

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? Sleis'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-smearred 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.

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