, I took a long sip.

"No," I eventually say.

As my co-workers continued chatting, I discreetly poured the rest of my sample into a provided container. I'd never *hated* red wines, but cabernets were the bane of my existence.

"Ready for another?"

Well, I'd thought I'd been discreet. Smiling at the impeccably dressed man in front of me, who was raising a bottle in invitation, I shook my head.

"Give me a minute," I said. "I can't appreciate my wine if the room's spinning, can I?"

Chuckling, the man lowered his bottle.

"I'll return soon, then."

"Wait a minute," I said before he could dash off. "I heard someone mention that this winery's owned and operated by a single woman? Is that true? I know a lot of celebrities try their hand at this, but I didn't think the average person did."

"You're well informed, ma'am, although my boss isn't quite the 'average' person," the man said. "Audrey Blair runs the place."

"Interesting. I've never heard the name before," I said.

"I wouldn't expect that you had. The Blair's fame only runs as far as California's border. People from out of state don't often know of them."

"Mm," I hummed, distracted by my co-workers.

They'd, as usual, begun to make fools of themselves with Allan drunkenly chatting up a girl while the others egged him on. Sighing, I turned to the impeccably dressed man, who was watching me with an eyebrow raised.

"Pour me another sample, and I'll take two bottles of your sweetest wine," I said. "I have to go save my friends before they make complete asses of themselves."

With a refilled glass in hand, I made my way toward Allan, keeping an eye out for Tim. Where was our team manager when we needed him?

"What's a pretty girl like you doing here alone?" Allan was saying when I came closer.

The object of his attention curled around her glass with an uncertain twitch to her lips.

"I'm... trying wines," she said. "Isn't that what you're doing?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Allan!" I sid, wrapping my arm around the man's elbow. "There you are!"

With Allan's attention briefly pulled from her, his victim gratefully smiled at me, and I gave her a subtle nod.

"The boss wants to talk-" I continued.

"Tim can wait," Allan said. "I'm busy."

"Keeping company with this nice woman. I can see that," I said. "Still, Tim didn't look happy-"

"I said he can wait!"

Allan shrugged me off, and as I stumbled away from him, wine splashed down my front. Gasping, I gaped at the damage while a dark stain spread across shirt. It had probably seeped into my camisole too. My glass was empty, my outfit ruined, and the room's eyes were on me.

Too many eyes.

Horrified, Allan said, "Bren-"

Taking a deep breath, I returned to the tasting bar, setting my glass down.

"I'm so sorry. I appear to have made a mess," I said. "Is there any way I could try that last sample one more time?"

The man at the bar said not a word as he poured, and I kept my eyes fixed on that swirling liquid. Once its tumult had stopped, I tossed it back, grimacing at its bitter taste.

"Bathroom?" I asked.

The impeccably dressed man pointed toward a nearby doorway. With directions in hand, I stormed toward it while Allan raced to catch up.

"I'm sorry, Bren," he said. "I didn't mean to... I'll replace the shirt."

"It's ok," I said. "Mistakes happen."

Mine had simply been in trying to help him.

"Once I've cleaned up, I think I'll take a walk around the vineyard," I said. "Can you let the others know they shouldn't wait for me? I'll make my own way to the resort."

"Sure," Allan said. "I'm sorry. Really."

And he headed toward our co-workers with his head hanging and his shoulders slumped. Watching him disappear, I could almost imagine a tail tucked between his legs, and the sight was recompense enough for what he'd done.

Once in the bathroom, I unbuttoned my shirt and tied its sleeves around my waist, pulling my jacket back over my shoulders once I was finished. My camisole only had a few red speckles marring it, a small enough number for public presentation.

Leaning on the counter, I stared into glistening, brown eyes, noting my trembling lip.

“Get it together, you useless piece of shit,” I said. “It wasn’t that bad. There weren’t that many people.”

Because it hadn’t been the embarrassment of the spill or the ruined shirt that had bothered me. I’d had so many eyes on me, and my skin had crawled while my heart had threatened to leap out of my mouth. I’d come within a hairsbreadth of a panic attack, of bolting regardless of who’d stood in my way.

Too many eyes. Too many people. Too much for me.

After washing my hands, I slapped water on my cheeks before wandering outside. With grape vines twisting over their supporting wires, Audrey Blair’s vineyard was quite charming, but it would have looked the same as any other place we’d visited today save for one feature. On its far side, hills halted human cultivation.

With them the only interesting thing in sight, I strolled their way, enjoying the sun on me. Not many people were touring the vineyard, and I was glad for that. I hadn’t found nearly as much time alone as I’d have liked, and after what had happened earlier, I needed time alone. I enjoyed every minute of my walk to the hills. The quiet all around had become my friend with solitude its gift to me.

When I reached the hill’s base, I examined it, all dried grass and rock with a few scraggly trees scattered across its slope. It looked like a miniature, much more parched version of the mountains around San Jose, but this seemed scalable within a reasonable amount of time.

So, that was what I’d do. Climb to the apex, scan my surroundings, and maybe write for a bit before heading to the resort.

My muscles protested my plan halfway to the top. Pausing, I waited for them to stop screaming with my hands on my hips. I had no intention of surrendering. This far up, I could see over the Blair vineyard and to the road beyond. I saw the small villa where Audrey probably lived. I saw where the blue sky met the horizon on the other side of the road, and I wanted to see more.

But perhaps making a beeline for the top wasn’t the best idea. Instead, I spiraled around the hill.

On the face opposite the vineyard, I found more trees with the valley on this side sheltering a grove of them. I spied another vineyard peeking through the leaves, so I knew this grove couldn’t be large, but I was impressed nonetheless.

Not with the trees found here. Sad looking oaks and pines dotted every section of this land. No, I was impressed that a grove this small could look so lush in this dry of a place.

I was so occupied by admiring the green canopy above me that I didn't see the fissure splitting the hill's side up ahead. One minute, I was ambling with my eyes fixed on the serenity above me, and the next I was falling.

It wasn't a long drop, maybe two seconds total. It certainly wasn't long enough for me to understand what was happening.

No, that realization only came when sharp rock bit into my face and a bulge punched into my stomach. For a moment, I couldn't breathe, and I scrambled to roll onto my back. After I'd succeeded, I took a wheezing breath, hissing it back out. Groaning, I patted my body down, certain I'd find *something* broken, but besides small cuts in my cheeks and forehead, I seemed whole.

Now, what the hell had happened? Sitting up, I dashed tears from my eyes to establish where I was. Light shafts were angled toward the patch of pebble I was sitting on, piercing a thin gash in the earth above me. Besides this bit of illumination, dimness surrounded me, one that gradually gave way to pitch black. A faint trickling noise fought the noise of a muffled breeze overhead with leaves and branches rustling in its wake.

An underground spring, albeit running low considering I wasn't soaked right now. That was how the grove stayed so lush!

But... that meant I'd fallen onto its bank, somewhere that was usually full of water when the spring wasn't dry. And it was *underground*.

"Oh, shit," I whispered. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!"

Chapter 4: Start of the Isekai Journey

So what if I'd fallen into a crevasse, getting myself into a dangerous situation I'd have made fun of someone else for? It was going to be ok. I had my purse, that bulge that had knocked the air from my lungs earlier. I could call for help and...

After digging in my purse for a bit, I pulled my hand from its depths with half a cell phone. How the hell...? A shattered screen, I could understand but *broken in half?*

Screeching, I tossed my phone at the far-distant fissure, only to have it hit me on the shoulder on the way back down.

"Ok. Admittedly not the smartest thing I've done," I said. "Let's see if this dead weight has anything useful in it."

Scrambling to my knees, I dumped my purse's contents in front of me, organizing them into two piles. In the junk pile: two halves of a cell phone, several receipts, my coin purse and wallet, sunglasses, and keys. Possibly useful: my e-reader as a light source, alcohol swabs, a bottle of portable hand sanitizer, travel lotion, chap stick, sanitary bags for Beau, and a small first aid kit from the last CPR class I'd taken. All good stuff.

As I bandaged my face, I eyed the few as-of-yet unclassified items from my purse, uncertain which pile to put them in. In these circumstances, my journal, fountain pen, and ink cartridges might not necessarily be *useful*, but I thought of them as an integral part of maintaining my sanity. I had so many stories and places and *people* in my head that if I didn't release that noise at times via pen and paper, a tiny piece of me would wind into an anxious knot. Considering that, my writing implements went into the useful pile.

Identifying the second item took me a minute. It was a black cube, small enough to fit in my palm, with square buttons bristling from two of its opposing faces. With glowing, purple dots in each button, the smooth surface in between them felt seamless, except for an indentation in one side. An O-ring was floating inside it.

Yes, floating. As in not attached to anything. If I hadn't been kneeling underground, I might have been tempted to.... I don't know. Pull it? But as it was, I ignored the temptation, wondering where this had come from...

The junkie's gift. In the chaos of traveling, I'd forgotten about that encounter. Chills shot up and down my spine as I again considered the possibility that my life had changed that night.

Roughly shaking my head, I tossed the cube into the junk pile. This was reality. The junkie must have gotten his hands on a piece of tech that wasn't on the market yet. Somehow. And given it to me. For some reason.

"Quit it, overactive imagination," I said. "Focus."

Unlocking my e-reader, I swept its light over my surroundings before wincing. There was no way I could climb out of here. Those walls were too slick and the fissure too far above me. I might try it later, but for now, there must be another way out.

Maybe this underground spring emerged from the earth somewhere nearby. It was running low enough that I could follow it for a time. Thanks to my dumb decision to share my solitary plans with Allan, no one would come looking for me until later tonight. I might as well do something until then. I'd keep track of the time with my e-reader, and once evening had come, I'd follow the spring back here.

If I didn't find a way out first.

Everything—junk and useful—went back into my purse, save for my e-reader. Its glow led the way into the black.

Despite the aches and pains of imminent bruises and the worry gnawing at me, I found myself humming as I stumbled over pebbles. After all, I was alone, and this was an adventure of sorts, even if it wasn't one I'd planned. I'd never wanted to go cave diving before, but I would enjoy this once in a lifetime experience and *damn* the terror of it.

A couple of hours into my trek, I stopped to take a break. I'd never been the most physically fit person, and if this became a 'starving to death if you're not careful' sort of situation, I wanted to save my strength. I'd rather risk dying via a fall rather than go out in the throes of hunger's delirium, and that preference would involve me trying to climb out of here. At some point. Which meant I needed the ability to climb.

Finding the most comfortable looking patch of pebbles nearby, I switched my e-reader off. The device might come with an impressive battery life, but regardless, I'd save its charge when I could.

With my back to stone, I pulled the strange cube out of my purse. As I'd been walking, my thoughts had kept turning to it. Forget the mystery of how it had gotten into the junkie's hands. I wanted to know *what it was*. I couldn't think of a use for its complicated interface, and that fascinated me. Why make it so intricate?

Plus, its button's violet circles could keep darkness at bay while my other light source 'rested'. A few minutes alone, in absolute darkness, was fine and dandy—glorious if I was being honest—but I'd rather not experience the hallucinations that came with an extended stay in it.

Turning the cube in my hands, I pushed its buttons, but nothing happened. Perhaps it required the correct combination? Perhaps the O-ring...?

Curling my finger through it, I paused. Was this a good idea? I didn't know what this cube did. What if it was a weapon of some sort? What if it was something... more? Fantastic, impossible ideas cluttered my head, and I shook them free.

"This is reality, Brennan."

I tugged on the O-ring.

And nothing happened.

"See? I told you so."

Taking it in one hand, I bounced the cube on my palm, and in mid-air, it exploded.

Or rather, its buttons did, floating free of their middle ring. A burst of purple and blue light had me slamming my back into stone, squinting. I dropped the cube, and after hitting the ground, it rolled away from me.

When it stopped near the water, I crawled toward it until my nose and eyes were hovering inches from it.

"Huh."

With its buttons sprayed free of it, the cube's innards were revealed. A gridline of nearly invisible, silver wires formed hundreds of smaller boxes within the cube. Inside each of these hung an incandescent teardrop with some of them blue and some purple.

Carefully, I grabbed the central ring, taking the cube to where I'd been sitting. Once there, I bit my lip. Almost without my permission, I extended a trembling finger into the cube, all while my brain screamed *this is a bad idea* on repeat. I poked a blue teardrop.

And it turned purple.

Chuckling, I repeated the process a few more times before lowering the cube into my lap.

What the hell was this thing?

"Well," I breathed, licking my lips, "fascinating as this has been, I should get going."

Much as I'd like to continue figuring this mystery out, I'd caught my breath. It was time to once more try getting myself out of trouble.

How did I return the cube to its original size, though? It wouldn't fit in my purse like this, not with everything else in there.

I tried the O-ring. When pushing and pulling on it didn't work, I tried pressing the buttons into place, both one at a time and all together. It remained splayed with the teardrops inside of it

mocking me.

“Whatever you are,” I told it, “I’m *not* leaving you behind. And I’m certainly not carrying you like this.”

Flattening my hands on each set of buttons, I *pushed*, gritting my teeth. The cube resisted me, so I, being the barely advanced animal that I was, tried applying more force. Then, in a moment that would remain forever engraved in my brain, I heard something inside the cube shatter.

“Oh, no.”

Blue and purple sparks flashed over the cube in waves, each one coming faster than the last, and dropping it, I leapt to my feet.

“No, no, no, no, no.”

Blinding light poured from the cube, searing my eyes, and when I tried to run, I tripped on something.

“God. damn. it. No!”

I clawed at the ground, trying to get to my feet, but it only gave way beneath my fingers. Purple and blue light flashed over me while cold crept up my arms, and growling, I reached my feet again.

The light cut out.

Panting, I blinked, begging my eyes to work. Whatever had happened had doused me in ice, and I rubbed my arms, trying to return life to them.

The first clue that all my fears had come to pass was a continued source of illumination. If I were still underground, darkness would have surrounded me by now, but as the blurry shapes around me grew clearer, it appeared as if I’d found sunlight again.

When my vision returned to me, I wished it hadn’t. I spun in place, hoping something else might lie at my back, but no.

I was surrounded by snow. In all directions, rolling hills, smothered by a pile of fluffy white, spread for as far as I could see.

Still fine. Maybe the cube was a teleportation device, something that big business or the government had created. I’d rather believe a kooky conspiracy theory like that than what I was afraid of because if that was what had happened, help might be imminent. I might be standing in the northern reaches of Canada or Alaska, which would be much preferable than... than...

Swallowing, I looked up. A blue sky hung over me, just like the one I’d praised in San Jose, and angry looking clouds were billowing on the horizon. All good.

What wasn't was the sun, a tiny, white pinprick that was almost lost on its blue background.

And the two moons. One of which loomed so large that it was like it wanted to eat the sky. And of course, half of it had been shattered.

"How did this...?" I whispered with my fingers twitching. "Are you *kidding* me?"

I dragged my gaze to the horizon and once more, spun in place, forgetting how cold I was while tearing at my hair.

"A portal fantasy," I whispered before shouting. "I'm in a *fucking portal fantasy!* The *worst* kind of story!"

Screaming, I kicked at the cube that had brought me here. It flew into snow, burying so far into that white fluff that I could hardly see it. Squeezing my eyes shut, I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"I'll probably need that," I said to no one.

Sighing, I trudged through the snow drifts to retrieve the demon box. I should have known better than to play with the damn thing.

Chapter 5: My Mortal Enemy

I'd never liked snow. One of the small advantages of living in Houston had been that I'd rarely seen the stuff. The one time it had fallen while I'd lived there, people had been in their yards all day, building muddy snowmen and trying to sled down nearly non-existent slopes. Kids' screeching laughter had filled my neighborhood with groups of them disappearing beneath their friends' thrown snowballs.

Having prepared from the moment 'snow' had been mentioned on the news, I'd locked my door, turned up the heater, and refused to leave my home. I'd proceeded to indulge in a grumpy day, only venturing outside to let Beau do his business.

He hadn't found snow amusing either.

You see, yes. Snow's quite lovely as it falls from the sky. The tiny flakes seem to resist gravity as they drift toward tongues or grass or hair. The problem with snow doesn't come as it flutters like a leaf through the air. It comes once it's finished its descent.

Precipitations of all types have their own unique disadvantages. Hail causes property damage. Rain's hell to drive through. Sleet's just... no. But for these three, the annoyance is fleeting. Hail and sleet quickly melt since they only appear in warmer temperature, and rain soaks into the earth.

Unless it floods. Which Houston does *a lot* of. But this isn't a rant about flooding.

This is about snow. Once the goddamn stuff hits the ground, it sticks. around. *forever*. Within a day, the fun of it passes, but it always overstays its welcome. Until it melts, it's there to make footing treacherous, soak shoes until one's feet are freezing, and generally, act like a prank-enthused asshole.

What I'm getting at here is that I. *hate*. snow.

And now, it surrounded me. Having stuffed the demon box into my purse, I retrieved my sunglasses and chap stick. Hopefully, the first would protect my eyes from sun glare. Even if this place's star shone dimmer than what was found around my home, the reflection of its light was blinding. The second item, I stashed in a pocket, knowing I'd need it before long. If possible, I'd rather keep my lips from bleeding.

"Ok," I said. "Ok, ok. What the hell do I do?"

I'd spun in place more times than I could count, hoping another pass would reveal some sign of civilization or barring that, shelter. I'd need something to shield me from the cold and wind found here. Soon. My fingers were already blazing a bright red from digging the demon box free, but as

far as I could see, this place seemed made of endless snow.

“It would be just my luck to get transported to a deserted waste-land.”

Great. My teeth were already chattering.

I should pick a direction and walk. At least that way, I'd generate warmth. It would be much better than standing here, complaining and waiting for that nearby roiling storm to finish its approach.

With no other reference point to guide me, I put those black-tinged clouds behind me and forged through the drifts with my hands shoved under my arms. The effort of dragging my legs through knee-high snow soon had me sweating, which was an improvement from freezing while standing still, but it wasn't a long-term plan. Not that I had a 'long-term' to anticipate.

“Shu-shut up,” I gasped.

Did I have anything to start a fire with? The receipts in my purse and my clothes might make decent kindling if I'd been willing to sacrifice my thermal wear, but I had nothing on me that would create a spark or keep a blaze going once it had begun. Maybe if I could get the demon box to malfunction again...

Why was I letting a potential ticket home sit in my purse?

Wincing at my hands' exposure to the cold, I withdrew the cube that had brought me here. Compared to before, it looked dead with no glow seeping from the dots in its buttons. They were just black indentations now.

“Ser-serves you right,” I said. “This is you-your fault, you know. Dumped into a landscape from my wor-worst nightmare, freezing to death? Your fault.”

Turning the demon box, I played with its buttons and... its O-ring had vanished. Shit!

With my heart in my throat, I dug through my purse until I found the tiny piece. Pressing my hand to my chest, I caught my breath before retrieving the demon box from where I'd dropped it in the snow. Only then did I resume my struggle.

“It's not really your fault,” I said after a moment. “A mysterious, ob-obviously unwell stranger gives you to me? That's how *at least* thir-thirty percent of fantasy stories begin. I should have known better.”

While I tried different button combinations, hoping to breathe life into what I was holding, I wracked my brain for ways to survive a day here. Wherever here was. While I had plenty of supplies to help if I cut or bruised myself, I had nothing to counter exposure. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with a way to use my things that would resist the cold.

After... I don't know. An hour or two? It was hard to measure time here, so...

When despair kicked in, I turned my focus solely on the demon cube. It had brought me here. Perhaps if I ignited its lights, it could take me home.

“Come on, you magnificent cu-cube,” I said. “Turn on. It’s the least you can do after dro-dropping me in this hellhole.”

I scanned said hellhole for what must be the thousandth time, landing on an impossible sky. Every time I saw that shattered moon overhead, hanging so close that it seemed like I could touch it, my breath caught.

“What do you suppose happened there?” I asked. “Did a meteor fly too close to the pla-planet and hit its moon instead, accepting the sacrifice of a child for its parent? Or do you think people once lived here? God, how advanced would their technology have to have been to unleash such devastation? And if they were so ad-advanced, what killed-”

A cloud drifted into view, making my stomach drop.

“Shit.”

Hurrying to the top of the closest mound of snow, I glanced around me, searching for...

Yes!

Snow flew around me as I ran for the smudge I’d spotted, and when I came upon it, I nearly cried. I advanced on the sad looking tree with something approaching reverence before throwing my arms around it. Or as far around it as they’d reach.

“How are you alive?” I asked its branches.

It didn’t respond, but I didn’t need it to. Not really. I’d found a form of shelter! It was the most pathetic, minimal degree of shelter I could have stumbled on, but it was better than nothing.

“As good a place as any,” I said.

Glancing back toward the storm with its line of precipitation visible now, I swallowed the lump in my throat. While I waited for its arrival, I paced beside the tree, messing with the demon box, but before long, darkness crept over my surroundings while snowflakes began to fall. Collapsing at the base of the tree, I huddled into as tight of a ball as I could.

For I didn’t know how long, I poked and prodded the demon box while the wind howled and snow flurried from the sky. My fingers steadily went from burning to numb to minimal sensation once more, but I never gave them a break. Suffering a bad case of frostbite would be worth it if I could make it home.

Before long, however, this place’s weak star gave up on piercing through the clouds. A black that was almost as deep as what I’d found in the caves enveloped me, and unable to differentiate between the cube’s buttons anymore, I lowered it into my lap, pressing a hand to my eyes.

I couldn't tell if I cried. If I did, my tears turned to ice on my cheeks, joining the frost that was already crusting my face. I was so tired, more exhausted than I'd ever been in my life, but I forced myself to return the demon box to my purse so I could retrieve my e-reader. If I was dying here, I'd do it rocked in the arms of my favorite stories.

I couldn't say how long I read tales of swords and heroes, characters living in the gray with their morally ambiguous choices, but as I did, I marveled that I was still alive. I hadn't moved for what felt like hours. I should have frozen over by now, but perhaps I had. Perhaps this sensation of getting lost in yet another world was one long dream before my brain shut down.

If it was, why was I still tired? My eyelids drooped while my head was dragged forward as if by a stone. I just wanted to sleep. That was ok, right? I could close my eyes for a moment. I knew that was what everyone who was freezing to death said, but it would only be for a moment. A single second. It was ok. I'd be ok. I'd-

An unexpected sheet of snow crashed over me, and as my eyes slid closed, I caught a glimpse of a black, brown, and white something.

No... Beau! Go... home.

"Cò th 'annad?"

What a... strange thing... for a dog...

Chapter 6: Yay... New People

I'd always had the strangest dreams, a symptom of being a writer, I thought. I spent my free time creating worlds where other people could escape, and while I slept, my brain extended the same courtesy to me.

So, dreaming about a junkie, his mysterious cube, and a jump to another plane? That was normal for me.

What wasn't so normal was waking up to strangers crowding over me. Three faces, two of which were framed by brilliantly orange bushes of hair and one who was bald, look down on me with scrunched eyebrows while vivid green and blue pinpricks drilled through me. These people had *the* most vibrant hair and eye colors I'd ever seen and...

It hadn't been a dream. I had been whisked away from home and would soon need to begin my search for a way back. Why, why, *why?* I'd somehow gotten trapped in a story, and its creator had insisted on using my *least* favorite plot device. It was enough to make me want to scream.

I didn't do that, of course. Shouting for no apparent reason didn't seem like a good way to establish first contact with these strangers, but then again, I, socially inept and solitary person that I was, had no clue how to do that in the first place.

"Tha i na dùisg," said the man hovering over me. "Rachaibh ag innse do bhrathair."

That wasn't, of course, what he'd actually said. It had been such a jumble of foreign syllables and sounds rolled into one that I had trouble picking the words apart. But it was what my brain translated the mush to in my head: an approximation of a somewhat familiar language I'd been learning back home.

As the youngest of the strangers ran off, I felt my countenance souring. They didn't speak English. Of course they didn't. English wasn't the only language back home. Why should I expect that it would be in this hellish, frozen...?

Frozen.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I lifted my hands in front of me, and after taking a deep breath, I squinted at them.

I'd expected ruined fingertips. Blisters across bleached skin. Possibly no hands at all with the limbs having been removed to save the rest of me from necrotic tissue. What I got was my hands: whole, flushed, and healthy.

Shooting upright, I flipped them a few times before running them over the rest of me, seeking any sign that I'd almost frozen to death, but I found nothing. I should have at least a mild case of frostbite, but I could detect nothing wrong with me besides a pit in my stomach.

"That's only hunger," I said, pressing my hands to my abdomen.

Perhaps this place wasn't as terrible as I'd thought. Obviously, human civilization existed here, and from my perfectly healthy state, I'd say it was a fairly advanced one, more so than what was found on Earth.

Now that my health and existence had been verified, perhaps I should examine my surroundings. Instead of getting lost in my head again. Yeah, that seemed like a good idea.

I was sitting in a room with only the older woman still nearby. Ignoring her avid gaze, threatening to gobble me whole, I instead scanned what little I could see of the room.

Gel formed pads on the slab I was sitting on, and unnaturally still curtains flanked it, closing me into a skinny rectangle. These weren't like the plain dividers used in hospitals back home, the ones that always induced an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of one's gut. They were intricately woven with every shade of blue intertwined, presenting a fabric painting of ice and sky. On this, splashes of silver and gold had become stars and fire. I didn't know if an evening landscape had been intended with the presentation given, but it was what I saw.

A ripple dropped through the curtain from top to bottom, and curious, I poked it. A shimmer spread away from my finger with a brief glimpse of what lay beyond it given before the image restabilized, and a faint chuckle puffed from me. A hologram. One I'd mistaken as real for far too long.

With a dry mouth, I peered over the slab's edge, half-expecting to see further fancy laser work, but all that greeted me was milky blue... stone? It looked almost like condensed ice, but I had no intention of testing its properties unless it was required. I'd had too many cold experiences recently.

The same material made up the ceiling, although its carved blocks had etchings in them, swirls and patterns that might have been found in the floor back home. Strange that their placement was switched here.

In the furrows between these blocks, a white... liquid, bright phosphorescence to light the room, flowed. Why wasn't it falling from those cracks? Nothing held that plasma to the ceiling, and yet, there it stayed. Fascinating.

Now for my least favorite subject of interest, the other human with me. She stood at the end of the slab, blocking my view outside of the rectangle. With her hands folded in front of her waist, she returned my stare with eyes the color of sapphires, of the ocean deep, of...

Hmm. On Earth, we have these poisonous frogs, found most commonly in the rainforest. They're decorated in some of the most vivacious colors a living being can find. This woman's eyes were blue like theirs, and that same vibrancy infused her hair. It was orange like flames. Orange like a

pumpkin.

And so. many. freckles. Crossing her button nose. Invading her near-colorless lips. Brushing her tiny ears and plunging down her neckline.

Now, I wasn't into women. Or men for that matter. But I did appreciate people's physical attributes, especially when they were pleasing to the eye. This woman was *gorgeous*.

And she hid that beauty in the weirdest looking outfit I'd ever seen. A black, high collared cape billowed from her shoulders to her knees with two holes in the front of it allowing her arms to pass through. A white undershirt peeked through the cape's deep neckline before getting eaten by it. Puffy—*clown* puffy—white pants emerged from the cape's hem, tucked into black ankle boots.

And at every seam, a glowing strip sent pulsing blue along it.

Ok, maybe not the weirdest outfit I'd seen—fashion shows back home could get unnatural at times—but it was certainly strange.

The bald man returned with a bowl, brushing his green eyes over me before turning to the woman.

“A bheil thu cinnteach gum bu chòir dhuinn a beathachadh?”

Fluttering her fingers where they clutched one another, the woman said, “Mura dèan sinn sin, bidh e troimh-chèile?”

Sighing, the man extended the bowl toward me without looking my way. Rude.

“Thanks ever so much,” I said as I accepted.

While I examined what he'd given me, the man stalked away. Had they noticed me complaining about my hunger earlier? Wait. Did that mean they understood me?

Meeting the woman's eyes, I said, “Your home is... beautiful.”

What little of it I can see.

Her only response was a blink, which could mean she hadn't understood me or that she refused to make polite conversation. Either of those would be acceptable to me. For now.

Lifting the bowl to my lips, I sipped it. If they'd meant to kill me, they could have left me to die in the blizzard. I doubted they'd poison me now.

A fruity concoction hit my tongue, and gagging, I took a moment to reassess my belief. Wines should be sweet. Deserts should be sweet. Soups, on the other hand, should not. Forget all of the recipes back home that claimed something different. I didn't care. Hot soups should. be. savory.

Having begun to drink their offered meal, however, I couldn't think of a polite way to refuse it. I made myself swallow mouthful after mouthful of what tasted like something between an apple and a watermelon. Once I was finished, I lowered the bowl while fighting to retain my stomach contents.

And still, the woman stared at me.

"I get it. You're creepy," I said, "and you're probably someone important too, based on the fancy clothes. I didn't catch what your husband- Sorry. You might not be married. For all I know, you might not have the concept of marriage here. So, let me start again. I didn't catch what the man from earlier was wearing because I was so... entranced by your outfit."

Again, I only received blinking in response, so with a sigh, I scooted to lean against the wall, crossing my arms.

"I'm pretty good at staring contests too, you know."

But I had a weakness when it came to boredom. After around five minutes of placid silence, I was about ready to launch myself at the woman. Before I could, though, a commotion started outside the holographic curtains. Footsteps slapped toward us with a crash punctuating every fifth one. With a smile plucking at her lips, the woman turned away from me before stepping out of view.

"Cuimhnich a bhith faiceallach, a mhic," she says.

"Tha, tha. Leig mi faicinn i."

A sigh drifted through the hologram before the woman spoke once more.

"Gabh spòrs."

A kid took the woman's place. Well, I say kid. He was probably fourteen or fifteen, at the tipping point where his behavior might qualify him as an adult where his body wouldn't. A mild case of acne mingled with his freckles while stubble tried *so hard* to make a beard.

Don't worry. You'll get there soon enough.

He wasn't bald like the other man, but his shockingly orange hair was cropped close to his scalp. Lime green eyes—and I did mean *lime* green—sat above a crooked nose and the same near colorless lips I'd seen in two of the other three. He'd already achieved his full height, a few inches shy of six feet, or I hoped he had, for his sake, but he hadn't quite grown into it yet, all awkward proportions and lankiness.

As for his clothing, it was more what I'd expected, if perhaps not for this frozen world. Stiff pants reminiscent of blue jeans, dyed black, hung from his hips. A collared shirt, waistcoat, and formal jacket, all in stark white, covered his torso with all of its corners tapering to points. The jacket didn't have a lapel or buttons, just an opening that started wide at the hips before cinching at the

midline and nearly touching at the neck. A collar rose from this to half-circle the neckline, and a black and white, checkered tie hung from the shirt to be tucked into a buttoned waistcoat.

And as with the woman, strips that were oscillating with blue illumination provided accents at the hems.

Crouching, the boy folded his arms atop the slabbed surface I was on. He rested his chin on them before looking up at me, although he refused to meet my eyes.

“Are *you* who we were waiting for?” I asked. “Interesting. What’s so special about you?”

Wincing, the boy clapped his hands over his ears before licking his lips.

“Air do shocair,” he said, lengthening each syllable.

Did he think I was stupid, or...?

No. No, no, no. I was *done* with negativity. Yes, I was far from home. Yes, it sucked, but *I was far from home*. I was physically in a place that was similar the settings of the books I enjoyed. The act of finding my way home might end up being a pain in the ass, but I *would* enjoy each step along the way.

So, either I believed this boy was condescending to me or...

He was just as confused by the language barrier as me. He probably wanted me to slow down.

Straightening from the wall, I poked my chest.

“Brennan,” I said. “Brennan Adams.”

Lowering his hands from his ears, the boy pointed to himself.

“Ellair Baran.”

That had been easy. I had a name for him. How about one for where I was? Waving my hand around me, I shrugged.

“What is this place?”

For a minute, Ellair blankly stared at me, frowning, and with a groan, I scrambled for another way to ask my question. He, however, copied my movement, forestalling my effort, before cupping a space in front of his face.

“Colavar.”

He pulled his hands away from one another, creating a much larger space between them.

“Dalliesh.”

After swinging an arm over his head, he folded both of them on the slab again.

“Brighde.”

So, Colavar was a smaller location, probably a city or town. Dalliesh would be somewhere mid-range like a nation or continent, which made Brighde the planet’s name. Presumably. If so, I was sitting within the protection of Brighde’s atmosphere.

And this kid had conveyed that in three words and a few hand gestures. Tapping my temple, I pointed at him with a smile.

“Smart,” I said.

Blushing, Ellair nuzzled his chin into his arms, and I decided I liked him. It had been so long since I’d last felt like I could relax in another person’s presence, and that was shown in the beaming grin I gave him. He hesitantly returned it with his lips twitching, and I leaned forward.

“My things,” I said. “I’d like them back, please. I need to write...”

His eyes had gone wide as milk saucers, and sighing, I mimed using a pen and paper.

“Writing,” I said. “I need it. I...”

Biting my lip, I stared at my hands.

“If I don’t do it, the pressure builds,” I said with my lip caught in my teeth. “Abstain, and I’m an explosion of ideas, anxiety, and tears waiting to happen.”

Making an explosive noise, I burst my hands apart.

“And with everything that’s happened—finding myself here, worrying about the people I left behind, nearly dying—I need to get it out. I have to write it down-”

“CUS!”

Jerking my head up, I caught Ellair jumping to his feet with his hands plastered to his ears. He beat them against his head, staring with wide eyes past me as he continued screaming.

“CUS, CUS, CUS!”

Spinning, he fled from me with his voice chasing him.

“Chan eil, chan eil, chan eil, chan eil...”

It faded to silence, and I was left staring.

“Well,” I said. “I messed that up. Somehow.”

The woman from before stormed into view, and as she tapped at the air, her face was cloudy.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what I did, but I didn't do it on purpose. It-"

When the gel covering the slab changed from gray to green, I swayed in place with the world swimming.

"Oh, shit."

As quickly as I could, I laid down and just in time too. Within two seconds, I went from completely alert to submerged in dreams.

Chapter 7: Increasing Understanding

Something warm and furry flopped onto my chest, and I squirmed beneath it.

“No, Beau,” I mumbled. “Need more sleep.”

Shouldn't I be... concerned about something? A half-buried memory tickled the back of my mind, refusing to let oblivion claim me once more. Something... something to do with how I'd fallen asleep in the first place.

When I snapped my eyes open, ceiling tiles with plasma between them offered me a morning greeting. Forcing myself to breathe as if I was still dreaming, I glanced at what was lying on me. A coat, black ribbed thermal protection ringed with brown fur, was piled on top of me with gel lining its insides.

In my limited field of view, I saw no people. I was in an empty room, one quite different from where I'd first woken up, but I'd consider its oddities later, once I'd escaped from the woman who'd drugged me.

Slowly, I sat up, looking for anything I could use to my advantage, and the coat slipped to the floor, drawing a gasp.

I twisted toward the noise. The girl from before, the one who'd left so soon after I'd woke up, sat cross-legged on the floor with her hands half-raised in the air. She lowered them as her pale, blue eyes widened and a rash spread over her waxy skin. As her pink lips parted, she took a breath.

“No, no! Wait!”

“*Ellair!*” she bellowed.

Slumping, I glared at her.

“Great.”

Bending to retrieve the jacket, I pulled it on, hoping it would ward off the room's chill. Then, I turned to examine the girl.

This one had a slightly different appearance from her compatriots. No freckles were splashed across her pasty face, and the vibrant colors found in the others' hair and eyes were leached from hers. Her eyes more resembled a California sky, and her hair, falling to her chin, was more russet

than orange, a dying flame rather than one in the midst of its meal.

With its white fabric accented by black strips, her knee-length dress wrapped around itself while the skirt's top layer rose in a diagonal to a belt at her waist. The dress's strapless corset formed a sweetheart neckline that a bolero partially covered. Black boots with buckles jutting from them rose to mid-calf on her, and unlike the distinctly cloth-like material her companions had worn, her outfit looked shinier, as if made from latex, if that substance could also be forced into suppleness.

"Ellair!" she shouted again, and I blinked.

Yes, that's it, Brennan. Distract yourself from possible danger by analyzing this girl's clothing. Don't choke her out before escaping.

Could I do that, though? Was I capable of violence?

Fortunately, that decision wasn't thrust upon me. As I tensed to spring forward, the boy from before, Ellair, sailed into the room, fiddling with something. He stopped in front of me, never lifting his eyes from what he was holding, and before his failure to speak could irritate me, the girl sighed, joining us.

"Duilich mu dheidhinn," she said, pointing at Ellair with a grimace. "Faedaidh e a bhith na asal."

"Cànan," Ellair muttered.

They weren't acting like they meant to drug me again, which was good. Right? Honestly, I couldn't tell what these people wanted from me when all we could spew at one another was nonsense. Establishing usable communication lines should be a top priority for me.

"Good luck with that, oh socially awkward butterfly," I said under my breath, drawing my legs up under me.

"Chrìochnaichte!"

Grinning, Ellair held what he'd been playing with toward me. A delicate, silver chain was draped across his palm with clasps on either end of it. A necklace? I didn't much care for jewelry, but when one was at the mercy of one's host, one didn't refuse their gifts.

Plucking the chain from Ellair's hand, I held it at eye level while tangling it in my fingers.

"Thank you?"

"Cuir air e," Ellair said.

He mimed wrapping the necklace around his neck, and with my lips thinning, I obliged him. It was tight against my skin, like a choker—hooray, my favorite—but it fit. As I clasped it together, however, vibration purred against my skin, and coughing, I fumbled for the catch.

“No, no, no,” I growled. “I’m not getting decapitated by some choking... choker. I’ve read about that too many-”

Tinkling giggles froze my fingers before I could remove the necklace.

“You’re funny.”

I glanced up at the teenagers in front of me. The girl was holding a hand to her mouth with her dancing eyes glittering above it while the boy watched me, or rather my forehead, with a gaze that was trying to drill through my skull and burrow into my brain.

“Hush,” Ellair hissed. “Testing’s not complete.”

“Testing? What testing?” I snapped. “Also, why do I understand you now? Wait. Is it the necklace?”

Frowning, Ellair crossed his arms.

“It’s a translation charm not a... ‘necklace’,” he said. “I’m testing if it works while looking for potential-”

The girl elbowed his side.

“*Ellair!*”

“What?” he growled, rounding on her.

At her expectant expression, he screwed up his face.

“Oh. Um. It functions as expected. So, that’s... good?”

“Aaaand?” the girl said, waving her hand toward me.

Releasing a long sigh, Ellair faced me once more.

“I’m sorry about before,” he said. “Mother shouldn’t have put you under because of me, but to be fair, you were making a lot of noise after I told you not to. I... don’t like noise.”

I could relate to that. In so many ways.

“How long was I sedated?” I asked.

“Only long enough for me to finish the charm,” Ellair said, “which took...”

Again, he scrunched up his face—*oh, God, don’t say days*—and the girl stepped in.

“A few hours.”

Thank all that was holy.

Wait.

“You made *this* in a few hours?” I squeaked, touching my neck. “Did you have a blueprint prepared for it already? Or- or is this a prototype of your own design? Or-?”

Wincing, Ellair flicked one hand as if ridding it of unwanted filth.

“The charm’s my creation,” he said. “Please, stop screaming at me. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, no!” I said. “I’m not angry. I’m-”

A little intimidated, actually.

“Look. The getting drugged thing? Forgiven,” I said, chopping at the air in front of me. “Let’s focus on more important things. Like where I am.”

“Colavar. The last citadel,” Ellair said. “Didn’t you get that from when we met?”

“I did,” I said. “I meant more where are we sitting right now. When I first woke up, it was in an... infirmary of some kind? This place looks different.”

For one thing, it had actual walls, not holographic curtains. Three of them looked like they were made of plaster with silver and gold stripes painted on them. The fourth was curved into open air with a thin layer of ice making a window. I assumed from the shimmer covering it that a force field or something like that kept heat inside. Deep blue rugs dotted the floor, but besides a small, bare desk in the corner and the bed I was sitting on, no other decorations filled the place.

“It’s my room,” the girl said. “Do you like it?”

“It’s very...”

Was there a word that combined Spartan and luxurious into one? Would she even understand the implications of the description ‘Spartan’?

“-nice,” I settled on. “And who are you?”

“Oh! I should introduce myself, huh? I’m Seònaid Baran, Ellair’s sister. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Bowing to me, she lowered her head, sweeping her hair aside to unveil the back of her neck. Umm... what-? Was I supposed to touch her, or had I missed some context, or-? Agh! What did she want from me? I didn’t like it when I couldn’t meet someone’s expectations.

“I don’t think Brennan has an overlay, Seò,” Ellair said.

“Oh. Of course not,” Seònaid said, springing upright. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

No, it isn't.

"I'm--"

My fingers twitched. Too much had happened, too quickly, and that was- I needed-

"Where are my things?" I brusquely asked.

"I suppose you *would* want something familiar, wouldn't you?" Seònaid said. "I'll grab your bag."

"Get mother while you're at it," Ellair said.

With a laugh, Seònaid waved over her head before disappearing around a corner, but I couldn't keep still while waiting for her. Leaping from bed, I paced around the room, flexing and relaxing my hands.

"Calm down," I whispered. "No panic attacks. Not here, you worthless bitch."

I forced myself to stop, and when my screaming brain took note of my surroundings again, I found myself standing in front of the window. As high off the ground as I was, I could see a retaining wall far below me, but of this supposed city, Colavar, I saw nothing. All that lay before me was a snowy expanse that was soon strangled by craggy mountains, stone fingers reaching for the shattered moon overhead. They stretched further toward the sky than any mountains back home could, only broken by a narrow pass in the distance.

The saddest looking forest I'd ever seen dotted the mountains' base, dwindling the higher up their slopes it climbed. How was plant life surviving in this frozen wasteland? I mean, it did the same back home at times, but from what I could tell, this place perpetually persisted in winter. Or so I thought. So, how did a forest grow from such deep snow?

Was it a forest?

"I have questions for you," Ellair said, stopping beside me.

I kept my eyes fixed on the view while my lips twitch.

"No, shit. I could say the same to you," I said, "but you're already answered some of mine. It's your turn."

"How gracious."

Snapping my head Ellair's way, I was smacked by his cheeky grin.

"Oh, I'll *really* like you, won't I?" I said.

"That would make a nice change. Most people don't," Ellair said, "but let's focus on my questions. Where did you come from? You're obviously not Brúid. Not even one of them would be stupid

enough to get caught in a *doineann*. So, maybe you've come from outside the Dalliesh boundary. What else could it- it-?"

He made a moaning sound before cutting off with a headshake, and when I opened my mouth to answer him, that head shake became almost violent. So, I waited. Only when he was breathing easier did I speak.

"I'm from Earth. Have you heard of it?"

I was fairly certain he hadn't, what with the pinprick of a star and the two moons I'd found here, but I'd had to ask.

"What's an Earth?" Ellair asked.

"A planet. Also, another name for dirt."

Ellair looked like he was trying to figure out if I was making fun of him.

"What's dirt?" he asked.

"What's-?"

Speechless, I gaped at Ellair while searching for my floundering words.

"You don't have dirt here?" I asked. "How do you grow crops?"

"What are-?"

I raised my hand before he could finish.

"Let's not continue down this rabbit hole," I said.

"Oo! I know rabbits!" Ellair said. "Furry, little hopping animals!"

...They had rabbits here but not dirt. God, where had I landed?

"Suffice it to say that I'm not from Brighde," I said. "I'm from somewhere out there-"

I pointed toward the sky.

"-or possibly a parallel universe. I'm not sure yet."

Biting his lip, Ellair said, "That'll be a difficult story to sell to the Conclave. How did you get here?"

"I can show you once your sister comes back. It was in my belongings-"

"Ah! The Tòimhseachan!" Ellair interrupted. "I'm afraid it's quite broken now. I had to pick it apart to give your charm a proper language base."

Taking a deep breath, I turned to Ellair and deliberately did *not* grab his collar to shake him.

“You did *what?*”

Ellair winced, giving me something besides my fountain pen that I wanted to squeeze.

“Don’t you dare agitate my son again, *coigreach.*”

With her heels clicking on the stone, the woman from earlier, the one with the ridiculous outfit, strode toward us, and stiffening, Ellair hurried to get between us.

“Mother. She wasn’t bothering me. Where’s Seò?”

“Here.”

The girl stepped out from behind their mother with my purse in her hand, and that bag became my world. The next thing I knew, I was kneeling over my purse’s upended contents with Seònaid gone and the demon box clutched to my chest.

“You said you broke it!” I snapped over my shoulder.

“*That’s* what brought you here?” Ellair asked.

As he sank opposite me, he pointed toward the electronic bits scattered amongst my first aid supplies.

“I thought you meant that,” he said. “The strange reading device. It’s how I found you in the *doineann.*”

“My *e-reader?!?*” I nearly shrieked. “You broke my goddamn e-reader?”

“I thought you’d rather talk with us than read from it,” Ellair said with his hands rising toward his ears.

God, so many stories vanished from my life but...

I dragged cool air through my teeth, forcing my heart to calm down.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” I said. “Thank you for rescuing me and for the charm. It’s genius work.”

“Of course it is, *coigreach.* Someone as savage as you couldn’t understand my son’s brilliance.”

Rolling my head in a circle, I pasted a pleasant smile on my face before addressing the bitch who’d talked down to me.

“I understand plenty, ma’am,” I said, “and who might you be?”

“Deirdre Baran, but you may call me Ceannard.” the woman said. “My son tells me you’re named Brennan Adams.”

"I am," I said while rising to my feet. "I'm sorry for upsetting Ellair earlier. It wasn't my intention. I'm a bit out of my depths here, so I hope you can forgive my rude behavior. Can we please start fresh, Ceannard?"

At our feet, Ellair was organizing my purse's junk, neatly placing it back in my bag once he'd prepared it. Deirdre watched him with a smile tugging on her lips, and after a moment, she pulled me aside.

"So far, aside from the one incident with my son, you've followed Colavar's laws, even if your very personage violates them," she said. "Continue following them like a proper Saoranach, tolerate my son and his... eccentricities, and I'll overlook your presence here. My family's everything to me, and Ellair is... special. His mind's both a wonder and a curse, and *he* isn't strong. I'll do *whatever* I must to keep him safe and happy. Make friends with him, and I'll help you find your home, wherever that may be. Cause another incident, and we'll be having a different conversation."

Ok. So, she was definitely the leader of this family, which meant I should make every effort to please her.

"We have an understanding," I said. "I'll do my best with Ellair. He seems like..."

A quirkier version of me.

"-a sweet kid."

"Brennan, what's this?" Ellair asked.

He held my journal and fountain pen above his head, and with my legs going watery, I almost fell to the ground at the sight of them.

"What I've needed since waking up," I said. "Give me a second?"

Turning to Deirdre, I lifted an eyebrow.

"Anything else?"

I couldn't imagine there was, not yet. Soon enough, we'd need to have a longer conversation about logistics and where the hell I was, but for now, we both had things to handle.

With a shake of her head, Deirdre started for the door while I sat with Ellair. He craned his neck at his mother as she passed him.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Could she-?"

"We shouldn't involve the Conclave yet. Not until we learn more."

Deirdre never stopped, and once she'd gone, Ellair was left pouting beside me. I didn't like that, considering my very recent promise to keep the boy happy, so I hefted the demon box.

“Hey, how’d you like to mess with something that teleports people through time and space?” I asked.

Ellair never stopped scowling, but he accepted my offer. While he started pressing the cube’s buttons, I put pen to paper and dove into the worlds that had been threatening to crack my skull throughout this long morning.

Chapter 8: The Conclave

The pressure in my head relented a few hours and several ink cartridges later. I should probably start rationing my writing time, seeing as how I had a limited supply of paper and ink, but after everything I'd experienced, I'd needed time... not here.

As I folded my journal around my pen, I noted my solitude with surprise. Ellair had moved from my side a while ago, but I hadn't seen him leave the room. Thank God he hadn't taken the demon box with him. Instead, it sat on the floor, taunting me.

"Laugh it up now," I said. "I'll crack you eventually."

After replacing the journal and cube in my purse, I stood, wondering whether I should find my hosts. I didn't know how etiquette worked in this place. Should I say good night before heading to bed? I was tired despite my recent time spent unconscious. Perhaps I was still recovering from near death by freezing.

And where was I supposed to sleep? This was Seònaid's room. I couldn't take her bed, but I also didn't want to sleep on the floor.

Something, clothing of some sort, was draped over said bed. Lifting it into the air, I cocked my head. I was holding something similar to a wet suit, but its material was wafer thin, and rampant lines of shiny black were flickering over it, almost like the distortions I'd seen in the holographic curtains.

"Oh, good. You're back."

Twirling, I hugged the delicate fabric to my chest, but only Seònaid was standing in the room's entrance.

"You haven't activated it yet," she said, frowning.

"Activated what?" I asked.

Her frown deepened.

"Your thermal coating," she said, indicating what I was holding. "You'll need it when you're outside, and exposure to the outdoors happens a lot, even in Colavar. Most people wear theirs round the clock."

"Thermal coating?" I said.

Holding the thin cloth out in front of me, I flipped it back and forth.

“So, it what? Retains your body heat? Generates its own?” I asked. “Also, how do I activate it?”

“I left you a note,” Seònaid said. “Didn’t you read it?”

She pointed at the air above her bed, and seeing nothing there, I glanced from it to her.

“Note?”

“Right!” she said, smacking her forehead. “You don’t have an overlay. You couldn’t see the note. Silly me. Here. Let me help.”

Taking one of the thermal coating’s limbs, she gestured for my arm.

“It’s simple,” she said. “Touch fingers to fingers, and...”

After pressing my hand to fabric, she stepped back as the thermal coating shivered. It clung to my flesh, refusing to let go, before moving. As it flowed over my wrist, slurping as it went, I shrieked, trying to shake it off.

“It’s *eating* me! Get it off! Get it off!”

Delicate fabric slunk under my shirt’s cuff, but even unable to see it anymore, I felt it crawling up my arm. No, no, no! Did not like! No matter that I *knew* this... thing wasn’t consuming me, my animal brain screamed as waves of fingers brushed over my skin.

Crouching, I flung my arms over my head as the sensation crawled over my shoulders, chest, hips, and legs. When it stopped, I was left huddling with tears streaming over my cheeks and my breath coming in ragged gasps. The ringing in my ears gradually lessened, enough for a voice to pierce it.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean- I didn’t know-”

“It’s ok,” I rasped, unclenching from my ball.

Kneeling opposite me, Seònaid also spilled tears into the air with her hands hovering over me.

“I didn’t-”

Clicking my tongue, I stood, scrubbing my face.

“Don’t feel bad,” I said. “I’m a little-”

Thinking back on what I’d just done, I grimaced.

“Ok, I’m a *lot* touch averse at times, especially when it comes to unknowns. I wasn’t expecting... that, but it’s done, and I get awesome temperature resistance in exchange. Totally worth it.”

Grinning, I shakily extended my hand to the girl, and she hesitantly took it.

“Still,” she said. “I should have warned you-”

“Stop. It’s in the past,” I said.

And I’d rather not dwell on it.

“Thank you for the gift.”

“What gift?”

Four strangers, dressed quite similarly to Dierdre, filed into Seònaid’s room, and the girl stiffened, becoming a human rabbit before prey. They wrapped around us with two men on one side and two women on the other.

“Have you given the *coigreach* a piece of our bounty, Saoranach?” one asked.

“No, Ceannard,” Seònaid said in a small voice.

What was this? Visit by police force? Chat with Colavar’s ruling body? These people seemed to hold some measure of authority, considering how Seònaid was reacting to them. So, how much should I be worried?

“You see? She’s not from Brighde but is as polite as any Saoranach.”

Ellair. Oh, God. What had he done?

The *boy* swept through the four people arrayed against his sister and me.

“Go on,” he said. “Talk to her.”

“Ei!” Seònaid hissed. “Quiet! You can’t speak to the Conclave like that.”

“Why not-?”

“We aren’t the Conclave at the moment, Seò,” one of the men said. “Your mother’s not here, therefore we’re simply four Ceannard summoned at your brother’s behest.”

“A boy who’s barely stepped a toe into our ranks and has already caused us more headaches than every other problem we typically face,” a woman grumbled.

“Oh, give him a break, Lucrais. He’s only trying to help.”

“By advocating changes to a system that’s worked for centuries?”

“Stop it,” the second woman said, “I have a wife and son waiting for me. Can we please not argue? I’d like to fulfill this *gairm* so we can go home.”

Grumbling, the quarreling parties fell quiet, and the second woman turned to Ellair.

“So, *deuchainn* Ceannard, tell us why we’re here. Who’s this *coigreach*? Why is she in the city?”

Throughout the four’s discourse, Ellair had been subtly flicking one hands in a repetitive fashion with the motion increasing in strength each second, and when the strangers turned on him, he froze, burying his chin in his chest.

“She’s...” he said with his voice almost a whine.

When nothing more came from him, tongues clicked, eyes rolled, and seeing this, I found my voice.

“Why don’t you ask *me* those questions?” I said. “Let Ellair collect his thoughts.”

From the corner of my eye, I watched Seònaid turn white as a sheet, and Ellair’s frantic movements hiccupped for a moment before resuming. That wasn’t reassuring in the slightest, but at least I’d pulled attention away from the boy. That should give him time to recover, and once he had, he could help with... whatever this was.

“My name’s Brennan Adams. I’m a stranger to your lovely city, having recently arrived from what might be an alternate universe,” I continued. “The Barans have been kind enough to offer me hospitality during the short time I’ve been here. Perhaps you can tell me how I might pay them back for their kindness?”

As the four strangers stared at me, I fought not to cringe. Too many eyes! And whoever these people were, each of them had mastered the art of expressing disdain and authority with a look alone, lending credence to my theory that they made up this place’s form of governance.

“I’m confused,” Lucrais said. “She’s *coigreach* but acts nothing like a Brúid. That shouldn’t be possible.”

“And yet, it is.”

When Lucrais glared at the man who’d spoken, he shrugged.

“What? It is.”

“Why do you bother opening your mouth when it comes to anything related to the Barans, làcob?” the second woman asked. “We all know you’ll side with anything one of them says.”

“And you’ll always choose the path that seems most enlightened, Caitir,” làcob said. “Enlightened to you, at least.”

“Hush. All of you.”

As one, the room’s occupants turned to its threshold, where Deirdre stood with her hands folded in front of her waist.

“*What* are you doing in my home?” she asked.

“Your son asked for a *gairm*,” said the second man, the last one who I couldn't name.

“He did, did he?” Deirdre said.

Striding to the semicircle around us, Ellair's mother took a central position, glaring at me as if this was somehow my fault. Considering I didn't know what this was, I wasn't sure why she'd think that, so I met her glare with a shrug.

“Well?” Deirdre said. “Present your argument.”

What argument? What the hell was I supposed to say?

“You already know it,” Ellair said. “It's the same one I've presented to you for the last year.”

Oh. Deirdre had been talking to him. That made much more sense.

“Ei, they hear more than your *gairm* on a daily basis, and they don't have your clear-cut memory,” Seònaid said. “You'll have to repeat your argument.”

“But-”

“Why is my daughter here if this is a Ceannard's *gairm*?” Deirdre asked.

“A *deuchainn* Ceannard's *gairm* but all the same,” Iàcob said. “Saoranach Seònaid should leave us.”

“But-” Ellair again tried to protest.

Seònaid's fluttering bow shut him up, which was good. Whatever was happening, it was probably best if less people were in an already crowded room. There were so many eyes here that might examine me, judge me, find me lacking. I'd welcome one less.

Once Seònaid had disappeared, Lucrais said, “Now, we're a Conclave in truth, *deuchainn* Ceannard. Be on your best behavior, and present your argument to us.”

“But-”

“Ellair!” Deirdre snapped.

They weren't helping. Couldn't they see his agitation and the barely resisted impulse to bang his fists against his skull or bolt, like he had with me?

But maybe that was the point. Maybe they didn't want him to 'make his argument'. Maybe I should push them straight into the decision they were here to make. Most likely, it was already made, after all. It was clear they wouldn't listen to Ellair.

To my surprise, he tried to reason with them anyway.

“Colavar is stagnating,” he said. “We have our laws, the ones we’ve followed since Innealdeam and Sgaradh’s last battle shattered Sleii, but this perpetuation of the same system for centuries is killing us. We can’t always follow the rules that were handed down to us, not if we want to advance beyond what Brighde once claimed before our loss of history.”

“Progress requires change, change like what Brennan represents. Think of all that we could learn from her, a woman who’s *not from here*. How many of our problems could someone with a different perspective help solve?”

“Please, honorable members of the Conclave. Hear my argument and the logic found in it. If Brighde’s ever to advance, thriving as it once did, we need some chaos in our static world.”

A bit of a moan had invaded his last sentence, but Ellair held it together. His fingers twitched, but that was his only concession to whatever was making it so difficult for him to interact with others.

“This again, *deuchainn* Ceannard?” Caitir said. “We’ve answered this *gairm* so many times before. Colavar’s laws, including the ones that govern who may dwell in this city, are in place for a reason. You should be happy for the machine development that we already allow you, let alone this. We can’t have the creation of another Innealdeam.”

“My request isn’t coming from just me. It’s also made on another’s behalf!” Ellair interrupted with his teeth gritted. “Someone much more important than me.”

On one end of the semi-circle, Lucrais crossed his arms.

“And I don’t suppose you’ll share who this mystery supplicant is this time?” he asked.

“I can’t. I can’t! He said-”

With his trembling hands creeping for his head, Ellair looked like he was on the brink of another collapse, like the one I’d caused before.

“My God, you lot are cruel.”

It took a minute and the Conclave’s gazes whipping my way to realize I’d said that out loud. Whoops.

“He’s obviously uncomfortable,” I said, waving at Ellair. “Why don’t you give him a minute? Or a glass of water?”

Why was I defending this kid? He’d caused this... disaster. Yeah, that seemed like a good word for what had happened. Why wasn’t I letting him suffer the consequences for his actions?

Shuddering, Ellair ran out of the room, pushing through the Conclave to do it. Oh. That was why. I’d been where he was. I knew what it felt like, and I couldn’t watch it happen to someone else.

It seemed like I’d been too late to stop it, though.

“Well, that ends this *gairm*,” Lucrais said. “Shall we discuss the *coigreach* in our midst before dispersing?”

“Better not to have her hanging over our heads,” the unnamed man said. “Unless anyone wishes to speak, I vote in favor.”

“In favor.”

The others repeated that phrase before the room’s gazes landed on Deirdre. Rather than speak it, though, she stared at me with thin lips and her arms crossed.

“I abstain,” she said, “on the condition that I’m the one to do it.”

“Fair enough,” Iàcob said. “Until tomorrow, then?”

“Wait!” I said. “Do I not get a say in the fate you’ve decided for me? No chance to argue my case?”

With laughs and shaken heads, Iàcob, Caitir, and Lucrais stalked out of the room while the unnamed man paused beside Deirdre.

“Get rid of her quickly,” he said. “I’d hate to find a Conclave member in violation of the laws. That could get messy for us all.”

“Don’t you have something better to do than threaten me, Ràild?” Deirdre said, looking down her nose at him.

Snorting, Ràild left while I tried to recover my lost voice. Deirdre released a long sigh with her eyes fixed on me.

“I told Ellair we should wait before bringing in the Conclave,” she said. “Oh, well. Come with me.”

“Why?” I snapped with fear finding my voice faster than I could. “So you can kill me easier?”

Deirdre turned to me with a laugh on her lips.

“Kill you? What do you take us for? Brúid?” she said. “No, we’re getting you the supplies you’ll need to survive. I assume you’d like a few days rations before leaving Colavar?”

Leaving... Colavar?

“You’re throwing me into the cold,” I said with a numbing hand reaching up my spine.

“That *is* what happens to *coigreach* who happen to make it into the city,” Deirdre said, “but you’re welcome to try your luck against our Armachd. They usually shoot people like you on sight, but maybe this time will be different.”

My head was whirling. The last ten minutes had held too many new words, too much missing context, and too much of a change in circumstance. Exiled from this city, a guaranteed place of

warmth and safety in this world of ice? How was that better than someone shooting me? Wouldn't it be more of a mercy to end my suffering before it began?

Even still, I couldn't take that chance. I cursed my primal urge to survive, even as it forced me to follow Deirdre.

Chapter 9: Life in the Freeze

The retaining wall that held Colavar aloft served as a detractor for anyone who might want to invade the citadel. Standing at its base, I couldn't help but feel like a speck of dust before its size, even knowing that induced feeling was one of its primary purposes. I'd stared at it for several minutes, which had my neck aching.

With its solid black color, I had no clue what composed the wall. I knew it wasn't a metal, having risked touching it in the freezing cold. The wall had felt almost spongy, like living coral, but it seemed solid. Stable. Knocking a hole in it would require a powerful explosion.

In any case, anyone who wanted to keep the citadel for themselves after an invasion would never do something like that. A breach in the retaining wall would lead to an outpouring of the packed snow and many other things it surely contained, and with it would come the fall of the towers hovering above.

To take this city intact, an enemy army would not only have to climb this wall while contending with Colavar's defenses but also breach the second wall that circled the citadel at its apex. Again, while resisting the defenses that its citizens would use to repel the invaders.

After that would come the arduous task of taking the city itself, and although I hadn't seen much of it while on the inside, my view from here told me that only tight quarters with multiple levels would await them. With its skyscrapers shooting upward like an icy future-scape, Colavar was quite pretty, but it would be hell to conquer.

All of which told me that my chances of once more getting inside it were close to zero. The lift, guided along its mag track, that had taken me and Deirdre here was guarded by two Armachd, the citadel's soldiers, and I wouldn't be able to convince them to let me ride it once more, considering Deirdre had given strict orders for them to never allow it. I couldn't climb either of the walls with my toes and fingers, and since they had *no* handholds on them, I'd need a pickaxe to pull my way up, which I didn't have. I was stuck outside. In the cold and snow.

Again.

At least I was better prepared this time. My thermal coating made Brighde's subzero temperatures merely chilly, and the weight of the pack on my shoulders reminded me of the many rations and the minimal survival gear it contained.

"I'm not supposed to do this," Deirdre had said as she'd filled it. "I'm supposed to immediately escort you outside the walls, but I won't let you starve, not when I can help it. Even if you're a *coigreach*."

So helpful. Give me what I need to survive for a few days and then, cast me out with a weak, 'Good luck!'

But that wasn't fair. Deirdre had done her best for me. She'd done her best to correct her son's mistake. Oo, I badly wanted to kick Ellair's ass right now, but I couldn't, and I was supposed to *enjoy* my time stuck here.

So, while I might have been banished from the only source of civilization that I'd found on Brighde, I'd also gotten a chance to explore this world without interference. Perhaps I'd find another hub for humanity, hopefully one that was a bit less strange. Perhaps I wouldn't, instead finding the solitude I'd always craved for my writing. Either way, I should have asked Deirdre for directions before she'd left.

Before I started exploring, though, I should find a place that could serve as a base of operations, preferably one that was far from here. Maybe somewhere in the mountains to my back? They'd at least make for a pretty setting.

"Well, boys, I'd say it's been fun, but all you've done is stand and stare at me," I said to the guards. "See you never."

Spinning, I left them in my dust. At a snail's pace.

Reaching the forest at the mountains' base took me hours. I'd learned from my last journey in the cold, insisting on better shoes along with my rations. The boots I was wearing conformed to my feet, sucking to my skin like my thermal suit did. They also had thin plates that shot from their soles at the touch of my heel to their cuffs. With them, I sank far less deeply into snow drifts, allowing a faster pace.

I also kept a close eye on the sky above. I wouldn't get caught in another storm, a *doineann* as they called them here, if I could help it.

Taking breaks every half hour, I reached the forest and a fast-rising incline as Brighde's star painted the sky orange and purple. Since I had no relevant skills or the knowledge needed to find shelter, I relied on a time-honored technique that I'd learned from video games: wander until stumbling on what I needed.

Fortunately, luck decided to be my friend in this endeavor. As two moons lit the forest more brightly than Brighde's star could, I found a small cave tucked between some outcroppings. It was so cozy that I was instantly in love, and that wasn't just because the silence I'd enjoyed all day had broken into... other noises with the moonrise. I scurried into my hole to wait for daylight.

Weeks passed with most of my activities in this time enough to drive someone up the wall with boredom. I'll only share a few events of note.

Exploring wasn't nearly as fun as I'd expected. Brighde presented me with a canvas of snow, rock, and frozen trees. Ice coated everything so thickly that dead foliage failed to fall from dead branches. What could have flash frozen these trees so that they remained standing even after

rotting?

Besides that one mystery, I found nothing of interest. I definitely didn't find signs of other civilizations.

Then again, I didn't get much time to look for them. If I learned one thing from my time in the wild, it was that video games lie. Surviving was much more difficult and *much* more of a pain than they portrayed.

For instance, I'd thought catching food would be a simple task. Throw rock at bunny until it's dead, right? No. Those jumpy little fuckers are much smarter in real life than in a game, and I, in turn, had to be smarter than them, which was harder than it should have been. Fortunately, Deirdre's rations lasted long enough to get me through my initial learning curve.

I must admit. I was surprised to find rabbits or anything else alive in this dead forest. I never saw plants uncoated by frost, so what on earth could the rabbits here be eating? How did they survive?

When I had spare time, I tried to track them to their homes, but I quickly learned I was just as *abysmal* with this as I was with most aspects of survival.

Thankfully, I did have some of the basics under my belt from the many camping trips I'd taken with my parents while growing up. So, I knew how to start a fire—when I had the proper materials to do that, of course—which trust me. That's a lot harder to do than you might think, especially here.

Dethawing enough twigs for kindling took much longer than I'd have liked. Considering I only had a small—if still futuristic looking—lighter from Deirdre on hand for that, I ended up burning through those tiny scraps of wood half the time, even after I'd gotten their icy coverings to melt away, and that task wasn't nearly as difficult as gathering the rest of the wood I needed for a fire.

I found myself often revisiting one of my original questions about this world while struggling with these particular problems. The forest I gathered my fuel from looked quite literally flash frozen, as if its seemingly crystallized state had come as a surprise. Sure, the trees beneath that icy layer looked nothing like what we had back home, but I could tell that they'd been in nearly full bloom when a sudden drop in temperature had killed them. What could have caused such a strange thing, especially over such a large area?

My many questions didn't start bothering me until I reached a point where every day wasn't a struggle to feed myself or keep warm. A few weeks after I'd gained a steady supply of food and wood, I established a routine for myself, getting comfortable. I had a swiftly improving home, one that grew on me every day, and I had the time to again mess with the demon box, left to quiescently sit while its owner had starved, slept, and fought to survive. Life began to look up for me.

And that was, of course, when disaster struck. Again.

Chapter 10: Second Meeting

My first clue about what I'd find at home was mused snow. I'd gotten used to my widened prints and the delicate press of rabbits' paws, but those two types of marks were all I'd seen in the forest.

Until today.

Frowning, I crouched beside this new trail. A crescent carved through the snowdrifts in an uninterrupted path that weaved through the trees as if lost. What on earth could have made it?

I was halfway tempted to follow the strange tracks. I'd killed my rabbit of the day, and Brighde's star had yet to reach its apex. I should use my unexpected free time to further explore the surrounding area or to discover what monsters had been travailing my patch of the woods at night, especially since I'd found neither hide nor hair of them during daylight.

The only proof I had of their existence was the, frankly, terrifying noises they made at night. I couldn't remember how many hours those noises had kept me up when I should have been sleeping.

Honestly, though, I was too tired to care about the strange tracks I'd found. I'd lost track of the weeks since Colavar, and for one day—and single one!—I'd like to relax.

And that was exactly what I meant to do. As I trudged home, I placed bets with myself about how long it would take me to prepare my meal today. For a city girl, skinning and gutting an animal had taken some getting used to, and I still wasn't great at it. Hopefully, I could finish the task early enough that natural lighting could accompany my furious scribblings for the night.

As I shook snow from my tattered clothes, I winced at seeing those scribblings scrawled on my cave's walls. I'd exhausted my supply of paper and ink ages ago, but the relentless pressure in my head hadn't dissipated just because I'd had no way to release it. I'd turned cooled cinders and stone into journal and pen, perfectly aware of how batshit crazy it made me look, but what else was I to do? Let my characters and worlds waste away in my head? Let the pressure of it drive me truly insane?

I'd finished ripping fur off of my meal when I first heard the voice. Alone for as long as I'd been, my heart skipped at the faint noise, but when it failed to repeat, I hunched over my meat again, using a sharpened stone to tear open the rabbit's guts in painfully slow increments.

This method was a vast improvement on my first ill-conceived attempts to roast rabbits whole. The animals' last meals had baked into mine, and... it hadn't been good. I'd been *quite* sick the next day. Eventually, I should make a better tool to eviscerate the hoppy, little bastards, but for now, a poorly crafted, flint blade was what I had.

Besides, if I did somehow screw up meal preparation again, I had a handful of rations left, sitting in my pack at the back of the cave.

“Brennan!”

I paused in digging my stone knife through muscle. Ok. So, what I’d heard before had been real, which meant I’d either enjoyed solitude long enough to go *mad* or someone was looking for me. Who, though? In Brighde, the only people who knew my name had seemed overtly hostile to me the last time I’d seen them, but perhaps that had changed. The voice had sounded familiar.

As I crept to the edge of the cave’s opening, sharpened stone bit into my hand, my thermal coating parting to allow it access. On scanning the forest outside, however, I found no sign of another person, so I slunk into bright daylight, flitting between the cover of the trees, leaving my ears open for-

“Brennan!”

For that. I glided over the snow with my weeks here having taught me the art of moving quietly over it. Soon, someone’s less practiced crunch teased at me, and I followed it. The sound of out-of-breath panting led me toward a protrusion of rock, jutting from the mountain.

“Where is she? I swear. After today, I’m done looking for her. Brennan!”

I knew that voice. Crouching, I scooped snow from a nearby rock, packing it into a ball as I approached the protrusion’s edge, and when I peered over it, a hissing wildcat unfurled in me.

Cropped, orange hair was peeking from under a hood, letting the mane’s color pop against its monochrome surroundings. The one to claim it had exchanged his suit-like outfit for more appropriate outerwear. A fur-lined, black jacket topped puffy pants that boasted a sheen, and black flickers shot across his exposed skin, his thermal coating at work most likely. Something was sitting behind him, but right now, I couldn’t be bothered to find out what it was.

Because the sight of him made me want to scream. As I rose to my feet, snow fell from my form, and I cocked my arm.

“Ellair!” I shouted.

He snapped his head toward me, giving his lime green eyes a split second to widen before my snowball exploded in his face. Sputtering, he wiped clinging ice crystals from his skin, but by the time he was done, I’d already started toward home, done with him.

When I heard crunching behind me, I scooped more snow off of the ground, packing it as I turned. Facing Ellair, I let it fly, and when the ball burst on his shoulder, he rocked in place.

“Go away, asshole,” I said. “I don’t want you here.”

When I strode away from Ellair, I hoped he'd get the hint, but again, snow crunched behind me, and again, I bent to create more ammunition.

"Please, don't do that!" Ellair shrilly said. "I don't know what you're doing, but I don't like it!"

Frowning, I stacked a missile in the crook of my elbow. A planet of snow and ice and they hadn't figured out how to have a snowball fight? The hell was wrong with them?

Ellair didn't need to worry, though. What I was holding wasn't for him. Yet.

He continued following me, the stubborn bastard, and when we reached my cave, I whirled on him with a snowball raised.

"If you *insist* on plaguing me with your presence, you can do it outside," I hissed. "I'm not having you drive me from another place of safety."

Lifting his hands, Ellair retreated to the tree line before folding into the snow. I kept one eye ever on him while stacking ammunition outside the cave before darting to retrieve today's meal. He hadn't moved when I returned, so I sunk to the ground too. I watched him for a while, but he just examined me with his head tilted and hands folded. Soon enough, I started gutting the rabbit again.

"Will you say it?" I asked.

"Say what?"

Clicking my tongue, I pulled intestines from meat.

"You summoned the people who cast me out of your city," I said before waiting.

Waiting.

"Don't you think you should say something about that?" I continued.

"I requested *gairm* of the Conclave," Ellair said. "It's our way of proposing policy adjustment, although it rarely works. Nothing changes in Colavar."

"Riveting," I said. "And?"

"And I made the request because the citadel's stagnation will kill us, whether now or a century in the future, and no one will open their eyes to it," Ellair said. "I hoped that showing them you, a *coigreach* acting in a civilized manner, might show the Conclave that change can be good. I failed to account for how stuck in their ways they are. As usual."

After several heartbeats, I set the gutted carcass in the snow, letting red seep into white. Standing, I hovered over my snowballs with my gaze boring into Ellair, and as usual, he avoided meeting my eyes.

"And?" I hissed.

"I don't understand," he said. "Do you... expect something from me?"

"No shit, dumbass," I growled around the fist in my throat. "Do you have any idea what my life's been like since getting banished from your 'paradise'? Do you know how many times I've almost died? Do you-?"

"STOP!"

The scream cracked through the mountains' stillness, freezing me in turn. Moaning, Ellair rocked in place with a hand to his mouth.

"Too much, too much," he raggedly gasped around it. "No, no, no!"

Rolling my eyes, I stalked into the cave to ready my firepit. If I was right, Ellair would be at that for a while, and until he calmed down, I had things to do.

When he eventually fell silent, flames were licking at a precariously arranged stack of dried wood. Grease was sizzling on burning logs when he eventually spoke again.

"I made you a gift."

Pursing my lips, I stopped turning my spitted rabbit over the flames. Outside, Ellair was standing beneath his tree with something strange resting beside him. A white sphere was balanced on the snow, rising to Ellair's knees. Pulsing, blue rings circled it, and as I watched, a panel on it popped open, dusting glitter into the air.

"What," I breathed, "is *that*?"

Leaning to the side, Ellair brushed glitter off of the sphere.

"This is a construct that I made, hoping that it could help you," he said. "His name's Ailig, although I suppose you could choose a different one if you want."

He nudged the sphere.

"Go on," he said. "That's her, the one I was telling you about."

The flash of blue in its rings quickened for a moment, and while two, opposing slices of its surface stayed stationary on the ground, the middle portion rolled its bulk toward me. When it reached me, it bumped into my leg before stopping, wildly pulsing.

"Fascinating," I said, crouching in front of it. "How smart is it? Has to be at least a pretty high-level AI, right?"

Another panel almost smacked my nose as a claw extended from the sphere toward me. After I'd blankly stared at it for a moment, it bobbed up and down, and I hesitantly took it to shake.

"What does AI mean?" Ellair asked.

"Artificial intelligence," I said.

I couldn't wait to rip into this thing. Maybe Ellair would share parts of its construction with me so I wouldn't have to break it. Either way, I wanted to see inside.

"Like a machine mind?" Ellair asked. "Ailig comes as close to Innealdeam's level as I could safely get."

His words stole my gaze from the marvel in front of me.

"And what's an Innealdeam?" I said.

Ellair's face crinkled while the corners of his lips turned down.

"Brighde's demon," he said. "The machine mind that's come closest to resembling a human and whose fight with Sgaradh shattered Sleib."

He pointed at the broken moon, looming above, and I sighed.

Yes, Ellair had pushed me out of safety, but he'd also come to find me with a gift in tow, all to make sure I was ok. I got the feeling he'd never apologize. Ailig was his way of saying he was sorry.

And that was fine. As long as he brought me mysteries to ponder, taking my mind off of my problems, I could forgive him for what he'd done. For instance, I couldn't wait to learn how a machine destroyed a moon. Maybe he'd share the story with me.

Standing, I waved to him.

"Come on in."

Ellair grinned, but before he could start toward me, a net flew from out of nowhere, pinioning him to the tree at his back. Stunned, I watched him struggle for a moment before ducking behind cover while Ailig followed like a baby duckling would its mother.

"No, no, *NO!*" Ellair roared. "TOO MUCH!"

Laughter answered his distress. Two figures ambled in front of my cave's entrance with their long hair hanging in dreadlocks and draping, ragged clothing covering them. They looked like raiders from a typical post-apocalyptic film, and with my mouth drying, I plastered myself against stone.

"Cad atá againn anseo?" one asked.

The other one shoved him.

“Éirigh as! Ba cheart dúinn do thairiscint a dhaingniú sula dtagann cabhair,” she snapped.

Why wasn't my translation charm working? It was supposed to make nonsense like what they were speaking understandable, right? So, why had I returned to fear that was only heightened by unintelligible words?

In the net, Ellair went limp, hanging in its rope.

“Brúid,” he hissed.

“Oh, ho! Tá a fhios aige dúinn!” the man says, chortling. “Is dócha gur as Colavar é, ar dheis?”

“Neamhghnách, más amhlaidh,” the woman says. “A ligean ar dul, Nuadha.”

She withdrew a pole from across her back, and as she approached him, panic turned Ellair's lime green eyes vivid.

“Bren-!” he cried.

The woman touched him with the pole's end, making a stuttering click rise alongside his scream. Diving for Ailig, I hugged the construct to keep it from racing to help, like my heart was roaring to do, but how could I help Ellair as one unarmed woman against... *them*?

Eventually, the noise stopped, and the two strangers jabbered at each other as they bound Ellair, hand and foot. The man threw the boy's unconscious form over his shoulder, and they strode over the snow with their laughter harsh on my ears.

Once it had faded, I released Ailig, and it rolled away from me, revving its midsection before careening into my shins.

“Ow!” I said, cursing. “I'm not abandoning him, stupid machine! What do you think I am? A monster?”

As Ailig's pulsing oscillated between fast paced and slow, I narrowed my eyes. That was strange. Why was it reacting to our situation and me like this? A typical artificial intelligence wouldn't be able to do that, or at least, one from home couldn't.

“We'll follow those strangers. Track them until rescuing Ellair won't get me killed,” I said. “Is that ok with you, big hunk of metal?”

Blue flashed from front to back across Ailig, and my narrowed eyes became slits. How advanced of an AI had Ellair put in this thing?

It didn't matter right now. Retrieving my pack, I slung it over one shoulder and rushed to rescue my... friend?

Yeah. Friend.

Chapter 11: Well, That Went Poorly

Tracking the strangers was more difficult than I'd anticipated. I'd learned how to recognize the impression of rabbit feet in the snow, but these *people*, dozens of pounds heavier, had left no trace of their passage. I didn't know how that was possible, and the question would have had me tearing at my hair, wondering if I'd imagined Ellair's visit, if Ailig hadn't been rolling in a straight line in front of me, heading toward an unseen destination.

Maybe the construct had locked on to an electronic device that was on Ellair's person. Maybe it saw tracks that I didn't. However it was following the strangers' trail, the teenager should be grateful for it. His creation would save him.

As Brighde's star grazed the treetops, I spotted the glow of a fire ahead of us and raced forward to slow Ailig down. Grabbing the construct, I crouched in front of it, searching in vain for a face.

"We'll sneak to a good vantage point," I whispered. "We'll wait until they fall asleep. *Then*, we'll rescue Ellair."

After a minute, blue light rippled over Ailig. An acknowledgment, I supposed. It was too bad Ellair had been *kidnapped*, somehow, before he'd gotten around to sharing what those lights meant.

As I glided forward, I kept my eyes and ears open. Ailig and I made minimal crunching sounds while moving through the snow, the only noise to break the silence, and in the dying light, I spotted no sign of our quarry, which didn't surprise me.

We were still surrounded by dense trees, and these strange people, whoever they were, seemed like masters of camouflage. Back at my cave, they'd snuck up on me and Ellair without either of us noticing.

They'd made camp in a small depression, and now that we'd come closer to it, I could see that the flames I'd spotted earlier were more akin to a giant bonfire than something smaller. The snow around it was melting, and the tree branches overhead sent water droplets to sizzle in its flames.

When Ailig jerked forward under my hand, I barely kept it beside me.

"Wait," I hissed, glancing where it had tried to dash.

In the clearing, Ellair was sitting against a tree, bound and gagged. His eyes wouldn't keep still in their sockets, flicking every which way, and their sclerae had almost drowned out their irises' lime green. His legs were folded in an uncomfortable position beneath him, and even distant as I was, I

could see sweat drenching his hair.

Caught in terror, it would seem. That would make getting him out of here more difficult, given how completely stupid panic could make people at times, but I'd deal with that when the time came for it.

I saw no sign of the strangers who'd taken him. Maybe they'd gone looking for food or left to perform an arcane ritual, one that goddamn kidnapers like them might undertake. I didn't know what could have drawn them away from their kidnappee, but whatever the case, I should take this chance to free Ellair and run.

Something held me back, though. I didn't know what that was. Instinct? A familiarity with situations like this that books had long ago drilled into me? Listening to that impulse, I refused to move, simply continuing to scan the clearing and my surroundings. Despite Ailig's increasingly insistent jerking and the deepening dark, I became a statue: as frozen as the trees around me.

When the moons hung heavy in the sky...

Well, I say heavy. They'd been hanging heavy hours before, so when the moons sent my heart skittering in my chest because I *knew* they'd pierce Brighde's atmosphere, the strangers still hadn't returned, and I couldn't wait any longer. It would be dawn soon, and if I was going to undertake this rescue, I should do it under the cover of night.

"Right," I whispered. "I'm going to help Ellair. *You* stay here."

Poking Ailig, I immediately regretted doing that. Whatever made up his casing didn't give like flesh would have.

Sucking my finger, I said, "If anything goes wrong, get help. Go to Colavar, find Ellair's mother, do *something* to form a rescue party. Got it? You help us if shit hits the fan."

I didn't know why I was telling Ailig this. It was a machine, controlled by programming, and I doubted that programming would let it comprehend my command.

But when blue light flashed over it, I took that sign as acceptance anyway.

"Ok," I whispered.

Breathing into my hands, I rubbed them together. Oh God, this was a terrible idea, but I wouldn't leave Ellair here. No one deserved to be dragged away from home or trussed up like he was.

So, I crept forward to the clearing's edge. When I crossed into firelight's glow, I cringed, expecting steel or an energy bolt to sink into my body at any moment, but with every step that my expectations failed to manifest, I quickened my pace, and the vice around my heart loosened.

Then, Ellair saw me. His eyes went wider than I'd thought a human's could go while he roughly shook his head.

“God damnit.”

Abandoning stealth, I ran to him, tugging on the ropes binding him with one hand while ripping his gag free.

“It’s a trap!” he said once it was free.

I clicked my tongue.

“*Of course* it’s a trap, moron,” I said in a growl. “What the hell else would it be? But if I can free you, maybe we can fight back.”

With a trembling sob, Ellair continued shaking his head, perhaps hoping I’d take the hint and leave him here.

“Brennan, you don’t understand,” he babbled. “They’re Brúid. We’re-”

Yanking one knot free, I hissed, “*I don’t care what they are.* They tried to hurt you. I’ll *kill* them.”

For the first time, Ellair met my eyes before frowning.

“Why-?”

“Is maith liom an cann seo, a Míde. An féidir linn í a choinneáil?”

Spinning, I watched the man and woman from earlier advancing on me without a care in the world. Their loose clothing created twisting shadows in the light, and both held a pole, like what had knocked Ellair unconscious at my cave, by their sides. Seeing that, my heart soared into my throat even as I continued tussling with knots behind my back.

Don’t think about their eyes on you. DON’T THINK ABOUT THEIR EYES ON YOU!

“Sin cinneadh Dagda, agus tá a fhios agat air,” the woman said.

Licking my lips, I watched them lift their poles, knowing that what came out of my mouth next would need to be brilliant if we were to talk our way out of this.

“Hello.”

God damnit, really? The *hell* was wrong with me?

“I don’t suppose we can work this out peacefully, can we?” I asked. “I’d rather not kill you.”

Another knot came undone beneath my fingers. Snorting, the man paused, nudging his partner.

“Is *maith* liom an bhean seo, deirfiúr,” he said.

The woman slapped the man upside the head.

“Seans go ligfidh Dagda duit í a choinneáil,” she said. “*Tar éis dó a chinneadh a dhéanamh.*”

Rubbing his scalp, the man said, “Tá, tá.”

Ignoring them, I continued my work, unhurried despite the danger we were in. I’d defeated another knot, but who knew how many of them remained? God, had these people thought Ellair was an escape artist?

But the strangers had lowered their poles, advancing on me, and as the ends of those weapons came far too close to my chest, I threw my hands over my head.

“All right!” I said. “No need for that. I surrender.”

Whatever the poles were, they’d sent Ellair under earlier, which we couldn’t afford right now. If I could keep my wits about me, he and I would have a much better chance of escaping.

Stopping short, the man lowered his pole, scratching his head.

“Cad atá á dhéanamh léi?” he said.

Shrugging, the woman shoved her weapon forward. It touched my shoulder, and my world exploded.

Chapter 12: Great... I'm a Prisoner

A horse had kicked me in the chest. That was the only explanation for why my lungs were crying with every breath I took or why my ribs, *my goddamn bones*, were aching as though beset with a fever. It would also explain why my stomach was bouncing off of a surface that was trying to pass itself off as soft.

Whatever had woken me up to this hell, I cursed it, loudly and with as many impossible anatomical positions as I could, all while shifting to find a more comfortable spot. Maybe if I could get back to sleep, I could ignore what had landed me in so much pain.

“Tá an ceann seo deacair, Míde.”

“Ansin, cuir sí síos, leathcheann.”

Oh, right.

Screaming, I beat my bound hands against the man holding me, but my struggling only made him laugh.

“Is ceann láidir í.”

When he heaved me forward, the world arced around me, and snow billowed as I fell into it. Above me, two moons grinned down with one the ignored sibling of its overpowering big brother. Then, something yanked on the rope around my wrists, and I stumbled to my feet, refusing to fall into the man who'd kidnapped me. Snarling, I took a step toward him, only to have a rifle pointed at me. Still, I advanced on him, occupied with only one question.

“*Where's Ellair?*” I growled while a gun dug into my throbbing chest.

“Here, Brennan,” a soft voice called from behind me. “Please, don't antagonize them more-”

A sharp crack turned me more quickly than his voice alone would have, and when I found Ellair, he was tottering, nearly tumbling into the snow, while a woman finished swinging her hand back to her side.

“Ciúin,” she snapped.

Ignoring her, I ran to Ellair. Once I was at his side, I hovered my hands over him, looking for injuries.

“Are you ok?” I asked. “Did they hurt you?”

Something smashed into the back of my head, and I saw stars, but despite the world’s already desperate twirl, I spun on the woman who’d assaulted me.

“I’ll keep talking to him no matter how many times you hit me. So, either knock me out again, or let us speak,” I hissed. “It’s not like letting us do that will help us escape. We’re pretty well at your mercy.”

Raising my arms, I strained against the knots binding me to no avail. Only as she stared at me without replying did I consider that she might not understand me. After a moment, however, she shrugged, striding over the snow, and the man’s prodding rifle urged us after her.

After a little while, I moved closer to Ellair.

“How did she know what I said?” I asked from the corner of my mouth. “I can’t understand her.”

Ellair gave me nothing, kicking through the snowdrifts instead. Even out of breath as he was, he was frowning with his eyes devouring ice crystals as if they were a complicated puzzle he was trying to solve.

Rubbing my chest, I glanced around us, curious how far we’d traveled if Ellair was tired enough to keep quiet.

The forest had fallen away from us. We were walking across a mountain’s slope with a break in that massive wall of stone a few miles ahead. Perhaps that was the pass I’d seen in Colavar?

Not helpful. *Nothing* helpful lay around us, in fact. It was all snow and shoots of jagged rock. If Ellair and I managed to escape our bonds, our captors could run us down in seconds.

And I had no clue what was going on, something I should quickly fix.

“Ellair,” I said, more insistently, “why isn’t your charm working?”

His frown twisted into a scowl.

“It is,” he whispered, “and *keep your voice down.*”

Well, ok then. Drawing as near to him as I dared, I bumped my shoulder into his.

“Look, asshole,” I said. “I’m trying to take our minds off of the fact that we’re getting carted off God knows where by these...”

Glancing over my shoulder, I caught our male captor humming. He was striding *on top of* the snow as if he weighed nothing, scanning his surroundings with a faint smile. If it weren’t for the gun in his hands, I might actually want to chat with him, which was weird for typically solitary me.

“Brúid,” Ellair said. “They’re Brúid, and they’re taking us to Kilkeid where they’ll-”

“I don’t want to know,” I cut in, thrusting my hands toward him. “Not yet. Stick to safe subjects for now. Like why I can’t understand them.”

Ellair shifted his eyes to my neck, where they lingered for a moment before dropping.

“They speak a dialect that’s slightly different from my people’s, like the *coigreach* do,” he said. “I never thought you’d need to understand their tongue, so I didn’t add it to the charm’s lexicon.”

“You mean I’m stuck listening to babble from them?” I said.

That would be... *annoying*.

“The charm will soon learn their dialect as well as any other languages you might encounter, like I taught it to do,” Ellair said. “It just needs a wider selection of words to work with before it can manipulate your brain into understanding and speaking those tongues. In theory, it should learn more quickly as you run into more languages, but we’ll never know if I properly taught it that function, not if they’re-”

“*Haigh! Má* you’re going *chun labhairt, é a dhéanamh* where we can *chloistéail*,” the woman said.

Ellair shrank in on himself, but his voice was firm when he snapped.

“*An gá dom labhairt ar son na Brúid?* Or is it just my use of a superior tongue that confuses you, bitch?”

A coughing fit had me hunching over. My God. Ellair had a backbone. Who’d have thought?

Soft crunching preceded the woman stopping in front of us. On top of the drift we were slogging through, she towered over us, even when crouching as she was.

“Your *pretty* tongue doesn’t confuse me, *lagú*,” she said, “and a spot of defiance will do you good in Kilkeid.”

Cocking her head, she tilted Ellair’s chin so he was facing her.

“Ach ná é a thaispeáint anseo, duine faoi pribhléidé.”

When the back of her hand crashed into his cheek, Ellair sprawled into the snow while the man behind us chuckled.

“Stop it, Míde,” he says. “*Ná déan damáiste* the goods. Dagda won’t *maith é. Seachas, táimid* almost to *an pas sléibhe. Invertyre beidh* shelter us.”

Growling, the woman kicked snow into Ellair’s face while he struggled to stand.

“*Tú* like them *an iomarca*.”

The man shrugged as he grabbed Ellair's collar. Setting the kid on his feet, he dusted his hands off.

"Do phointe?"

Snapping her teeth together, the woman took off, and after some prodding, Ellair and I fought to keep up with her.

"So," I said after a moment, "how much of that was in their dialect?"

"Nearly all of it," Ellair said. "Why?"

He kept touching his injured cheek, and every time he did, I wanted to jump the woman who'd hurt him. I held myself in check, though, waiting for him to glance my way, and when he did, I gave him a broad grin.

"Oh. That's good, I guess," he said, quickly dropping his head again. "You'll know exactly what's happening when they kill us."

Goddamn, but he was insistent on drawing attention to our deplorable situation. It wasn't like we could change anything about it *for the moment*, so why fixate? But when he continued dejectedly kicking through the snowdrifts, I knew he wouldn't let me distract him any longer.

"Ok! You win!" I shouted. "What will these 'Brúid' do to us?"

"They're going to--"

"Níl, níl, níl," our male captor said, pushing between us. "You don't get to tell scéal Roghnaithe, pribhléidé."

"I'd only share with her what you *will* do to us, *Brúid*," Ellair snapped before twitching and raising his hands. "I can't. I can't--"

"My name's Nuadha," the man said, "and *we* are Roghnaithe. Brúid is *your* name for us."

A faint whine started from Ellair, and he started jerking on his bonds. To this point, I hadn't noticed it, but blood was seeping around that rope. He must have rubbed his wrists raw, but that didn't surprise me. I'd wondered when his tics would show up. He'd done well to hold it together for as long as he had.

"Ellair, maybe focus on putting one foot in front of the other," I said. "Let this Nuadha fellow tell the tale for now. You can share your side later."

Please. Focus.

"Yes," Ellair said. "I can... do that."

He buried his chin into his chest with a faint mutter emerging from its crook. Soon enough, his push through the snow quickened, leaving me behind, and I craned my head toward the man looming over me. When my attention landed on him, the funny look he'd been wearing while watching Ellair vanished.

"Do you truly not know about the Roghnaithe?" he asked.

"I'm new to Dalliesh," I said. "Only learned about Colavar in the last few weeks."

"From... across... the boundary?" Nuadha said with his face crinkling. "No one has—"

"Are you going to make me stare up at you for this entire conversation?" I quickly said.

My neck was already hurting, but I mostly didn't want him focusing on where my home might lie.

"You don't have to look at me while I'm talking," he said.

Well, shit. There went my niggling hope about learning what was keeping him on top of the snow.

"Fine. Story time?" I prompted.

"I'll get to it," Nuadha amusedly said. "I just don't know where to start."

I was a bit curious about why he was inclined to tell me anything at all about himself or his people, but I wasn't going to question it.

"How about with why you and your demon companion are forcibly marching us to your home?" I snapped.

"Míde's my sister," Nuadha said with a half-smile.

When I stiffened, he flashed his fingers in dismissal.

"Don't worry. She *is* a demon, but in some ways, that's a good thing. In some ways, how she acts relates to what you were asking about, but I can't start there," he said. "Let's see. How much do you know about Dalliesh's many cultures?"

"Little to nothing," I said. "Recently arrived, remember?"

"Then, you have either the best or worst luck I've seen in a woman. Time will tell," Nuadha said. "So. The basics. Dalliesh is home to three... factions we'll call them. There's the *coigreach*, the people who've struck out from the others. To the *pribhléidé* who live in the citadel, *coigreach* fall into the same category as my people, but they come nowhere close to the Roghnaithe. Since they're outsiders, they're the ones we typically hunt, but occasionally, we're lucky enough to snag someone from Colavar like your...?"

He trailed off as if hoping I'd finish the thought for him, but I merely watched Ellair banging his hands on his forehead with my lip caught in my teeth.

Hold it together.

"*Pribhléidé*, all of them," Nuadha eventually continued, spitting to the side. "Animals grown soft and weak in their citadel's protection--"

"Which makes you the strong ones, I presume?" I said.

"Well, yes..."

"They think they're Sgaradh's chosen," Ellair called from ahead.

Something streaked by me, and ahead, Míde spun on her heel. Brother and sister tackled Ellair, and in the resulting pile of limbs, I spotted a rifle pressed to the back of his head.

"Speak not her name."

I couldn't tell which of them had spoken, but the fury in those words screamed danger to me, as did their flushed cheeks and trembling fingers.

"What would you rather me call her?" Ellair asked with his muffled voice high-pitched and barely recognizable. "Bitch Queen? Slei's destroyer? Disintegration? Gluttonous Mistress of Suffering? Death Dealer-?"

"You may call her Changer," Nuadha said, "like the *coigreach* do."

He and Míde climbed off of Ellair. He lay gasping in a snowdrift with his arms flung every which way, as if he was trying to make a snow angel. Shudders ran over his body, vibrating the flakes around him, and his wild eyes found me standing over him with a crazed grin blooming when I dropped down at his side.

"That's what they mean to do to us," he wheezed. "They worship her. Across Dalliesh, they steal souls, people like us. They'll take us to Kilkeid, and once there, they'll sacrifice us to their goddess."

As soon as I heard those words, I knew them for truth, but that didn't stop me from spinning toward Nuadha, unsure what I was looking for. Reassurance that this barbaric idea couldn't be right? Any other form of contradiction?

He shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck with a sheepish smile.

"Unless Dagda finds you worthy, yes," he said. "We'll feed you to Sgaradh. That's your purpose."

Stuck in shock's grasp, I couldn't stop my eyes from unfocusing, looking through him to the pack I'd seen bouncing on his back earlier and the demon box lying inside of it.

“Are you *kidding me?*” I shouted at it. “An elitist society was one thing but a *barbarian culture* too? What’s *wrong* with this world that you’ve dropped me into?”

Pain from my scalp stopped me from screaming more at it, and I scrabbled at my hair until I was released.

“Less nonsense,” Míde said. “More walking.”

She pushed on my back, nearly sending me to the ground, but I tripped over myself to follow the provided momentum forward instead.

“Do you still like her?” Míde muttered to her brother before flitting ahead.

I considered talking with Ellair again, if only to annoy our captors, but he looked too far gone to engage in anything semi-rational.

Instead, I focused on marching across the mountain, wondering with every step if I was walking toward death or if I’d escape it again.

Several hours later, the mountains’ slope carved into a narrow valley, one that cleaved straight between it and the next one. A pass, as I’d thought.

On its floor, campfires dotted the snow with people milling between hillocks. As we approached, the people were revealed as Brúid, much like our captors, with bright orange hair and pasty skin cloaked by draping cowls and tattered jackets. What I thought had been a hillock proved to be a bunch of hexagons, welded into a dome, over which grainy white fabric had been stretched.

Míde and Nuadha pushed us through this camp. At least, I assumed it was a camp. It didn’t look large or organized enough to be anything else.

No other Brúid commented on our passage. Apparently, prisoner escort like this was common enough to elicit no surprise. We stopped at a tent that was slightly larger than the rest, and while Míde ran her hand in an arch over its fabric, Nuadha grabbed my bound hands.

He pulled a pen from a pocket, pressing it into my wrist, and after a sharp prick, he removed it from my skin, wiping at the blood droplet it had left behind.

“I hope Dagda finds you worthy,” he said. “You’re fun.”

Popping his blood-smeared finger into his mouth, he heaved me into the opening that his sister had created. I barely stopped myself from careening into the people crowding its entrance, but when Ellair rammed into my back, I fell into the arms of the woman in front of me.

“Yn ofalus,” she said.

Unsure how to respond, I led Ellair through the packed tent until I’d found us a spot with some breathing room. Once there, we sat, and I waved for his hands, working at the rope binding them

while he did the same for me.

“Ailig?” he asked.

“Sent for help.”

“Good. That’s good.”

But it wouldn’t be enough.

I worked at knots until my fingers were raw, but in that time, I came no closer to freeing Ellair than I had last night. At some point, he stopped, and I assumed that the feel of the rope or the many voices raised in conversation around us had overwhelmed him. Then, he spoke in a whisper so quiet that I almost missed it.

“Why?”

When I lifted my eyes, I met his, and he slid them to the side. That shift did nothing to lessen the intensity of his frown or the furrow between his eyebrows.

“Why did you help me?” he asked. “We barely know one another. I got you banished from Colavar. You shouldn’t have come for me. I don’t understand it.”

Sighing, I dropped the puzzle I was working on, resisting the urge to clasp Ellair’s hands or force him to meet my gaze.

“I know you well enough to like you,” I said, “and I wasn’t about to let these people take you away against your will, even if we hadn’t resolved our argument. You could get me home. Possibly. And I-”

Plunging my hands into my lap, I ducked my head.

“I think we could be friends, and that... You don’t know how difficult it is for me to make friends, Ellair. I *would not* let the chance for it go, no matter what these assholes might do to us. I hope- I hope you feel the same way.”

The voices around us fell to the side while I waited for his response. He truly couldn’t know how surprising I’d found the sense of ease that lay between us, even with our recently resolved conflict. Back home, my preference for solitude, my strange hobbies, and... other things had kept people at arm’s length. My circle of support had included my parents and Beau, which was *pathetic*.

So, when Ellair didn’t say anything, moisture pooled in my eyes. When a source of warmth lifted my hands, I blinked, letting teardrops patter on Ellair’s skin, and he flicked his gaze to my face.

“Oh, shit. I was supposed to say something, wasn’t I?” he said. “Yes, Brennan. I’d like to be your friend.”

After everything else the day had brought, Ellair's absolute... *obliviousness* was too much for me. My body shook, toppling me backward, and I rolled back and forth, shrieking with laughter, while he asked me time and again what was wrong.

When I could, I gasped, "You can call me Bren."

Sitting up, I gently patted his knee. He flinched, thrusting his hands toward me, and we returned to the nearly impossible task of freeing ourselves.

Chapter 13: The Shaman

I thought I'd find a picture of ferocity in Kilkeid. I thought I'd see a palisade around it with each of its log's ends sharpened into a stake. I thought heads and skulls would be spiked on these with skeletons left dangling from them. I thought gibbets, hanging from the wall, would hold starving prisoners with bones straining against their flesh. Very medieval all around. Also gruesome, I know, but that was how I would have described Kilkeid if this had been my story.

But it wasn't. It was much worse. It was my life.

By the time we reached the Brúid city, Ellair and I should have been long gone from the raiding party that had captured us. On day two of our trek, we'd undone the rope binding us before loosely retying its knots to give us the appearance of helplessness. Then, we'd waited for an opportunity to bolt.

Unfortunately, none had presented themselves. While we'd trudged among our captors, they'd pointed weapons at the prisoners without fail, and at night, we'd been crowded into tents, ones that neither of us could figure out how to escape.

Now, we were entering Kilkeid, and I was worried we'd missed our chance.

No wall protected the city, and from what I could tell, it was just a vast spread of the same tents that had contained us each night of our hike, although these came in a much wider variety of color than white. Bright shades of the rainbow dotted the snow, and between them milled the Brúid.

Besides the obvious threat hanging over our heads, I didn't understand why Ellair found these people so terrifying. They looked like him, if stringier and a bit more ragged. I even saw children playing tag between the tents.

For the most part, the Brúid city looked similar to most nomadic towns back home but larger. People chatted, bartered, carved up carcasses, and played cards or dice. I saw old men smoking in sprawled heaps, mothers screeching at abashed children, and cookfires with pots or spitted meat hovering over them. It was, to my eye, ordinary, so why was Ellair trembling beside me?

"Hey," I whispered, "it'll be ok. Just breathe."

His fits of erratic behavior had gotten worse and more frequent the closer we'd come to our destination. Fortunately, he'd kept them suppressed enough that they hadn't drawn attention our way, but I didn't know how much longer that would last.

After nearly a week around him, I had a theory about why he acted the way he did, but I couldn't voice it while bloodthirsty people who made human sacrifices of the weak were nearby. I didn't know if they'd consider his situation a weakness and had no desire to see my friend's brains

sprayed across the snow. So, I was keeping my mouth shut. For now.

"I'm trying," Ellair said, "but there's so much noise."

Oh, God... I didn't know how to help the kid, but I tried to do it anyway.

"You can do this," I said. "I believe in you."

And then, I shut up. There was no need to add more input to what was already overloading his brain.

I had good timing too. Tents were falling away from us, and I caught my first glimpse of what I'd originally expected from this place.

Cages. They stretched around us with tents forming a ring around those blocky prisons. Inside, people huddled, shivered, and whispered. Or lay motionless. About half were packed full with only standing room remaining, but thankfully, our captors were herding us to a block of empty ones.

As we passed our fellow prisoners, several of them reached for us with imploring hands. Hands that shone. Hands with black fingertips.

When I followed the line of their arms to empty eyes, I went stiff with my stomach's contents making a bid for freedom. Frozen solid. They were *frozen solid*. I wrenched my eyes from the sight.

Behind the cages rose a wall, but it wasn't made from sharpened logs as I'd expected. The curving structure was made up entirely of snow blocks. Flags flapped atop them with their black fabric snapping in the wind. In their center, a man's face, half of which was dissolving into flakes, stared at us. When people caught sight of the stitched image, they flinched, and I frowned at what seemed like an extreme reaction. Sure, the symbol was creepy, but-

"It's Sgaradh's sigil," Ellair said. "Generations ago, it heralded the arrival of one of Brighde's nightmares."

"The other being Innealdeam?" I asked.

At his nod, I said, "You really need to tell me those two's story."

"I'd rather not," Ellair said.

Snorting, I said, "What if I need the information, EI? My cover as a visitor from beyond Dalliesh lies thin enough as it is. If I seem ignorant of something that everyone in Brighde knows, it'll crack."

I counted the crunch of his footfalls while he considered.

"Fine," he said in the sourest tone I'd ever heard. "The next time we have a free moment alone, I'll share."

“Thank you,” I sang under my breath.

Ellair glared at me while the woman in front of us sniffed.

“Pobl rhyfedd.”

As always, I ignored our fellow prisoner. A cold shoulder was all they’d given us on the trip here. Why shouldn’t I return the favor?

Apparently, *coigreach* were rude. It came from enjoying solitude, I supposed. Ha! I could relate to that.

Our captors stopped us, prodding us into a line in front of the cages. I couldn’t say how long we stood there, waiting. Without the benefit of a thermal coating, the people around me had stamped their feet and rubbed their extremities for quite a while before *he* arrived.

The first I saw of him were the horns. They towered over the Brúid encircling him, long and curling with tips the color of rust. When the group drew near, his escort parted, revealing the rest of the man.

The face wrapped in ragged strips. The weathered, army style jacket. The loose Henley shirt and cargo pants. The bones and hides hanging from every part of him. The combat boots rising to his knees. The intricate tattoos covering the backs of his hands, the only bit of his skin that we could see. The rail-thin body that his clothing tried to hide.

He advanced on us, moving down the line of prisoners. The others flinched as the slits in cloth where his eyes would sit passed over them, but for some reason, when he reached Ellair and me, he paused, cocking his head. After a moment, I blew hair out of my eyes for what seemed like the thousandth time today.

“What are you supposed to be?” I snapped. “Some sort of scary shaman?”

“Mm,” Ellair said, leaning forward. “I think he’s Dagda, speaker for Sgaradh. Sorry. *The Changer*. So, yes. He’s the Brúid’s shaman.”

Turning to us, Dagda crossed his arms.

“You are not afraid?” he asked in a muffled voice.

“Duh.”

“Of course we are.”

After a sharp glance at Ellair, I continued, “But bravery has never been an absence of fear, has it?”

Seconds ticked by with something about Dagda’s wrapped head begging me to cower before him. Even without his eyes visible, I could feel them on me—watching me, judging me—and a slow crawl

built beneath my skin. Before I could succumb to my burgeoning panic attack, Dagda huffed.

“Interesting.”

He strode away from us, and once he'd reached the end of the line of prisoners, returning to his escort, he pulled one of them aside. They discussed something with Dagda pointing several times at Ellair and me.

“Oh... crap,” I said.

Had we pissed him off? I thought we'd made a fairly decent showing to an audience who appreciated strength. As Dagda's escort moved toward us, however, I wondered if we'd made a mistake.

Grabbing Ellair and I, the escort dragged us away from the others. He marched us to the far end of the empty cages, locking us into separate ones, far from each other.

“Wait!” I called after the man. “What's going on? What do you want from us?”

He kept walking as if I hadn't shouted, and ducking, I made myself a snowball. It was a difficult task to complete with my hands bound, but once I'd done it, I took aim and *threw*.

Snow exploded on the back of the man's head, and he froze halfway through a step. After recovering from his stumble, he twirled on me, and I stood steady against the strength of his advancing fury until he reached through the cage's bars and grabbed my hair.

When he jerked me forward, fire blossomed in my nose and cheeks and teeth. It raged in my scalp as I was lifted off of the ground. Air accepted my body for the briefest moment before sharp pangs splintered across my back, and the cold kissed my face. Through ringing ears, I heard snow crunch as the man left me to bleed.

My body screamed for me to stay down, but the fragment of my brain that wasn't containing the worst pain I'd ever known whispered of strength and maintaining the appearance of it. I used the cage's bars to drag myself to my feet with packed snow in hand. Weaving, I threw something at the man once more.

The snowball landed at his feet this time, and when he glanced over his shoulder, I spat a mouthful of blood through the bars, smiling. That drew his own grin from him before he marched away.

Once no Brúid stood within sight, I let my body's shaking tumble me to the ground. I pressed a handful of snow to my face, uncaring that I was exposing the only part of me vulnerable to frostbite to the cold. For the first time, I was grateful for this awful stuff. Such blessed, cool relief.

“-talk to me! *Bren! Please!* Are you ok?”

Oh. Ellair.

Shakily, I gave him a thumbs up.

After a moment, he called, "I don't know what that means."

At least he sounded less panicked. Sighing, I pulled my abused face out of the cold, searching through clumps of melting snow for my friend. Ellair was clinging to his cage's bars, pressing his body against them as if trying to squeeze through.

"I think my nose is broken," I said, "and some of my teeth might be chipped. I hope not. Dental work's expensive."

"But are you... ok?"

How did I tell someone like him that simply speaking was agony?

"I'll be fine," I said.

"What're we going to do?"

Groaning, I collapsed, sprawling as much as the cage's confines would allow me.

"Right now, I plan on lying here and *not* passing out," I said. "Once I've managed that, we can talk."

"But--"

"Ellair. I need you to let me think, please."

Of course, I didn't *actually* do that. Ellair fell silent, and within seconds, the black that had been lapping at my consciousness stole me from pain.

When I crawled my way free of its embrace again, a dark sky loomed over me with shattered Sleir's brightness drowning out the stars.

"Quietly now."

Shooting upright, I scrambled to find Ellair, who'd sounded much closer than I remembered him being. He was standing right outside of my cage with his bound wrists freed.

And Ailig was at his feet.

"What's going-? *Ow!*" I hissed, prodding my face.

At my quiet yelp, a panel popped open on Ailig with a capsule spat from it.

"Take that," Ellair said. "It should help with the pain."

Diving on the pill like it was a last ration, I shoved it into my mouth and swallowed. Once it was gone, I undid the loose knots around my wrists.

“What’s going on?” I asked, successfully this time.

“I woke up to a crackling sound,” Ellair said. “Thought it was the Brúid doing their sacrifices, but it was Ailig instead.”

Another panel popped open on the construct with the teensiest blowtorch of all time emerging from it. Igniting the tool, Ailig cut through my cage’s bars while I winced at the noise. I knelt as close to the construct as I could with sparks flying every which way.

“You were supposed to get help,” I hissed.

Blue light flashed in sporadic patterns over Ailig while it wiggled in place.

“Ailig *is* our help,” Ellair said, seemingly translating for it.

“This wasn’t what I-”

Groaning, I dug my fingernails across my scalp.

“If you’re our help, why wait until *now* to rescue us?” I asked.

Ailig retracted the blowtorch with its pulsing light turning dull.

“He learns by example,” Ellair said. “Maybe at some point you taught him the virtue of caution. This is the first viable chance he’d have had to get close.”

Yeah, I’d shown the construct caution: when I’d tried to rescue Ellair. Look how much good it had done me.

Grimacing, I said, “Sorry.”

With a bright flash, Ailig returned to cutting me free, and I frowned.

“Wait. Why am I apologizing to a machine?” I said under my breath.

Crouching, Ellair flung his hands on either side of Ailig’s sphere.

“Don’t say that,” he hissed. “Ailig’s a machine *mind*, not just a... a *machine*. He comes as close to sentient as I could get him with Colavar’s restrictions, and *he has feelings*.”

The last was whispered before Ailig rumbled in place, shaking Ellair off, and I gaped at it and my friend. A machine that could simulate human emotions. That... was...

“So cool!” I said. “Can I take a look at its programming?”

Cocking his head, Ellair asked, "Programming?"

"You know! The code you wrote for it. The instructions it follows."

"Umm..."

Before Ellair could decide, a sizable chunk of my cage thumped into the snow, and escape took priority over how the construct worked. I rolled through the hole Ailig had created, brushing snow off of me once I was standing.

"We should free the others too," I said. "They could make good distractions-"

"*What?*" Ellair squeaked. "Ailig and I took enough time freeing you! We should run before the Brúid show their faces again."

Stopping short in my stride, I spun on Ellair with my muscles grating against their bone.

"I'm so sorry that helping *your friend* wasted valuable time," I said. "Maybe you should have left *your friend* to die if it gave you more time to escape."

Why was I getting upset about this? Hell, why had I stopped to express that hurt? We should be running right now, not-

"Maybe I should have," Ellair growled, "consider she wants to waste more time saving strangers, *coigreach* of all people."

Oh, *hell* no.

"I want to free them so the Brúid are too busy chasing them down to go after us," I hissed. "I'd love to save them all, but I'm not an idiot, El. We'll need more bodies if we're to-"

"To do what?" Ellair snapped. "Return and free more prisoners?"

How had he known that was what I wanted to do? I couldn't stand the thought of leaving so many people behind in this... awful place. I couldn't condemn them to death by freezing or sacrifice to a foreign god.

Ellair looked panicked and maybe a hint... guilty. Maybe he was feeling the same thing as-

"This is Kilkeid, the heart of Brúid territory! And those prisoners waiting to be sacrificed? The ones you want to save?" he said. "They'll just be replaced. Besides, they're *coigreach*, Bren! They're nothing!"

Sucking in a breath, I rapidly blinked to relieve the burning in my eyes. Why was I-?

"Does that make me nothing?" I hollowly asked. "I'm *coigreach*, right? That means I'm *nothing*."

Oh. That was why.

“That wasn’t-” Ellair started before frowning. “I didn’t-”

“Oh, go have one of your fits, Ellair,” I snapped. “Ailig and I will free *nothing*.”

Spinning, I tore through the snow with my thoughts blazing. That short-sighted, selfish idiot. Couldn’t he see what I was trying to do? Couldn’t he-?

I was softly growling by the time I reached the next set of cages, but even with that noise to cover it, I still should have heard crunching snow behind me, whether from Ailig or Ellair. If he’d chosen to follow me, that is.

Whatever. At the least, I’d need the construct to break through these cages’ bars, so where was it?

“Bren!”

Ellair’s shrill voice broke the night’s quiet in a shriek, and I went cold inside.

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit!*

When I faced my friend, a Brúid had an arm wrapped around his chest while holding a gun to his head. For a moment, I considered leaving him here; anger was burning so brightly in me. If I abandoned my friend because he’d *hurt my feelings*, though, what would that make me?

“Let him go!” I shouted.

I’d taken two steps toward Ellair when someone behind me grabbed my arm. Hard. God, I didn’t want to learn who’d done that, but I forced my head to rotate. A face wrapped in rags looked down on me.

“How did you get out?” Dagda said.

I showed him my teeth, waving my hands with many a finger wiggling.

“Magic,” I said.

And I punched him. Or I tried to. He caught my fist in his palm, twisting his hand until his tattoos gleamed in the moonlight, and grunting, I fell to my knees.

“Fascinating,” Dagda said. “I thought it was so before, but this...”

He stared at me while I sneered at him, or I thought he did. It was hard to tell with those strips concealing his facial features.

“Fial should meet you,” he said.

“Who’s-?”

He hauled me to my feet by my captive fist, and I couldn’t resist him, not with my bones’ creaking at the pressure he’d applied to them. Twisting me, he forced me forward, herding me into the

darkened tents of Kilkeid.