

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.

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