

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, El? 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.

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